

# The Landmark Trust

## HOWTHWAITE History Album



**Researched and written by Clayre Percy, 1986**

**Updated in 2015**

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**BASIC DETAILS**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Built</b>                              | <b>1926, for Miss Jessie McDougall</b>                       |
| <b>Designed by</b>                        | <b>Not known</b>   |
| <b>Last owner</b>                         | <b>Mr Kenneth Sykes</b>                                      |
| <b>Acquired by<br/>The Landmark Trust</b> | <b>1986</b>  |
| <b>Architect</b>                          | <b>E. A. Mason of Charles Pearson Son &amp;<br/>Partners</b> |
| <b>Main contractor</b>                    | <b>B &amp; I Hewitt Ltd of Windermere</b>                    |

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**Howthwaite was designed to make the best of the views.**

## Summary

Howthwaite stands at the edge of Grasmere, immediately behind and above Dove Cottage, once the home of William Wordsworth. According to his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth used to walk all around the area, and often composed his poems outside. When Howthwaite was offered for sale, the trustees of Dove Cottage were keen that it fell into friendly hands. They asked if the Landmark Trust would join them in buying it, and Landmark was more than happy to help because of Howthwaite's significant location. This was in 1986, when Landmark was still backed by its founder John Smith's trust fund and could contemplate such purchases.

Howthwaite was built in 1926 by Miss Jessie MacDougall, from a family of millers. It seemed to Landmark a good, unaltered example of the type of solid house put up by cultivated, well-to-do folk living in (and visiting) the Lake District at the time. It was also desirable to help protect the surroundings that had inspired one of Britain's greatest poets. The name of the architect who designed Howthwaite if there was one, is not known.



**William Wordsworth, by Benjamin  
Robert Haydon, 1842  
(National Portrait Gallery)**



**Dorothy Wordsworth (1771– 1855)  
was an author, poet and diarist and the  
sister of William Wordsworth.**



## The Site

Howthwaite stands on the fellside above Dove Cottage, where William and Dorothy Wordsworth walked, and where he composed his poetry during his most creative years. Although Howthwaite was not built until 76 years after Wordsworth died, its view over Grasmere is the same as the famous poet enjoyed, and has strong associations with him.

In the 1870s the Hollens estate, including the site now occupied by Howthwaite (then known as 'the Copse'), was bought by Manchester Corporation. Manchester's burgeoning population needed a new water supply, and the Corporation's proposal was to lay a pipeline through the Hollens estate, running south towards the city from a proposed new reservoir at Thirlmere.



**Engraving of Thirlmere, about 1836 by W.F. Topham**



**A late 19th century postcard of Thirlmere before the dam was built, when there were two separate lakes, Leathes Water and Wythburn Water.**

The project to dam up Thirlmere – raising it by several feet and inundating a large area of common land – caused uproar amongst preservation societies and lovers of the Lake District, and the Thirlmere Defence Association (TDA) was formed to oppose the parliamentary act which was required before work could begin. The TDA opposed it on the basis that raising the water level by 50 feet would submerge the dramatic cliffs which then surrounded the lake, and that a receding shoreline in summer would expose an odorous and unsightly lake bed. Its campaign stalled the reading of the Act in Parliament in 1878, but it was passed at the second reading in 1879.

The reservoir was built, and to make matters worse, the banks of the reservoir were planted with rows of Norwegian spruce. The 'Rock of Names' – where William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Sarah and Mary Hutchinson had carved their names when they met for a picnic – was dynamited. *'The Rock of Names has lost its guardian right, Where poets tryst they meet no more'*, wrote Hardwicke Rawnsley, a poet, clergyman and leading conservationist in the Lake District. Octavia Hill, the social reformer, had been involved in the battle of



Thirlmere; her failure here spurred the foundation – by Hill, Rawnsley and Sir Robert Hunter – of the National Trust in 1895.

The water pipeline from Thirlmere to Manchester was planned to run just above the site which Howthwaite now occupies, but the Corporation was forbidden to build on land bought for the pipeline and this restriction continued until 1914. In 1906 the Howthwaite site was sold to the Bishop of Barrow-in-Furness who, with his wife, Mrs Ware, owned Howe Foot, the house on the south side of the road, opposite Howthwaite's wicket gate.

