

## **Sussex Connections, an article on Charles Eamer Kempe (1837 -1907) and his home 'The Old Place' Lindfield**

**By Sally Walker, Sussex Gardens Trust, Autumn 2000**

The Kemp family has been of note in Sussex for centuries but Lindfield, near Haywards Heath, boasts its own famous son. Charles Eamer Kempe (1837 -1907) was an artist and designer of all aspects of ecclesiastical decoration and is particularly remembered for his stained glass. Many are the windows of churches in Sussex which are adorned with examples of his skilled glassmaking.

Charles Kempe visited Lindfield while still at Oxford and in 1875, the year after his mother's death in Brighton, he purchased what was then Townlands Farm, the estate consisting of 200 acres, which he renamed Old Place. The house was a small manor dating from 1590 and owned by the Chal(l)oners.

Kempe's maternal grandfather had been a city magnate and Lord Mayor of London, so he was able to combine his love of craftsmanship with the ability to employ and buy the best for in his new home in Sussex. The house he had bought had rooms too small for his purposes and more space was needed if he was to offer the hospitality that he had in mind for his friends. He much increased the size, and his purist style led him to create the additions strictly in keeping with the date of the existing house, without the affectations of his Victorian peers.

The gardens are a testament to Charles Kempe's vision. The style is arts and crafts blended with a simplicity that was in keeping with the style of the time he was emulating. The lines are bold and clean, with great yew hedges dividing the more intimate garden areas. To the east stands the Bishop's Gate, the magnificent stone piers surmounted by Greek urns and adorned by statues, with ornate iron gates. The statues are half size replicas of two in the Whispering Gallery in St Pauls and built by the firm of Farmer and Grindley for Kempe. These gates act as a punctuation point between two different levels in the garden and lead the eye through a pair of stately conifers standing either side of the path, along the pleached lime walk to more iron gates and a view of the Church tower. To the west of the gates, was *The Ride*, an avenue of oaks that sadly were decimated in the 1987 storm. A *claire voie* to the south allows for the continuation of a vista from the gardens into what was the Wilderness, now built over, and in the garden was a mount with views out to the woodland.

Although his main workshops were in London, Kempe built a studio on the southerly boundary of Old Place: the Pavilion is a substantial building in the half timbered Tudor style with a black, white and tiled tower. The path from the house to the Pavilion was bounded by yew hedges, beautifully clipped into castellated shapes. The exotic Sundial to the south of the house is a copy of one at Pembroke College which Kempe attended at Oxford, the dial being surmounted by a fine carving of a pelican in her piety, feeding her young. Kempe was a most hospitable man (his visitors' book is in the V and A) and his guests could play tennis and croquet. There was a bowling alley and bowling green, so there was plenty to entertain.

Frustratingly, little has come to light so far that has been written about the gardens at Old Place. The Country Life article of 20 July 1906 is in the usual effusive style but tells us little about the history. However, there is plenty of evidence in the way of photographs and we know from Margaret Stavridi's book on Kempe, Master of Glass, that Gertrude Jekyll was a friend, therefore it is safe to assume that she was involved

with some of the design. One photograph of the gardens shows abundant herbaceous planting but most of the evidence is of plants overly well spaced for our tastes - sparse, indeed.

One must make room for mention of Frances, Viscountess Wolseley who has left Sussex with such a magnificent archive of information about gardens and gardening. Frances deserves an article in her own right but suffice to say that she and her mother were frequent visitors to Old Place from 1890. Indeed, Frances laid the foundation stone for the final wing of the house that Kempe was then building. Kempe took her to see many houses, although she admits that she was too young to appreciate them at the time. Later, she became an avid visitor to the old houses of Sussex and, luckily for us, wrote copiously about them. Through her friendship with Kempe, she became a friend of Gertrude Jekyll and her Glynde School (later College) for Lady Gardeners at Ragged Lands was brought in to work on the gardens and to help build the dry stone walls of the terraces at the King Edward VII Hospital in 1906. Her archives are in Hove Public Library and hold a selection of her own photographs of Old Place, more varied than those published by Country Life, as do the archives of the Kempe Society.

Charles Eamer Kempe died in 1907 and the estate passed to his cousin, Walter Tower, who lived there with his wife until monetary difficulties forced its sale in 1925. The sale particulars show that in the garden were the formal elements, the pleached lime avenue, herbaceous borders, lawns, a range of glasshouses and 148 acres of grass and arable farmland.

Today, still in place are the fine gates with brick piers at the entrance to Old Place, the Sundial, Pavilion, the Bishop's Gate, the pleached lime walk, the gates at the west end of the walk, the *claire voie*, mount, hedges and a donkey wheel. Needless to say, the tiny Irish yews shown in one of the photographs of the west wing, are now almost too big and are clipped to reduce their size. The house has been in divided ownership for some time and neither it nor the gardens are open to the public, but glimpses may be had from outside. This little known jewel is being quietly looked after by its various owners and lives on as a memorial to a remarkable man.

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