

The Landmark Trust

DUNSHAY MANOR – SUMMARY OF HISTORY

From 1923 to 2006, Dunshay Manor was home to the Spencer Watson family, a trio of remarkable artistic figures. Mary Spencer Watson, the daughter (1913-2006), was a renowned sculptor. Her father George Spencer Watson, R. A. (1869-1934), was an accomplished society painter and her mother Hilda (1879-1953) was a mime artist and dancer who devised her own shows, with Mary often also taking part. Mary bequeathed Dunshay to Landmark, to be used 'in the custom and manner of the Landmark Trust,' asking only that its artistic heritage be cherished.

Dunshay/Downshay is an ancient site, once part of the Manor of Worth. It lies surrounded by Purbeck stone and marble deposits, and the hollows around it are shadows of ancient opencast workings. In the early 1200s, de Pole widow Alice de Briwere (*d.*1233) held the manor. She made a generous gift of Purbeck marble to Salisbury Cathedral where it was used for the decorative shafts on the pillars (Purbeck marble is a dark, hard limestone that can take a high polish).

In the Middle Ages, Dunshay had a sequence of owners from prominent Dorset families. In 1349, the manor passed to the Matravers family and then by marriage to the Earls of Arundel. In 1560, the then Earl, heavily in debt, sold the manor of Worth in four parts.

Dunshay was bought by Henry Dolling (*d.*1560), of another a well-established Dorset family. In 1576, Henry's widow bequeathed the farm to their son, Christopher (*d.*1616). With his wife Elizabeth, he set about rebuilding what was probably by then a dilapidated farmstead. Windows on the west (rear) range of the house still bear their initials. Christopher's grandson John Dolling (1609-63) and his wife Anne further enlarged the house in the 1640s, adding two gabled ranges to either side of a porch. Under John, Dunshay became the manor house for Worth. He left their initials 'I A D' on the lead rainwater hopper dated 1642 on the porch (the obelisk gateposts beside the pond are probably early 18th-century).

When Civil War came, John Dolling fought for the King, and was later fined by the Parliamentarians for this loyalty. From its style of dress, the headless figure of a man put up on the north wall of the house may originally have represented Major Dolling. Dollings held Dunshay until 1675, when the estate was divided among three daughters. One, Margaret, married John Pyke who became lord of the manor, and so began Dunshay's next dynasty.

The Pykes were another prosperous local family, living in the manor house, but mostly leasing out the farmland. A later John Pyke fell into debt and by 1771 had sold most of his Worth lands to John Calcraft of the Rempstone Estate. Just before his death in 1776, Pyke sold Dunshay to Thomas Hyde, a rich Poole merchant, but in 1793, Hyde himself went bankrupt. John Calcraft II seized the moment to add Dunshay to the Rempstone Estate, leasing it out as a farm.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

From 1796, Benjamin Jesty (1736-1816) leased the house and farmed its land. Jesty, from Yetminster in West Dorset, was a pioneer in vaccination. In 1774, he had noticed that milkmaids did not seem to catch smallpox, and attributed this to exposure to the milder cowpox. During a local epidemic, he therefore vaccinated his wife and children with fluid from an infected cow. None of them caught smallpox. Jesty's experiment was some 20 years earlier than Dr Edward Jenner's but the honest farmer did not at first publicise his work so Jenner got the credit.

One tenant followed another through the nineteenth century. A first floor room in the south range is marked as a Cheese Room, for exemption from the Window Tax, in graffiti that must pre-date the tax's repeal in 1851. The pigsty and dairy were built, but the house itself became increasingly dilapidated. By 1881 (and probably more than 40 years earlier according to the 1840 tithe map), most of the north wing had fallen, or been pulled, down.

In 1901, the Rempstone Estate was inherited by Captain Guy Marston, RN, who moved the family seat at Rempstone Hall. By now, Dunshay was in serious need of repair. Marston commissioned Arts & Crafts architect Philip Sturdy to rebuild the north wing of the house. Sturdy created the Dunshay we see today. Many of the internal features are also his work: the offset corner fireplaces, and the staircase. Some earlier panelling and joinery survives, for example the panelling in the sitting room, but not in its original position. Another rainwater hopper on the porch bears the initials 'G M M' (Guy Montagu Marston). Marston however began selling the southern part of the Rempstone Estate. In 1919, Dunshay was bought by E. J. Holland, a farmer.

In 1923 he sold the house to George and Hilda Spencer Watson, who moved in with their ten-year old daughter, Mary, at first dividing their time with their London house. George and Hilda converted the Dairy to a studio, created the pond and built a stable block, which Hilda then converted into a studio theatre. After George's death in 1934, Hilda and Mary spent most of their time at Dunshay. As a young girl, Mary was fascinated by the Purbeck quarrymen and their work. One gave her a chisel to have a go, and so began her lifelong vocation for sculpture. She studied at Bournemouth Art College, the Royal Academy, the Central School of Art and finally in Paris. After the War, which Mary spent with Hilda at Dunshay, commissions began to flow and her works include many public sculptures. She worked mostly in stone and wood, either in the Dairy studio or, if the weather was fine, outside in the little stone shelter beyond the pond.

Mary died in 2006. Wishing Dunshay and its artistic legacy to be protected, she bequeathed the estate to the Landmark Trust, the buildings by then in a state of some dilapidation. Landmark has repaired and refurbished Dunshay, and gently reversed some of Mary's later changes. Today it is presented to evoke the Spencer Watsons' life in the 1920s and 30s, when Arts & Crafts mingled with Hilda and Mary's bohemian world in the interwar period.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for self-catering holidays. Dunshay Manor sleeps up to 9 people. To book Dunshay or any other Landmark property for a holiday, or to find out about our free open days, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk