Castle Drogo, Drewsteignton

Val Harrison and the Research Team at Castle Drogo

The 1920s saw the virtual completion of Castle Drogo, a project that had been designed and started over a decade previously. Seen by some as a folly and by others as one of the most iconic buildings of the twentieth century, it is true to say that Castle Drogo divides opinion. The brainchild of a grocery chain magnate, Julius Drewe, the castle was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the leading architect of the time, considered by many to rank with Sir Christopher Wren as one of the greatest of all British architects.

Figure 1: Aerial view of Castle Drogo (Copyright: National Trust Images/James Dobson)

In 1889, at the age of 33, Julius Drewe retired from active participation in the running of his business, The Home and Colonial Stores, which he had founded six years previously with a partner. After his retirement – and now one of the wealthiest men of his day – he continued to receive remuneration from the company, which ensured him and his family continued an affluent lifestyle, thus enabling him to pursue other interests.

Figure 2: Julius Drewe (Copyright: National Trust Images/John Hammond)

Together with his elder brother, a barrister, Julius developed a keen interest in their family history. The brothers satisfied themselves that they were descendants of one of William the Conqueror's cohorts, Drogo de Teigne, after which the parish and village of Drewsteignton, on the edge of Dartmoor, derives its name.[1] Although the genealogy link to Drogo de Teigne was later disproved, this was nevertheless the reason for Drewe's interest in this location for the castle.

By coincidence, Julius's cousin, Richard Peek, was rector of Drewsteignton between 1895 and 1904, and Julius and his family would on occasion holiday with his cousin in the locality. Postcards sent from Dartmoor to Julius's youngest son Cedric testify to this.[2]

---

[1] Following William the Conqueror's accession to the English throne on 13 October 1066, he appointed a close relative, Baldwin FitzGilbert, as Lord of Okehampton, with Okehampton Castle as his barony seat from which he oversaw 176 estates in Devon. He was made castellan of Exeter and sheriff of Devon. In the 1086 *Domesday Book*, he is recorded as having a manor at Taintone (Teign). At the same time at nearby Cageford (Chagford), Bishop Geoffrey Mowbray of Coutances held over 100 estates in Devon, administered for him by a trusted subordinate Drogo FitzMauger from Carteret. Drogo was one of William's knights who took part in the conquest; he was known also as Drogo de Monte Acuto. His early pedigree is obscured because of several versions of his name; Monte Acuto is a latinised form of Montagu, Montacute and Mortain. After the Conqueror's death in 1087, William II succeeded his father; Bishop Geoffrey became his deputy (justiciar); and a Drogo was appointed Keeper of the Great Seal. No evidence exists of any other Drogo in the area at the time and it is a reasonable supposition that Drogo de Taintone and Drogo FitzMauger were one and the same, a conclusion arrived at by Julius Drewe and his brother.

[2] Sir Cedric Drewe, *Post Card Album*, 1896–1971, https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/results?Places=30f0dd51fffffe0702132e044605920e&Categories=744a2d6affffe0702132e04772fd088&TimePeriods=20 [accessed 22 March 2024].

Figure 3: Local postcards sent to Cedric Drewe (Copyright: National Trust/Jemima Gamble)

It is believed that it was Peek who first became aware of the sale of the site on which the castle now stands, and he notified Drewe. Sometime between 1908 and 1910, Drewe (perhaps with Richard Peek's assistance) acquired over 400 acres of former church-owned land, being most of the glebe lands of Drewsteignton parish. He also acquired other local farms and cottages in the area – the Drogo estate would eventually grow to around 1,500 acres.

Ancestry and location resolved to Drewe's satisfaction; his next step was to choose an architect for his new castle. A decade before receiving his knighthood and not yet as well-known as he would eventually become, Edwin Lutyens was renowned for his creation of numerous country houses, mostly in the areas of Sussex, Surrey and Kent, where the Drewe family resided. Befriended by Edward Hudson – the founder of *Country Life* magazine and for whom he had rebuilt Lindisfarne Castle in Northumberland as well as a grand house in Surrey – Lutyens received much publicity for his creations in that magazine. Drewe engaged him, and in 1910, discussions commenced. Although always cordial in their relationship, there were many disagreements between architect and client concerning the project. For example, it is well documented that in 1910 Lutyens tried his utmost to persuade Drewe to build a grand manor house rather than a castle. The latter would not be swayed. His brief to his architect was to create a castle that was austere and medieval externally, and modern, warm and homely inside.

