

PAINTINGS OF OLD LONDON

COUNTRY LIFE

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TWO SHILLINGS



SUMMER IN DOVEDALE, DERBYSHIRE

F. W. Tattersall

ASHBY ST. LEDGERS, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE—IV

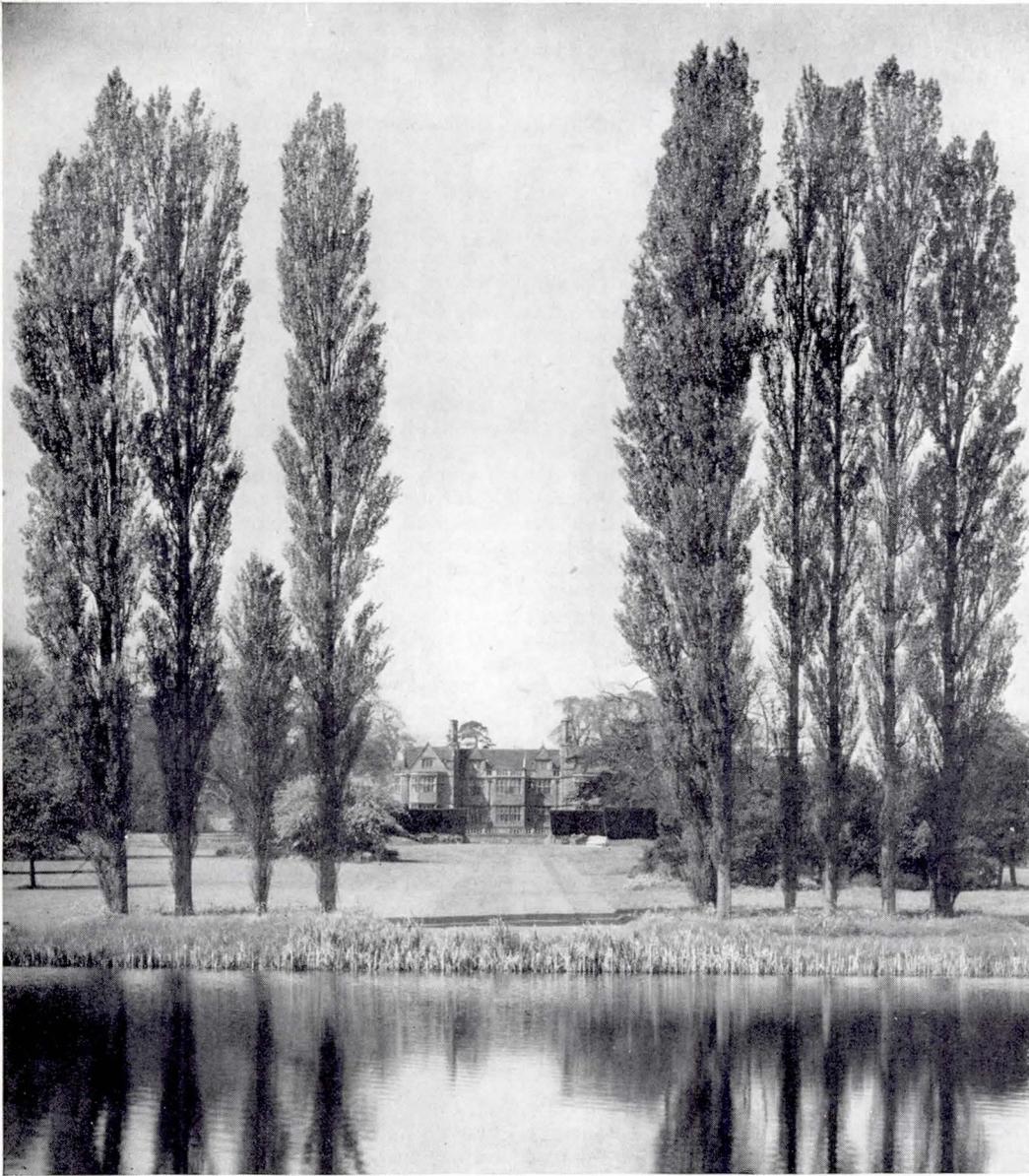
THE HOME OF VISCOUNT
