



Arts and crafts at Winterbourne

Winterbourne House and Garden was built in 1904 for John and Margaret Nettlefold by the Birmingham architect J. L. Ball. It is an outstanding manifestation of the Arts and Crafts philosophy which Ball promoted in his work, along with many other artists and designers of his day.

Developed by William Morris and his followers, the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to pursue quality in design, materials and manufacture. In reaction to the mechanisation of labour so accelerated during the Victorian era, Morris reasserted the value of the 'handcrafted' – of creation with an eye to a particular context, situation and user, rather than referring merely to a mass-produced model. Morris' famous maxim of having nothing in one's house which is not useful or beautiful epitomises the value the Arts and Crafts placed on need and usefulness. The movement saw utility as an addition, rather than obstruction, to aesthetic beauty.

In seeking to combine utility and beauty, Morris and his followers looked to the shapes, forms, colours and structure of the natural world. The tactility, solidness and earthiness of natural materials defined how objects, structures and works of art were to look under the Arts and Crafts banner. This approach is exemplified at Winterbourne.





Points of interest in the house

Overall design

The design of Winterbourne house is based upon the straightforward and spacious layouts of seventeenth century farmhouses. J. L. Ball took inspiration from this past age as a means of implementing the simpler way of life so espoused by the Arts and Crafts movement. The design of Winterbourne and its relationship to the outside were to encourage a deeper connection to nature and instil an appreciation of traditional materials. The large, bright living rooms and generous ceilings ensured spaciousness and comfort, whilst the simple layout guaranteed ease in finding one's way around the house. Ultimately, Winterbourne was built to enhance the inhabitants' quality of life – a central aim of the Arts and Crafts philosophy.

1. Bricks and detailing

The use of red bricks is typical of the Arts and Crafts' emphasis on simple, rustic materials. There is very little detailing or ornamentation to be found on the exterior of the house. This, again, is a nod toward appreciating the material for its own sake, as solid, suitable and locally produced. Patterns of variously arranged diamond shapes in the gable apices, ledges of dentilations below these patterns, and elliptical panels incised into the chimneys, are the only external decorations. The aesthetic pleasure of Ball's design is found in utility and simplicity rather than complicated excess.



2. Large windows

The casement windows are mainly set flush with the façade. Wide views of the garden and great quantities of natural light were two of the key assets Ball wished his design to deliver. The placement and size of the windows were hence crucial to the feel and ultimate success of Winterbourne. The largest windows are on the south-eastern side of the house. On the ground floor, French doors also act as access routes to the terrace and garden.

3. Panelling

Elegant rectangular panelling is found along the main corridor underneath the picture rail, as well as on the interior doors. This geometric form of ornamentation adds subtle interest whilst not detracting from other elements of decoration, such as the paintings, watercolours and photographs which would have adorned the walls.





4. Plasterwork

The panels of plasterwork found in various parts of the house are both the most intricate and only non-geometric decorative elements at Winterbourne. All were executed by George Bankart, a successful craftsman who led a revival of sixteenth and seventeenth century plasterwork in Birmingham. Most of the panels incorporate only natural forms – another reference to the outside – and, like the house itself, they are based on seventeenth century patterns. On the ground floor, three strips of plaster friezes depicting honeysuckle and roses run along the length of the barrel ceiling. Above the fireplace there is a panel of grapevines, heavy with bunches of fruit. The most intricate panel of all is found in the well reveal, seen as one ascends the staircase. It is a frieze of pomegranates, roses, squirrels, mice, rabbits and chicks.



5. Window latches

As well as their size and positioning, the windows add elegance and refinement to the interior of the house. Crafted with care and attention by the firm Henry Hope & Sons, the latches are of greatest interest. Finished with a lovely swirl, the latches are typical of the Arts and Crafts. William Morris himself used many swirl motifs in his wallpaper and textile designs.



