THE BARN HOUSE
KENT

THE HOME OF LADY CROFT

by MICHAEL HALL

Designed by Thomas Croft for his parents, the Barn House has been created within the shell of an 18th-century barn overlooking a beautiful garden. Modern forms have been inserted into the historic structure with startling success.

1—The view through the barn from the entrance to the garden

IN COUNTRY LIFE's early years, its writers interspersed their accounts of historic houses with the analysis of new ones. Published under the title *Lesser Country Houses of Today*, these articles are often looked back on wistfully, since they demonstrate the varied vitality of Edwardian domestic architecture. Lucky readers, we think, who were shown on a regular basis new small houses by Lutyens, Baillie Scott, Voysey or Detmar Blow, and could then commission one for themselves. It may seem presumptuous, therefore, to launch a new series under the title *Smaller Country Houses of Today*. Yet even a casual survey of recent houses in the countryside reveals designs of a quality which easily matches that of houses built 90 years ago.

What is more, architects and their clients are now more willing to be experimental than their Edwardian predecessors would have tolerated, as the great stylistic diversity of contemporary houses demonstrates. Any selection of the best small houses of the last decade would have to include neo-Classical as well as Modern Movement buildings, together with a large number inspired by vernacular or Arts and Crafts traditions. Critics who have a doctrinaire bias towards one style or another may not approve, but this diversity embodies a creative freedom and energy that has only occasionally been seen in British domestic design since the First World War.

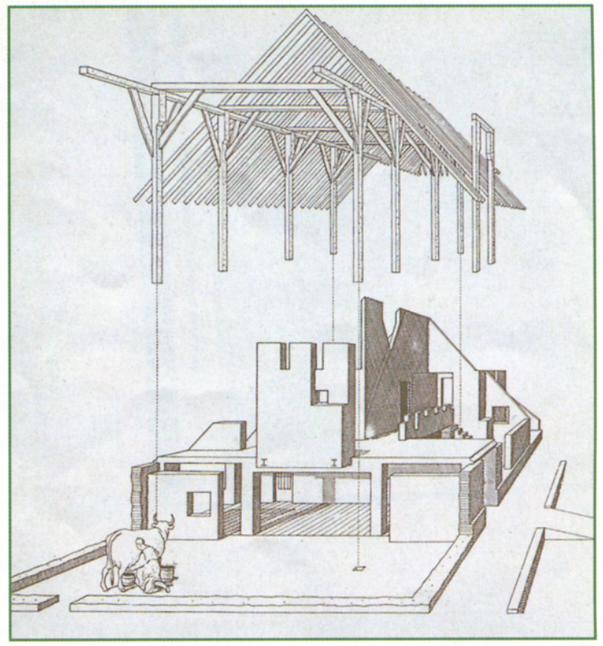
When making the initial choice of houses for the series, it was striking how many were designed by young architects. There is a good reason for that, as most architects still depend on family and friends for early commissions. Many distinguished careers have begun with a house for the architect's relatives—Richard Rogers and Norman Foster gained early fame with a house in Cornwall for Lord Rogers's mother-in-law. The Barn House, Kent, is another instance. Completed just over 10 years ago, it was Thomas Croft's first major commission, and was designed as a home for his parents, Sir John and Lady Croft, in their retirement. The house is a significant solution to a question which has preoccupied architects working in rural settings: how to design in a contemporary idiom in the context of historic buildings. It is also one of the few wholly admirable modern examples of a barn conversion, that favourite project of Edwardian architects which has become a *bête noire* of the conservation movement.

The house has been created within the shell of a large, five-bay 18th-century barn. It stands at right angles to its farmhouse—now in separate ownership—on the edge of a village in a remote corner of Kent. The barn faces south onto the former farmyard, which was laid out as a garden for the farmhouse in the 1920s and is now planted with mature trees, high borders of flowers and small formal walks centred on a large pond (Fig 7). The central bay of the brick-walled, timber-framed barn is a cross-passage. Designed for carts to pass through, it is entered on the north side by a double-height door—the midstrey—for the laden carts, which, having unloaded, left on the south through a single-height opening. At the east end of the barn is a brick oast-house, with the only windows in the original structure.

2—The ground-floor sitting room, from which the full height of the barn is visible. The front door can be glimpsed on the right

Mr Croft was helped in his task by the fact that his parents wanted a small house, and so only the half of the barn east of the midstrey, including the oast house, has been converted, leaving the western half untouched. On the exterior, the interventions have been sensitively managed. Although roof lights were a necessity, they have been kept on the entrance front, where they are difficult to see, thanks to the barn being enclosed by trees and hedges on that side. On the garden front, the great sweep of the pegtile roof is untouched. The most dramatic alteration has been the extension of the southern opening of the cross-passage upwards with a large new window (Fig 5), so that it now visually echoes the double-height opening on the north side. The other new windows are sufficiently small in scale to avoid compromising the building's majestic breadth.