WIMBORNE

By CHRISTOPHER HUSSEY

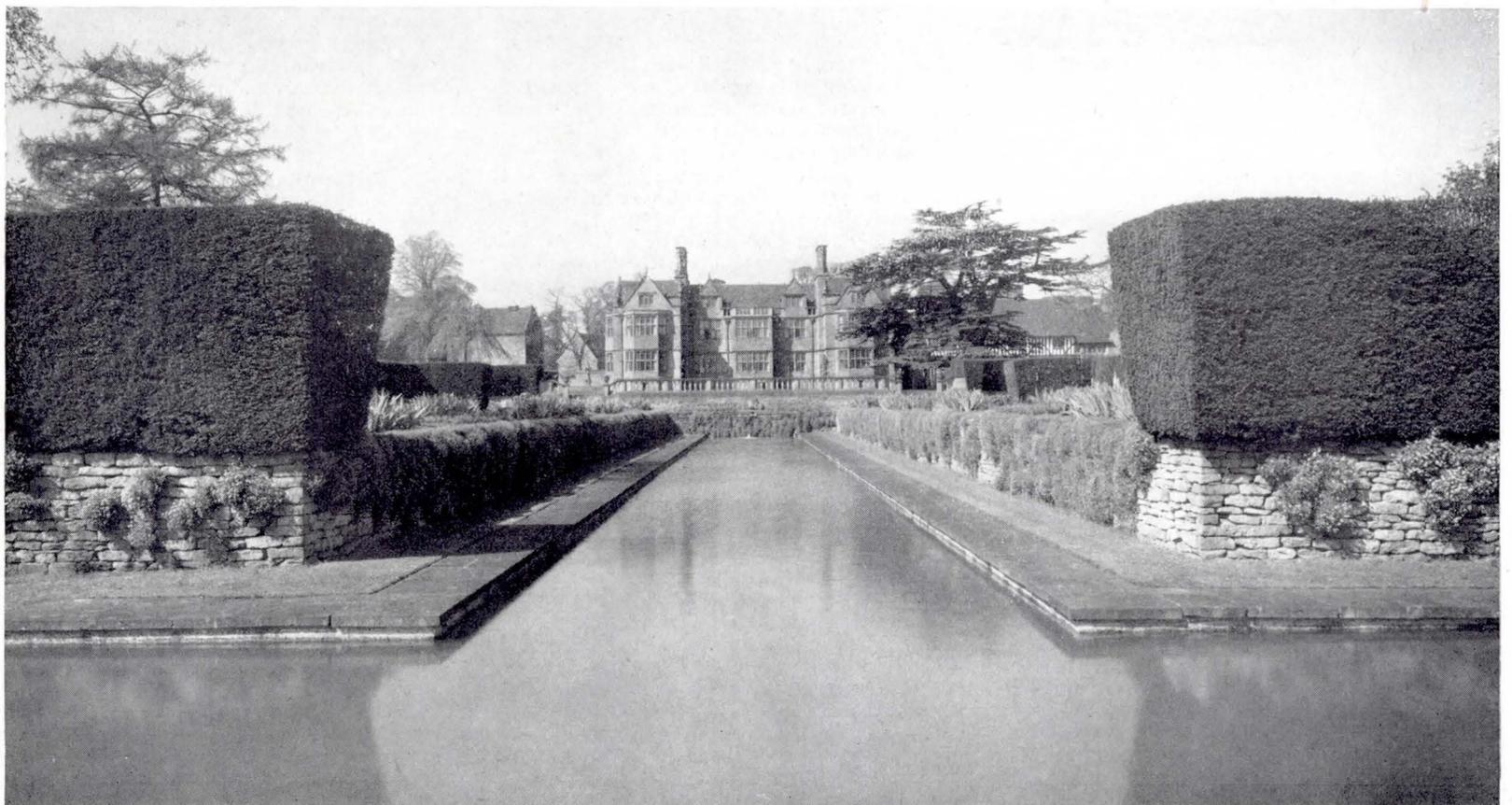
Laid out to a scheme originated by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1904, gradually developed, and not finished till recently, the gardens incorporate an original formal enclosure with sculptures dating from c. 1700