6. Bookshelf

The inbuilt bookshelf in the study was designed by Ball. Its solidity and lack of decoration is typical of Arts and Crafts furniture in which function, rather than ornament, was of primary concern. Quality design resulted from such a philosophy in which the natural materials themselves and skill of the craftsman were given pride of place. Again, the only decoration found on Ball's bookshelf are natural motifs: small daisy roundels found carved into the upper corners of the shelves.





Points of interest in the garden

Overall design

In her creation of the garden at Winterbourne, Margaret Nettlefold looked to the work of Gertrude Jekyll, a renowned Arts and Crafts garden designer. Jekyll's gardens incorporated productive and ornamental areas alongside each other. They were designed to develop happy relationships with their broader surroundings and to work well with the homes and buildings which stood within them. Ultimately, they were both beautiful and useful. This fusion of purpose was what Jekyll believed gave greatest pleasure to the garden's inhabitants and carers, making the garden a place of rest and reinvigoration: 'A garden is to give delight and to give refreshment of mind, to soothe, to refine, and to lift up the heart in a spirit of praise and thankfulness.' At Winterbourne, Margaret Nettlefold's design achieved this sense of comfort, peacefulness, and tranquillity.

7. Terrace

Creating a connection between the house and garden was a key concern in designing Winterbourne. The terrace acts as a transition space between outside and in. All the main living rooms on the ground floor have French doors which open onto it. The Nettlefolds used the terrace as an extension of their living space, enhancing the utility of both house and garden.



8. Stairs

The set of semicircular stairs which leads from the terrace to the lawn is simple and elegant. Constructed of the same bricks used for the house, it acts as another connective element which contributes to the harmony of the whole design.



9. Lawn

Jekyll believed open space in gardens was very important, for reasons of both utility and wellbeing. Lawns provided areas for relaxing as well as sports and activities. The Nettlefolds often had picnics on their lawn, as well as playing croquet. Aesthetically, the flat lawn ensures views from the house are not impeded, allowing the neighbouring woodland to be appreciated whilst indoors.





10. Pergola

Though the pergola was not built until the 1930s, it mirrors exactly the sort of pergola Jekyll portrays in her famous manual *Wood & Garden* of 1899. The pergola acts as a strong architectural element within the garden, creating a contrast to the natural forms, whilst also providing a structure upon which plants are trained. In summer the pergola ensures a shady, sheltered place from which to enjoy the garden. In winter, without a canopy, the skilful employment of natural materials – sandstone and oak – can itself be appreciated.



11. Gate

The gate which leads out of the formal garden and onto a path towards Edgbaston Pool is original. The swirl latch mirrors those on the windows in the house. It is a beautiful detail which blends into its setting, contributing to it, rather than appearing out of place and ornamental for its own sake. It is another feature which connects the interior and exterior elements of Winterbourne.



12. Nut walk

This original feature of the garden is like a living sculpture. Covered in a canopy of hazelnut plants, the nut walk is another element directly inspired by Jekyll's designs. Jekyll advocated these tunnels of greenery as quiet spaces to retreat into from the outside world. One can go for a meditative stroll along the length of the walk, or simply enjoy the comfortable peace of the green enclosure. The use of hazelnuts to create the canopy means that even this part of the garden was to have a practical side, creating produce for the kitchen.





13. Kitchen garden

The kitchen garden, surrounded by solid walls, was designed by the architect J. L. Ball. At the time of Winterbourne's construction, it was common for architects to design structural elements within the house's grounds as well as the house itself. The most practical feature of this kitchen garden, however, is also taken from Jekyll's Wood & Garden. The well, located centrally, ensures gardeners can carry out their watering of the fruits and vegetables more efficiently. Rather than having to walk to another area of the grounds to refill their cans, the well within the kitchen garden is always to hand.



14. Crinkle-crankle wall

The wavy wall at the bottom of the kitchen garden is a charming feature which blends aesthetics and practicality. The undulations may have been designed to provide shelter for tender plants, but they also lend stability to the wall, avoiding the need for buttresses.