When Mrs Ware died in 1911 Howe Foot and the Howthwaite site, still known as 'the Copse', were inherited by Mrs Ware's sister, Mrs William Spooner, wife of the Warden of New College, whose tendency to transpose his consonants in his sermon is the origin of 'Spoonerisms'<sup>1</sup>. They spent their holidays there. Either the Wares or the Spooners built the summer house; it is not on the map of 1906, but appears on one of about 1913.

In 1925 Miss Jessie McDougall, of the well-known flour milling family, bought the site from Mrs Spooner, and Howthwaite was built soon afterwards. While it was being built Miss McDougall lived at Ladybank in Grasmere.

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<sup>1</sup> A spoonerism is an error in speech or deliberate play on words in which corresponding letters are switched between two words in a phrase, for example 'Is it kisstomary to cuss the bride?' (as opposed to 'customary to kiss').

## The House

Howthwaite has several features typical of the Lake District. The walls have a 'dry' finish, with no pointing visible. In some early vernacular cottages and small houses in Cumbria no mortar was used at all. From the late nineteenth century onwards the mortar was there, but kept well back from the face so that the effect remained of a 'dry' wall. The stone for the house came from the Helm quarry (now disused), located a mile north-west of Grasmere, and which belonged to the Wilsons, a local family firm of builders who constructed the house.

The roof is of local green slate. These slates also mask the lintels over the windows. Slates were originally used in this way locally to protect wooden lintels from the weather; when concrete came into general use the practice continued for its pleasing effect. The chimneys are round, a not uncommon feature in the southern part of Cumbria.

The name of the architect, if there was one, is not known. It could be that Howthwaite is a house built from a pattern book, with modifications by the builders and Miss McDougall, who took great interest in its construction.

The ground floor rooms originally had a textured plaster finish, as they have now and were painted white, as was the outside woodwork.

## How the house was used by Miss McDougall

The dining room was the central room of the three main ground floor rooms, with the kitchen to one side of it and the drawing room (as now), to the other. The position of the kitchen is surprising: until the Second World War it was normal for the kitchen to have little or no outlook in order to ensure the privacy of the employer and his family. In this Miss McDougall was ahead of her time (or perhaps she herself enjoyed baking).

In the kitchen there was a big cast iron 'Herald' range. It burnt several buckets of coal every day and all the coal had to be carried down the steep path leading from the present garages. Mrs Dawes, who was Miss McDougall's parlour maid and was consulted in the writing of this history, said that the coalmen were given handsome tips every Christmas to compensate them for their heavy work. During the Second World War the original range was replaced by an Esse cooker. The cook baked all the bread used in the house. The glass-fronted cupboards were Miss McDougall's idea.

The cook's bedroom was the smallest one, which is now a bathroom. She was the only live-in servant. Mrs Dawes lived in the village and came in daily.

Miss McDougall was much liked in the neighbourhood. Landmark has no photograph of her, but she was tall with wavy white hair. She often had tea parties and would have friends to stay for weeks at a time. She loved the garden and spent a lot of time gardening; the hillside used to be full of spring flowers.

When war broke out in 1939 her small nephew, Simon, was evacuated to Howthwaite and Mrs Dodgson, who has also helped Landmark with information about the era, looked after him. Miss McDougall died in 1948.

## 1949-1986

In 1949 the house was sold to Mr Dixon, the retired headmaster of Featherstonehaugh School, at Haltwhistle in Northumberland, and his wife. They removed the Esse cooker and put in a smaller stove.

In 1963 the Dixons sold Howthwaite to Mr Kenneth Sykes, who still lived nearby in 1986. Mr Sykes built the garages above the house. He also made some minor alterations to the house itself, turning the kitchen into a dining room and extending what was Miss McDougall's pantry to the north to make a kitchen. He had the exterior woodwork painted blue.

Howthwaite survives as a handsome, sensible Lakes House, not quite a villa but no less pleasing for that. Landmark's care of it is one small piece in the conservation jigsaw, pioneering at first, that continues to ensure the preservation of this glorious landscape and its buildings.



