

History of a House

Documents

Plans

Drawings

Photographs

Compiled by J. M. A. Aretz

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How it all began..

When you move into an older house you cannot help wondering about its history and the people you lived there before you. It was a chance event which got me started to look into Larksciff Court's history. My wife Fiona and I acquired what was then known as Flat 6 Larksciff Court in 1980. We soon became very good friends with a couple who were lessees of Flat No. 1, Bob and Joan Springett.

In September 1981 Bob Springett noticed an elderly gentleman standing outside his garden looking at the house. He asked him if he could help him and the

gentleman told him that he had been brought up in 'Larkscliff' as it was known then. The conversation continued inside the Springetts' flat over a few cups of tea. The gentleman introduced himself as Robert Bolton, son of Arthur T. Bolton, the architect and first owner. In February 1982 Robert Bolton wrote to the Springetts thanking them for their hospitality and enclosed in his letter three photographs from the very early years of 'Larkscliff'. The letter and photographs are reproduced in the Appendix.

Researching Arthur T. Bolton I found that he has been a well known architect and scholar of art and architectural history. More details of his life and work can be obtained from the biographical entry in the 'Dictionary for Art Historians' also contained in the Appendix.

Many years later I was offered an off-print of an article, originally published in 1909, in the influential journal 'Architectural Review' (still published today) featuring 'Larkscliff' which contained, to my delight more photographs and above all floor plans. This off-print has been included in the Appendix as well. Doing more research on the architect I came across another publication 'Smaller Country Houses of To-day' which was published in three volumes in 1910. It was popular enough to have three editions the last one in 1922. Chapter XX in Volume 1 is an article on 'Larkscliff' with more illustrations. It is reproduced in the Appendix as well as the whole Volume I.

The Time Line:

From the documents we have so far collected we know that the original house was built in 1906. Robert Bolton's letter reveals that his father added the North-East Wing, facing The Parade in the late 1920s. The South-East Wing, facing the access alley way at the back, was built after the A. T. Bolton sold the property in 1930.

Thanks to files I discovered at the Birchington Heritage Trust we have learned that 'Larkcliff' became a residential hotel and club at around the same time. In the Appendix is a proof-copy of an estate agent's sales brochure from 1951 containing a description as well as two interior and two exterior views. It also tells us that the flat-roofed extension at the back was built in 1936 to provide additional guest rooms bringing the total up to 20.

There was also an all-weather ("en-tout-cas") tennis court in the area occupied today by the house "Highview on the corner of Alfred Road. In the early 1960s 'Larkscliff' was converted into seven flats and renamed 'Larkscliff Court'.

While the transformation from family home to hotel changed the use of the house, it did not interfere with the structure and fabric of the building. The conversion into flats was, however, not such a benign process. The developer chose to divide the building horizontally into four ground floor flats among which

the garden areas were divided. Outside staircases provide access to two of the three first floor flats, which share the attic on the second floor. The third first floor flat had an indoor staircase access at the 'cost' of a room on the ground and 1st floor. It has meanwhile been rejoined with the ground floor flat below turning them into a semi-detached house.

The last major change to Larksciff Court was an extension built to the North-Eastern wing on The Parade frontage. It was well designed and built in a way sympathetic to the old building and a casual observer would never know that it is some 90 years younger than the original North-Eastern wing.

This history is not complete. I shall keep looking and hope others will contribute. We do have, however, enough material to produce this DVD, a copy of which is presented to our neighbours and co-owners. Another copy has been deposited with the Birchington Heritage Trust.

Tracing, collating and presenting this material was a very satisfying task. If other people get some enjoyment from looking at the documents and illustrations it will have been even more worthwhile.

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J.M.A. Aretz

Larksciff Court, Birchington

November 2011

From "The Architectural Review " , 1909

ARTHUR T. BOLTON, Architect, LONDON.

LARKSCLIFF, BIRCHINGTON, KENT: A SEASIDE HOME IN THANET. This house has been built as a family home by the sea, and its plan and construction are to be understood from that point of view.