THE house of Ashby St. Ledgers in its existing extent and style can be regarded as a social document of the Edwardian period, reflecting particularly the tastes and outlook of that half of society which supported the Liberal governments. It exhibits the expansiveness and wealth, the zestful sentiment, yet withal the reticence, which discouraged over-ostentation. We are often able to distinguish the houses built by Whigs and Tories in the 18th century, the former tending to be Palladian, large and landscaped, the latter to maintain the older or "Wrenaissance" tradition, comfortable rather than stately. In the 20th century, Liberals were more apt to build country mansions than were Conservatives, who, being predominantly of the landed interest, were already sufficiently housed. Often wealthy and intelligent, they generally employed the best architects. Certainly Lutyens, as the most fashionable architect, found many Liberal clients, and, though of indeterminate politics himself, with a preference for feudalism, frequented that element in society which supported Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, in which the late Viscount Wimborne and his father figured actively.

In any case, whether this distinction is true or not, Ashby is undeniably phenomenal. It outstandingly represents the enthusiasm of the period for romantic houses, for the "game" of building and restoring, for entertaining generously but with imagination. Ashby illustrates, too, the sheer scale on



1.—FROM THE FISH POND. THE VISTA TO THE EAST FRONT



2.—THE CANAL GARDEN AND EAST FRONT



3.—THE BRIDGE AND THE NORTH-EAST SILHOUETTE OF THE HOUSE

which the age could indulge its tastes. Nowadays not only is the visitor to Ashby almost overwhelmed by the succession of delightful and interesting rooms, the halls, galleries, courts, and bedrooms, and then the really magnificent gardens, which extend so unexpectedly behind the modest original buildings, but, in these thinner times, it has required four articles in *COUNTRY LIFE* to illustrate the place, even so leaving out much of visual value.

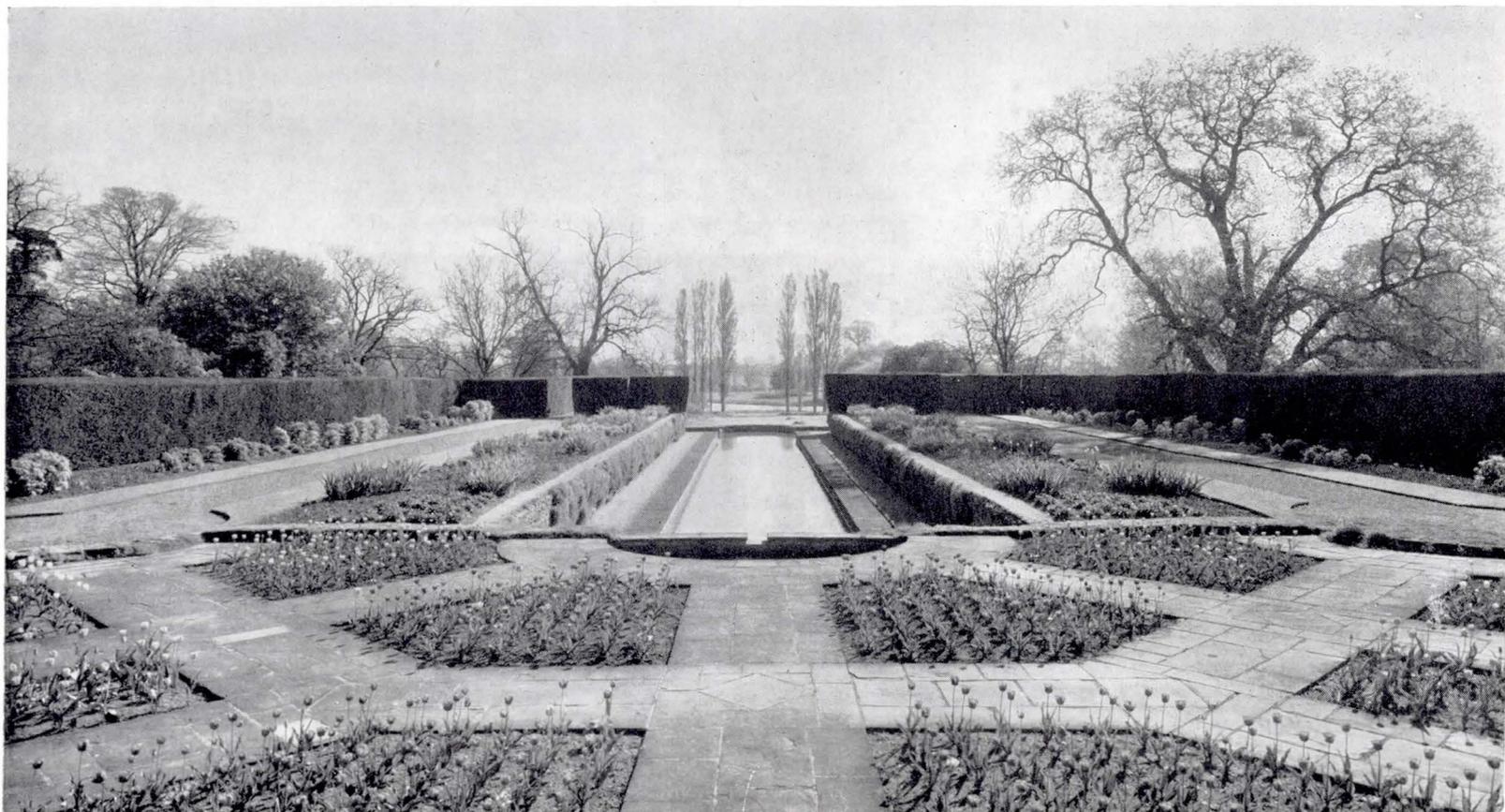
The gardens are, perhaps, the most completely satisfying of the various undertakings

