

CHAPTER XXIV.—WOODSIDE, GRAFFHAM.

Designed by Mr. Halsey Ricardo—Sir George Sitwell on Garden-making—The Choice of a Site—Colour in Architecture—William de Morgan's Tiles—Dodges for Curtains, Floors, Windows, Heating, etc.

SOME thirty-five years ago Mr. Halsey Ricardo came upon a pine-bowered site at the foot of the Sussex Downs and was conquered by its beauties. Straightway he set about preparing it for the house that he built there eighteen years later. During the interval Nature was also making her long preparations for the building that was to follow. Too often one sees houses, in themselves perhaps beautiful thrown down, as it were, on a barren field where the eye aches for a sense of shelter. Such houses seem to be accidents that might have been prevented, awkward intruders in a landscape which can retaliate only by making them look thoroughly uncomfortable. The first work at Woodside was to level and terrace the site, and plant it about with those shrubs which love best the sandy soil of Graffham. Azaleas begin the flowering year, rhododendrons follow, and they in turn give place to kalmia. Arbutus, magnolia and tulip tree have taken to their home in strong profusion. Happily, few of the trees needed



142.—THE HALL.

to be felled. The figure of the site suggested that the main front of the house should look to the south-east. West and north it was fully protected by a fine forest of Scotch firs, which fill the air with their sharp fragrance. To the east this wise preparer for the future house planted more trees, so that now there is protection on all sides save the garden front, whence one looks out over the rolling country to a distance of wooded hills. The slope is quick and the terraces called for retaining walls, which were built forthwith. At the same time were planted the yew hedges of the upper lawn, which enhance the garden's air of age. Thus field and hillside have slowly turned to garden, and when one sees the red light of the setting sun through the wood, as it touches the pine stems to a slow flame,

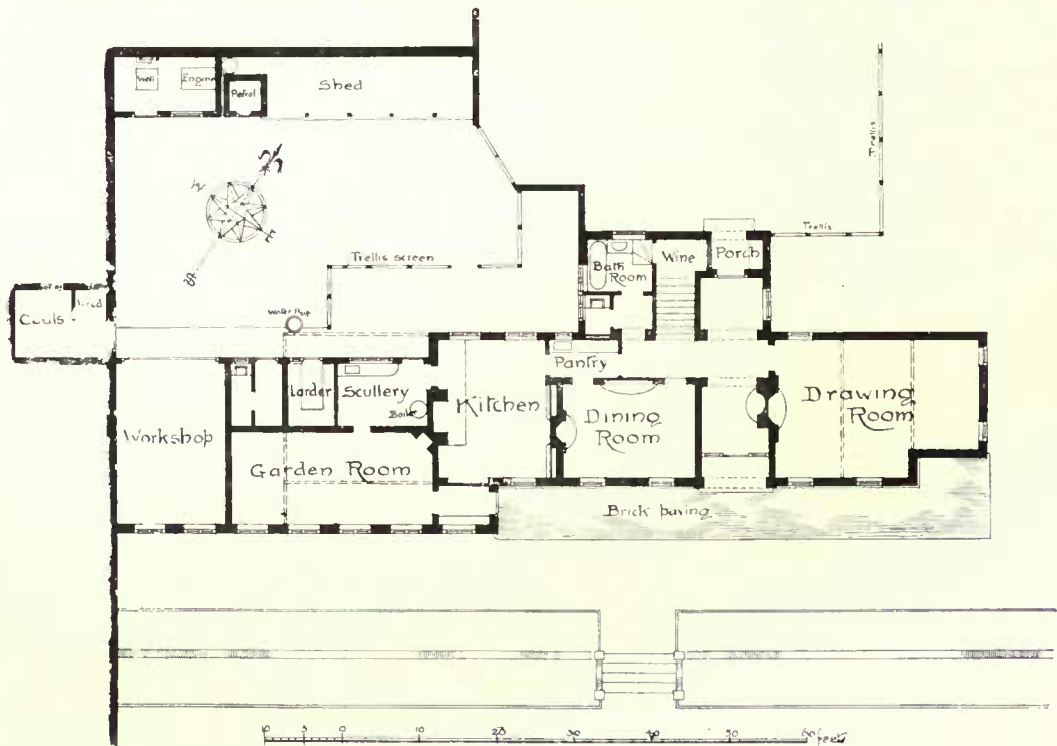


143.—LOOKING SOUTH-WEST.

the sober beauties of this Sussex home and its setting become impressive even to the casual visitor of a summer evening. Mr. Ricardo has not dragooned Nature, but has slowly tempered her disorder, and she has rewarded him with prodigality. When Sir George Sitwell wrote "On the Making of Gardens," he told us "The great secret of success in garden-making is the profound platitude that we should abandon the struggle to make nature beautiful round the house and should rather move the house to where nature is beautiful." Not one in a thousand can view the question in such a lavish spirit of abandonment. Better far the profound foresight which this chapter records. It is one of the trivial disadvantages of a

wooded site that photography meets with difficulties. It is practically only the main garden front facing south-east to which the camera can do justice. It will be noticed that the mass of the building steps up, as we face it, from left to right. This was done of conscious purpose to balance the upward slope to the left, which is better seen in Fig. 143. The elevation is severely plain, both in form and colour. The colourist's claim for streets gay with large surfaces of brilliant hue need not be followed here, the more so as Mr. Ernest Debenham's house in Addison Road is a monument to Mr. Ricardo's views. In the country "the need of artificial colour is less insistent; we have but to open a shutter or draw a curtain, and we disclose a painted window. We look out on a garden of living enamel." In an England of perennial colour the builder is wise not to compete with the green and scarlet, gold and russet, with which Nature has enriched him. At Woodside the exterior boasts nothing save the red of tile and brick, while the jalousies are a strong green on which time and weather have developed a blue bloom.

