

LEIGHTON HOUSE, KENSINGTON

By C. F. STELL

Leighton House in Holland Park Road, Kensington¹, was the home of Frederick Lord Leighton from 1866 until his death in 1896. As would be expected with an owner of his eminence the house as it stands to-day is a series of additions and modifications to the original design, each increasing the accommodation and the grandeur of the earlier house. The building was designed by George Aitchison, a lifelong friend of Leighton, and is a good example of this architect's advanced style, for even in the first almost unambitious design the house stood in the forefront of domestic architecture for its detail and for the way in which its layout was made to fit so well the character and needs of its occupant; an undertaking, perhaps, only capable of achievement where architect and client are on such intimate terms. Artists' houses were to become fairly common in Kensington in the 1870s. Val Princep's house, designed by Philip Webb, is a precedent; but although not the first, Leighton House is none the less an important early solution to a still novel requirement.

Some indication of the original design is to be found in a description in 'The Building News' for 9th and 30th November, 1866, which is accompanied by small-scale plans and sketches. The whole house was not to be completed at once but the extensions allowed for were very moderate in comparison with what was finally carried out. The style is described as 'Classical, of a type especially dear to a painter,—the Venetian', but this only really applies to the major ornament of the staircase hall with its columns and projecting impost blocks, the most part being an unmistakable though very advanced product of its own age. Externally, the house is treated as two almost separate units, the front block facing the road, and the rear overlooking the garden—a division emphasized by the separation of the roofs over the two blocks although internally there is no marked division. In the first arrangement the ground-floor plan was unambitious. The front door was placed in what was to be the centre of the completed frontage, opening into a narrow passage, flanked on the right by the breakfast room and on the left by the proposed extension where the library now stands. At the end of the passage the staircase hall with dining room and drawing room off it are unchanged, but the entrance passage and breakfast room have been completely altered. The first floor contains the more important accommodation, the whole of the rear of the house being occupied by the artist's studio. In the centre of the north wall of this room is the principal window, made with a light cast-iron frame; and although the sketches of 1866 show a more substantial construction there is no evidence, and it seems unlikely, that it was ever carried out. At the eastern end of the studio stood a gallery, moved in subsequent extensions, and at the opposite end a large apse with, to the left of it, a tall narrow door through which the massive canvases might be passed directly outside. The only other major room envisaged for this floor was a simple bedroom with a dressing room—the only sleeping apartment the house contained apart from the servants' rooms on the second floor. The kitchen and offices were in the basement. A service staircase, behind the principal one, rises through all floors, but the plans which show it as once also providing direct access between the bedroom and studio on the first floor are unlikely to be entirely correct.

George Aitchison was particularly interested in colour and detail, and it is in these that we find the evidence of that reforming zeal which he brought to bear on this aspect of architecture. Throughout the house the fireplaces strike one as unusual either in their position—some of them are placed directly below the window sills—or in their design. The dining room fireplace is particularly noteworthy with its upper shelf supported by

¹ I am greatly indebted to the Chief Librarian of Kensington for permission to revisit Leighton House, and to Mr. Hart for his invaluable assistance.

The following publications have been found to contain much useful information:

