

# The Albury House

2019



Made on the Albury Estate from  
locally sourced materials

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## Style and design: Surrey Hills

I moved to Surrey, or the part of it known as the 'Surrey Hills', a few years ago, after a period working abroad. The environment that now surrounds us has a very different kind of appeal to the wide-open, hedge less vistas of our former home. This part of the county is hilly and particularly heavily wooded so one often discovers small settlements, almost by surprise, after turning a corner in one of the many deeply sunken lanes that furrow the landscape. Touches of Tolkien and Arthur Rackham.



With all this timber around, the builders working in the local style typically rely on wood framing, in a tradition at least as old as the settlements themselves - some of which have histories stretching back to Roman times or pre-history. The other popular materials are a sort of chalky,

'clunch'-like, white stone, old quarries for which pockmark the woodland, as well as brick for trim and flint as an alternative infill. The ground floors are often masonry, supporting wood-framed upper storeys.

Another characteristic feature is the widespread use of hung tiles on the first floors and above. These can vary from plain, and sometimes quite crudely formed coverings to superb displays of carefully patterned tiles. Often the tile courses alternate between bands of plain and decorative, semi-circular 'club' tiles.



*Chalky stone and flint, trimmed with brick*

Club tiles can be 'half-round' or pointed, in an arrowhead form, and are used both for decoration - and to save weight.

The roofs have some distinct features too. They tend to be steep – either after fashion or perhaps it was once snowier in these parts than it is now – and decorated with gable-end finials and elaborate ridge tiles.



At the same time, villages or landed estates - the original builders and current owners of many of the local cottages - often have their own distinct patterns for the barge boards which can be quite elaborate.

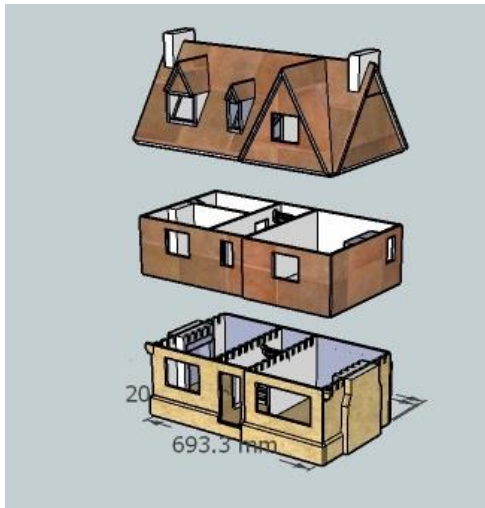


Above and right: *typical estate cottages*

### **From general to the specific: The Albury House**

I made the original designs into a drawing on a 3D software programme. This has a number of advantages, not least the ease of correction and the simplicity of dimensioning the drawings. It is also possible to rotate the images to see if there are possible conflicts or overlaps between components.





*Left: 3D software image of the Albury House*

### Sources

The original inspiration for the Albury House was the remarkable 'Old Post Office' in Albury. From this, I borrowed several features including the horse dismounting step, the large ground floor windows and the dormers. I also used the rather informal brick trim style for the ground floor.



*Above: The Old Post Office, Albury*

The chimneys are a very dramatic feature of this building and likely inspired by Augustus Pugin's use of Tudor-style chimneys at nearby Albury Park, where there are some 63 of them. In the Old Post Office, they sit on square chimney breasts rotated through forty-five degrees, diamond fashion.

This means that all the fireplaces, save possibly the main ground floor fire, would have been at forty-five degrees to each room, adding unnecessary complication to my build. On my houses, the chimneys rather more closely resemble those seen on many of the local estate cottages.



The chimneys themselves are very complex structures made of decorative, moulded bricks, designed individually. Copying these directly would have almost doubled the length of the build, so I used some excellent pre-made chimneys that mimic the shape without copying directly the original method of building. Building a dolls house is rather like building a real one: it is not necessary to make *every* component individually: where appropriate, one buys them in.

A significant design decision was to add a gable end to the front. The main reason for this was to give me a vertical level change to help mask the main door openings, which would be harder to hide if I simply copied the Post Office façade. The Post Office also has bargeboards using the local estate design of trefoil perforations, which I used in simplified form.



*Two other examples of local bargeboard detail*



*Above: the Old Post Office, bargeboard detail*



### External woodwork

All visible timbering, excepting the windows, is from ash wood grown on the hillsides near where I live and seasoned for three years or so. It is tough but easily handled. In this way, these house models share something in common with the real ones.



The Tudor style front door (a popular Victorian feature) was also made from this wood, including the carved lintel and frame, as were the barge boards and finials. These were stained a dark colour to mimic the pitch or tar-derived preservation treatments often used in the past to protect these very exposed timbers.

The windows were an interesting challenge as there are many competing styles in the local buildings. Some of the older houses from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries retain their original leaded lights. A few have had sash windows added at some point in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. But, for the most part, the local evidence suggests that buildings built here in the Victorian period generally had the casement type, as I have chosen, and there are plenty of examples of these hereabouts.