The Oblong plan affords the maximum of sunlight, and allows of a wide unobstructed view over the sea; there are in fact two direct sea frontages. The house stands on a quarter-acre plot on the edge of a chalk pit, which forms a sunk valley garden and gives shelter from the prevailing winds. In the plan of the ground floor the place of the usual third reception room is taken by the recessed veranda and a terrace, where, protected by a sun blind, meals can be enjoyed in the open air.

The other two rooms are made intercommunicating by means of folding panel doors in view of children's parties, and various minor arrangements of the plan are provided from the same point of view.

The kitchen arrangements are unusually ample, and allow of some degree of comfort for the servant. The main kitchen is practically a servants' hall. On the bedroom floor has been provided a complete suite, consisting of bedroom, dressing-room, and bathroom for guests, or for isolation in case of illness. The nursery has a central position, and the covered balcony can be used by young children for play or sleeping in the open, whilst it also gives access to the mother's room.

In the attic is a large playroom or children's paradise formed in the roof, with a lining of fireproof slabs. The arching over the flues forms a proscenium for charades and other games.

The house is built on the chalk (on a cement concrete bed over the whole site) of Kentish stock brick covered with granite and cement roughcast, and the roof is covered with red tiles. The roof is very strongly constructed to resist the wind and weather conditions, which in this locality are severe. The floors and partitions are specially packed to deaden the noise of the children playing. The bathrooms and lavatories are tiled and have first-class sanitary fittings; there is also a liberal provision of cupboards and fittings.

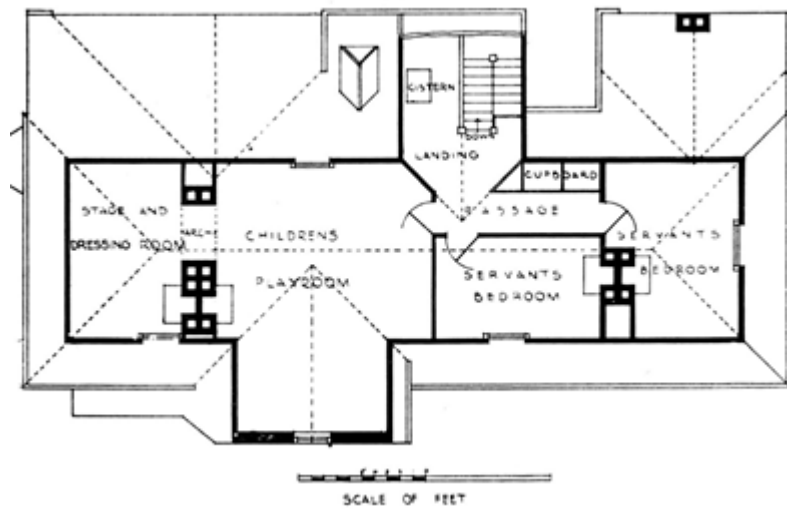
The garden is enclosed by a rough ragstone rubble wall ; the terrace wall is of flint and tile. A shelter wall has been erected at the back of the pergola, at the end of which is a seat recess. The cost may be taken as £1500 inclusive for a similar house in any ordinary locality.