Figure 4: Julius Drewe (left), Edwin Lutyens and J. C. Walker (right) (Copyright: National Trust)

In 1910, Lutyens and Drewe's eldest son Adrian, who shared his father's ambition for the castle, pegged out the site together. Soon after, in April 1911, the first stone was laid. An early priority was to create a drive from the main Drewsteignton to Chagford road to the planned site of the castle. This work was undertaken by well-known Exeter firm Veitch & Co.

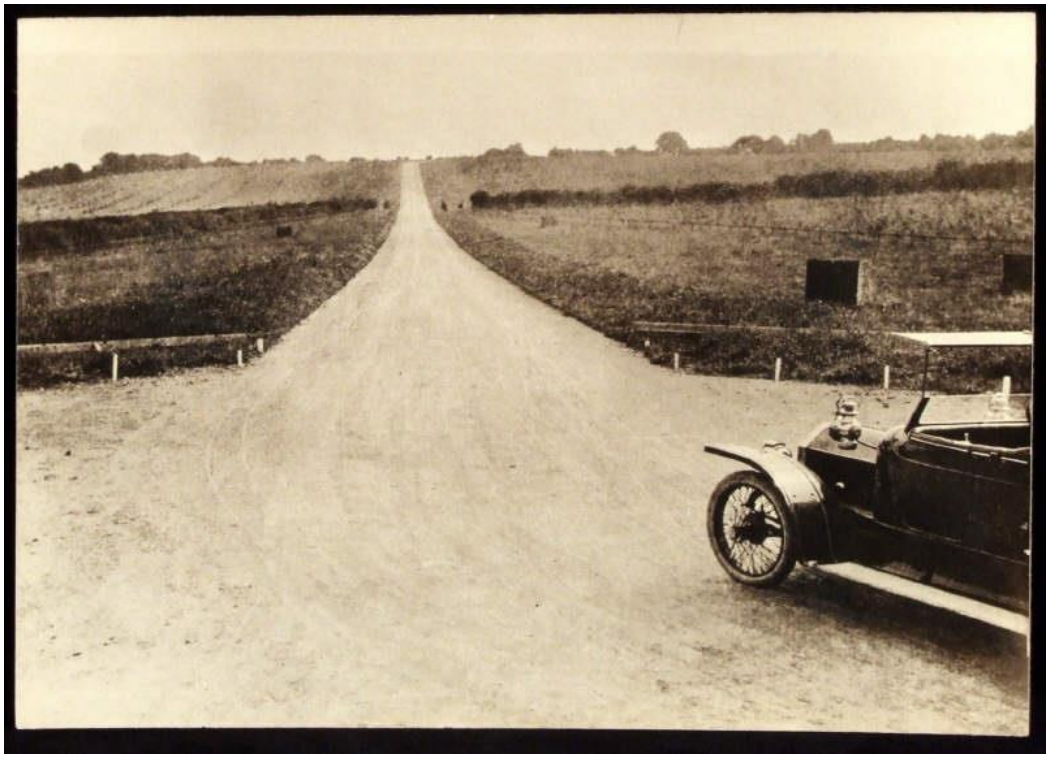

Figure 5: The new driveway, Castle Drogo (Copyright: National Trust)

Initially, work was slow. There were problems to overcome with the acquisition of materials, especially granite.[3] There was some early concern with the quality of the granite blocks and with the transportation of very heavy loads from quarries on Dartmoor to the building site taking a major toll on the roads. Early mechanised lorries were used as well as horses, and progress up to 1914 was steady. Momentum was not helped by Drewe's insistence of having wooden mock-ups built of some additional buildings suggested in the original plans, such as two gatehouses. These were never built.

