

Dr Mervyn Miller revisits 'Wylde's' Connecticut



'Wylde's' Connecticut



Joan 'Ning' Rich at 'Wylde's'



The living room at 'Wylde's'

Last October, after attending a conference on urban planning history in Portland, Maine, I took the coastal Amtrak train through the glorious New England Fall to New London, Connecticut. Here I renewed my acquaintance with Raymond Unwin's granddaughter Joan 'Ning' Rich and her husband, Norman, a retired professor from Brown University. It was almost 30 years ago that I met her mother, Peggy Unwin Hitchcock, who had lived at 'Wylde's' with her elder brother Edward, after Raymond Unwin had been appointed Consultant Architect to Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust in 1906.

Peggy, who had a dark Pre-Raphaelite intensity as a girl, met Curtice Hitchcock, when he visited 'Wylde's' as secretary to Edward A. Filene, Boston department store owner and philanthropist. Filene funded an investigative committee on social policy, who came over to Europe in the wake of President Woodrow Wilson's Peace Delegation to Versailles in the Summer of 1919. First impressions were lasting, and Curtice, who had obtained a

post teaching economics at Chicago University, returned to marry Peggy the following year, in a civil ceremony at Hampstead Town Hall.

Raymond Unwin developed professional and academic contacts with the United States and there were frequent visits, particularly after the early death of his son, Edward, in 1936. That same year, Raymond Unwin was appointed Visiting Professor of City and Regional Planning at Columbia University, New York. In August 1939, as ever accompanied by his wife, Ettie (Ethel Parker, elder sister of Barry) he sailed for New York, to prepare for the new academic year: the Second World War broke out shortly after his arrival. In Spring 1940 he fell ill and died on June 28, in a clapboarded cottage, close to the Hitchcocks' summer home in Old Lyme, Connecticut. It was 1943 before Ettie succeeded in obtaining a passage home: she died at 'Wylde's' in 1949.

'Ning' first visited her grandparents at the age of three, and on the next visit, two years later (when her brother John

Raymond was a baby) remembers 'when Granddaddy took me up to Whitestone Pond to sail a toy boat, and I fell in'.

During the later 1930s the Unwins regular visits to the United States strengthened the bonds and in Spring 1939, she accompanied her grandparents on a tour of cities across the country (and into Canada for a family visit). She was 11 at the time, and recorded her impressions in a diary and photographs. She was nothing if not frank (but rather proud of the celebrity of her grandfather, who was feted by the great and the good representatives of socially progressive thought, at each stopover). Typically the tour also included craft guilds, including Cranbrook, Michigan.

March 31: Prof. Whittemoor took us to Detroit. It's an awful place, worse than New York... Grandpop gave a talk. We saw the slums. Then Prof. Whittemoor took us to Cranbrook to see a school where they teach different arts. I thought we'd never get out of the architect part. Mr [Eliel] Saarinen showed us around.

April 1: We have just left Ann Arbor. I know all about housing. I've heard 4 lectures and oh was I bored.

Ning now recalls it as a wonderful trip, which opened her eyes to social and housing problems on a national scale. That family concern for social equity was passed down through the generations. During the late 1970s I struck up correspondence with Peggy Unwin Hitchcock, who provided me with many insights into the Unwins' family life as I commenced work on my PhD. Peggy had worked for the Unitarian Service Committee to develop modern education programmes in Korea and Cambodia in the late 1950s/early 1960s. For many years, she served on the Lyme Planning and Zoning Board and was President of the local League of Women Voters.

Curtice died young. I hadn't realised until my recent visit how important he was in pressing for the adoption of an Emergency Naval Housing Program, after America entered the War in 1917. This laid the ground for the revival of state aided public

housing under the Roosevelt New Deal in the early 1930s.

Ning didn't visit 'Wylde's' again until 1950, shortly after Ettie Unwin's death, and the house was presided over by Aunt Jane (Jennie Unwin, Edward Unwin's widow).

'Of course the war kept us apart until 1950, when I lived there for about 5-6 months at which point I joined an old friend in Highgate. Norman and I met at 'Wylde's' and were married in the

Hampstead Registry Office, where my parents also had married'.

The house at Grassy Hill, Lyme has now passed to Ning; it was built mid 18th century, and its elegant timber framing and clapboarding conceal a rugged stone chimney and fireplaces at its heart. The beamed rooms and open stair recall, not only 'Wylde's' itself, but also the early sketches made by Parker and Unwin of 'the Artisan's Living Room'. The dining table is a robust oak trestle table designed by Raymond Unwin for 'Wylde's', and was made by Stanley Parker, Barry's Craftsman brother, who had been educated at Bedales.

In the restoration of the building, Peggy acted as her own architect. The spirit that designed Letchworth Garden City and Hampstead Garden Suburb, and which created the 'plain living and high thinking' at 'Wylde's', seems to have been handed through the generations, to flourish in the distinctive ambience of its American cousin in Connecticut.

DR MERVYN MILLER



Peggy Unwin



Raymond and Ettie Unwin

in-fringe-ment, n. violation or breakage of law or agreement. (Sp in **Hampstead Garden Suburb** - nasty things done to houses eg: georgian doors, plastic windows, painted tiles, unauthorised dormers, paved gardens, satellite dishes, etc.)

Correcting infringements makes a major difference

There are lots of 'infringements' known to the Trust which were perpetrated some time ago when householders were less likely to be stopped. Reinstating the original features improves both the property and the Suburb. The Trust actively encourages residents to put things right especially when houses change hands and new owners are keen to improve the appearance of their new homes.



Inappropriate concrete wall and paving replaced by characteristic privet hedge and lawn. (The front door is to be reinstated in the original style shortly.)



Ugly plastic windows and porch replaced by attractive timber windows appropriate to the building.



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