# Dunsland: An Anniversary Post-Mortem

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*A rare colour image of Dunsland's late seventeenth century front. Author's collection*

In 2014 the National Trust, owners of Dunsland, four miles east of Holsworthy, issued a plea to local residents to share any memories they might have of the house before it burned down. There was scant response, few could recall it but, those who did, agreed the fire was devastating. Only the lead rainwater hoppers, a pair of ginger jars and two candlesticks were saved. An archaeological dig in 1993 had confirmed their recollections. Lumps of masonry, fragments of plasterwork, pottery and glass, a few metalwork items and the remains of a book was the sum total of recovered finds.[1] Dunsland, it seems, had not only been forgotten but also lost, the garden most of all which this brief postscript attempts to remedy.

*The roofless house after the fire in November 1967. Author's collection*

In the middle of a November night fifty years ago, John Price, the National Trust's caretaker at Dunsland House, and his mother, Enid Caffyn, were woken by the frantic barking of their collie, Rover.[2] Dunsland was ablaze. With no time to dress they escaped from the smoke-filled house only to witness its destruction together with almost the entire contents, including their own possessions.

*Dunsland in 1964. Courtesy of National Trust*

The fire, it is claimed, precipitated 'Devon's most tragic loss since the last war'.[3] Nikolaus Pevsner, who visited Dunsland in 1952 when compiling his architectural guide to North Devon, had enthusiastically described it, noting especially the decorative plasterwork in the saloon, 'as good as any work anywhere in Britain'.[4] At that time the house was owned by the society architect Philip Tilden and his mysterious wife Amalia.[5] They had bought it in 1950 from Mr De Savoury, a London–based timber merchant, who, in turn, had bought it three years previously from Arscott Dickinson. His family had owned Dunsland since the eleventh century, but by the time the Tildens moved in both house and garden were suffering from years of neglect. They did their best to put it right but poor health and the enormity of the task defeated them and in 1954 they sold it to the National Trust.

*The late seventeenth century plasterwork in the saloon. Courtesy of National Trust*

With the help of a grant from the Ministry of Works, the Trust embarked on plans to halt the decay. The house was reroofed and redecorated. Appropriate furniture was acquired, much of it on loan; small parties of visitors were shown round and concerts were held in the saloon. A guide book describing and illustrating the house was prepared in readiness for the formal opening of the property in the summer of 1968.[6] By then the restoration of the buildings would be complete and work could start on the gardens and park but it was not to be. After the fire the surviving

*Dunsland's gate piers.*
*Author's photograph*

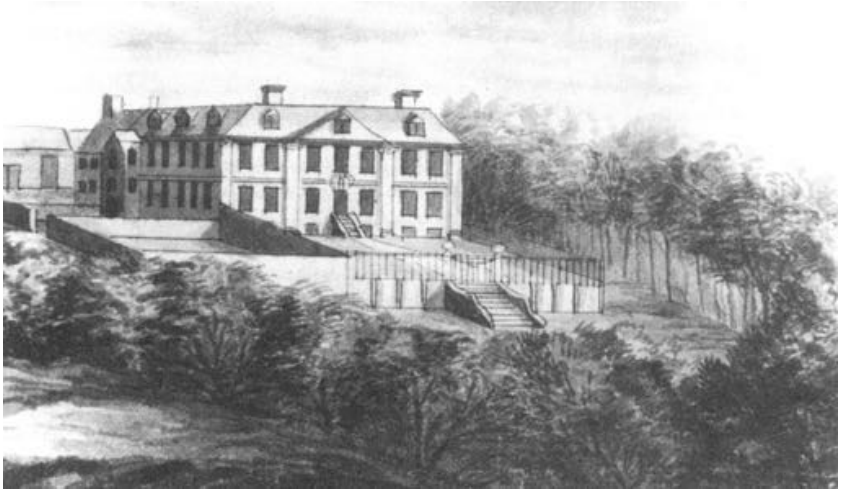
walls of the house, badly cracked by the heat, were pushed into the cellars and the lawns to its south and east were abandoned. A small caravan park was later established in a glade nearby. An unassuming, L-shaped stable block west of the site was used for storage and a brick granary moved to Arlington Court. As a consequence, from a distance the only visible clues that here was something extraordinary were a pair of massive gate-piers beside the road, and a clump of pink rhododendrons and a magnolia emerging in the spring among the scrub. Even the walls of the acre-sized kitchen garden were hidden by the undergrowth.