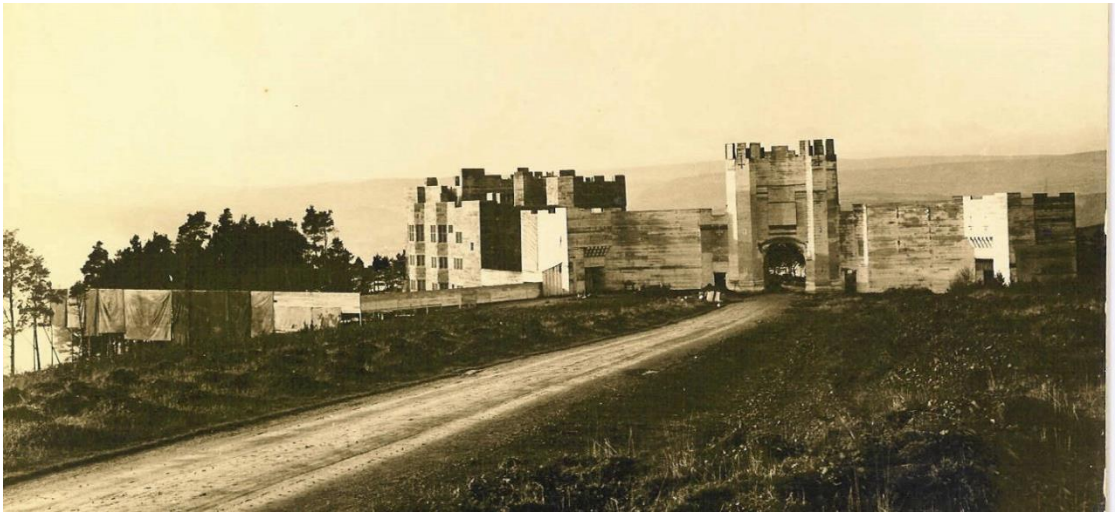

Figure 6: Timber mock-up of gatehouse, Castle Drogo, never constructed
(Copyright: National Trust/Lynda Aiano)

When the First World War started, Julius Drewe encouraged all his employees to join the war effort, offering every volunteer a gratuity to join and supplying each one with a uniform (a rarity, since most volunteers at that time trained initially in their own clothes). The three Drewe sons – all in their late teens or early twenties and passionate supporters of their father's dream – joined up in the first two months of the conflict. Mechanical lorries and horses were requisitioned for the war effort, and work on the castle slowed dramatically. In 1916, Drewe stipulated that no one under the age of 42 would be employed on the project, which meant that all work ceased on the building. Family, as well as those members of staff who had moved to Devon that were not called to the war effort, returned to the Drewe's 3,000-acre Wadhurst Hall estate in Sussex, where they would all remain until 1919.[4]

Very little was progressed at Castle Drogo in 1919, but work started in earnest again at the start of the new decade. At the outset in 1911, Drewe had chosen an experienced Yorkshireman called John Coates Walker to be his project manager/clerk of works. An inspired choice, it was Walker who would now largely be responsible for driving on the project to its finish.[5]

Reconvening a workforce in 1920 may well have been difficult as many skilled workmen had died during the war. Additionally, the eldest of Drewe's sons, Adrian, had been killed in 1917 at the Battle of Ypres. Mary, Julius's eldest daughter, is on record as commenting that her parents were devastated by the loss, adding that her father's drive and enthusiasm were noticeably reduced.

---

[3] Helen Harris, Letter to Peter Tate re. granite used at Castle Drogo, Construction and Architecture folder, sub-section: Granite, Quarries and Stonemasons, Castle Drogo archive, 17 June 1996.

[4] Extract from *Burke's Landed Gentry*, 'Drew of Wadhurst Hall', Castle Drogo archive, 1902.

[5] John Coates Walker, various letters, Castle Drogo archive.

Basil Drewe, the second-eldest of the sons, took the lead in supporting and representing his father's interests. Julius, however, was still very much in control and would have been frustrated by difficulties in discussing progress and adjustments with his architect, Lutyens. The latter was by 1920 well-ensconced as the lead architect for the building of New Delhi in India, as well as being one of the main consultant architects for the Imperial War Graves Commission. That would see him responsible for 149 cemeteries and over 50 memorials in the UK and Europe; one of which is outside Exeter Cathedral. Whereas Lutyens always ensured one of his apprentices was available to clients, his personal travels to India, which could be months in duration, and his war graves commitments made for limited availability for other clients. Nevertheless, the last stone of the construction of the castle was laid in 1925. Work on the interior and ancillary buildings continued.