The window frames in my houses were made from a wild cherry tree from our garden. The wood is very closely grained and works at any scale. I also used this wood for the treads on the staircases. Indeed, these houses exhausted that supply: the many stages from chain saw to table saw to thicknesser (a type of electric plane) and so on are unavoidably wasteful in this respect. The stair rails are obeche, stained and French polished. Each window is designed to be opened – with the exception of those in the attic - and has accurate, scale and functional fittings directly copied from my own Victorian-period home. Some care in their use is required however; at this scale, the fittings are very delicate.



*cherrywood stair treads*

I tried out various types of putty effects for the glazing which is made up of individually cut panes of clear polystyrene sheet. In the end, a simple bead of white glue seemed the most realistic and least visually distracting. The plastic panes also distort slightly after fitting, giving an uncannily accurate impression of the light reflections from old glass.

## **Masonry**

The bricks were individually cast from moulding plaster in the form of brick slips about eighth of an inch thick, in batches of slightly differing colours to mimic the colour effects of the firing process in the kilns of the period. The material is surprisingly tough if mixed with a minimum of water. The random-rubble walling was also cast from plaster on to a backing and this was then glued in place and stained in places.



The 'mortar' in both cases is a type of tile grout to which I add pigment. This sets very hard and adds further strength to hold the masonry in place. For corbels, which appear where the first-floor jetties out, I used painted and textured wood - and the 'slate' on the steps is plaster that has been stained and polished.

## **Tiles**

These were, in some respects, the sternest challenge of the project. There are ready-made tiles of various sorts on the market, some even made of real terracotta, but they are hard to cut and when fitted do not look much like the real thing because they lack patina and variation. There is then little point spending the sums involved in buying well over two thousand of these things if they are inevitably going to have to be painted anyway.

That left me with a problem. Making simple tiles with hardboard is not too much of a challenge but how to make the club tiles? Some form of stamp mechanism might have worked – but, lacking such a device, I had to find a material that could take a moulding detail routed along an edge and then be sliced up into little tiles. Wood was not practical because if one cuts across the grain, the resulting 'tiles' fall to bits in handling - and the grain itself shows prominently.

This left MDF, perhaps my least favoured material. MDF is unique. It is heavy yet weak - and distorts badly when exposed to moisture. It is something generally best avoided for anything other than speaker cases, for example. However, being effectively grainless, it was the only practical choice. Having finally cut my tiles, how then to keep them dimensionally stable? I tried dilute white glue but, when treated with this, the tiles promptly expanded by almost 50 per cent and became useless. This wasted a lot. Finally, after extended experimentation, I found a treatment to effectively seal them; soaking them in shellac, diluted slightly with white spirit. Indeed, after this, they happily survived the dramatic humidity change in the move from my workshop to my house and are now permanently stable.



## Interior

For the inside, the basic 'story' of the scheme is that this is a new or newly refurbished interior dating from around 1900 to 1914. I imagined those paying for the work would likely spend most money downstairs, somewhat less on the private areas of the first floor and treat the attic, where a maid or children might live, in fairly utilitarian terms.



Thus, the ground floor has 'anaglypta' wall coverings up to dado level, a picture rail and dark stained skirting and door frames. Anaglypta, a type of heavily embossed wall covering, intended to resemble patterned leather, was achieved with some suitably embossed card that had designs close in appearance and scale to real examples I have seen. There is still quite a lot of it around in London mansion blocks for example.

The wood staining process, meanwhile, was originally used to add a simulated grain effect to make cheaper pine look more like expensive hard wood. The treatment, as anyone who has ever restored old buildings will know, was extremely widespread at and seems to have died out only around the 1920s.

The fireplaces, which can all be lit, are by Sue Cook and spot on for the period. The wallpaper is from a supplier in Germany, Mini Mundus, and also appropriate for the time in question.

I did not stain the ceiling joists, on either floor, a very dark colour because, while the Victorians did do this quite frequently, to make the beams look older, that makes less sense in what would then have been a new building. Further, the timbers in these models will age naturally and take on their own patina over time.

The kitchen is a simple design with softwood panelling and simulated 'quarry' tiles. A local surveyor told me that this was a common choice in the area, as were slate floors. The reason is that there is no really suitable local stone for flooring.

Across the valley, the chalk gives way rather abruptly, to a hard, iron-rich sandstone which is alright for rubble walling - but little else. So, flooring, that is to be seen, must be brought in from elsewhere.



The kitchen has a large chimney breast to take a cast-iron cooking range, which is certainly what would have been there at the time. Happily, there are some excellent cast-metal models of these available on the miniatures market.

*Kitchen tiles before treatment and painting*

The little bathroom has a floor tiles made from hardboard squares in a similar way to the kitchen tiles, and these can be read either as tiles or the type of pattern one would see in the early lino flooring that was making an appearance in this period. The walls are half-tiled using a tile paper as this is, after careful measurement, the best way to get the correct scale thickness and makes fitting baths and lavatory slightly easier. The type for this house would be one with a high cistern.

