

Russell's home at Bagley Wood

Russell was a wandering scholar for much of his life, and until his final years at Penrhyndeudraeth he did not often live in one residence for an extended period of time. However, during the years 1903-1911 he lived at Bagley Wood, Oxford, and did some of his most important work there, including the discovery of the theory of descriptions and the preparation of *Principia Mathematica*. He also wrote from there many of the letters to Philip Jourdain on which I am now working,¹ and during a recent visit to Oxford I decided to try and find the "Lower Copse, Bagley Wood, Oxford" that his letterhead carried. After some persistence and a stroke of good fortune, I finally located the house, and this article constitutes a short report on its history and current condition.

In his autobiography, Russell reported that "Alys and I decided to live near Oxford, and built ourselves a house in Bagley Wood. (At that time there was no other house there.)"² At all events, it formed an ideally peaceful setting. Even now, with the state of splendid isolation of the house long since lost, it is still a delightful enclave on the south side of the city, centered on Bagley Wood Road and offering excellent views of the city centre.

¹Cf. my "Russell and Philip Jourdain: a study of their relationship", *Russell* 8.

²*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914* (London, 1967), p. 152.

Russell sold the house in 1911 to Mr. and Mrs. R.S. Spender, who lived there until about 1935. Then a Miss Lettice Devonport was in residence until 1970, by which time the house had fallen into some state of disrepair and was also threatened by a planned by-pass road to Abingdon. It was bought by the current owners, Mr. and Mrs. Pedersen, who were rewarded by the eventual decision to site the by-pass more than 200 yards from the house, rather than through the garage area as one plan had intended.

Now called "St. Giles", both house and garden have been thoroughly renovated and some extensions have been added. Despite my inevitably unheralded visit, Mrs. Pedersen, graciously received me and gave more of an hour of her time to show me round the house and tell me all she knew of its history. The following description is based on our conversation and on two articles about it published in 1924 (when it was called "Halsanger").³

The house was designed by Henry Martineau Fletcher (1870-1953), an architect of considerable reputation who held various positions in the Royal Institute of British Architects during his career. Before turning to architecture he studied classics at Trinity College, Cambridge and was two years senior to Russell there. He was also a cousin of Russell's close friends Crompton and Theodore Llewellyn Davies, and doubtless was an obvious choice as architect for Russell. He certainly deserves congratulation for producing a design of exceptional exterior attractiveness and interior grace and economy. His design shows some French influence, especially in its use of shutters, but proclaims its Englishness in many ways, such as the use of stone slates (which came from a barn) to cover the substantial roof. There is a plaque over the front door marked "A.D. 1904"; presumably in those good old days a new house could be left for a few months before the owner moved in (in this case, in the spring of 1905). A clearing was made in the wood to allow both the building of the house and also the construction at its rear of a large formal garden containing a number of statues. By the time of the Pedersens' arrival in 1970 the garden had become rather overgrown, and so they had it cleared and largely replaced with a lawn.

The most prominent interior feature of the house is the almost total lack of corridors. The front door opens into a small hall, which leads into an area used in Russell's day as a dining-room as well as the foot

³R. R[andall] P[hillips], "The Lesser Country Houses of Today. Halsanger, Bagley Wood, near Oxford, Designed by Mr. H.M. Fletcher", *Country Life*, 55(1924), 221-222; R. Stanley, "In a Woodland Setting. A House of Restful Character in Harmony with Its Surroundings", *Homes and Gardens*, 6(1924-25), 161-165. Neither of these articles mentions Russell, or even Mr. and Mrs. Spender.

of the stairwell (see ground plan). Apparently Russell used as his study a small room alongside, which was the dining room for later owners. The main room was later called "The Study", but probably contained Russell's library in his day. A substantial kitchen area with ancillary rooms (used by the unmarried mothers whom Russell and Alys apparently employed) completes the ground floor layout. Upstairs there are four bedrooms (one with an adjoining dressing-room), and bath and store rooms. The interior was enhanced throughout by Delft tiling and by the clever siting of windows, which makes the rooms unusually light and airy. Since Russell's time a flanking wall has been built to enclose the house edge of the formal garden, and the Pedersens rebuilt the adjacent buildings to provide garage and other accommodation.

As expected, the Bagley Wood area still resounds with Russell stories, and as usual their veracity is not always to be believed. For example, I heard that Russell disliked having the laundry done at home and encouraged the founding of Bagley Wood Laundry; but enquiries there suggested that in fact the laundry was started in the 1890s. A better established story came from the stroke of good fortune by which I found the house in the first place; an elderly employee of the Bagley Wood Sawmills not only told me its location but also recalled that on one occasion his father, the local postman, had a dispute with Russell over a bicycle. Russell once wanted to get into Oxford as fast as possible, and tried to take the postman's bicycle for the purpose. "Oh no you don't", the postman responded, "That bike is my livelihood, and you can't have it". For once Russell seems to have lost an argument.

Mr. Cross of Abingdon, who lived as a boy in the house from 1917 when his parents were employed as resident staff, tells me that Russell visited the house with his second wife Dora in 1923 (perhaps on the occasion of Russell's lecture to the Jowett Society at Oxford⁴) and took tea with the Spenders. But there seems to be no other evidence of Russell's contact with the house after 1911.⁵ For while the house is exquisite in setting and elegant in form, it must have been painful to Russell's memory for its association with the continuing decline of his marriage to Alys and the labour of producing *Principia Mathematica*. It is easy to imagine him walk along Bagley Wood Road and "stand on the foot-bridge at Kennington, near Oxford, watching the trains go by, and determining that tomorrow I would place myself under one of them ...".⁶

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⁴"On Vagueness", *Austral. J. Psych. and Phil.* 1 (1923), 84-92.

⁵Russell lived at Amberley House, Kidlington, from 1937 to 1938 with Patricia. I intend to seek out this residence on my next Oxford excursion.

⁶*Autobiography, 1872-1914*, p. 152.