**The south west front with blue paint**





**The north east side showing the flue for the oil central heating, now removed, and the blue paint.**



**The kitchen extension was removed.**





**The interior of the kitchen extension.  
The cupboard is now in the boiler-room.**



**The old kitchen. The top half of Miss McDougall's cupboard is  
In the present kitchen.**

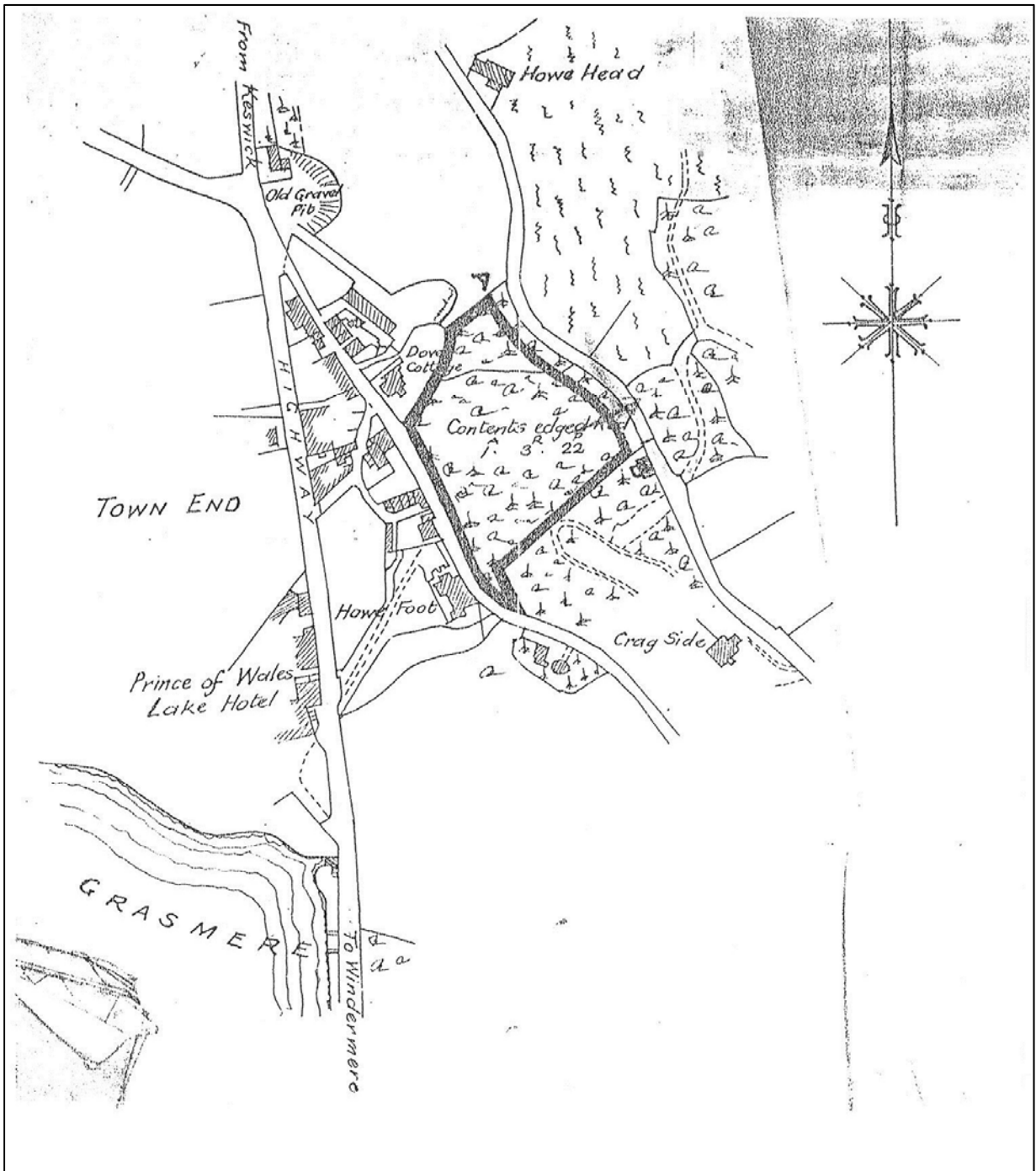




The drawing room as it was. The radiators were all renewed and re-sited.