## **Stairs**

I considered various forms, but all had their complications. An ordinary run from one floor to another would have left quite a lot of 'dead space' in each corridor beside them, with little room for furniture or anything else besides wall pictures. And then there is the question of what to do at the end? There would probably have been a door to a kitchen-garden, but that would make little sense in this design.

*Fitting the ground floor stairs*



So, to increase the useable area, I adapted a stair design I found in the cottage of an old family acquaintance. While it solved the space problem it was tricky to build, and I had to develop working patterns before I could even start.

### **Floorboards**

Actual pine looks hopeless at this scale - the grain is much too prominent, and it is often full of knots. But a popular modelling wood, called obeche, gives a good impression of old pine. In these models, the boards were cut, planed and then sanded before being given a very light coat of varnish to simulate the shine of continued use. I deliberately used a scale size of nine-inch boards for visual reasons, although by this time floorboards were often narrower, more like six inches. However, in an area such as ours, one so rich in timber, the larger board sizes would likely have persisted a bit longer.

At the time of this scheme, owners would probably have had their floorboards stained dark to match the skirting and doors, perhaps leaving an un-treated square area in the middle where the carpet would go. All models are a compromise and I felt that, while accurate, this might not be very appealing.

### **Doors.**

Most houses of this type would have simple four-panel doors, as found in these models. They would have been made of cheap pine and stained, as discussed above, and fitted with rim locks and brass handles, although cheaper handles of ceramic might have been used on upper floors. The door frame mouldings are of a Victorian pattern, but they might equally have been of the more typical ogee form.

### **Door fittings and window furniture**

All the door rim-locks and latches were designed by me on 3D software and taken from measured examples in my own home - or from others I have visited. The designs are printed or rather etched out from brass and then returned to me for folding, fabrication and soldering. I then chemically stain or paint the objects black.





The front door latch is a bit different in that I had to scratch build all the components from brass stock. This and the thumb latches in the attic are all functional.

*Left: front door fittings*

## Services

It is probable that these houses 'when built' would have had a plumbed-in water supply if not too isolated out in the woods. This would have connected, to begin with anyway, to a simple pump at the kitchen sink. Later a bath, sink and lavatory would likely have been plumbed in upstairs. Gas supplies in this area would have been unlikely at this time so lighting would have been with oil lamps on tables and candles - or lamps - in wall sconces.

In these models, plug sockets are fitted in all rooms although these would have first appeared around here by about the time of the Great War. Nearby Godalming was, improbably enough, one of the first towns in the world to supply its inhabitants with electricity, in 1881. But it took longer elsewhere. The house sockets are painted brown to resemble early ceramic or 'Bakelite' type fittings. The former would have appeared for the first time in the very late Victorian period and the latter between the War and the 1920s. There are also sockets hidden behind the ceiling joists in the centre of each room for ceiling lamps if required. Light switches are not fitted but would have been the type with shallow brass domes fitted to a wooden board.

## Painting

Painting, as with many, perhaps all models, is a challenge because there is a continual conflict between what our eye sees, what the brain interprets and what looks good on the model itself. For example, in this area, the roof tiles are made of terracotta which we all 'know' to be, well, a terracotta colour. But, in reality, while they start out a similar colour to bricks, the effect of weather and algae and moss accumulation alters the appearance dramatically. Around here, perhaps because forest clearings are often so damp, old tile roofs are often a very dark brown, stained with streaks of black, grey and green.



This, however, doesn't look too appealing on a model, particularly because the model itself is at eye height, or below, so the roof is a much more prominent feature than one appreciates looking up at a real example. So, I used a darkened terracotta to begin with, and then progressively stained and varied the tiles until they contrasted sufficiently with the hanging tiles.

The ridge tiles tend to be made with a glaze, so they resist algae and weather more effectively and hence, on some buildings, look a more obviously terracotta colour than the main roof slates.

The hanging tiles too, in real life are far from uniform. Each tile would be slightly different when it came from the kilns and these differences would then be magnified as they weathered, and algae stuck to the surface in differing degrees. The tiles also get much darker if subjected to regular water flows from roof or guttering and they vary too depending on which point of the compass they face. For aesthetic reasons, I did not add 'algae' but added considerable variety to the original colour of each tile and then progressive washes over the top to create the effect I was looking for.

The lead flashing is, in fact, made of lead and will age naturally, so no further treatment was required for this.

### **Afterthoughts**

Taken as a whole, it has been intriguing to see what a Victorian exterior and interior would look like when 'new'. It is distinct, and both familiar and not so - all at once. But the effect, inside especially, is hardly so dark and sombre as we sometimes imagine. Once the Art & Crafts movement began to see off the all-pervasive clutter of the high Victorian period – aspidistras, curios and pictures – homes must have looked smart and bright.

## Chimneys, tiles and trees: the Surrey Hills area

