**Dartington Hall (near Totnes, Devon, England), 1925 –**

**Summary**

Dartington Hall is a country estate centred on a medieval courtyard and Great Hall. In 1925, the newly married Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst bought and renovated the crumbling buildings with Dorothy’s family fortune. Plans for the Elmhirsts’ ideal community were based upon early twentieth-century progressive notions of education, technology, agriculture and social justice. Community access to the arts, including music, dance and theatre, was an important principle from the beginning.

The years up to the Second World War marked the high point of artistic modernism at Dartington. Commissioned houses, including High Cross House, were built in the international style of modernist architecture. There were studios for painters (e.g. Mark Tobey, Cecil Collins, Hein Heckroth), pottery (Bernard Leach), theatre (Michael Chekhov) and dance (e.g. Kurt Jooss, Sigurd Leeder). The estate was a haven for refugee artists from Europe including Chekhov, Heckroth, Jooss, Sigurd Leeder and Rudolf Laban.

After the war, Dartington became both a regional arts venue and a site for developments in education. With the conviction that potential teachers should also be practising artists, Dartington College of Arts provided teacher training courses in arts subjects, later setting up degree courses. Dartington College of Arts was incorporated into University College Falmouth in 2010.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

Unexpectedly for such a rural place, but issuing from the global outlook of its founders, Dartington contributed to major developments of twentieth-century British modern dance. Leslie Burrowes, Dartingon’s first dance teacher, arrived in 1928. Burrowes taught Margaret Morris Movement, a Hellenic ‘free dance’ style, but soon left to train with Mary Wigman in Dresden. In 1930, a new department opened, the School of Dance-Mime, which offered combined training in theatre and dance for resident students and recreational opportunities for members of the Dartington community and outlying villages. The teachers of the new school constituted a first connection with American modern dance. Margaret Barr, who had studied with Martha Graham in New York in 1927–28, choreographed group dances with left-wing themes such as *The People* (1932), similar to New York’s radical dancers. Louise Soelberg, a soloist and former teacher at the Cornish School in Seattle, brought her training in Dalcroze eurhythmics, Duncan dance and Central European modern dance to Dartington.

When fascism forced Kurt Jooss to leave Essen, Germany, he was invited to base his work at Dartington, replacing the School of Dance-Mime. Barr left, but Soelberg remained, eventually becoming a member of the Ballets Jooss. Mainly directed by Jooss’ Essen colleague Sigurd Leeder, the Jooss-Leeder School of Dance opened at Dartington in 1934, and the Ballets Jooss was based here from 1935 (except when touring). Dartington provided the facilities in which Jooss rehearsed and created new works such as *Ballade* (1935), *Chronica* and *A Spring Tale* (both 1939). In 1938, Laban arrived at Dartington as a refugee from Germany.

The Second World War forced the dispersal of Dartington’s émigré artists because of the risk of invasion. (Dartington is ten miles from the English Channel, and all ‘enemy aliens,’ whether or not they had opposed Hitler, were suspect.). Support from the Elmhirsts enabled Laban and Lisa Ullmann (previously a teacher at the Jooss-Leeder School) to continue developing his modern dance theory, one of the outcomes being the spread of ‘modern educational dance’ into teacher training establishments and schools in the 1940s and 1950s. The Art of Movement Centre in Surrey was set up with Elmhirst funding in 1953.

In the post-war period, the Arts Department evolved into an Arts Centre and then into Dartington College of Arts, with dance becoming a core subject alongside music and theatre from 1965. American teachers now replaced the earlier generation of Europeans. Dorothy Madden arrived from the University of Maryland to teach summer courses and with her background in Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey techniques, challenged the exclusive hold of Laban-based dance in schools and colleges. There were close connections with the London School of Contemporary Dance, where Graham technique had been introduced, with some Dartington students furthering their training there.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Dartington became a centre for changing aesthetics as dancers, attracted by more exploratory movement practices emanating from America, rejected the older codified techniques. Appointed to the College in 1973, Mary O’Donnell Fulkerson brought her own version of image-based release technique. Steve Paxton worked experientially with students, exploring the then new technique of contact improvisation. Dancers such as Richard Alston and his experimental company, Strider, travelled from London to work with them. From 1978 to 1987, the annual Dance at Dartington festival was a meeting point and stimulus for American, continental and British practitioners in postmodern genres and a support to the London-based postmodern dance practitioners of British ‘new dance’, as it was called.