This modesty of approach is also apparent in the decision that the midstrey opening would not function as the front door. From north to south, the passage is entirely open (Fig 1), providing the newly arrived visitor with a distant glimpse of the Elysian garden, framed by flowerpots, old tools and ladders stacked on the original planked floor. The small front door, deliberately placed towards one end of the passage, rather than centrally, leads into a low vestibule, the beginning of a carefully planned sequence of surprises. From this relatively dark, tightly confined space, the visitor turns 90deg to step



3—A new oriel window protrudes into the barn's unrestored half. (*Right*) 4—Drawing showing how the house slots into the barn

into a high drawing room, flooded with light from a window overlooking the garden. Only when the visitor turns round is the final surprise sprung: the full height of the barn is suddenly revealed, rising three storeys to the roof's ridge (Fig 2). This is reminiscent of the twists and turns Lutyens imposes when unfolding a sequence of contrasting spaces inside a house such as Little Thakeham, Sussex.

Mr Croft has designed his new interiors as an installation in the barn's shell—as he puts it, like a ship in a bottle (Fig 4). The new walls are smooth and their shapes precise and geometric, forming a visually stimulating contrast with the rough textures of the barn's brick walls and wooden frame. This contrast is emphasised by the colour scheme: where original elements are painted, a dark red has been used, whereas the new walls are a pale pink, which Mr Croft wanted to look artificial. At key points these walls have been shaped to suggest abstract versions of historic forms, notably in the battlemented wall to the gallery which links the rooms on the second floor.

Most striking of all is the bold positioning of the fireplace in the first-floor living room (Fig 6). Tucked behind it, in a contemporary version of the inglenook, is a little study where Mr Croft works when he is staying with his mother. From here, a tiny window looks into the unaltered half of the barn, still used for storing apples from the orchard. The bold contrast between the new wall in which this window sits and the unrestored, mud-floored barn provides a memorable frisson (Fig 3), as though a gleaming work of abstract modern sculpture had mysteriously materialised in this farmyard setting.

5—The new window above the south side of the cross-passage. (*Right*) 6—The inglenook and oriel in the first-floor living room

7—The Barn House, seen from the garden. The brick oast-house is at the right-hand end of the barn

The smooth, geometric forms used by Mr Croft suggest the influence of Richard Meier, in whose New York office he worked for a year. Although Mr Meier's refined and luxurious modern idiom has become known to a British audience largely through his new Getty Museum in Los Angeles, it is his less familiar work converting 19th-century industrial buildings which is most relevant to the Barn House. It is often assumed that American architects, unlike the British, are not especially interested in the problems of altering old buildings for new uses. However, Mr Croft found barn conversions in this country uninspiring in comparison with the freshness of approach across the Atlantic, evident, for example, in such major projects as Charles Gwathmey's and Robert Siegel's conversion of a barn on Long Island for Steven Spielberg.

Perhaps all this makes the Barn House sound a bit solemn. In fact, there is a delightful, gentle humour in the *Cold Comfort Farm* contrast Mr Croft has set up between metropolitan suavity and rustic roughness. It provides ample visual variety without straining to impress, and works well as a house for daily life: although the rooms are sufficiently large to show off a collection of family furniture and portraits, Mr Croft has not fallen into the trap of many barn conversions by making the interiors cavernous.

Much of the success of the project, as Mr Croft is quick to acknowledge, depends on the qualities of the original barn and his mother's careful nurturing of the garden, which was neglected and overgrown when she and her late husband moved here. Yet it is the bold but discreet handling of modern forms in the sensitive context of a historic building and beautiful garden which gives the Barn House its unexpectedly haunting quality. It is, perhaps, the sort of house that one of those Edwardian architects so admired by COUNTRY LIFE might have designed, had he fallen asleep on a warm July day in the shade of an ancient barn and awoken 90 years later in a world that was both reassuringly familiar and utterly new.

Photographs, 1–3, 5–7: Clive Boursnell. Illustration, 4, Thomas Croft Architect.

THE ARCHITECT

BORN in 1959, Thomas Croft was trained at the Royal College of Art and Bartlett School of Architecture. He worked with Richard Meier in New York and Rick Mather in London before setting up in independent practice. His recent work includes a new art gallery in Mayfair for Tim Taylor and the conversion of an Edwardian town house in Westminster back to residential use. Among his current projects is a new pavilion for the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes Castle on the Isle of Wight, due to be completed in time for Cowes Week next year.

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