In 1960 two articles on Dunsland were published in *Country Life* in which the author, Arthur Oswald, explained that, '… its [Dunsland's] surroundings have not yet been taken in hand'.[7] Accompanying illustrations of the exterior bear this out, the only significant feature being a terraced lawn outside the east front leading to crumbling stone steps. These shadowy relics offered a hint of what had been lost and further evidence of Dunsland's former garden is also provided by two early eighteenth century drawings by Edmund Prideaux.

Prideaux was from Norwich where his father, the Cathedral dean, dabbled in antiquarian pursuits, an interest that his son inherited. In 1716 and 1727 Prideaux toured the west country sketching houses connected in some way to his friends and relatives.[8] Twenty-eight of the drawings featured Devon properties, including two of Dunsland which are dated 1716. They show the house from the south and east and it appears little changed from the 1960 images in *Country Life*, but not so the gardens. Prideaux's sketches reveal a flanking avenue of trees beside the principal drive, the raised terrace to the east fronted by railings and the steps descending to a broad fairway bordered by trees. To the south are two walled enclosures with no visible planting but perhaps cultivated in the regimented fashion of the period.

After 1716, descriptions of the Dunsland landscape are almost non-existent until the mid-twentieth century. Polwhele, in 1806, referred to Dunsland in general terms as 'a garden in the wilderness' of north Devon.[9] Stockdale, about thirty years later, commented on its 'fine prospect' visible from the house.[10] Baring Gould in the early twentieth century mentioned the 'fine trees in [the] park'.[11] An impression of that prospect and the trees can be seen in two lithographs of Dunsland dated about 1850 showing the house enveloped by trees but by then seemingly lacking the walled enclosures.

Perhaps because Dunsland's garden was unexceptional it was largely forgotten but in the nineteenth century eight



*Dunsland drawn by Edmund Prideaux in 1716*
*(by kind permission of Mr and Mrs Prideaux-Brune)*

*Dunsland drawn by William Gauci c.1850*

gardeners were employed.[12] A description of the gardens as recalled by the Rev. Bickford Dickinson in the 1960s is revealing.[13] The kitchen garden occupied south-facing land in which soft fruits and vegetables were surrounded by espalier-trained fruit trees, mostly eating apples. Fan-trained fruit trees on the walls included pears, figs, plums, peaches, greengages and apricots. Outside the walls were two orchards producing cider apples. To the west was a small walled rose garden and around the house a variety of flowering shrubs flourished. Rhododendrons, some twenty feet tall, lined the back drive.

When Arscott Dickinson sold Dunsland in 1947 he was a widower, worn out by his efforts to maintain it during the war, when only the trees had flourished. Auction particulars described the 'Exceedingly valuable woodlands' with nineteen species listed, among them 302 oak, 581 beech, 142 ash, 53 sycamore, lime, chestnut, elm and silver spruce – a total of 1,286 trees.[14] The family was especially proud of an avenue of horse chestnuts, an ancient yew, several walnuts, and a Wellingtonia thought to be the tallest tree in England. None of this impressed De Savoury who launched an 'orgy of destruction'.[15] Most of the mature trees were felled including the chestnuts and Wellingtonia. The rhododendrons were uprooted and the walled garden ignored. When Tilden bought Dunsland he offered De Savoury five pounds for every tree left standing but the damage had been done.

*The site of Dunsland in 2004. The house stood on the raised platform in the middle distance. Author's photograph*

In 1964 Leonard Elmhirst proposed converting the property into a north Devon version of Dartington, to include a gardening programme.[16] In 1993 *Country Life* toyed with the idea of sponsoring a new house on the site to mark the magazine's centenary. There was even a plan to redevelop Dunsland into an arts centre but local opposition and lack of funds ruled out all these ideas. In recent years, a new orchard has been planted beyond the walled garden and local beekeepers have taken advantage of the wild flowers. Rare lichens and invertebrates have secured Dunsland Site of Special Scientific Interest status. These days visitors are rare but few sites in Devon can evoke a greater melancholy than Dunsland's deracinated landscape.

## References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