

A family's idyll on the hill

Hilles House, Gloucestershire

Set on the Cotswold escarpment, this magnificent Arts-and-Crafts house is a monument to the ideals of its architect. Clive Aslet investigates

Photographs by Paul Barker

HILLES HOUSE, in Gloucestershire, is witness to an ideal, steadily maintained, whatever the circumstances, since the architect Detmar Blow began to build it for himself and his family in 1913. The ideal is that of the creative existence, lived among the beauties of the English countryside, around a welcoming hearth and beneath a roof that seems capable of sheltering all the world. Not even a fire that destroyed much of the interior, together with the thatched roof, in 1951, could extinguish the spirit, maintained by Blow's grandson, who happily bears the same name.

The story of Hilles is that of its architect. Detmar's father, Jellings Blow, a wine merchant, claimed descent from the composer Dr John Blow, and Detmar's mother had been taught the piano by Clara Schumann. The young Detmar chose to follow an architectural path, and, in 1888, won a scholarship

to travel in France and Italy. When at Abbeville, where he drew the cathedral, he met the seer of the Victorian age, John Ruskin.

Ruskin believed that architecture, in the professional sense, was best avoided. By setting out every detail of the building on paper, architects destroyed the self-reliance of builders and craftsmen, as well as their creative participation in the work. Blow followed Ruskin's advice, and, on returning to England, apprenticed himself to a builder in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Soon, he was sitting at the feet of William Morris, at the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), studying, as his fellow architect W. R. Lethaby would write in a memoir, 'the common facts of traditional buildings in scores and hundreds of examples' under the tutelage of SPAB's co-founder, the architect Philip Webb.

Through Webb, Blow became foreman on East Knoyle Church in Wiltshire (where Sir Christopher Wren's father had been rector), then being restored for the Hon Percy Wyndham. It was to prove a fortunate connection: Blow became the architect of choice for the group of artistically minded, intellectual aristocrats known as the Souls, of which Wyndham was a prominent member.

One day, in the early years of the 20th century, Blow was making his way through Suffolk in a gipsy caravan. Gipsy caravans, as Mr Toad would have confirmed, had a Bohemian appeal, and Blow was on

a sketching trip. His peregrinations took him to the grounds of Helmingham Hall, where he met Winifred, second daughter of the Hon Hamilton Tollemache, who had been raised there. They fell in love and, in 1910, married. The ceremony took place in St Paul's Cathedral, with a team of craftsmen sitting in the pew

behind that of the bridegroom's family.

Blow was not the youthful inamorato that Lutyens had been when he married Lady Emily Lytton; at 43, he was well established in his profession. But marriage into an old family reinforced his sense that romantic paternalism, based on a shared devotion to beauty and craft, was the way forward. This was the vision that built Hilles.

A ridge in Gloucestershire, with immense views to the Severn estuary (**Fig 6**), became a microcosm of the perfect world. Although the eve of the First World War was hardly a propitious time to begin it, Blow's service as an ambulance man made the need for a personal Arcadia all the more intense. ➤

‘A ridge in Gloucestershire was turned into a microcosm of the perfect world’

→ **Fig 1: Hilles seems to grow out of the soil. After the fire of 1951, the thatch roof was replaced by old Cotswold stone tiles**







↑ *Fig 2 left: View to the Elizabethan screen from Seckford Hall, Suffolk, which Detmar Blow bought when it would otherwise have been shipped to America. It was rebuilt after the fire of 1951.* ↑ *Fig 3 right: A Queen Anne needlework carpet hung as a tapestry*



When Christopher Hussey described Hilles in *COUNTRY LIFE* the year after Blow's death (September 7 and 14, 1940), it was in rhapsodic terms. 'Its position, one to dream of but such as few would dare to tackle, is an unsuspected ledge just below the crest of the Cotswolds west of Painswick, commanding the whole valley of the Severn from the Malverns to Chepstow, with the better part of the Welsh Marches stretching range upon range westwards.' Yet the 'breath-taking panorama' only served to intensify the interest of the house. 'It does not arrest the eye intentionally or by contrast with its setting. Very much the contrary.'

Like an Elizabethan builder, Blow turned the corner of the house to the view, because he knew that was where the bad weather

would be coming from. Picture windows would have been dangerous; they would also have been banal. Hilles was anything but that. Its Cotswold-stone walls rise up from the grass slope, as massive as the rock itself, like a natural outcrop (*Fig 1*). All through the house was a sense of simple things done well.

Thick boards of silvery elm, wooden racks in the kitchen with hams hanging from them, the glint of polished pewter on the sideboard—such details, Hussey felt, imparted a 'sacramental' quality to the kitchen. The reverence paid to materials created a 'warm and welcoming domesticity'. But Blow's budget was not infinite, and he used cheaper alternatives to carved stone when occasion offered: for example, the scallop-shaped half-vaults over some window embrasures

were made of cast concrete, the same moulds being used for the niches in the garden wall.

It was a house Webb would have approved of. 'The rooms are large and full of light,' wrote Detmar's friend the Hon Neville Lytton. 'The hall is paved with stone, which does not fear the muddiest boots. The long drawing-room has a floor of raw elm, which also cannot be injured by large boots with nails in the soles... There is little furniture—one or two beautiful chests and chests of drawers; three or four tapestries and three or four pictures; a splendidly solid dining-table, a few good chairs; an old organ, and one beautiful frieze carved by the owner.'