The chimneys are of a fine solidity and group pleasantly with the gables, while the railing of the balcony gives the needed sense of substance and safety. The inside of the house is extremely simple in arrangement. We look from the entrance porch through the small hall to the garden, with the drawing-room and dining-room left and right. It might be said that a little too much floor area has been absorbed in vestibule and passage, and that the kitchen is of rather sumptuous proportions compared with the dining room; but when a man designs a



I44.—GROUND FLOOR PLAN.



145.—THE SOUTH-EAST FRONT.

home for himself, he knows his own requirements accurately and is likely to depart in some things from normal methods. Precisely such a personal need has produced the garden-room, which Mr. Ricardo designed for a studio.

Though the exterior is conceived on lines almost austere, with an entire absence of modelled decoration, and with the simplest and broadest colour treatment, the picture of the drawing-room shows that Mr. Ricardo has a joy in ornament rightly placed (Fig. 147). The plastering of the deep beam, with its decoration modelled by Ernest Gimson, is natural and charming, and in happy contrast to its soft whiteness is the brilliance of the tiled fireplace. It is only fair to Mr. Ricardo to point out that the decorations of the house were incomplete when the photographs were taken. The picture-rail, which gives a hard horizontal line, was merely temporary, and the intention was to fill the space between the top of the tiles and the ceiling with more plaster-work. Unhappily, too, the monochrome of the illustration can give only an idea of the pattern, but none of the amazing richness of colour that belongs to William de Morgan's tiles. It is probable that few of the thousands who delight in "Alice for Short," realise that they are the product of the elder years of an artist whose early association with William Morris proved so fruitful. Together they worked in the painting of stained glass windows, and out of that developed the tiles which made the name de Morgan famous. Most of those used at Woodside are of the early days when the house in Queen Square Bloomsbury saw the revival of so many aspects of

decorative art that are now taken for granted. The early de Morgan tiles entirely caught the spirit of the splendour that belongs to old Persian work. In some of the examples that front the fireplace at Woodside one looks into pools of colour that are like the transparent living blue of the deep sea. It is a melancholy reflection that though people talked a deal about de Morgan's work, it was not supported by adequate purchase ; and there was a limit to the labour and expense to which he could go for an unappreciative public. Told shortly, the secret of the effect of these tiles is in the depth of glaze. This is impossible if they are made of compressed dust in the ordinary way, for the glaze splits the tile. It is a cumbrous and costly business to form the " biscuit " or body of the tile by the wet process, but it rendered possible the richness of the glaze which will make the name de Morgan remembered among the great ones of the Decorative Revival. How powerful was his personal influence is very clearly seen by comparing the tiles made originally by him with those later examples by his workmen who followed his methods, but lacked his immediate supervision. Mr. Ricardo found it necessary to make up his sets of the earlier examples with some later ones. The latter are still good, but the master touch was lacking. However, old and new blend well, and the tiles in their framing of Istrian marble form a sumptuous picture.

It is not always that an architect who is greatly concerned with the artistic side of his work busies himself with those structural trifles that collectively add so much of comfort to the home. Woodside is full of what may be not



146.—EAST CORNER.



147—THE DRAWING-ROOM.

disrespectfully called "dodges." Here are a few of them. It is often alleged with justice against curtains that it is needful to make windows much larger than they should be, because a proportion of the light is blocked out by the hangings. Mr. Ricardo provided recesses in the architraves into which the curtains go when thrown back ; in fact he recognises them as part of the architecture and provides for them. Too often they are an after-thought and look it. It has been said that sliding sashes are so called because they usually will not slide. This sticking is often caused by the part of the frame on which the sash works being painted. If it be made of teak, even a hardened painter is likely to leave it untouched.

Then as to floors : It is common on the ground floor to leave a space of 6ins or more, between the concrete foundation and the floor-boards. The space thus provided has to be ventilated from the outside, and in any case forms a needless arena for the Olympic games of mouse and cockroach. If the concrete is struck to a level surface and painted with pitch, the boards can be nailed directly to it and the result will be a much warmer floor. The backs of wooden skirtings are usually vermin galleries ; if worked in solid cement that nuisance is avoided.

A word as to heating : In the ordinary way the heat, once it has passed from the fireplace, is lost up the chimney. At Woodside the fires of the drawing-room and hall are back to back. An inlet from the outside air is brought between them, zig-zags to and fro, and delivers a good volume of heated air into the hall at no extra cost.