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# Dartington Modern

*The Architecture of William Lescaze and Robert Hening*

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PURCELL 

## Introduction

The purpose of this tour is to visit and assess the modernist architectural legacy at the Dartington Estate left behind by the involvement of the pioneering American Modernist William Lescaze and continued by the Estate architect Robert Hening. The tour is intended to give an overview of the impact of modernism on the architectural history of the estate and demonstrate the quality and depth of the modern project here. All the buildings we visit will be confined to external visits except for High Cross House, where we will go inside. A brief introduction to the wider positioning of these buildings, both internationally and nationally is given below as background and edited descriptions from the listing texts for each one are also given for the purposes of architectural description. All the buildings you will see today are listed.

## William Lescaze and the International Style

William Lescaze's work at Dartington closely resembles other Modernist work in Britain of the early 1930s in its use of a smooth-surfaced, block-like style. The intention of this style was to be, as far possible, universal rather than regional in its aesthetics. His own nationality between Switzerland and America made him in this respect a text-book example of a modern architect, indeed, in the introduction to a book on his work in 1982, Christian Hubert wrote 'the term "International Style" could almost have been coined for Lescaze'. Influenced by his early work in practice with George Howe in America, where he was responsible for a number of key early works in the International Modern Style, Lescaze's influences within the modern canon were broad and encompassed appreciation for the work of Gropius at the Bauhaus and the European avant-garde work of the Theo van Doesburg's *De Stijl* movement.

Lescaze's work does not stand out as obviously different from that of other contemporaries in the movement, although there are more subtle indications of a personal 'signature' in the work. As an architect, he was one of many non-British participants in the Modern Movement in Britain in the 1930s, although as Hubert writes, 'Lescaze was an unusual contributor to this scene, since he was travelling in the opposite direction to the current that flowed primarily from East to West, and without the impetus of political pressure. Lescaze was among a handful of architects from elsewhere who brought a fully-formed modernism to Britain in the early 1930's and High Cross House is one of the earliest of such buildings.

## Modernism at Dartington

Dartington architecture up to 1939 is difficult to see in a single glance, consisting as it does of a number of styles that represent the two primary movements of the period in European and American architecture – Traditionalism and Modernism. There is both at Dartington and they cannot be seen as chronological here – the Modern architecture at Dartington is a unique and special collection of interwar buildings that are sandwiched by more traditional architectures. Clusters of modernist buildings, sometimes by a single architect, as at Dartington, and sometimes by a variety of hands, are sometimes found but the Dartington modernist work is unusual, because it was created outside the commercial world of development in the manner of a country estate of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has also been well-cared for and remains a high - quality collection of modern buildings in good condition in expansive and beautiful settings.

## The Tour

### Dartington Central Offices Lescaze and Hening, 1935. Grade II

Offices of the Dartington Hall Estate. 1935 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening; later alterations. Whitewashed rendered brick cavity walls with concrete coping to the parapets concealing flat roofs. Plan: International Modern Style building. Basically H-shaped on plan with a short north east wing and the stump of a south west wing. A low building on a sloping site, it is 2 storeys on the higher south side and 3 storeys on the lower north side. The north east and north west wings drop down to 2 storeys, the longer north west wing was originally open on the ground storey and supported on very slender steel tube posts, but it has now been underbuilt. The south east wing is single storey but heightened in late C20 to 2 storeys with a small boiler house and chimney on the south end. The building was designed to be extended and altered. The extensions and alterations which have been carried out make the original room use difficult to reconstruct. Exterior: 2 storeys on the south side. 3 storeys on the north side. the elevations are characterised by the long bands of metal-frame windows with concrete cills, which are continued around the south west corner but stop short of the corners elsewhere. Generally, the window bands are deeper on the ground storey except on the 3-storey north elevation of the central wing which has shallow ground and first floor window bands lighting the corridors on these floors, and similarly the north east wing which has deeper windows on the first floor. A very rare building type for the period and style in a UK context and a fine expression of Lescaze's adaptability as an architect.