at Ashby and, in point of design, among the finest in England. The house, for all its charm and picturesqueness, inevitably leaves one a little perplexed, if only because its growth was so piecemeal and its shape can nowhere be comprehended in one impressive scene. The gardens, though similarly combining old and new, and formed over an equally long period, have the bigness and simplicity of design that the house designedly lacks.

An early scheme for them, which cannot be later than 1904, drawn and tinted by

Lutyens himself, exists among the mass of Ashby plans and shows that the main garden lines were determined then, though they were carried out and modified gradually till Lord Wimborne's death in 1939.

The old garden lay south of the original house, between it and the church (Figs. 5, 6). It consists now in a lawn adorned with statues—the four seasons, with Atlas shouldering the Globe in the middle—and is probably due to Joseph Ashley, who bought the place in 1703. Walled on three sides, and originally, perhaps, laid out in geometrical



4.—THE CANAL GARDEN FROM THE PARTERRE, LOOKING EAST



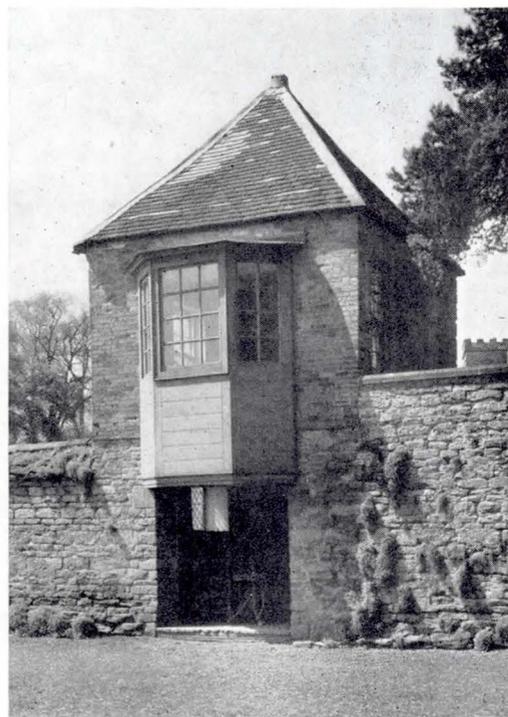
5.—THE OLD GARDEN (c. 1700), WITH THE SOUTH END OF THE HOUSE (1652)