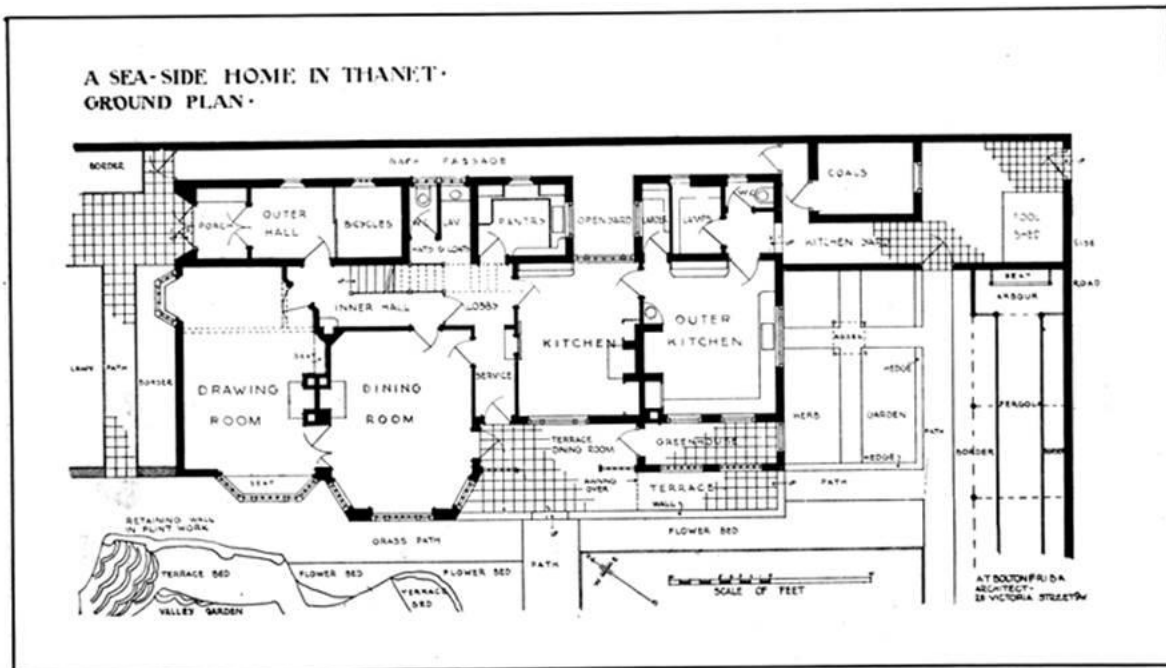


LARKSCLIFF.
BIRCHINGTON, KENT.
THE DRAWING-ROOM.

The builder was Mr. Pettman, of Birchington, and all the work was done locally, the joinery, including mantelpieces, being made in the builder's shop from the architect's details. The stock bricks came from Sittingbourne, the roof tiles from Ashford, the paving bricks were Staffordshire quarried, the flints were obtained on the site, and the Kentish rag for the rough garden walls came from Maidstone. The granite for the rough-cast came from Messrs. Herbert & Co., of Leicester, and was used with the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers' cement. The sanitary fittings are those of Morrison, Ingram & Co., Manchester; the grates are by Lockerbie & Wilkinson (who also supplied the rainwater goods) and by Bratt, Colbran & Co., while the tiles for the grates and the bathrooms, &c., were supplied by Van Straaten & Co. Kent slab roofing was used to line the attic playroom. It is noteworthy that brick and timber construction was adopted, girders being avoided in view of the heavy railway rates. Timber was conveyed by sea to Ramsgate Harbour. Among other special goods used were Carbolineum for the eaves timbers, Hall's distemper and Wildasht enamel for decorations, and silicate cotton for packing the floors and partitions. A "Jack Horner" independent copper and a "Worker" range, by Edwards & Co., London, were installed in the outer and inner kitchens respectively. The sundial and bronze initials were made

by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft from the architect's drawings, and the cherub's head over the sundial was modelled by Mr. Schacht, of Woking.





LARKSCLIFF.
BIRCHINGTON, KENT.
PLANS.

Small Country Houses of To-Day, (1922) Volume 1, Chapter XX

LARKSCLIFF, BIRCHINGTON, KENT,

Designed by Mr. Arthur T. Bolton - A Seaside Family Home - The Right use Of Rough-cast - An Outdoor Dining-room - Ali Baba's Cave — Greenhouse - Attic.

ON the edge of the chalk Cliffs at Birchington Mr. Arthur T. Bolton has built a house that is above all a family home. The site has been admirably chosen and the house so devised that, in its main outlook seawards, the view is untroubled by buildings. It stands on the chalk cliff, which, reaching round from the Dover headlands, is here about to disappear before the Thames estuary is reached. Eastwards, beyond the bungalows, is the reddish mass of Westgate, and some six miles away, the grey, chequered outline of the older Margate. Beside the house wild flowers and chalk weed grow in profusion. Larkscliff, as the house-name, has its plain meaning. The larks, their song and their secret architecture. have not yet been driven away by man's obtrusive building. Such a situation demands an architectural treatment altogether different, both structurally and aesthetically, from that of an inland house. The designer had to bear in mind that his building would be searched by every Wind that blows. Just as the cliffs are being slowly

eroded, so the sea salt would affect his walling, while the maximum allowance of brilliant sunshine, of which Thanet is so proud, calls for special provisions.