Figure 7: Front entrance, Castle Drogo (Copyright: National Trust Images/James Dobson)

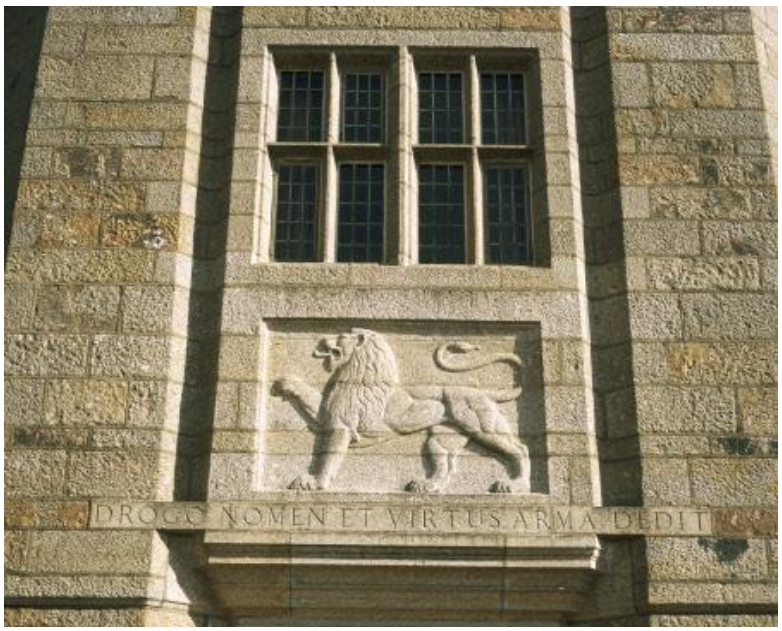

Figure 8: Heraldic lion over the front entrance to Castle Drogo
(Copyright: National Trust Images/John Blake)

On the subject of architects apprenticed to Lutyens, it is interesting to note that two of his previous pupils were responsible for significant 1920s buildings in Devon. Oswald Milne, apprenticed in the first decade of the century, designed Coleton Fishacre for the D'Oyly Carte family. This was completed in 1925 and now, like Castle Drogo, is under the care of the National Trust. He also designed houses on the Dartington Estate as well as Blundells School at Tiverton. Fred Harild RA, who was also apprenticed to Lutyens at the start of the century, set up in practice in Totnes and designed a house at Meadfoot in Torquay, started in 1928. The latter includes a spectacular terraced garden similar in design to one originally suggested by Lutyens for Castle Drogo (but not proceeded with).

Another factor to affect Lutyens was his relative obsession in the early 1920s with designing and building in his chambers a doll's house for Queen Mary, now on display at Windsor Castle. Even a friend admonished Lutyens for spending too much time on the doll's house to the neglect of his clients.

Drewe's frustration at his inability to communicate with Lutyens as often as he would like resulted with him in 1921 appointing a garden consultant to 'assist' Lutyens in the design of the garden – a final design for which had been shelved since 1915.[6] George Dillistone from Tunbridge Wells in Kent was appointed and all evidence suggests that he and Lutyens enjoyed a good working relationship, which resulted in the amicable co-design and creation of the garden, much as it is today. Lutyens would appear to have been responsible for the overall design with its bold layout and strong architectural framework. Dillistone seems to have had primacy in developing an arts and crafts vernacular inspired garden planting scheme.[7]

[6] C. Smith, 'History of the Garden at Castle Drogo', *Drogo Chronicle*, 5 (spring 2020), pp. 12–13

[7] Jonathan Lovie, 'Analysis of Garden', Castle Drogo archive, National Trust, 2011.

Figure 9: Sinus path with herbatious borders above the sunken Rose Garden, Castle Drogo (Copyright: National Trust Images/James Dobson)

In the early 1920s, building work gathered pace and several modern (for the time) facilities were incorporated into the castle design. A sophisticated central heating system and intercom were agreed, along with a state-of-the-art bathroom/shower room, which would not be out of place in a bathroom of today. One of the first electric clocks was acquired. A lift was installed and an integral system for vacuuming was designed – but never used.

