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The West Country

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ESMOND AND SUSIE BULMER'S new house in Somerset is a happy union of three perennial ideas in architecture. The first is the pavilion or trianon, a smallish building of exceptional charm, such as the *pavillons de plaisir* around Paris that gave their name to Cyril Connolly's enchanting but now forgotten book. The second is what is rudely described as bungalow eating—transforming the proverbial ugly duckling into an object of beauty. The third is the house on a series of levels, cascading down a hillside to take advantage of glorious views.

More than this, The Pavilion is a meeting of three minds, the Bulmers as clients and William Bertram as architect. For years, Mr Bulmer chaired the family cider business and also served as a longstanding Tory MP and member of the executive committee of the National Trust. They have transformed a series of compact architectural *chef d'oeuvres* into comfortable homes. The first was a casino or hunting lodge by Sir William Chambers in the Golden Valley in Herefordshire, close to the family apple orchards. The second was an icon of Palladianism: the quadrangular stables by Colen Campbell that sit in the park of Studley Royal near Ripon in North Yorkshire. The third is here, The Pavilion at Redlynch, Somerset.

Mr Bertram is best known for his work for The Prince of Wales, but, to some extent, is an architect operating beneath the radar, less known than Quinlan Terry or Francis Johnson, but with an impressive number of imaginative and unusual houses to his name. Like Lutyens, he is imbued with a Puckish sense of fun and is architecturally a wild card, with Arts-and-Crafts kings in his pack as well as Classical ones. His projects can begin as quick sketches and often evolve, as here, in a series of amusing exchanges on postcards, as well as during lively lunches.

Based in Bath, his long experience has also made him a master of building materials and how they weather and he has a mason's knowledge of where to find and how to dress the best building stones in distinctive and durable ways.

Mrs Bulmer's parents were given a house to restore by Rennie Hoare at Stourhead and she wanted to return to her roots.

The house the Bulmers consequently bought in 2007, and which has become The Pavillion, stands on a steeply rising hillside above the site of one of England's many lost country houses, Redlynch Park. It was dramatically burnt down by Suffragettes in 1914. The original house by the Somerset master

→ *Fig 1: Like a ziggurat, the house rises in a dramatic cascade of terraces, each overlooking the garden*

A West Country ziggurat

*The Pavilion, Redlynch Park, Somerset
Home of Esmond and Susie Bulmer*

A bungalow has been reworked in spectacular form to create a modern country house. Marcus Binney is impressed by the result

Photographs by Paul Highnam





↑ Fig 2: The Pavilion enjoys spectacular views over Somerset and the Dorset Downs



↑ Fig 3: A view across the lower hall, with its timber and inlaid marble floor



↑ Fig 4: The drawing-room chimneypiece, with its Morse code message in Classical ornament, spelling Esmond and Susie

mason Nathaniel Ireson was not rebuilt. What survives are the former stables and servants' wing remodelled by Lutyens, which form a pair of apparently matching wings in the manner of the famous Villa Lante in Italy (or, nearer to home, the Inigo Jones wings at Stoke Bruerne in Northamptonshire).

The existing modern house the Bulmers bought was then known as Foxhill and had been built by an international lawyer in 1996. His single-storey entrance front, with swept-forward centre, was distantly based on the famous Amalienburg pavilion outside Munich and the bricks had even been made in Bavaria. Mr Bulmer's firm instruction to Mr Bertram was to turn

a goose into a swan. Mr Bertram wickedly says that the house was 'in the neo-Georgian telephone-exchange idiom'.

After his initial visit, Mr Bertram retired, baffled, to nearby Bruton, but quickly produced a sketch wittily entitled *The Bruton Pavilion* (see box), showing a villa capped by an onion dome in the manner of Nash's Royal Pavilion, Brighton. The legend reads 'After Matt by Sir Edwin Bertram'. This is an allusion not just to Lutyens's work at Redlynch—the massive masonry plinth also has an echo of Lutyens's famous garden at nearby Hestercombe, with imposing dressed masonry walls and exquisite garden pavilions.

The 1990s house was built on two levels overlooking the garden. Mr Bertram transformed

it into three, creating a cascade of terraces down the hillside (Fig 1). Mr Bulmer makes a comparison with the stepped gardens at Linderhof in Bavaria. Mr Bertram produces another parallel—Thomas Harrison of Chester's design for the Alupka Palace in Crimea, which was conceived as three succeeding terraces. All these can be traced back to the ancient Roman temple of Palestrina near Rome, which fascinated Renaissance architects and was reconstructed most famously by Palladio, who showed it as a series of colonnades on terraces linked by steps.

In the less clement climate here, it is interpreted as much as an indoor descent as outdoor. The three levels signify the nether

garden world of a grotto for an aquamarine swimming pool within, a *piano nobile* with central arch and, apparently, a smaller bedroom floor. Each tier is treated distinctly, diminishing in size.