### Gymnasium at Foxholes School, Lescaze, 1933-34. Grade II

Gymnasium. 1933-34 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America. Built by Staverton Builders for Dartington School. Rendered brick walls to steel or concrete frame, concrete coping to parapets concealing flat roof. Plan: Rectangular plan. Large gymnasium hall with a gallery at the north end reached by a rectangular tower on the north west corner which rises above the roof level to give access to the roof which was intended for outdoor recreation. Under the gallery a stone, locker room, lavatories and showers. On the east side a lower block was the exercise room and the staff room are by the north east entrance International Modern style. Exterior: On both east and west long sides there are 6 rectangular high-level windows with steel frames with large panes. On the right of each side double doors, the east doors have circular lights and a porch with a reinforced concrete canopy supported on a thin steel part and rendered side wall. The south end the blank by 2 louvred ventilators. On the north west corner, the rectangular stair turret interlocks with the main block and rises above its roof level with a doorway to the roof; there is also external doorway at the base of the tower and 2 windows above. The gymnasium was originally freestanding but is now attached to Foxhole School building by a Post-war 2-storey building on the north side and a single storey building on the east side.

## High Cross House, Lescaze, 1932. Grade II\*

House. 1932 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America for W B Curry, the headmaster of Dartington School. Whitewashed rendered brick cavity walls. Originally the front (North) block was painted blue and the south block painted white in contrast. Concrete coping to the parapets which conceal the flat roof. Plan: An International Modern Style house, carefully planned.

Many patrons of modern architecture were restricted by budget and therefore commissioned buildings of restricted size. High Cross House is unusually generous in scale compared to many of its peers and at £8,365 was exceptionally well-funded. It is distinguished by its use of a colour (blue) to pick out part of the building volume and so emphasise the compositional technique that may be derived from Walter Gropius and his principle of 'Baukasten im Grossen' or 'large scale building blocks'. Christian Hubert finds 'Lescaze's work at Dartington Hall was influenced by his admiration for the Dessau Bauhaus' (the location of a number of buildings designed by Gropius) and by the work of the De Stijl movement.

The house is basically a long rectangular front block interlocked with a taller square block behind and a small lower rectangular block with a curved corner in the rear right-hand angle. The ground plan consists of an entrance hall the servants' room and kitchen. The large drawing room and the slightly higher-level dining room are in the square rear block which has cut away in the left-hand rear corner a verandah, and in the angle to the right the study occupies the small low block with a curved corner and a roof terrace above. On the first floor the guest bedrooms at the right-hand end of the front range has access to this roof terrace and the maids' bedrooms and linen cupboards etc. are at the left-hand end of the front range. The principal bedroom is in the rear block with its bathroom and writing room and the headmaster's daughter's room to the left had access to a roof terrace over the left-hand corner, but this has been converted into another room. The stairs rise above the roof into a tower which gives access to the flat roof terrace of the taller rear block. Exterior: 2 storeys and stair tower. The house is conceived basically as 2 interlocking blocks with a smaller block with a curved corner in the rear right-hand angle. The long 2 storey north block has the entrance at the centre the kitchen to the left and garage to the right at a lower level. The entrance is to right of centre with a concrete cantilevered canopy over a boarded double door with a flashing wall and seat projecting to the left; high level cloakroom windows to right of doorway, band of windows and doorway to left and a long continuous shallow band of windows across the first floor above. The garage doors are at a lower level in the right-hand (west) end of this north block. A large, taller, almost square block projects to the rear facing the garden to the south; the right corner is cut away to form a verandah on the ground floor and a roof terrace above supported on very thin steel tube posts. High Cross House was the first of the International Modern Style buildings to be built at Dartington and remains a largely intact evocation of the principles of the International Modern style in the UK. It's use of colour was a first in British Modernism