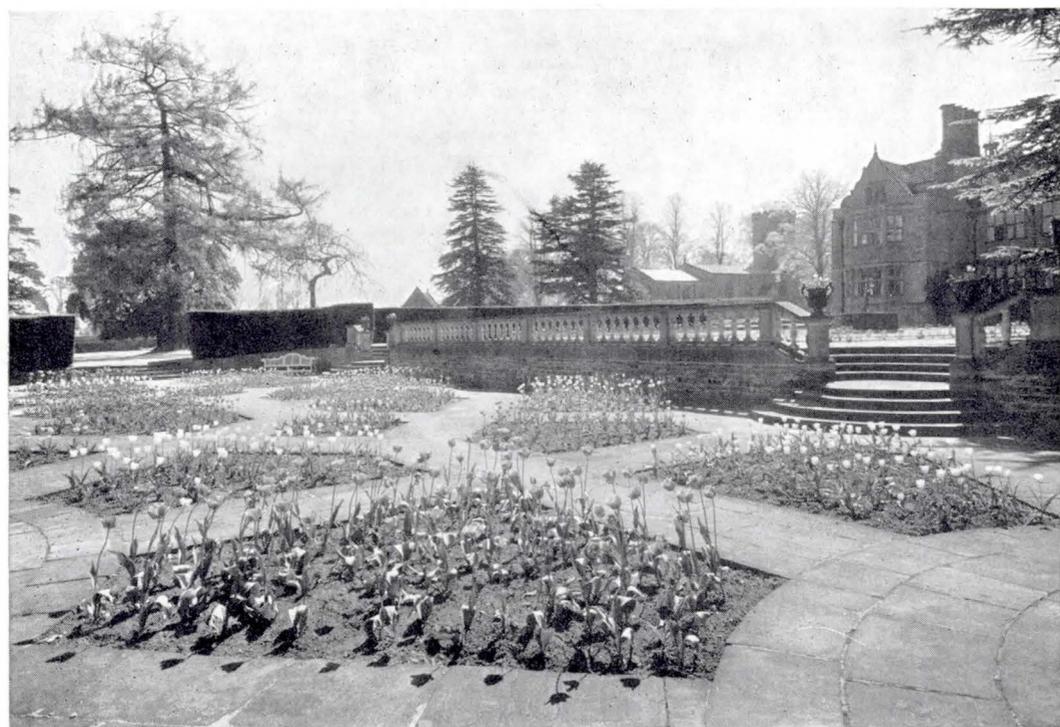
6.—CHURCH AND DOVECOT FROM THE OLD GARDEN

beds, it is an enchanting enclosure, whether seen with the golden brown gables of the house as background, or looking towards the church and dovecot. Beyond it, south-east of the church, extends a terrace against one of the walls of the kitchen garden. Part of the latter has been converted into tennis courts, and a gazebo, built in the early 18th century on the wall, was adapted to serve above as a summer-house overlooking the court, and a pavilion for the players below (Fig. 8).

The first extension of the garden was in connection with the new east front (1909-12) and, as executed, consists in a lawn laid out with rose beds extending to a balustraded retaining wall, in which paired flights of circular steps descend to a paved parterre (Fig. 7). An intricate geometrical figure is formed by the paths radiating from the six semicircular flights of steps entering and leaving the parterre. Eastwards (Fig. 4), the sides of the parterre are extended in parallel walks, flanked by borders and yew hedges, having between them a sunk canal. The



