

The Landmark Trust

HOWTHWAITE, GRASMERE, CUMBRIA

Built in 1926 Howthwaite is a good unaltered example of the solid houses put up by those cultivated, well-to-do people who were attracted to the Lake District. The house stands directly behind Wordsworth's home, Dove Cottage, where Wordsworth would sit and compose his poems. (Wordsworth was born in 1770 and died in 1850)

The Site

In the 1870s, the Howthwaite site, then known as 'the Copse', was bought by Manchester Corporation and was touched by one of the great early conservation rows that led, indirectly, to the founding of the National Trust.

Manchester needed a new water supply and in 1878 the Corporation announced their plan to dam up Thirlmere, raising it by several feet and inundating or enclosing a large area of common land. The project, known as the Thirlmere Development, caused an uproar. The Thirlmere Defence Association was formed, but when the Bill for Thirlmere went before the Parliamentary Select Committee the Defence Association proved ineffective and the Committee found in favour of Manchester Corporation.

The reservoir was built, and the 'Rock of Names' where William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel 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, the leading conservationist in the Lake District. To make matters worse the banks of the reservoir were planted with rows of Norwegian spruce. Octavia Hill had been involved in the battle of Thirlmere, and its failure was one of the events that led her, Hardwicke Rawnsley and Robert Hunter to found the National Trust in 1895.

The only direct effect all this had upon the Howthwaite site was that it was not built upon for thirty years.

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. 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, famous for his Spoonerisms. They spent holidays there.

In 1925 Miss Jessie McDougall of the well-known flour milling family, bought the site from Mrs Spooner, and the house known today as Howthwaite was built soon afterwards.

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The House

Howthwaite has several features typical of the Lake District. The walls have a 'dry' finish, with no pointing visible. The roof is of the local green slates. The lintels over the windows are masked by these slates, too. Originally this was to protect the lintel, which would have been oak, from the weather.

The chimneys are round, a not uncommon feature in the South of Cumbria. The ground floor rooms had a textured plaster finish, as they have now, and were painted white, as was the outside woodwork.

The name of the architect, if there was one, is not known. It could well be that it is a house built from a pattern book, with modifications by the builders and Miss McDougall.

How the house was used in Miss McDougall's time

The dining-room was the middle room of the three main ground floor rooms; the kitchen was the room next to it on the far side; the drawing room was where it is now. The cook's bedroom was the smallest one, now a bathroom. She was the only live-in servant. Mrs Dawes, the house parlour-maid lived in the village and came in daily.

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. Mrs Dawes told us that the coalmen were given handsome tips every Christmas to compensate them for their heavy work. During the Second World War the 'Herald' was replaced by an 'Esse' cooker. The cook baked all the bread used in the house.

Miss McDougall was much liked in the neighbourhood. We have no photograph of her but she was tall with wavy white hair. She often had tea parties and would have friends staying for weeks at a time. She loved the garden and spent a lot of time gardening.

The Later Years

In 1948 Miss McDougall died and then in 1949 the house was sold to Mr and Mrs Dixon, the retired headmaster of Feathstonehaugh School, at Haltwhistle in Northumberland. They removed the Esse cooker and put in a smaller stove. In 1963 they sold it to Mr Kenneth Sykes. Mr. Sykes built the garages above the house, turned the kitchen into a dining room and extended what was Miss McDougall's pantry to the north to make a kitchen. He had the exterior woodwork painted blue.

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The Landmark Trust bought Howthwaite in 1986 during the years when it was supported by the Manifold Trust, in order to protect the views from Dove Cottage. Very little has been altered and most of what has been done can be seen on the 'existing' plan. The kitchen extension has been removed, two new windows formed, and Miss McDougall's kitchen and pantry have been combined to make a kitchen/dining room. A small bedroom on the first floor has become a bathroom. The oil fired central heating system has been replaced by a gas fired one. The exterior woodwork has returned to white.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Howthwaite sleeps up to 7 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.