

HASKOLL & COMPANY

A R C H I T E C T S & D E S I G N C O N S U L T A N T S

39 HARRINGTON GARDENS, LONDON, SW1 4JU

This attractive and delightful house, now the headquarters of Architects and Designers, Haskoll & Company, was built as the home of Sir William Schwenk Gilbert and his beloved wife, Lucy Agnes Turner.

They lived here from 1883 to 1890 and it is believed it cost him £19,000, which sum represented his shares of the profits from the light operetta, 'Patience' for which he, of course, wrote the libretto and Arthur Seymour Sullivan wrote the music.

His family arms and crest appeared over the doorway, carved on a shield of stone and supported by birds held by cupids.

The house was specially designed for him by the fashionable Architect Practice of George and Peto, and includes many personalised features.

The elevations of the building are designed in a bold, flamboyant Flemish style framed by massive chimney stacks. The main gable has 19 steps with a fine galleon at the culmination which is not, as some thought, a reference to HMS Pinafore, but more likely a romantic reference to Gilbert's possible descendancy from the Elizabethan seafarer Sir Humphrey Gilbert, founder of the first English colony in North America.

After passing through the outer lobby the visitor reaches the spacious oak-panelled hall, the first of a number of particular attractive rooms. It has a beamed ceiling and, as a special feature, a large stone ingle fire place with Gilbert's and his wife's initials carved on the mantle.

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It is said it was here Gilbert smoked his hams and perhaps studied the fine collection of hand-painted Delft tiles which provide the backcloth to the ingle.

The Holbeinesque painted glass window in the hall, with the initials of GG, is another striking feature. It was supplied by Lavers and Westlake.

On the right is the dining room, originally decorated by Howard and Sons. It again has fine oak panelling and a fine curved beam ceiling which rests appropriately on carved corbels depicting the joys of food.

At the rear facing the garden and to the south is the drawing room with two large stone-mullioned bay windows. This room has particularly elegant proportions, rosewood panelling, delicate strapwork ceiling decoration and a very striking hooded alabaster chimney piece with a 16th century theme.

The doors to the drawing room from the hall are interesting in that they are panelled in oak on one side and rosewood on the other, and even more no doubt for the mottoes written over:

"And those things do best please me, that befall
prepost'rously".

There is another over the door to the dining room which says:

"All hope abandon, ye who enter here".

The second is a quotation from Dante's Inferno.

From the hall the gentle rising stair has steps made of single blocks of oak, and oak serpent-carved S-shaped balusters and heavily decorated newels. A fine example of a staircase of its type and time.

Off the staircase at the half-landing there is a charming little room with a delightful oriel window overlooking the hall. It is not now certain what this room was used for but probably it was the boudoir.

On the first floor the Billiard Room was at the front, together with Gilbert's bedroom and adjoining bathroom to the rear but the most significant room is undoubtedly Gilbert's oak panelled study and library. The study has a stone corner fire place, high oak panelling, decorated ceiling, a frieze of leather paper, as well as double glazing, no doubt to ensure he had peace to think. The frieze now only has gold decorations but was originally in red and gold, and is the only remaining example in the house. Originally there were leather paper decorations in the main hall and the dining room.

The floors above constitute comprehensive bedrooms and bathrooms, no doubt for relations, guests and staff. The numbers of them must have been a talking point, for Beatrice Potter's gossip of the day fantasised that Gilbert had 26 bedrooms with bathrooms and mused on the thought of 26 burst water pipes!

It certainly is true that Gilbert did provide himself with the latest amenities, for what with the double glazing in his study, electric lighting, central heating and a telephone, the house seems more like one of this century than the last. For the electric lighting he obtained an estimate from R.E. Crompton and Company for £600 for an eight-horsepower Crossley engine with a Crompton-Burgin dynamo to supply 77 Swan electric lamps.

The house was built by Messrs Stephens and Bastow of Bristol and designed by Architects Ernest George and Harold Peto. In reality, although it was Peto that Gilbert knew, it was really George who did most of the design.

Sir Ernest George (b 1839 - d 1922) made his name not like other eminent Victorian Architects in great public buildings but through country houses, although probably his best years were between 1871 and 1890 when he was in practice with Harold Peto.

He was much travelled, especially to the Low Countries, and there can be no doubt that this formed the basis of the Flemish and Dutch influences in the house. He was a brilliant water colourist and draughtsman and attracted young aspiring architects to his office, architects of the calibre of Lutyens, Herbert Baker, Dawber and Schultz Weir.

In 1896 he was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architect's Gold Medal and became its President in 1908. The buildings for which he was responsible include, in addition to the group of town houses in Harrington Gardens and Collingham Gardens, Claridges Hotel (1894), The Royal Academy of Music (1910) and Southward Bridge (1915).

Although Gilbert was not an admirer of Shakespeare, he did use a quotation from that bard on the wall mounted sundial framing the garden:

"Lord what fools these mortals be".

In this remarkable mansion, Gilbert wrote three of his most famous operas (The Mikado, The Yeoman of the Guard and The Gondoliers), and two less famous ones (Princess Ida and Ruddigore), seated comfortably in an armchair in his study.*

So pronounced was the success of The Mikado that there was no need for the partners to think of their next opera for some time to come. Gilbert settled down quietly to enjoy his London home, which became the scene of marvellous children's parties, when he would stuff them with sweets, load them with presents, take the lead in their games, and behave like Santa Claus and Mr Maskelyne rolled into one.

Gilbert preferred to entertain a few carefully selected friends from home, when he would relate amusing stories in a dry quiet voice or flirt with the prettiest woman present, telling his wife, when she laughingly protested, that he was "too good to be true".

This house, and no other, is therefore a Mecca of all true Gilbertians.

* Gilbert and Sullivan, a biography by Hesketh Pearson (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1935)

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