After the fire that gutted the interior, the hall was combined with the dining room to create a single large room, now known as the



↑ *Fig 4:* The staircase with solid elm treads was made by Blow for Little Ridge, then given to him by Lord Margadale when the house was enlarged to become Fonthill House (subsequently demolished). Pewter plates and armour are displayed in the hall below

Big Hall, and, in the long room at the end of the house, the wooden ceiling was replaced with plaster. Fortunately, there were, in those days, still plenty of people working on the land to rush to the aid of the house. As the Blows gave a party for the tenants every year, rolling up the William Morris tapestry was nothing new and could be done quickly.

The mood of the interior relied on the character of the materials, simply worked: unlike Lutyens, Blow was at pains to prevent his personality obtruding itself in quirks of design. But the austerity was, and is, relieved by moments of richness (*Figs 2 and 3*), provided, for example, by a 17th-century royal coat-of-arms. Although some tapestries were lost, a set from Mortlake was rescued, as was one of the 'Primavera' series, designed by

‘The austerity was relieved by moments of richness, such as a royal coat of arms ,

Burne-Jones and woven by Morris's firm.

The staircase (*Fig 4*), with its wide, solid treads, without bannisters or ornament, still takes visitors to the bedrooms, all of which face south. But at this level, the rooms were all gutted. Rebuilding them at all was a challenge, given the shortage of materials after the Second World War, and the panelling had to be made from coffin boards; Blow might have appreciated the unaffected character

of the solution. They are set off by dazzling textiles introduced by the present Detmar's mother, Helga de Silva, from Sri Lanka.

Hilles keeps the 21st century at arm's length. But, in the early days, backward-looking romanticism did not preclude social experiment. Blow puzzled the county by running his little kingdom on 'sovietic' lines, and his wife did everything herself for the children, the nurse being 'merely an understudy'. Naughty children were corrected by means of persuasion, example and kindness, causing, according to Lytton, 'a period of monstrous anarchy between the years of five and ten'. There was no nursery to keep the young Blows out of the way of the rest of the family nor conventional servants' quarters. For a time, family and servants ate >



↑ *Fig 5: Memorial to Detmar, begun by his widow in 1947. The lower part was designed by Oliver Hill and frames a view to Gloucester Cathedral where the two are buried. It was roofed in memory of Isabella Blow after her death in 2007, to a design by Roderick Gradidge*



An ideal in architecture

Detmar Blow at Hilles (*above*), and a sketch of the belfry of Clare Church, Suffolk (*right*), which he restored. Inspired by Ruskin, whom he accompanied to the Alps, Blow began his career as one of the most radical of Arts-and-Crafts architects, apprenticed to a builder and heavily engaged in SPAB. Built slowly, using local materials, Hilles embodies the romantic Toryism Blow shared with his wife, and provided a refuge from the harsh world of the 20th century.



together in the kitchen, at separate tables, but sharing the same food and some of the same conversation—a practice that was eventually dropped, to the relief of both parties.

As the Blows were agnostics, daily prayers were abolished; folk culture, however, had a kind of sanctity in Arts-and-Crafts households, so each morning, the children sang a hymn or a folksong in the hall before starting work. The two maids and the odd man as often as not joined in, too. Generally, there was country dancing after tea, with the servants helping to make up the sets. But Blow, with a Church of England living in his gift, did not neglect the established Church: he supported the parson because he was part of the traditional fabric of the countryside.

His attitude to the farm, which could be seen from the front door of the house, was



↑ *Fig 6: Hilles, on a bluff looking towards the Severn estuary, is the paradise created by idealistic Arts-and-Crafts architect Detmar Blow*


equally romantic. ‘Having had a terrible struggle to acquire his own small fortune’, he was ‘determined that those who live by the land and on the land should have no other enemies but fickle Nature and still more fickle politics.’ Consequently, he only charged his farmer a peppercorn rent. It was not, however, the way to prosper, or to maintain the position in the world to which his wife, however liberal she may have been in some ways, felt her family background demanded.

Blow’s lack of business sense led to disaster. When the First World War put an end to the flow of grand country-house commissions on which he had relied, he became increasingly drawn into the orbit of the 2nd Duke of Westminster. ‘Bendor’ was a capricious man; Blow,

in commercial matters, a naïve one. He had already scandalised some of his Arts-and-Crafts friends by taking a Frenchman, Fernand Billerey, as a partner. Trouble was now made by the Duke’s third wife, who detested the court by which she saw her husband as being surrounded. In his mid sixties, Blow was ignominiously dismissed and, unable to gain access again to his former patron and friend, retired to Gloucestershire a broken man.

Since Blow’s death, Hilles has continued to inspire artists, writers and designers (*Fig 5*). The present Detmar is a barrister-turned-art dealer, his late wife, Issie, was a famous figure in the fashion world: their magnetism attracted some of the most dazzling figures from fashion and the Arts, including Philip

Treacy, Alexander McQueen, Tracey Emin and Bryan Ferry. His sister, the fashion designer Selina Blow, lives on the estate.

The spirit is captured by a story that used to be told by the late Lynn Chadwick, the sculptor, who rented a cottage at Hilles after the Second World War. When local people commiserated with Winifred Blow over the fire, she turned to her younger daughter Lucilla to say: ‘We would have gladly sacrificed a member of the family—wouldn’t we Lucilla?’ Lucilla replied: ‘Yes, Mummy.’ Hilles is more than an ordinary house. 

Hilles House, Edge, Gloucestershire, can be hired for weddings and celebrations. Telephone 07745 804900 or visit www.hilleshouse.co.uk