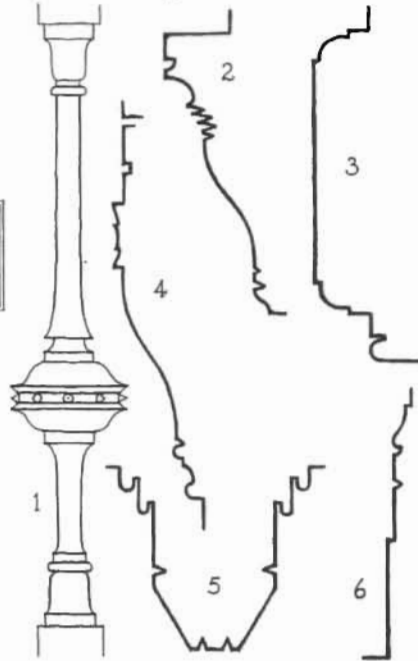
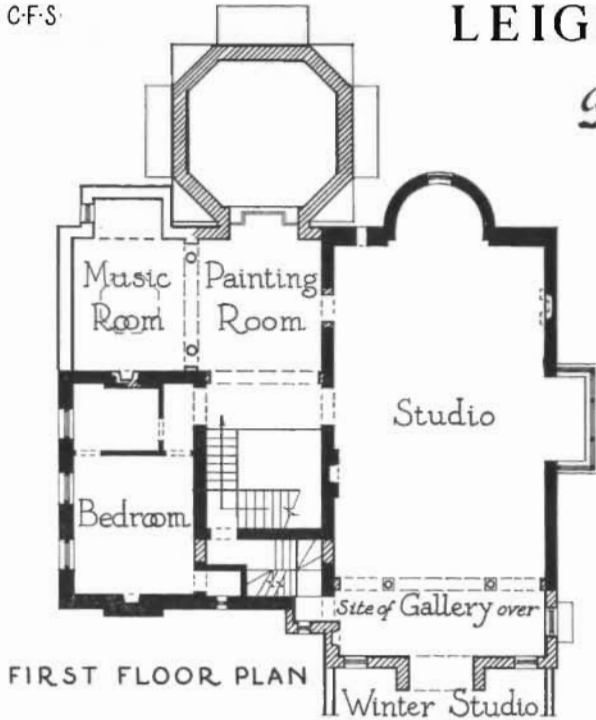
Adams, M. B., *Artists' Homes* (1883).

Rhys, E., *Frederick Lord Leighton*, 3rd Edition (1900).

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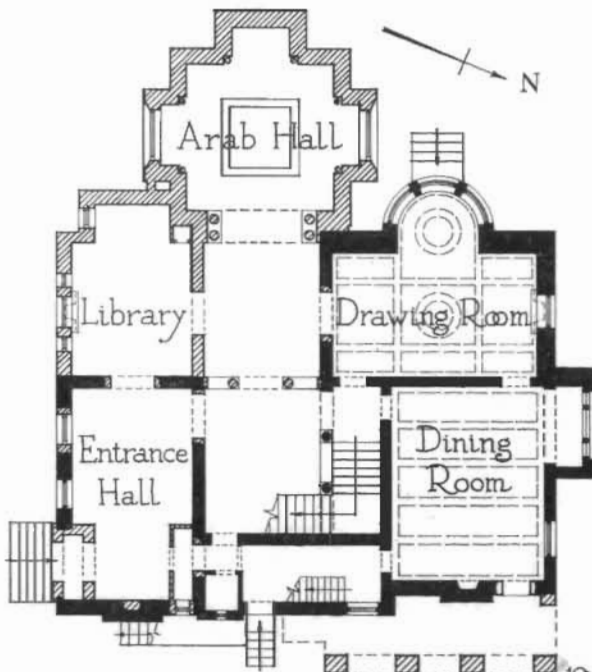
LEIGHTON HOUSE

Kensington



DETAILS OF MOULDINGS &
not to Scale

- 1 BALUSTER FROM PRINCIPAL STAIRCASE
- 2 ARCHITRAVE OF STUDIO DOOR
- 3 TYPICAL ARCHITRAVE
- 4 PANEL MOULDING - DRAWING RM DOOR
- 5 CEILING BEAM OVER STAIRCASE
- 6 SKIRTING IN STUDIO



