

Signs of the Times
The Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich

The Country Life House
76 Khakum Wood Road
1928
Julius Gregory, architect

The 1928 Country Life House at no. 76 Khakum Wood Road represents the unique collaborative effort on the part of *Country Life* Magazine and the Real Estate Board of Greenwich to build a model country estate to be featured in a popular magazine published at the time by Doubleday & Co. Magazine editors and a ten-member syndicate from the real estate board commissioned the design from New York architect Julius Gregory and supervised the furnishings and an illustrated story on the house ran to much fanfare in the January 1930 issue of *Country Life*.

Both the house and the entire district of Khakum Wood are significant to the history of Greenwich. The concept for the residential area, initially laid out in 1925, was the joint effort of Greenwich resident Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (1867-1944), a New York architect, and the landscape firm of Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts. Founded by Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), father of American landscape architecture, the firm continued under the leadership of his son and stepson. The Olmsted office worked in Greenwich on at least 25 private houses, two other subdivisions (the Percy Rockefeller and Edson properties) and the grounds of Greenwich Country Day School.

In 1903 I. N. Phelps Stokes, who had purchased about 180 acres of farmland in Round Hill, approached the Olmsted firm with the idea of subdividing the land for a series of houses set on naturalistically planted sites. Stokes hired the firm to landscape his own Khakum Wood estate, High-Low House, and the first "general plan" for the entire neighborhood followed in 1925. An Olmsted project always began with this requisite plan, which was based on a topographical survey and set the basic template for house lots, building placement, roads, driveways, general landscaping and bodies of water (the Olmsteds created a lake and two ponds for Khakum Wood). Revisions and refinements followed. Engineers, architects and horticulturists worked for individual clients within the Khakum Wood

neighborhood but were required to submit plans to Stokes and the Olmsted firm for approval.

The general plan broke the Khakum Wood property into irregularly shaped parcels, ranging in size from less than an acre to more than four. Many purchasers combined lots to create large parcels. To ensure respect for the natural topography, the designers suggested the general positioning of houses and specified the individual driveway designs, each of which incorporated a circle of some kind.

By the fall of 1926 road building was complete and water and electricity were provided to each lot. The district, designed in the traditional image of the ideal American suburb—defined by winding drives and carefully placed houses screened by informal plantings—owes a direct debt to the Olmsted concept of civilized living. Residents were free to choose their own architects but were subjected to guidelines issued by the Khakum Woods owners' association restricting building designs to "English architecture," which was defined rather loosely as "Tudor" and "Georgian." No all-wood structures were permitted, possibly to reduce fire risk. Regulations also prohibited telegraph, utility poles and the obstruction of views with tall plantings.

By 1933 twenty houses had been built on 155 acres that were set off from the Stokes estate. Most were conceived as English manor houses designed in brick or stone with half-timbered gables, leaded windows, tall corbelled chimneys and slate roofs. Julius Gregory's design for the Country Life House conformed to rules limiting all structures in Khakum Wood to 40 feet in height.

Gregory devised a horizontal floor plan that enabled him to limit the plan to one room in depth so that virtually every room, excepting two maid's rooms, had views of the grounds and the Olmsted-designed lake to the west. The layout accommodated a library, living room, dining room, kitchen and servants' quarters on the first floor, four bedrooms and a dressing room and maids' rooms on the second floor and two bedrooms and a cedar closet on the top level. The basement level housed a recreation room with a domed ceiling painted with a mural of Long Island Sound and fitted with a built-in bar. Throughout the interior original detailing, including slate flooring, carved stone fireplaces, oak paneling and intricate brass window and door hardware, are intact.

During the building boom that followed the Depression, Greenwich was particularly receptive to the kind of Tudor Revival estates exemplified by the Country Life House. Literally interpreted, the Tudor style was the final development of the late-Gothic architecture built in England under the

reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII (1485-1547). The looser revival of the late 1800s and early 1900s also incorporated elements of the Elizabethan (1558-1603) and Jacobean periods (1603-25) of the English Renaissance

The original design of the both interior and the exterior of the Country Life House, built of cut stone, is remarkably intact. A very steeply pitched intersecting gable makes a strong architectural statement on the east façade, where the gable roof facades slope nearly to the ground. Set within is the front entry, recessed in an arched opening. Leaded casements, peak-roofed dormers at the second story and narrow dormers with steep, slanting shed roofs contribute to the distinct medieval character of the design. The steep pitch and the tight layers of tile were meant to simulate thatch to accentuate the look of an English manor house. In an extravagant use of the tile, the roof covering continues from the main roof down the long broad planes of the front gable.

On the west side of the house, fronted by a stone terrace, twin two-story towers crowned by conical roofs suggest the grandeur of a castle. Here a stucco wall treatment provides a counterpoint to the textured stone, which is limited primarily to the first floor.

In late 1928, the Country House on lot no. 7 was sold to Ray Parker Stevens, a New York utilities executive who brought the Olmsted Brothers back to create the landscaping for the 3.4-acre site. The detailed plan, designed to follow and accentuate the natural rock outcroppings, incorporated thousands of new plants. In 1929-30 Stevens, who also owned lot no. 6, added a service building to the north. Designed by Julius Gregory, that building housed kennels, stables and two apartments, for Stevens's kennel manager and caretaker. The Greenwich builder Peter Mitchell of North Mianus served as contractor on much of the project. At the same time, Gregory also designed a swimming pool. The pool, raised on a stone foundation that houses changing rooms, stands intact on the south side of the property. R. P Stevens divided the property and sold the buildings separately in 1944 around which time the main house was named Brae-Tarn.

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Sources:

Architectural plans, Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich and
Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site

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The Country Life House, and the entire district of Khakum Wood are significant to the history of Greenwich. The area was designed in 1925 by Greenwich resident and New York architect Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (1867-1944) along with the leading landscape architectural firm of Olmsted Brothers in the tradition of the firm's founder, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903). Khakum Wood was designed to respect the natural topography and to include winding drives and carefully placed houses screened by informal plantings. Stokes and the Olmsted firm reviewed building plans. The Khakum Wood owners' association restricted building designs to Tudor and Georgian styles. Regulations prohibited houses built entirely of wood (perhaps to reduce fire risk), telegraph and utility poles, and the obstruction of views with tall plantings.

The 1928 Country Life House at 76 Khakum Wood Road is the result of a unique, much-publicized collaborative effort. Country Life Magazine and the Real Estate Board of Greenwich built this model country estate to be featured in the popular magazine. Country Life Magazine editors and a ten-member syndicate from the Real Estate Board commissioned the design from New York architect Julius Gregory and supervised the furnishings. The story ran in the January 1930 issue of Country Life.

Gregory devised a horizontal floor plan that enabled him to limit the layout to one room in depth. This gave virtually every room, except two maid's rooms, views of the grounds and the Olmsted-designed lake to the west. One of the many notable features was a basement-level recreation room with a domed ceiling, painted with a mural of Long Island Sound and fitted with a built-in bar. Throughout the interior original detailing, including slate flooring, carved stone fireplaces, paneling and intricate brass window and door hardware, are intact.

The original design remains remarkably unchanged. A very steeply pitched intersecting gable makes a strong architectural statement on the east facade, where the gable roof facades slope nearly to the ground. Set within is the front entry, recessed into an arched opening. Leaded casements, peak-roofed dormers at the second story and narrow dormers with steep, slanting shed roofs contribute to the distinct medieval character of the design. The steep roof pitch and the tight layers of tile were meant to simulate thatch to accentuate the look of an English manor house. In an extravagant use of the tile, the covering continues from the main roof down the long broad planes of a front gable.

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