



Photo: Screens Passage, c1920s

William Weir and Dartington Hall by Reginald Snell. The life of an outstanding architectural craftsman and a study of his work at Dartington Hall.

The Gardens at Dartington Hall. A revised version of a guide originally written by Dorothy Elmhirst, with photographs and a garden plan.

From the Bare Stem: Making Dorothy Elmhirst's Garden at Dartington Hall by Reginald Snell. A tribute to the energy and vision of Dorothy Elmhirst, and those who helped her create the Hall Garden.

All but the first book named are normally available from Dartington, and can be ordered at the Dartington Cider Press Centre or Totnes Bookshop.



Photo: West Wing viewed from old Churchyard

Further reading on Dartington includes:

Dartington Hall by Anthony Emery, Oxford University Press. A comprehensive study now out of print but obtainable from local libraries.

The Elmhirsts of Dartington by Michael Young. A biography of the Dartington Hall Trust's founders, Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst.

A Modernist Footnote

William Lescaze and Dartington

A collection of buildings by William Lescaze (1896-1964) made Dartington architecturally famous throughout Europe and America during the mid-1930s. The commissions were noticed by all the major architectural periodicals and included in the Exhibition 'Modern Architecture in England' organised by the Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1937.

Somewhat eccentrically, the boarding houses at Aller Park were similarly cast as examples of the 'Architecture of the Future' in Gabriel Pascal's film of Shaw's 'Major Barbara' filmed at Dartington. In marked contrast to the rest of the country there was a frenzy of building activity on the estate during the inter-war years. As well as Lescaze, the architect and designer, Walter Gropius (responsible for part of The Barn Theatre) was a contributor. At Dartington the restoration of the medieval buildings by a "Victorian" craftsman and the introduction of the international architectural style were simultaneous processes.

Lescaze was an important architect of the Modern Movement. Swiss-born, he studied in Zurich under Paul Moser between 1915 and 1919, before moving to the United States. In 1929 he designed his first Modernist building, a nursery school at Oak Lane County Day School, Philadelphia, where Bill Curry (shortly to become Head of Dartington Hall School) was headmaster. Others among his American buildings were the offices on Manhattan Island known as Number One New York Plaza and the Swiss Embassy in Washington DC, as well as the famous Philadelphia Savings Fund Society building which he designed whilst with his partner, George Howe. In all he completed about 1000 commissions, including product designs for furniture, lighting fixtures and tableware.

Lescaze came to Dartington in 1931 as a direct result of his friendship with Bill Curry. He was asked to design High Cross House, to a brief that included specifying furniture and fittings. This was followed by three boarding houses at Aller Park, (Orchards, Chimnells - now known as Chimmels - and Blacklers, all named after estate fields); a home with performance space (Warren House) for the dancer and choreographer, Kurt Jooss and his company; workers' cottages in Warren Lane, the gymnasium at Foxhole, and the Trust's Central Office building at Shinnars Bridge.

High Cross House is located to the right of the road on the main drive approach to the Hall and is open to the public for part of the year; Warren House and cottages, and the three boarding houses, are along Warren Lane and Park Road; the Central Office building, now known as Lescaze Office, stands to the left of the road to Plymouth beyond the roundabout at Shinnars Bridge. Shinnars Bridge is where the Dartington Cider Press Centre is now located.



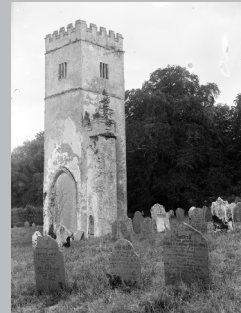
Photo: High Cross House c1932

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Dartington



Short guide to the buildings & architecture of Dartington Hall

Dartington Hall

The site on which Dartington Hall stands has been continuously occupied for well over a thousand years. The written record does not begin until the thirteenth century, but there is evidence of considerable activity in the area during the Roman occupation and the manor of Dartington is mentioned in a Royal Charter of 833 AD. Early in the twelfth century we know that the land was owned by the Fitz Martins, wealthy West Country landowners, who probably built the church in the grounds, the tower of which survives.

In 1348, after another short-lived change of ownership, the manor reverted to the Crown. In 1384 Richard II granted it to his half-brother John Holand. Soon afterwards Holand became an Earl and during the following two decades he made Dartington Hall into a great country house, laying out new buildings in the form of a huge double quadrangle, covering almost an acre. The modern Courtyard is a fragment of the buildings originally planned.



Photo: Dartington Hall with Great Hall on right before restoration.

The Manor of Dartington remained in the hands of the Holand family until 1475, when the last of the line, a prominent Lancastrian returning with Edward IV's army from an abortive invasion of France, was drowned in the Channel (possibly to the order of the Yorkist king). There being no male heir to inherit, the manor again forfeited to the Crown to be held by a succession of owners and tenants. For short periods it became the property of two of Henry VIII's wives, the Catherines Howard and Parr.

Then came a change of historical pace: in 1559 the Estate was purchased by the Champenownes, a Devon family well connected during Elizabethan times and

related by marriage to the Gilberts and the Raleighs. Dartington was to remain theirs for nearly four hundred years, but family wealth and influence dwindled until agricultural depression in the nineteenth century all but robbed them of a livelihood. At the beginning of the twentieth century they were forced to sell much of their land, and in 1925 the remaining 800-acre estate was bought by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, to become the basis of their joint venture in rural regeneration.