Fig 114: Larksciff from the Sands

Raging winds and driving rains are no respecters of the picturesque conventions that may rightly find their place in the seclusion of a tree-embowered site.

Whether seen in a hot sunlight across a shimmering sea, or in the pearl grey tulle of its haze, ingenious combinations of polychrome architecture would have been neither restful nor agreeable. In order to obtain the tone and texture that befit such conditions and yet resist the penetrating force of angry gales, the house was sheathed in a rough-cast of granite and cement. There is, perhaps, no treatment more apt to be misapplied than rough-casting. Mr. Bolton adopted the logical idea of it,



Fig. 115 — The Garden Front

and treated it as a protective cloak for the whole house. It is a too common practice to rough-cast isolated surfaces, leaving the brickwork of other parts uncovered. Sometimes also a brick or stone arch is left untreated to emphasise the decorative value of such constructional features. It would be unwise to dogmatise on such a question as this, for it is closely connected with the architectural needs and intention of the particular house so treated. It is safe to affirm, however, that the uniform use of rough-cast at Larksclyff was altogether wise. Not the least of the problems of rough-cast is that of colour. The mixture of sand or fine gravel with Portland cement produces a cold, dull, bluish grey tone most unattractive in itself, which is often veiled by distemper of cream or other pleasant colour. This, however, means a recurring cost, galling to the economic mind of the householder.

Mr. Bolton solved the difficulty in, having his rough-cast made of red Leicestershire granite. This is not so strong to overcome the cement and produce a pink effect, but modifies it to a warm and kindly grey. The roofing in of Kentish tiles employed in the traditional way. The eaves are restricted by remembrance of the lifting power of the gales that search the house on all sides.



Fig. 116 — The Upper Corridor



Fig. 117 — The Entrance

An essential element in the design is the outdoor dining-room, which is afforded by the verandah and terrace adjoining the dining-room. Above it, the enclosed connecting balcony is not only a practical feature, but gives a strong defining mass of shadow, which adds value to the design of the front.

Except for a sundial, the owner's initials and a date in bronze, there is an entire absence of carved ornaments. The house has grown round its plan, on the traditional lines which governed the development of the farmhouses of the county. The simple character of the exterior is helped and emphasised by the white-painted weather-boarding, which has been so judiciously used. Any sort of elaboration would have been out of place, for the intention was simple. The site included an old chalk-pit, and this presented obvious advantages, as a sunk garden escapes the gales that come so vigorously from the sea. In this vally, too, tea may be taken comfortably without the wind taking too violent liberties. For the formation of paths chalk was wanted, and was obtained by tunnelling. The inside of the cave so formed has been concreted and palisade gates put at one of its two entrances, the other being a rubble archway with a porch of stout poles brilliant in July with rambler blossoms. We have said that Larkscliff is a family house. The uses of the cave may be divined. It is the home of Robinson Crusoe, the cave of Ali Baba's brigands, the scene of high smuggling exploits, and given on occasion a Bond Street shop. An admirable feature of the garden, and one that adds greatly to the privacy of the house, is the enclosing wall of rough flint and

quarry tiles that looms large in one of the illustrations Fig. 117). As befits a tall in Thanet, it is built in the Roman manner. Tiles in flint walls have a great decorative value, but like all good ornament they have a strong structural significance. At Larkscliff the greenhouses difficulty has been cleverly overcome. There is no question that greenhouses are the bane of an architect's life, and on no other question is the garden-loving client so likely to come into conflict with the architect. In big houses they can be exiled to a walled garden, but in the case of a site of a quarter acre the difficulty is insistent. At the right-hand end of the garden front are two large, round-headed windows (Fig. 115). These light the, little conservatory, which also has windows at the two ends. The space thus afforded is enough in proportion to the small garden, and though it lacks a top light, it is, an admirable compromise between a conservatory which would be a blot on the house and none at all. The windows in its back wall give added light to the kitchen, which is however, adequately lit otherwise. This brings us inside the house and at the domestic end. The kitchen arrangements are much more ample than is usual in a of this size. The inner kitchen, in fact, is a servants' hall, and the domestics thus enjoy an uncommon degree of comfort.