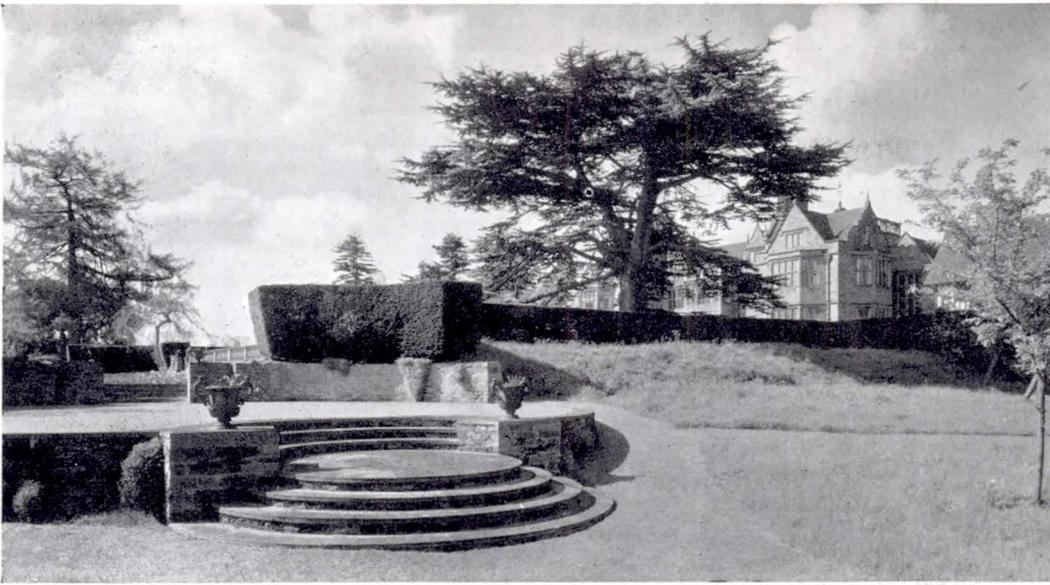
8.—GAZEBO AND TENNIS PAVILION



7.—THE PARTERRE AT THE HEAD OF THE CANAL, LOOKING SOUTH-WEST

retaining walls are brilliant in spring with aubretia and alyssum, the parterre with tulips. At the far end of the canal the hedges turn inwards to frame the vista (Fig. 2), which is extended by a mown walk through bulbs and shrubs in grass to a gap in a platoon of poplars planted on the margin of a lake, the "fish pond," formed out of a marshy field (Fig. 1). The value of the vertical accents given by these trees in the flat landscape and predominantly level lay-out is very evident in the view down the axis from the centre of the balustraded terrace (Fig. 4).

Yew hedges also flank the rose-garden lawn before the east front of the house, where an old cedar provides a valuable feature at its north-east corner (Fig. 9). Near it the cross-axis of the parterre is carried down to the sloping orchard by a delightful and typical Lutyens device: concave steps drop to a circular platform from which descending concave and convex flights contain a second, small, round platform—a device foreshadowed in the 1904 plan. The formal area which we are leaving contains other charming details of design of this order. At the end of the hedge nearest the house, for instance, the gates to another



9.—STEPS FROM THE PARTERRE TO THE ORCHARD

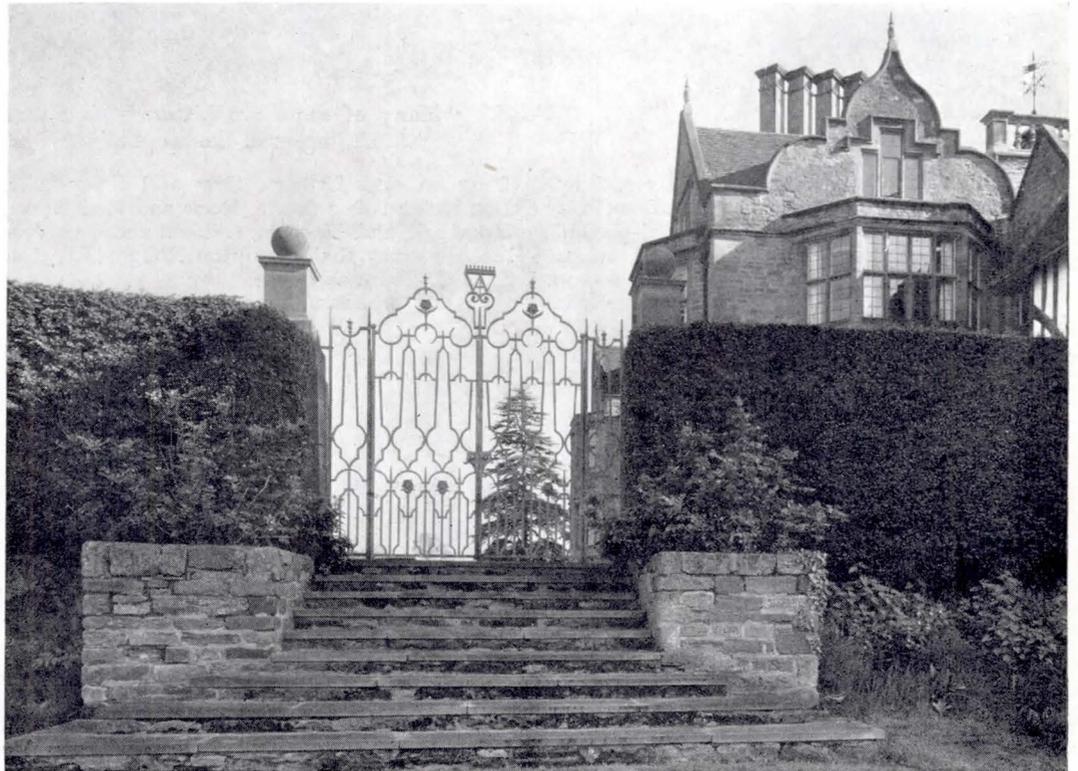
descent embody the late Lord and Lady Wimborne's initials in such a way that when the gates are open they read I.W. and A. W., and when shut combine as in Fig. 10. These gates were among the last additions, the patterns of the ironwork deriving from Lutyens's Delhi period.