**Legacy**

In the 1940s, Margaret Barr settled in Australia, where she became a seminal figure in the development of modern dance. Former students of the Jooss-Leeder School include the Swedish choreographer Birgit Cullberg; the Dutch dancer/choreographer Lucas Hoving who settled in America and had a long career with the José Limón company; and Labanotation expert Ann Hutchinson Guest. Although Kurt Jooss returned to Essen, Sigurd Leeder maintained a successful studio in London until 1967, afterwards centring his activities in Switzerland. Laban-based work continued in Britain, principally at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Graduates of Dartington College of Arts, including Rosemary Butcher, Janet Smith, Laurie Booth, Yolande Snaith and Kevin Finnan, have become central figures in today’s increasingly diversified dance culture. They have gone in markedly individual directions, informed by a broad education across the visual and performance arts.

**Artistic and Educational Departments of Dartington Hall**

Dartington Hall School (1926-87)

School of Dance-Mime (1930-34)

Jooss-Leeder School of Dance (1934-40)

Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio (1936-38)

Dartington Arts Department [and Centre] (1934-61)

Dartington College of Arts (1961-2010)

**References and Further Reading**

Bonham Carter, V. (1958) *Dartington Hall: The History of an Experiment*, London: Phoenix House. (An account of Dartington’s commercial, educational and artistic activities by Dartington’s first archivist)

Cox, P. (2005) *The Arts at Dartington 1940 –1983: A Personal Account*, Totnes, Devon: The Dartington Hall Trust. (Cox directed the post-war development of arts policy at Dartington.)

Guest, Ann Hutchinson (2006) ‘The Jooss-Leeder School at Dartington Hall’, *Dance Chronicle*, 29 (2): 161–94. (A memoir by a former Jooss-Leeder student who became a leading scholar of dance notation)

Lester, G. (2006/2007) ‘Galvanising Community (Part 1)’, no. 25, December: 39-49; (Part 2)’, no. 26, June: 38-55, *Brolga: An Australian Journal about Dance*. (Two articles about the activities of Margaret Barr at Dartington Hall)

Nicholas, L. (2007) *Dancing in Utopia: Dartington Hall and its Dancers*, Alton, Hants.: Dance Books. (A monograph exploring dance at Dartington Hall in the twentieth century)

Young, M. (1996) *The Elmhirsts of Dartington*, Totnes, Devon: The Dartington Hall Trust. (An account by a friend and collaborator focussing on the beliefs and activities of the founders)

**Moving Image Material**

*The American Invasion 1962–72* (2005) director of research, Valerie Preston-Dunlop, producer Luis España. (Interviews and footage concerning the introduction of American modern dance into British educational establishments and the role of Dorothy Madden at Dartington Hall)

**Photographs and Archive**

Dartington Hall’s website has photographs and a history of the institution, including information on the individual buildings.

[http://www.dartington.org/](#_top)

Many photographs of dancers associated with Dartington can be viewed online, at [http://www.dartington.org/archive](#_top)

The Archives of the Dartington Hall Trust are housed at the Devon Record Office, Exeter, England.

**Paratextual Materials**

The images have been sent in separate files.

*Dartington Hall as it looks today.* Photograph by Larraine Nicholas.

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*Dartington Hall as it looks today.* Photograph by Larraine Nicholas.

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*Dartington Hall from the gardems with the Henry Moore reclining figure in the foreground. The sculpture was a memorial to Christopher Martin, the first administrator of the Arts Department.* Photograph by Larraine Nicholas.

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