## No 10 Warren Lane (Jooss House) Lescaze and Hening, 1935. Grade II

House. 1935 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening; for Kirt Jooss. Painted rendered brick cavity walls, concrete coping to the parapets concealing the flat roof which is partly tiled for a roof terrace. Plan: An International Modern Style house. Overall

the plan is L-shaped with a flight of steps up to the entrance porch in the angle leading to a central hall which gives access to all the ground floor rooms. To the left the living and dining rooms have a sliding partition between and the dining room has a verandah on the left side of the house. The kitchen is in the front left-hand wing over the garage which is on the lower ground level of the front. The 'back' stair is next to the kitchen off the hall. There is a curved partition wall separating the hall from the drawing room at the back. To the right of the house at the back is Kurt Jooss's dance studio with a study library off and at the front the main staircase to the first floor. The first-floor plan is similar to that of the ground floor but has 2 principal bedrooms, a dressing room, bathrooms, visitors' bedrooms or nurseries and the nurse's and maid's rooms. The front left-hand bedroom has a balcony on the flat roof of the kitchen wing and the rear right-hand bedroom has a smaller balcony over the studio; both balconies were intended for outside sleeping. The main stairs rise to a tower giving access to the flat roof. Small extensions have been added to the left-hand front wing. Dartington Hall became the headquarters of the Ballets Jooss and this house was built for its creator, the dancer Kurt Jooss. As with High Cross House, this is a substantial exercise in modernist planning and design, made more interesting by the client needs – in this case a studio.

## **8 and 9 Warren Lane, Robert Hening, 1938. Grade II**

Pair of attached houses. 1938 by Robert Hening for Dartington Hall. Built by Staverton Builders. Whitewashed brick. Flat roof. Plan: Pair of symmetrically planned attached houses, each the mirror image of the other with the kitchen and entrance hall at the front, the hall with an integral porch in the front corners and with a large living room at the back, the bedrooms above having a balcony. Projecting at the centre of the front are a pair of garages at lower ground level. International Modern Style. Nos 8 and 9 were designed entirely by Hening and is the last to be built of the group of houses in Warren Lane.

## **5,6 & 7 Warren Lane, Lescaze & Hening, 1935. Grade II**

Row of attached houses. 1935 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening. Built by Staverton Builders for Dartington hall. Whitewashed rendered brick walls. Flat roofs. Plan: Row of 3 attached houses, the end houses (Now 5 and 7 are the mirror image of each other with kitchens at the front, entrance halls at the sides and living rooms at the back. The centre house (No 6) is similar with a living room behind the kitchen and stair hall but the hall is entered through a doorway at the front instead of the side. Against the front wall each house has an integral store shed, but Nos 5's has been incorporated into an enlarged kitchen. International Modern Style. Nos 5, 6 and 7 is the second to be built of the group of houses in Warren Lane by Lescaze and Hening.

## **3 & 4 Warren Lane, Lescaze & Hening, 1934. Grade II**

Pair of attached houses. 1934 by W E Lescaze of Howe Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening. Built by Staverton Builders for Dartington Hall. Whitewashed rendered brick walls. Flat roofs. Plan: Pair of symmetrically planned attached houses, one the mirror image of the other, with kitchens at the centre of the front, entrance halls at the sides with staircases in the front corner and with living and dining rooms at the

back. Designed in the International Modern Style. Nos 3 and 4 is the first to be built of the group of houses in Warren Lane designed by Lescaze and Hening.

*Also note:*

## **Aller Park School, Delano & Aldrich, (New York), Project Architect, Ides van der Gracht, 1929-31. Grade II**

Nursery or primary school at Dartington School. 1929-31, by Ides van der Gracht of Delano and Aldrich of New York. Sneked local grey limestone with tooled face. Graded Delabole slate roof with coped gable ends to the cross-wings with kneelers. Large stone gabled stacks. E-shaped on plan with central kitchen wing projecting at the rear. Domestic Revival style.

