

Ernest Trobridge, Kingsbury's Extraordinary Architect.

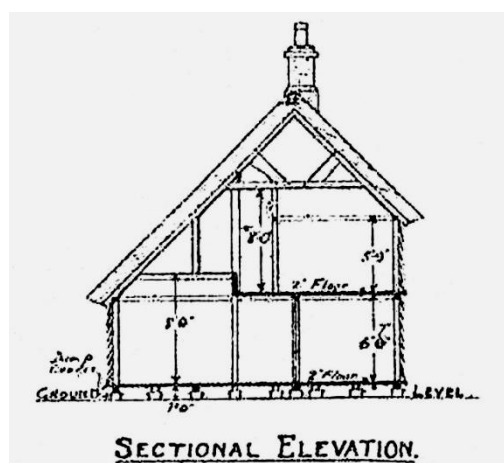
Kingsbury, in the London Borough of Brent, is where the architect Ernest Trobridge lived from 1915 until his death in 1942. Although he designed buildings in other parts of London, and across southern England, it is here in London NW9 that you can see and appreciate the full range of his unique work. This note will introduce you to these homes and their history, as well as help you to understand some of the ideas behind them.



Ernest George Trobridge (aside) was born in Belfast in 1884, the third son of the artist, George Trobridge, who as well as being headmaster of the city's School of Art was a leading member of The New Church, and the biographer of its inspiration, Emanuel Swedenborg (an 18th century Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic). Ernest trained as an architect in Belfast, and after winning a travelling scholarship he arrived in London around 1907. A successful commission to rebuild the Camden Road New Church in 1908 led to further work designing churches for his denomination, but by 1910 he was working in Golders Green and following his ambition '... to build houses'.

Within two years Trobridge had married Jennie Pulsford, a fellow New Church member and daughter of a builder he was working for. In August 1915, when private building work had virtually dried up because of the First World War, they moved to "Haydon House" in Kingsbury where Trobridge had rented an 11 acre smallholding, which he ran as a market garden producing food for his vegetarian family as well as for sale. It was here he worked on the ideas that he hoped would solve the post-war housing shortage.

Trobridge proposed a return to the traditional timber house, but with a number of improvements which he patented in 1919/20. Cheap and plentiful elm wood, cut and shaped while "green", would be built into a house over an eight week period with frequent adjustment for shrinkage, leaving a very strong yet light building. Only the brick piers supporting the raised floor (to avoid damp) and the brick hearths and chimneys would need foundations. The straw-thatched roof would also use cheap, local materials, give the house good year-round insulation and would be protected from fire by another of his patented ideas.

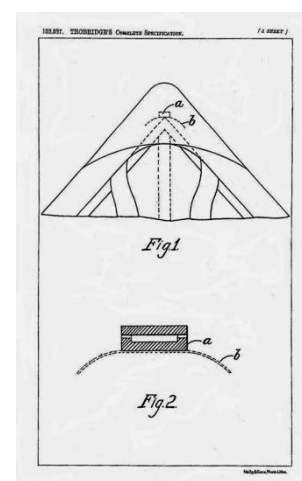


< Drawing for a "semi-bungalow" on the Elmwood Estate, showing the asymmetrical style of these homes.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley plans microfilms No.6744.]

Trobridge's fire protection design, for a water trough and pipes within the ridge of the thatch. >

[Source: British Library – from Patent No. 152,527]



Inside, feature inglenook fireplaces in the main living rooms helped both heating and air circulation, and the lower level that this allowed for the bedrooms on just one side of the first floor meant that only ten stairs were needed to reach them. As well as having many good and practical features, Trobridge's designs also had a spiritual purpose, to provide a beautiful, welcoming and protective home that would be a joy to live in.



< An individually designed brick fireplace in a 1920's Trobridge living room.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection, slide 3267]

A Trobridge hardwood staircase in a thatched house in Stag Lane. >

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2010]



Although his ideas were not widely adopted, Trobridge built two estates of his compressed green wood houses in Kingsbury. The Fern Dene Estate (1920-22), at the corner of Slough Lane and Kingsbury Road, should have had 32 homes in groups of four, but delays and arguments with Kingsbury Urban District Council saw only ten detached houses built, including "Hayland" which Trobridge moved to in 1922. This first estate was a financial disaster, and a wealthy New Church supporter, David Wynter, had to step in to fund the Elmwood Estate (1922-24), on the corner of Stag Lane and Hay Lane, which again had fewer homes than originally planned. These did include two groups of four, with those at each end at right angles to the two in the middle. One of these groups still survives at 345-351 Stag Lane.

Thatched timber houses in Stag Lane on the Elmwood Estate, photographed in late 1964.

[Source: Brent Archives – photographs by Mrs M Davies, images donated by Gareth Davies in 2010]



By the mid-1920's, Ernest Trobridge was designing homes for individual clients and small-scale developers. Some still wanted thatched timber homes, but now he offered a variety of materials, including brick and tile-hung walls and tiled roofs, while continuing with timber panelling and individually designed brick hearths in the main living rooms. A number of his "transitional" designs from 1924/25 can be seen in nearby Colindale (at 89-107 Colindeep Lane and 25-31 The Loning), all with tiled roofs either because that is what the developer wanted or because that is all that the local Hendon UDC would allow. Between 1925 and 1930 he designed at least ten homes for private clients who had bought plots on H.J. Aldous's Summit Estate in Kingsbury (Hayland Close and Buck Lane). These include some of his latest and largest thatched houses, with the semi-detached pair at 3-5 Buck Lane showing his clever use of the sloping site to include an integral garage, and demonstrating how much his individual designs differed from the typical late-1920's "semis" on the opposite side of the road.