The slope northwards from the house and garden has been planted as an orchard and falls gently to an artificial river formed in the Capability Brown tradition—out of an inconsiderable brook. One of the paths radiating from the steps in Fig. 9 leads to the bridge spanning it (Fig. 3). Draped with honeysuckle, the bridge is at first sight pure Willow Pattern. But, looked at more closely, it reveals itself as a little gem of Lutyens garden architecture. On several other occasions he used the device of reducing the masonry substructure of a bridge to about 30 ins. width, then bracketing out the wooden foot-walk and parapets, but nowhere else did he combine this with the hump-back profile. Every timber member of the superstructure is thus on an incline, for not only do the posts radiate from an imaginary centre somewhere below the bed of the stream, but they incline outwards in section, and also in plan, since the foot-walk broadens at each end. The foot-walk consists of shallow overlapping treads (without risers) resting on beams that follow the profile of the bridge's curve and are supported by cross-joists. These lie across the masonry and project some feet at each of their ends, where those between the arches are trussed from below and all support trusses buttressing the parapet posts above. The conception and execution compose a masterpiece of carpentry, which it is a pity there is not space to illustrate more fully.

From this direction most of the buildings added to the old house can be seen, and form a very picturesque group (Fig. 9). In this view, the gable and chimney-stack on the extreme left belong to the Catesby-Ianson house. All the rest is due to the late Lord Wimborne since 1903, the latest addition (1923) being the large north wing on the right of the group.

The collaboration of client and architect was not quite ended by Lord Wimborne's death in 1939, for Lutyens was to design a memorial to his old friend. He proposed a cloister south of the church (Fig. 11) enclosing on three sides a garth, and in the centre the war memorial Cross (Lutyens's War Graves Cross), next to which was to be placed the altar tomb. The designs for the cloister show arcades of Tuscan columns with pitched roof of tiles, raised on a retaining

wall above the lawn, the central arch to form an approach through the memorial garth to the south porch of the church. Lutyens reported characteristically (December 13, 1939): "I have written to Alice W. to say all is well, and that my only sorrow is—that the churchyard will be so beautiful that she will die to be buried there!" But the days for such a spacious project, that would certainly have been in scale with those hatched during the previous 35 years at Ashby, were past. The buttressed retaining wall and steps were built, bulbs were planted at its base; the Cross and the finely moulded and inscribed altar tomb were erected. These we can see by looking over the churchyard wall. Tomb and Cross are a graceful tribute to half a lifetime's friendship on the part of the architect, of whose genius they are so characteristic, supported as they are on those deeply undercut ogee plinths which have the appearance of balancing them a little precariously and artificially, but proudly, above the common level.



10.—THE GATES FROM THE ORCHARD TO THE EAST FRONT



11.—THE MEMORIAL GARTH SOUTH OF THE CHURCH