The Hall in ruins

All the buildings were by then badly run down and much of the Hall was in ruins. The original beams having been long open to the sky and at the mercy of deathwatch beetle, had been removed as early as 1813 so that the heart of the Estate had languished roofless for more than a hundred years. The floor was grass covered, ivy overhung the window tracery and the kitchen was a shell.

The courtyard fared little better during the nineteenth century; the East Wing had been drastically altered for farming purposes, and served as coach house, cow houses and hayloft. The central section of the West Wing had been turned into a farmhouse, and much of the enclosed space served as a farmyard. The entrance range was a stable, with a hayloft above it.

William Weir, one of the country's foremost experts on medieval architecture, who was greatly influenced by his former colleagues Philip Webb and William Morris, supervised the restoration of all the courtyard buildings, which was to take more than a decade to complete. His Great Hall roof constructed in 1931 is a faithful reconstruction, using timber from the estate.

Photo: Reconstruction of the Great Hall: making the beams for the hammer beam roof. (Copyright Dennis Mill, Cirencester)



A tour of the Courtyard

Dartington Hall has been called the most spectacular mansion in Devon. It is not only the largest medieval house built in the West of England, but unusual for its time in never having had any protective fortification.

The building to the right of the surprisingly modest looking main archway gate is the earliest part of the Hall and its large central room would have been the stables. It dates from the late fourteenth century. All the windows in the range are modern insertions. The long low building on the other side of the entrance, the Barn Theatre, dates from the later middle ages. It was built as a barn and converted into a theatre partly under the eye of the German architect Walter Gropius. The hexagonal-roofed wing that juts out towards the road was once a threshing floor and contained a huge grinding wheel.

Inside the Courtyard, a good impression of the layout of the whole quadrangle can be gained from halfway along the East side (to the left). It was originally completely enclosed and the ground sloped evenly from one side to the other, but the East Wing has been much restored as well as shortened and the levels have been altered. Both ranges were built to house the knights, squires, pages and staff who formed the household of John Holand. Their food was cooked in the single storey kitchen whose lofty roof is to the left of the tower at the far end of the Courtyard. It measures 35 sq. ft. and has two great arched fireplaces, each over 14 ft. high. The retinue dined in the Banqueting Hall (the Great Hall) on the other side of the tower. The small Church Tower, which is visible above the roof of the West Wing (the right hand range of buildings) is all that remains of the old St. Mary's Church. It was dismantled in 1880 and rebuilt at the junction of the Dartington Hall and Buckfastleigh roads to a new design by the distinguished Victorian architect, J. L. Pearson (also responsible for Truro Cathedral).



photo: The Great Hall before reconstruction, c1920s.

The surviving range of 'service lodgings' in the West Wing contained two floors of four rooms each, arranged in pairs. Access to the ground floor was by two doorways, set close together, separated by a thin partition wall, at the opposite end of which were originally twin garderobes. Each doorway served a square chamber, which had a window looking out into the Courtyard and a fireplace in the back wall - some of the chimney stacks can be seen above the roof. Above were two similar rooms, the upper entrances being reached by an external staircase at the front, arched over the lower doorway. West Wing and East Wing together would have provided forty-eight living chambers.

During the eighteenth century most of the windows were enlarged and all but one of the outside staircases removed. The dormer windows in the roof are twentieth century work; the modern tiles are from the Delabole quarries in Cornwall. Nevertheless, about a fifth of the West Wing, which retains its staircase and mullioned windows, still looks much as it would have done five hundred years ago. Multiply it and match it in your imagination with a similar range on the east side and you will begin to picture the original design.

The Elmhirst Centre, part of which can be seen in the far southwest corner, was the former residential block. It bears little resemblance to the medieval originals, which are believed to have been contained round a small courtyard between the ruined arcading (which can be

seen from the Gardens) and the Hall. It was demolished in the late seventeenth century, when the present four-gabled building was modified as a sort of façade to the older private house.

Visitors now please enter the porch to the Great Hall



Photo: Old Church of St Mary at Dartington Hall, c1920s

The White Hart



Photo: the White Hart boss

The crest - the White Hart - carved on the boss in the apex of the porch is that of Richard II, above it, originally approached by a little stairway just inside the entrance, are residential rooms once used by the squires and stewards who served the family in the Great Hall. As the Elizabethan look of its exterior suggests, the tower was remodelled in Tudor times.

The Screens Passage ahead was intended to separate the Great Hall from the noise, smell and traffic of the kitchen area on the other side. The group of triple arches opened respectively into the buttery, where beer and wine were stored, the kitchen and the pantry, where bread was kept. Above these is the Solar (an old term for a sunlit upper chamber) or private reception chamber. The door at the end of the passage gave access to the further court, whose ruined arcading alone survives. The wooden screen and the gallery above it are modern work. It seems likely that there was a medieval screen here, but the gallery probably does not reproduce any original feature of the Hall.

Visitors now please enter the Banqueting Hall, which is open for viewing when not in use.

The Great Hall

The internal measurements of the Great Hall are 69 ft. by 38 ft. The length of the fireplace is 17 ft. It is a remarkable example for its time, since many contemporary halls were still warmed by a fire in the middle of the floor, so that the smoke escaped where it might. The original hammer-beam roof was one of the first of its kind in the country, pre-dating the larger and more ornate one at Westminster Hall.