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 (1896-1966) 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 Pascual’s film Shaw’s Major Barber 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 renovation 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 Moor between 1915 and 1919, before moving to the United States. In 1929 he designed his first Modernist building, a nursery school at Oak Lake County Day School, Philadelphia, where Bill Cumy (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 Cumy. 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, Chennells – now known as Chennells - and Blackbells, all named after estate fields), a home with performance space (Wren House) for the dancer and choreographer Kurt Jooss and his company; workers’ cottages in Warren Lane, the gymnasia at Forshole, and the Trust’s Central Office building at Shermers 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. Wren 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 Shermers Bridge. Where the Dartington Cider Press Centre is now located.

Supporting the Trust

Please donate to The Dartington Hall Trust. Help us to be responsible custodians of these buildings so that future generations can enjoy this beautiful place.

Visit www.dartington.org to make a donation.

Short guide to the buildings & architecture of Dartington Hall

Dartington Hall Trust, Registered Office, The Elmehirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6SL. Registered in England as a company limited by guarantee and a charity. Company No 1145563 Charity No 270756 VAT No 462358775
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 832 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 was inherited by the Bassetts. In 1396 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, connected by a cloister. The modern Courtyard is a fragment of the buildings originally planned.

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 exposed 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 surfaced for more than a century. The floor was普及 covered, terry overlooking the window trace and the kitchen was a shell.

The courtyard faced little better during the nineteenth century. The East Wing had been blockaded down 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 farman. The entrance range was a stable, with a hayloft above it.

William weir, one of the county’s foremost experts on medieval architecture, who was greatly influenced by his former colleagues Philip Webb and William Morris, supervised the restoration work, which began before the end of the century, and which was to take more than a decade to complete. His great Hall roof restored in 1931 is a masterpiece, with its long corbels, its main roof timbers, and its roof trusses, some of which are hung with Edward V’s wives, the Catherine Howard and Parr.

Then came a change of historical pace. In 1929 the Estate was purchased by the Chaterpomeres, a Devon family well connected. During Elizabethan times and related by marriage to theGilberts, and the Raleighs. Dartington Hall was then reserved to nearly forty hundred years, but family wealth and influence dwindled until agricultural depression in the nineteenth century all but robbed it of a livelihood. At the beginning of the twentieth century they were forced to sell much of their land, and in 1920 the remaining 800-acre estate was bought by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, to become the basis of their joint venture in social realism. A Tour of the Courtyard

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

The building to the right of the entrance may have been the 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 large join 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 to the Theatre in 1930, under the eye of the German architect Walter Gropius. The shell of a demolished wing that juts out from the road was once a threshing floor and contained a huge grinding wheel.

In 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 from local stone, dressed stones, ragstone, page, and staff who formed the household of John Holand. Their food was cooked in the single stone kitchen, which leads to the left of the entrance from the end of the Courtyard. It measures 35 ft. by 10 feet, and has two great seventeenth century places, each of 14 ft. high. The wicket dined in the Banqueting Hall (the Great Hall) on the other side of the town. 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 demolished in 1840 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).

The sunning range of ‘service lodgings’ in the West Wing contained two sets of four rooms each. Access to the ground floor was by two doorways, set close together, guarded by an iron partition wall. At the opposite end of which were originally twin black and white doorways. Each doorway served a square chamber, which had a window looking out into a garden and a fireplace in the back wall - some of the chimney stacks are very ornate. Above were two similar rooms, the upper entries being reached by an external staircase at the front, arched over the lower doorway. West Wing. 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 casements windows in the dormer windows in the roof are of the eighteenth and the modern tiles from the Delabole Quarries in Cornwall. However, almost a fifth of the West Wing, which retains its staircase and minimal 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 Elizabethan part of which can be seen in the far southwest corner was the former residential block. It bears little resemblance to the medieval original, which are believed to have been contained round a small courtyard between the ruined arcade (which can be seen in the Garden Hall). It was demolished in the late nineteenth century when the present four-gabled building was modified as a sort of façade to the older private house.

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 16 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 room, or the smoke escaped where it might. The original hammer-beam roof was one of the first of its kind in the county, preceding the larger and more ornate one at Westminster Hall.

A tour of the Great Hall begins at the stone archway between the Great Hall and the Cloisters. The Craftsman's Hall, which is the East Wing.