- 1866
- ▨ ADDITIONS, TO 1879
- LATER ADDITIONS, TO 1896

Scale for Plans

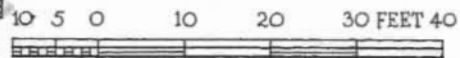


Fig. 1. Leighton House, Kensington. Plans and details of mouldings

griffins bearing shields. The staircase balusters too are of a very individual design, more suitable for cast-iron than painted pitch pine. The mouldings employed throughout the house are of the greatest consequence, showing a complete breakaway from that debased classical tradition that had become standard practice. They are based simply on the requirements of light and shade, with grooves and deep V-shaped incisions to give shadow, separated by only slightly undulating surfaces. Where a more peaceful treatment was required in the panel mouldings of the drawing room doors, the inner and outer members were finely reeded with an occasional cross reeding, giving an appearance of delicate ripples. In all these the mouldings were to be treated in plain colours, but colour, ornament and moulding combine in most of the door architraves. These have a flat surface to take panels of incised ornament picked out with occasional touches of gold shining out from the black background. The frequent use of black paint relieved with gold is a feature of much of Aitchison's work, and here black is used throughout for doors, skirtings and architraves. However, colour was also liberally applied; the report of 1866 notes that the beams over the columns at the foot of the staircase 'were painted of a peculiar blue' as were the floor of the drawing room and the gallery columns in the studio. The floor and ceiling-beams in the dining room were painted a dull red. A later account notes that the walls of the studio were painted an Indian red and that the woodwork was, as elsewhere, black. Further ornamentation of the house by paintings is indicated by the mention of an oil sketch by De La Croix set as a circular ceiling panel in the drawing room, with a broad border of gold; only the latter now remains.

The studio has been altered and enlarged at various times. The original gallery was situated to the west of the present columns which mark the site of the former end wall. Subsequently, and probably soon after the completion of the building, the studio was extended to the east and the gallery rebuilt; beyond this extension lies the much later iron and glass Winter Studio together with additions of the present century. This first extension of the studio to the east includes two windows (now internal owing to the later building) which are of importance as the first sign of that Arabian interest that was to culminate in the building of the Arab Hall. The two windows were designed by George Aitchison and coloured drawings of them, dated 15th February, 1870, exist in the R.I.B.A. Library. As Leighton made a tour in the East in 1868 it is possible that these windows result from it, and show an early awakening of the oriental interest which was to be further stimulated by his second tour in 1873. It was this latter tour and the collection of oriental tiles which he then formed which inspired him to employ Aitchison to design for him a hall based on drawings made specially by the architect in Moorish Spain. This hall and its approaches were to be the setting for his collection, though not only that, for their decoration includes much contemporary work, notably a frieze designed by Walter Crane. The hall was finished in 1879 and it marks the completion of a programme of alterations affecting the whole character of the ground floor. In these the breakfast room had been swept away and the front door, now placed at one end of the street frontage, gives access to a large entrance-hall at the far end of which stands the library. The date of the addition of the library is uncertain, but it probably preceded the building of the Arab Hall. It was a single storey addition and, although extending the frontage to the length originally proposed, it does not attempt to repeat the earlier window treatment. Its erection probably coincided with the alterations to the entrance-hall. The Painting Room above the vestibule to the Arab Hall has a small gallery which overlooks the Hall. This room and the Music Room are lit from above. The latter is probably the last addition to be made to the house during Lord Leighton's lifetime, and was designed to take his collection of pictures by fellow artists. It is illustrated in a coloured drawing in the R.I.B.A. collection dated April, 1896, a month after Leighton's death, in which the walls are shown painted an olive green and the woodwork black. Externally the wall cresting of the Arab Hall is carried around this extension.

From this brief description it will be seen that, in spite of the remarkable Arabian additions for which the house is justly famous, its real importance lies in the attempt made by the architect to break away, so far as an age of revival would permit, from the

accepted clichés of stylistic detail. In 1864 Aitchison is found expressing criticism of the copying of past styles ('On Iron as a Building Material'—R.I.B.A. Transactions, 29th February, 1864) and the originality and life which he put into his mouldings and colour schemes were as much an innovation as was the architectural style of John Soane. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that like Soane, Aitchison found few disciples to continue his experiments.