A main bedroom

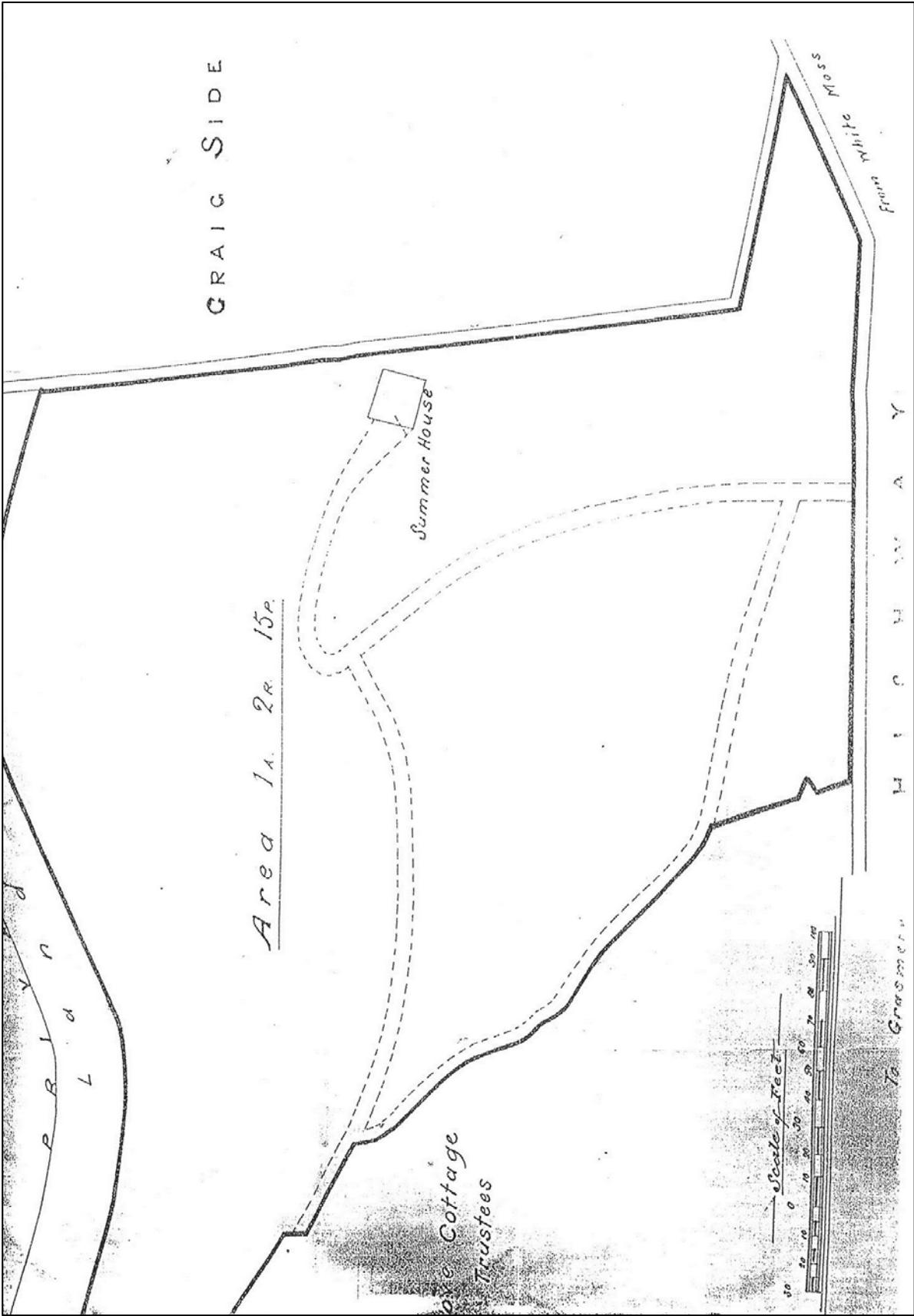


A map showing the land bought by Henry Ware, Bishop of Barrow, of Howe Foot, from Manchester Corporation in 1906.

