

HASLEMERE UNCOVERED



Undershaw - A mystery solved

One of the most baffling mysteries of recent time appears to have been solved: *What can be done to save Undershaw?*

On Wednesday September 3rd 2014 Waverley Borough Council's Planning committee, in the face of strenuous opposition from the UPT (Undershaw Preservation Trust, a group set up by John Gibson), agreed planning consent for a Change of Use for Undershaw, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's old home at Hindhead. Planning consent is granted for specific uses and Undershaw had been a hotel since the 1920s.

"The new use will be as a special school. It will be special in several ways and it will allow Stepping Stones School in Tower Road, Hindhead, to help more children, their families and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties. The restoration and development of Undershaw will be completely funded by the DFN Foundation, a charitable trust set up by David Forbes-Nixon, whose 12 year old son currently attends the school. "



Photo courtesy of the Victorian Society

The restoration work will be carried out in such a way that all the important features of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's house will be restored, including the stained glass window, wrecked by vandals in the years after the restaurant closed in 2005. Sir Arthur's

study will also be authentically re-created for use as the headmaster's study. We have been told that the house will be made available out of school term time to special interest groups. Attention to detail will, therefore be very important.

The grounds of about 2.75 acres will be restored. A point which is of particular interest to me concerns the future of the unattractive extension added in the 1930s, shown to the right in the photo above, the plain extension beyond the gabled dormer windows in the roof which mark the extent of the original house.



The very tall stained glass window (see below) was created by Doyle. When his mother saw the plans she complained that there was no reference to her own family while much was made of the family's Scottish lineage, so Doyle added extra panes. This made a very fine window as the picture shows. In fact the family was of modest means, and the heraldic devices may not be totally accurate in genealogical terms!

Doyle was a very dominant figure at the end of the 19th century, making the restoration of his house a great asset to literary history, enabling his story and that of his family to be told in its proper context. A recent email from his great-nephew, Richard Doyle, included the following:-

"If it is possible for some of this magical, special building to become the heart of a new school that contributes to the thriving community of Hindhead then I would be very happy. If this school could then work with the Doylian and Sherlockian community to offer open days and writers' workshops during school holidays, I would be overjoyed.

However, I think the final choice should not rest with the scholars or the family, but with the good people of Hindhead. Because if they had not rescued Uncle Arthur and his younger brother Inness (my grandfather) from under a motorcar Arthur had crashed when turning into Undershaw, then things would have been very different indeed."

In 1882, aged 23, Doyle was a doctor with a struggling practice in Southsea where he and his brother Inness lived in very poor circumstances. It was at this time that he turned his hand to writing short stories. Doyle's first work featuring Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson was the novel 'A Study in Scarlet'. It was taken by Ward Lock & Co in 1886, giving Doyle £25 for all rights to the story.

Arthur Conan Doyle married Louise in 1885 and they had two children,² Mary and Kingsley. Louise suffered from tuberculosis. By 1895 Doyle's

writing income enabled them to spend the winter in Egypt where he hoped the more benign climate would help his wife's condition. On their return to England in the autumn of 1895 he met Grant Allan, another writer, who had moved to Hindhead for the pure air as he too had TB and it was he who encouraged Doyle to do likewise in the hope that the air of Little Switzerland (Hindhead) would also help Louise.

The land was bought, an architect commissioned, a builder found and Undershaw completed in the latter part of 1897. As a successful writer Doyle became a celebrity and his many famous visitors included George Bernard Shaw, JM Barrie and Bram Stoker (of Dracula fame). Shaw lived nearby but it is not true that the name Undershaw was in any way linked to his name. Shaw is a name for a belt of trees – some of which exist to this day.

Louise (Touie) died from TB in 1906 and in late 1907 Doyle married his great love Jean Leckie whom he had met ten years previously. They moved to her family home in Crowborough, East Sussex, but Doyle only sold Undershaw after the death of his son Kingsley who had served as a medic in WW1 and who was to die in the great flu pandemic which followed the war.



West elevation showing existing front door

The saga of Undershaw is still unfolding, but the future looks bright and although Mr Gibson is opposed to the school (he would prefer it to be a private house) there is near universal support for this splendid DFN scheme. We however must be eternally grateful to Mr Gibson for challenging WBC

successfully in the High Court in 2013 over its planning decision to allow conversion of Undershaw to flats. Had this been implemented, the chance now provided of a sympathetic and publicly accessible restoration would have been lost forever.

Robert Serman

I am indebted to Dr Marion Dell for her help with information on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; however any errors are mine as are any views expressed. 3