The school dormitory blocks are unusual in being built as a set of three together, whereas it would be more normal to find a single building of this type. Having the three together is a great enhancement of their individual quality

## **No 3 Boarding House Lescaze and Hening, 1935. Grade II**

Boarding house at Dartington School. 1935-4 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening. Rendered brick with plain concrete coping to the parapet concealing flat roof. 2 small rendered stacks on the roof. Plan: overall rectangular plan with a projection to the right of the east front. The entrance towards the right (north) end leads to the stairs at the back and a longitudinal passage to the left, off which there are kindergarten classroom and playroom, dining/playroom, kitchen and cloakroom and at the right-hand end the housefather's flat and bicycle repair room. The first floor is carried over a covered playground at the left (south) end; a longitudinal spine corridor gives access to the children's' bedsitting rooms, bathrooms, lavatories and trunk room etc, and at the right-hand end the housemothers' flat with access to a balcony across the front. International Modern Style. Exterior: 2 storeys. East front: Right-hand projects with a recessed entrance park in the angle. The rest of the ground storey is advanced with a balustrade above of steel tube and mesh. The first floor which is therefore set back behind the ground storey projects at the left end over a covered area and is supported on 3 slender steel posts. The band of ground storey windows continues around the left end under the first-floor projection. The first horizontal band of windows is continuous, each light separated by a concrete pier.

## **No 2 Boarding House Lescaze and Hening, 1935. Grade II**

Boarding house at Dartington School. 1934 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening. Rendered brick with plain concrete coping to the parapet concealing a flat roof. 2 small rendered stacks on the roof. Plan: overall rectangular plan with projection to right of east front. The entrance towards the right (north) end leading to the stairs at the back and a longitudinal passage to the left off which these are 2 classrooms, one with a stage, a dining/playroom, the kitchen, the cloakroom and at the right-hand end the house-father's flat and bicycle repair room. The first floor is carried over a covered playgroup at the left end; a longitudinal spine corridor gives access to the children's' bedsitting room, bath rooms, lavatories and trunk room etc and at the right-hand end the housemother's flat with access to a balcony

across the front. International Modern Style. Exterior: 2 storeys. East front: Right-hand projects with a recessed entrance porch in the angle. The rest of the ground storey is advanced with a balustrade above of steel tube and mesh. The first floor which is therefore set back behind the ground storey projects at the left end over a covered area and is supported on 3 slender steel posts. The band of ground storey windows continues around the left end under the first-floor projection.

## No 1 Boarding House Lescaze and Hening, 1935. Grade II

Boarding house at Dartington School 1933 by W E Lescaze of Howe and Lescaze of America, assisted by R Hening. Rendered brick with plain concrete coping to the parapet concealing a flat roof. 2 Small rendered stacks on the roof. Plan: Long rectangular plan with a single storey projection with a balcony over the left at the back. The entrance and staircase rear the left (north) end of the front gives access to a longitudinal passage off which there are playroom/classrooms, a cloakroom, a kitchen, a dining room/; playroom and at the left (north) end the housefather's flat. At the right (north) end the first floor is carried over a covered playground area; a longitudinal spine corridor gives access to the children's' bed- sitting rooms and washrooms at the rear. International Modern Style. Exterior: 2 storeys. Asymmetrical west front; recessed porch towards the left with flush doors with small round lights; above the doorway a large rectangular stair window with a drip course continuing to the left and right over long horizontal bands of windows of 2, 4 and 3-lights, each light divided by a concrete pier, the centre band much shallower. The ground storey is similar but has deeper window bands, the right-hand classroom window is the deepest and continues around the right-hand end to the back under the projecting first floor of the right-hand end which is carried on 6 very slender steel tube posts and forms a covered playground area with access from a doorway in the classroom.

**Ends**