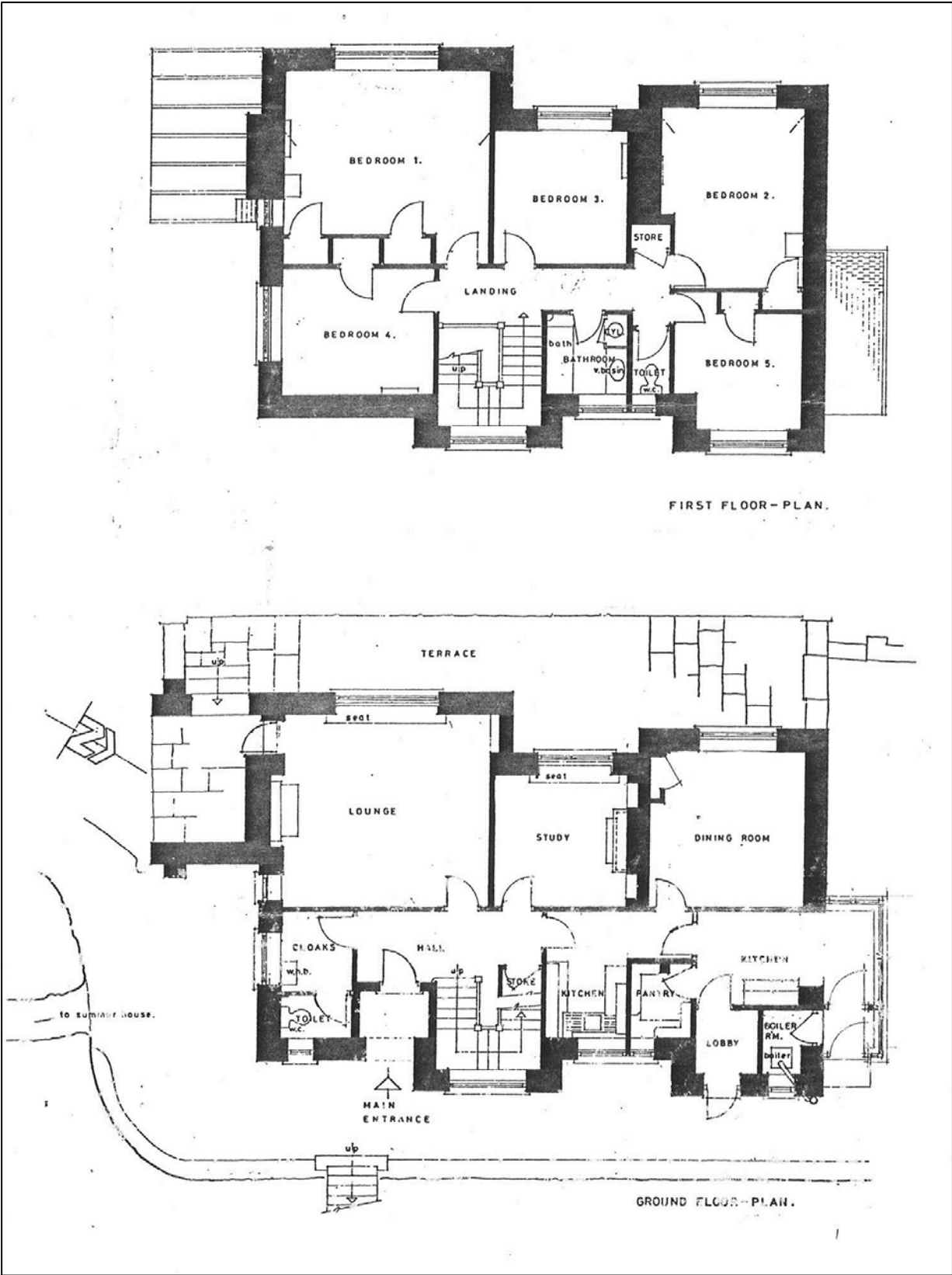




A map of about 1913 showing the summer house.



Land bought by Miss Jessie McDougall in 1925



The existing plan in 1986