

## Pacific Heights Architects #1 - Ernest Coxhead

*The subject of this month's article is Ernest Albert Coxhead and his home at 2421 Green Street.*

Coxhead was born in Eastbourne, England in 1863, the fourth of six children. His father William Coxhead was a retired schoolmaster who had set up as a lodging-house keeper in this coastal town on the south coast of England, about 20 miles east of Brighton. At the age of 15 Ernest became articled to civil engineer George Wallis who did a number of public works projects which were instrumental in Eastbourne's development as a resort. After five years experience in both public projects and residential developments, in 1883 Coxhead left Eastbourne for London. In London he worked for architect Frederic Chancellor, who instilled in Coxhead a keen interest in old churches. Coxhead assisted in many restorations and also did measured drawings of existing churches - St. Mary's in Eastbourne (13th Century), Felstead Church in Essex (16th Century), and Ottery St. Mary in Devon (13th-16th Century), the last of which won him the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Silver Medal in 1885.



Coxhead's own house, 2421 Green Street, and to the right his first residential commission, 2423 Green, reminiscent of the thatched roof type of cottage in Coxhead's native England but adapted to California materials. His house is atypical in its asymmetry, but both are early examples of what has come to be known as the Bay Region style of design.

Coxhead was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1883 and stayed there for three years. At the same time he attended the Architectural Association's evening classes, necessary to prepare draftsmen for admittance to RIBA, to which he was elected as an associate in 1886. Soon after obtaining that qualification and still only 23 years old, Coxhead left England for the United States.

In January 1887 he opened an office in Los Angeles assisted by his 2-year older brother, Almeric W. S. Coxhead, who took charge of business affairs. Between 1887 and 1889 Coxhead designed seven new Episcopal Churches in Southern California and in 1889 they moved to San Francisco with commissions for six more churches in Northern California. The firm of Coxhead and Coxhead was established in San Francisco in 1890 with their first project as the Holy Innocents Church at 455 Fair Oaks. That was followed by another church on 11th near Market, before they obtained their first residential commission in 1891, a brick and half-timbered house with symmetrical paired leaded-glass windows and a steep shingled roof rolled at the edge, for James McGauley. Except that it is perched high up on a graded street, this house at 2423 Green Street reminds the viewer of an English thatched-roof country cottage adapted to the California environment using materials appropriate for this area, such as cedar shingles instead of thatch.

Soon after, in 1892, he designed a home for himself and his brother immediately east of the McGauley house, but on a lot one-half the width, at 2421 Green Street. By contrast, this house is completely asymmetrical and reminds one of a home on a remote part of the English coastline. With this design Coxhead established himself firmly as one of the small group of architects who were rejecting the overly-ornamented and brightly-painted Italianate and Queen Anne styles in favor of a more simple design and an approach to building which used materials left in their natural state to harmonize rather than stand-out from the existing landscape.

In 1893 his Episcopal Church client, Bishop William Kip, died and Coxhead started to concentrate

on residential work in San Francisco and Berkeley. In the City he went on to design 2710 Scott in 1893, 2940 Jackson in 1894, 2600 Jackson in 1895, 2511 Baker and 3362 Clay in 1896, 2700 Scott in 1897, 2800 Pacific in 1899, 3647 Washington in 1900, and 3232 & 3234 Pacific in 1901. Remarkably, all of them survive 100 years later, largely retaining their original exterior appearance.

Coxhead's legacy to San Francisco architecture also includes Prayerbook Cross (1894) and a bridge over Stow Lake (1896), both in Golden Gate Park; three buildings for the Home Telephone Company (now Pacific Bell), including their headquarters at 333 Grant in 1908, which is now San Francisco Landmark #141; and the Golden Gate Valley Branch Library at 1801 Green on the corner of Octavia in 1910.

In 1898 Coxhead married his wife Helen, with his friend and fellow architect Willis Polk as best man. Coxhead (along with Polk to a lesser degree) is now considered to have had a direct and positive influence on other Bay Area architects such as Bernard Maybeck, Edgar Mathews, Albert Farr and William Wurster and to be one of the forefathers of the Bay Region style.

In contrast to the younger, more dynamic Polk, Coxhead kept his practice small and stable. After the First World War, he volunteered many months of his time in France training French architectural students to prepare them for the daunting task of rebuilding their country. He was also active in the local architectural community and he was Vice-President of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects for the 2 years (1921-22) that George Applegarth was President. Coxhead's lifelong partnership with his brother continued until November 30, 1928 when Almeric died. Ernest continued working for another five years until he died on March 27, 1933.

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