The lower level has a central portico *in antis*—that is, set back rather than projecting with widely spaced columns flanked by arches. These are flanked by corner bastions with battered or sloping stonework suggestive of fortification. This is a feature Mr Bertram has adapted from the police post at Highgrove, Gloucestershire. The biscuit-coloured Bath stone is laid like dry-stone walling, with no visible pointing. The stonework is self-supporting and independent of the structure behind.

Mr Bertram has transformed the main front of the 1990s house with a smart stone trim, consisting of a balustraded parapet and a projecting portico. The central pediment rests on stone side arches instead of columns. These help to provide protection from the weather, but imbue the frontage with openness. The trios of windows have alternating triangular and segmental pediments and on the roof is a neat cupola dashingly set, diamond fashion, with scrolls at the corners and a dome and golden ball. Much of the judiciously proportioned detail is found in the engravings of country houses in Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*.

The contractor was Roger Williams, who worked at Highgrove, and the stonemasons

were Phidias Neo Classical of Bath, a family firm run by Trevor Dring. The stone is Hartham Park, from a mine (not a quarry) near Corsham in Wiltshire, which was reopened 15 years ago. Each block is cut into suitable sizes using diamond cutters. Some of the cutting of repeating features, such as balusters, is done with sophisticated machinery and then hand-finished. The brickwork is enlivened with lime-mortar pointing, picking out the pattern of Flemish bond. There are just five shallow steps up to the front door, allowing the house to be given dignity by a stone plinth and lending a touch of formality to the entrance.

Inside, Mr Bertram playfully works it out rather differently. The entrance front opens >



↑ Fig 5: The hall and the top of the main stairs, lit from above through an octagonal pyramid

into a spacious hall with a beautiful white-marble floor laid on a lattice pattern. Large pavours of pure-white Carrara marble are edged with pale grey. On the left, the stair descends in a sweeping half circle. The space is lit by a dramatic octagonal pyramid with steeply rising sides that carry the external lantern (Fig 5). In character, it has an echo of the great central chimneys of palace kitchens.

The paints for the main rooms have been supplied by Mr Bulmer's son, Edward, who is well known for his work on historic-house interiors. The main rooms have been painted with his Pots of Paint range made with natural ingredients, Ethereal Blue in the drawing room, a pale stone white in the hall, an *eau-de-nil* green in the dining room and a reddish brick in the study. Edward also supplied the flat-weave herringbone wool matting in the drawing room, which is made of pure, undyed Turkish wool, from both black and white sheep.

The drawing-room chimneypiece was carved by Marcus Dring in grey-flecked Carrara marble. The unusual design is a conceit of Mr Bertram's, including cider apples and the Classical ball-and-reed ornament (he calls it bead and sausage) rearranged as a message to spell Esmond and Susie in Morse code (Fig 4). 'This is how I sign my buildings,' he jokes.

Mr Bertram has created a strong axis on the middle level, where bedrooms are situated. The curving stair has a handrail with ebony and mother-of-pearl inlay. He has

a masterful solution to the over-high hand-rail that modern building regulations demand must be 900mm not the traditional 750mm (by metric measurements) by measuring height from the middle of the tread not the front.

The stair turns onto a bold vista towards an arched Venetian window or Serliana, which forms a glazed doorway opening onto the terrace. The vista is framed in both directions by elliptical arches carrying a groined vault. Beneath this is a beautiful Italian marble floor in the form of a clock-face or sundial, in red and cream marble (Fig 3).

Another very architectural stair plunges down in a half circle through the paved floor, descending to an indoor swimming pool below (Fig 6). Designing the perfect, timeless Classical pool is ever more difficult when modern features such as retractable pool covers must be introduced and large sheets of glass are available to create an alfresco feel and let in more light than Georgian glazing.

Mr Bertram has unselfconsciously mixed classic Doric columns with floor-to-ceiling glass set almost invisibly into both floor and soffit. Portland stone paving is inset with diamonds of black slate in the style of a Palladian entrance hall. At the end of the pool is a blemishless white statue of *The Swan Maiden* by George Simonds, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1898, which has travelled with the Bulmers from one house to the next.

At each level, The Pavilion has lovely southerly views down across parkland



The architect's first response to the problem

'The Bruton Pavilion: How does that grab you, Sir Esmond and Lady Susie?

After MATT of *The Telegraph*, by Sir Edwin Bertram!

to the distant blue of the Dorset Downs, some as far as 50 miles away. There is hardly a building in sight to disturb this vast panorama, in which the horizon is visible from one side to the other (Fig 2).

Landscaping has played a key role. Simon Johnson, the landscape gardener, explains that the Bulmers had a vision of The Pavilion as a house in the woods. His aim was both to give the house a proper platform on which to sit—it had previously been an entirely sloping site—and then to begin to blur the boundaries as to where the garden ended and the woodland began.

The terraces outside the bedrooms are treated very simply, with panels of lawn as settings for the fine statues; lines of clipped trees and ornamental pears pull the height of the building sideways out into the garden. The swoop of land culminates in the great lawn, a panel of close-mown grass, surrounded by beech hedges. For a house completed just four years ago, it is already well settled in its grounds.

↓ Fig 6: The swimming pool is at the bottom of the house, accessed via a spiral stair, and opens onto the garden