A hydroelectric turbine house, designed by Lutyens, was built just below the castle in the Teign Gorge, which is still supplying electricity to the estate. A very large concrete reservoir, the size of a modern-day detached house, was constructed at the highest point of the estate to ensure a gravity-fed water supply to the many bathrooms, toilets and water outlets in the castle. Basil Drewe, having taken a double first at Oxford in law and science, had become a leading barrister specialising in patent law. His knowledge of technological advances of the day was very likely to have put him in an advantageous position to advise his father.

Figure 10: Turbine House, Castle Drogo
(Copyright: National Trust Images/John Millar)

All progressed smoothly until Julius Drewe suffered a stroke in the middle of the decade. He informed Walker that he was incapacitated and 'too ill to do business'. Because of the 'hands-on' approach adopted by Julius from the outset, everything ground to a temporary halt. Fortunately work soon restarted, with the building sufficiently complete to enable the family to celebrate Christmas there in 1926. They were able to take up residence in part of the building in 1927.

It is noteworthy that the project provided work for a very large number of people, either employed directly on the project or as subcontractors and suppliers, such as the two granite quarries supplying the granite for the building and gardens: principally Blackingstone but with some granite coming from Merrivale.[8] Weathered granite from the surface of Staple Tor was also used. Despite the large numbers involved, there is no record that the general strike of 1926 delayed or affected the work in any way.

Sadly, after his stroke, Julius' general health deteriorated. Although the stroke had affected his mobility, he acquired a mechanical bath chair to enable him to tour parts of the estate by the drive. A path was created along the edge of the Teign Gorge, which enabled him to foray into the countryside. However, as the decade drew to its close and the castle neared completion, Julius spent more and more time at Kilmorie, the house he had purchased in Torquay in 1919. This residence facilitated his chauffeur-driven daily commute to his beloved project. His large Torquay home, Kilmorie, has long since been demolished to be replaced by a large block of flats situated at the eastern extremity of Meadfoot Beach.

Although essentially completed before the end of the 1920s, Castle Drogo still required some finishing touches, including some carpentry within the house, such as the bookcases in the library, as well as the garden and the outdoor buildings. Some work carried on until 1931, when all builders and labourers were finally withdrawn.

---

[8] Helen Harris, 'The Industrial Archaeology of Dartmoor', extract in Construction and Architecture folder, subsection: Granite Quarries and Stonemasons, Castle Drogo archive, Castle Drogo, 1968, p. 76.

Figure 11: Panelling inserted into the drawing room in 1928
(Copyright: National Trust Images/James Dobson)

Figure 12: The library shelving, a late addition, Castle Drogo
(Copyright: National Trust Images/Dennis Gilbert)

Julius Drewe died in 1931, hopefully satisfied with the finished article and unaware that he was responsible for the last castle ever to be built in the United Kingdom. He could surely lay claim to having created the ultimate grand design of its time.

Postscript

Julius changed his name by deed poll from Drew to Drewe to more closely align with the Drewes of Broadhembury, which genealogical research had suggested there was a link to Julius's ancestors.

The Drewe's Sussex residence, Wadhurst Hall, and large estate was sold in 1929 to Mr Grant Maclean.

Mrs Frances Drewe, Julius's widow, and his eldest daughter Mary continued to live at the castle until Frances's death in 1954. Since that date, four generations of the family have resided there.[9] The National Trust became owners of the property in 1974 and entered an agreement with the family for them to retain an apartment within the building.

Well before the completion of the building in the mid-1920s, it became apparent that because of inappropriate use of materials and Julius Drewe's rejection of some building recommendations by Lutyens, there were problems with water ingression in various parts of the building. These persisted to blight the castle for decades. From 2007 to 2021 the National Trust conducted a multi-million-pound repairs programme to tackle the problem, ensuring the castle will survive in perpetuity.

[9] Francis Drewe, 'The Family of Drewe', copy of typed manuscript of Adrian Francis Drewe's proposed book on the Drewe and related families, Castle Drogo archive, February 1973.