

## **Peter Cox and the Arts at Dartington**

Michael Dower

To appreciate Peter Cox's life in the arts at Dartington, you need to understand the place. A former royal manor, it was bought in 1925 by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst for an "experiment in rural reconstruction".

Leonard was the son of a Yorkshire parson, trained at Cambridge and Cornell as an agricultural economist, and had worked with Rabindranath Tagore to create the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan in West Bengal. Dorothy was an heiress of the Whitney family in America, already a young widow with three small children after the death of her husband Willard Straight, a woman of high principles and independent mind.

They had no fixed vision of what they would do at Dartington – beyond seeking to build a full life for those involved; farming and other enterprises; a strong element of education; and a central role for the arts, in which Dorothy had a passionate and well informed interest.

By the late 1930s, the experiment was advanced, the Great Hall restored, enterprises flourishing, the School well launched ... and much artistic activity, both amateur within the Dartington community and professional at high standard through the arrival of Mark Tobey, Bernard Leach, the Ballet Jooss, Michael Chekhov and others.

In 1934, the Trustees set up an Arts Department, led by Christopher Martin, to support this array of professional talent. But the war broke up that group and shifted the emphasis on education for the arts. This was prompted by the creation of a Devon County Committee for Music and Drama; the launch of CEMA, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts; the start of a national Inquiry into the Arts in England and Wales; and the arrival at Dartington of Imogen Holst, an inspiring music teacher.

Peter arrived at that point. Aged 22, having secured exemption as a conscientious objector, he visited Christopher and Cicely Martin. Christopher was seriously ill with TB. He asked Peter to stay and help him.

Peter had no expertise in music, theatre or teaching, but was thrown in the deep end. He plunged into work at Dartington, and joined the team on the national Inquiry into the Arts. He did a survey of the arts in Wales, and spent agonizing weeks writing the report, because "learning to write had no part in my Cambridge education".

Christopher died in 1944, and Peter filled his role while the Trustees decided what to do. In a telling episode, which shows his courage and strength of character, he advised Dorothy not to impulsively appoint Sven Berlin as resident artist until the trustees had agreed a policy for the visual arts. She dropped the idea. Peter was appointed as Arts Administrator.

Thus started his nearly 40 years of leadership. The story is told in his book, "The Arts at Dartington 1940-83". It embraces :

- Evolution of the Arts Department into the Arts Centre
- The Summer School of Music, which moved from Bryanston to Dartington
- Many imaginative events, such as the Made in Devon exhibition and the Children's Christmas Festivals
- Creation of the Dartington College of Arts, with Peter as Principal
- Dartington Arts Society
- Dartington String Quartet
- The Devon Centre for Adult Education
- Widening of the College's scope to include specialist teaching in Dance and Drama, and the Visual Arts
- Change in governance of the College into a partnership between the Trustees and Devon County Council, after long and difficult negotiation
- Change from a quasi-independent college into a structural part of the national higher education system, with degrees at Exeter University, again after long negotiation at government level.

Throughout this time, Peter was at the helm ...

- sustaining the impetus of change and growth
- retaining the confidence and indeed the affection of Leonard and Dorothy, and of the trustees whose ideas for innovation were not always helpful
- recruiting and encouraging staff, and protecting them from the politics of change
- drawing on his extraordinary range of friends and contacts throughout the world, and building creative links with arts activity in America, in Europe, and particularly in India through strong personal contact with the Institute at Sriniketan
- and acting as prime negotiator with the public authorities.

In Leonard's phrase, "Peter was the rock on which the arts at Dartington were built".

Throughout this period he was living on the estate, active in the Dartington community, always ready to help. He was loyal and attentive not only to the College, but to the whole Dartington idea and family. He was enormously helpful to newcomers such as myself during the period of growth in the 1960s, and a stabilising force during the later years of rethinking by the trustees, the closure of the School and other disappointments. He did much to build creative contacts between Dartington and the surrounding community, Totnes, the South Hams and Devon.

After his retirement in 1983, he became Chairman of Dartington Tech, the company set up by the Trust to train young school leavers, and also of South West Arts which he had helped to create in 1956. He joined the Carnegie Council for Arts and Disability, and did

much of the research for the setting up of the Voluntary Arts Network. He became Patron of the institute at Sriniketan, which had been re-named as the Elmhirst Institute of Community Studies.

Peter was a man of high principles ...

- strongly committed to Dartington and the vision that inspired it
- striving always for high quality in the arts and education
- creative, and skilled at stimulating and supporting creativity in others
- patient and tenacious when needed
- firm in taking action when things were going wrong
- extraordinarily hard-working
- and yet always gentle, humorous, sensitive, considerate and kind.

He had a lightness and humanity not always found in the heads of large institutions.

He was not religious, but deeply appreciated the ancient roots and wonderful range of human culture ... so, it was apt that in 1973 he and Bobbie bought the historic Dartmoor longhouse at Cudliptown and set about rescuing it from dereliction.

Reflecting on Peter's life, and on a College which has moved to Falmouth, we can say with certainty that their influence lies not only in our memories but in countless lives transformed by the creative experience of the arts at Dartington. Teachers and students have taken inspiration from there, and the ripples of their activity spread out through the waters of life in many parts of the world. Peter, the rock on which the arts at Dartington was built, was also the pebble which created that ripple in so many ponds.

I finish with a tender salute to Bobbie. She came into Peter's life in 1952 when recruited as an art teacher at Totnes High School for Girls, and he arranged for her to work part-time at the College. She worked closely with him on exhibitions, and on the Children's Christmas Festivals. They married in July 1954, and spent their honeymoon searching for images in Italy for use in the College. She supported Peter throughout his long career, herself contributing much to arts activity and to local life, raising the family and hosting visitors at Warren House, creating her wonderful woven images of light on water, the changing face of fields and much else. Together, they created a new home at Cudliptown, and later the present home in the different setting of Frampton. We honour her loving care of Peter in the last years of his long life, and wish her well for calm and creative years ahead.

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*Michael Dower worked at Dartington between 1967 and 1985, as Director of the Dartington Amenity Research Trust (DART) and the Dartington Institute of Community Studies.*