The reception rooms are two only, the place of the third being taken by the open-air dining-room. They can, however be turned into one for children's as there are connected by folding paneling.

Other practical features of this well-thought-out plan are the children's lavatory on the ground floor and the small room by the, front door that takes the wheeled transport of the family. It is a great advantage to get this accommodation at the front rather than the back of the house, and at Larkscliff there many wheels of all sizes to be considered. The plan of the bedroom floor provides a complete suite of bedroom, dressing-room and bathroom, either for guests or for isolation in case of illness — a thoughtful provision.



Fig. 120 — From Drawing-Room to Dining-Room

Once more, on the principle of juniors priores, the nursery has the central position of the garden front.

The covered balcony is available for the little ones, either for play or as an open-air bedroom, while it also gives access to their mother's room. It is, however, on the top floor of this children' home that they find their paradise. The attic is given up as a playroom, and lined throughout with fireproof slabs. The arching• over the flues forms a natural proscenium for dramas more stately and ordered than belong to the robbers' cave in the garden.

The plan should be studied, for it is the outcome of much thought directed to producing a workable house. Its construction even recognised the age of the majority of its inhabitants. The floors and partition, where specially packed with sound-proof material to deaden the noise of the young folk, who can enjoy their holidays unchecked and without undue reference to the nerves of their elders.

Bolton, Arthur Thomas

Born: 1864, London - Died: 1945, London From *Dictionary for Art Historians*

Architectural historian; curator of Sir John Sloan's Museum; co-founder of the Wren Society. Bolton was the son of Thomas Bolton (1819—1895), a lawyer, and Emily Wildman (1831—

1906). He attended Haileybury College before entering University College, London, in 1882. In 1884 he apprenticed to the architect Sir Robert W. Edis (1839-1927), continuing to study architecture at the Architectural Association between 1885 and 1888. He formed his own private practice in 1890 designing minor works and some county home estates and gardens. In 1888 he was elected an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), becoming fellow in 1909.

In 1893 Bolton was awarded the Soane medallion for a railway terminal design. Bolton began writing architectural history during this time, earning the REA's silver medal for an architectural history essay, *The Influence of Literature on Architecture* in 1895. He married Harriet Barnes Fall (1863—1944) in 1897. In 1901 Bolton became the first headmaster (principal) of the day school formed for the Architectural Association. Bolton was elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1914. He succeeded Walter L. Spiers (1848-1917) as curator of Sir John Soane's Museum in 1917.

He fought hard for most of the 1920's to preserve Soane's masterwork, the Bank of England, from demolition, ultimately the interior renovation of Herbert Baker (1862-1946) prevailed.

Bolton published extensively on the museum, raising interest among scholars and architectural historians. In addition, a two- volume work on the Adam brothers, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam* appeared in 1922. In 1923 he joined H. Duncan Hendry (b. 1890) as co-editor of the Wren Society publications, an initiative to publish documents and drawing of Christopher Wren's life and work. Bolton published another book on Soane, *The Works of Sir John Soane*, in 1924.

The architect Sir Lawrence Weaver (1876-1930) invited Bolton to design an Adam room for the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. A biography of Soane, *The Portrait of Sir John Soane*, was published in 1927 and Soane's lectures to the Royal Academy on Architecture, edited by Bolton, appeared in 1929.

In 1930 Bolton discovered a fifth volume of Wren drawings in All Souls College Library, Oxford, and in 1935 the first model of St. Paul's Cathedral.

Beginning in the 1930s Bolton added the work of architect Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) to his research interests, but he was never able to publish on him. Bolton suffered a heart attack on the platform of Queensway London underground station in London in 1945 and died. He was succeeded at the Soane Museum by John Summerson (q.v.).

Bolton was better known for his scholarship than his architecture. His architectural commissions included Sanitas Company, Limehouse, 1900 and the offices for the Hamburg-Amerika Line, London, 1906—8, a country home in Hurtwood, Sussex and in the Usk valley, 1912-1914.