< 3-5 Buck Lane.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

A late 1920's tile-hung Trobridge house in Hayland Close. >

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]



In 1929 Trobridge was involved in setting up the Kingsbury Cross Co-Partnership, through which a group of builders and other investors would develop a large field beside Buck Lane as an estate of flats, which he would design, for sale or to rent. These were aimed at the lower end of the market, especially in the two new cul-de-sacs of Oak Tree Dell (from 1930) and Ash Tree Dell (from 1931), so the now more economic brick and tile were used; but Trobridge did

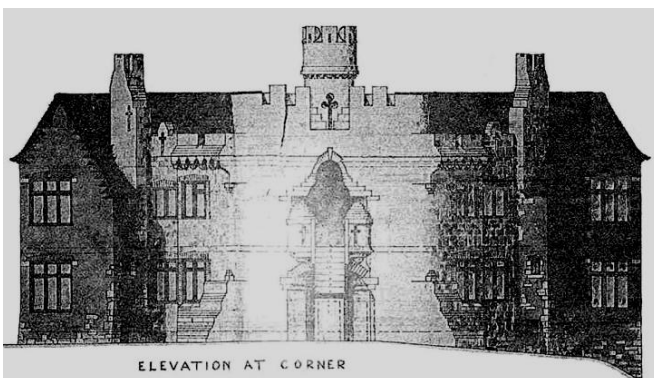
not sacrifice the beauty and individuality of his designs. He continued to use leaded-light windows, and individually designed brick fireplaces for each home. In his 1932 designs for a row of maisonettes in Highfield Avenue, he also used reinforced concrete (probably for the first time) for the external stairways to the first floor homes.



Maisonettes at 18 and 20 Oak Tree Dell, a fairly ordinary 1930's "semi" with some extraordinary Trobridge touches!

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

By the mid-1930's his interest in architectural history and belief that the home should be a place of protection was showing itself in a variety of unique "castle" blocks of flats. Between 1934 and 1937 he designed four distinct blocks around the crossroads at the top of Buck Lane, called Highfort Court, Tudor Gates, Whitecastle Mansions and Rochester Court. These included turrets that disguised chimneys and dust bin stores, battlements around roof gardens and practical features such as hatches on outside walls where a delivery man could empty a sack of coal straight into a cupboard beside your living room fireplace. Other nearby blocks of his flats in Buck Lane which include "castle" elements are Stonegate Court, The Triangle and Upminster House.



< Trobridge's corner elevation drawing for Highfort Court, a four flat "castle" built in 1935.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley plans microfilms No.9453.]

Tudor-style brickwork on a chimney at Tudor Gates, with a coal hatch for the ground floor flat. >

[Photo by Philip Grant, 2009]





Stonegate Court in Buck Lane.
[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

Not all of Trobridge's later blocks of flats were castles, but all of them provided practical homes and included beautiful brickwork as part of their design. His fifteen pairs of maisonettes at Old Saint Andrew's Mansions in southern Kingsbury (1934-36) exhibit some remarkable chimneys. One of his ideas for these to combine in an archway over the stairway was repeated at Shirley Court (c.1937). Across Highfield Avenue from this building, the thirty flats of Mountaire Court (1936-38) were Trobridge's last and largest block, with fronts that combine a mixture of brick, tile, timber and white rendering typical of his later work.



< 6 & 7 Old St Andrew's Mansions, with its chimney arch.
[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

Part of Mountaire Court, Highfield Avenue. >
[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2010]



With World War Two looming, Trobridge turned his mind to designing houses that incorporated a fortified garage, which could serve as an air raid shelter for many people if needed. His ideas included a buffer of sand (held in place by '*safety valve brickwork*') between two thick layers of reinforced concrete, and '*shock absorbing foundations*'. None were actually built, but the plans for them show another aspect of his remarkable architectural mind. You can find details of these designs in a separate article: "Ernest Trobridge, Air Raid Structures Consultant".

When war broke out in 1939, he turned his garden at "Hayland" and the spare Fern Dene Estate land into a market garden, finishing his time in Kingsbury as it had begun. Ernest Trobridge died in 1942 from diabetes, refusing to take insulin because of his vegetarian principles. His legacy is in the buildings he has left us, which will hopefully lift your spirits as he intended that they should. There are still over 200 local homes designed by him, and you can download a copy of the illustrated (with pictures and maps) article: "From Cottages to Castles – a walk around Trobridge's Kingsbury", to help you discover them for yourself.

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Note: The collections at Brent Archives (reference no. 19794) include some of Ernest Trobridge's correspondence, business papers, plans, sketches and photographs, for periods from 1908 to 1931. Plans submitted for many of his local properties are also held, as part of the Wembley Borough Council planning microfilms collection.