

# The History of the Attingham Trust

## A Pioneer in its Field

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*“This is one of our principles, that we would try and make everyone happy...”*

Helen Lowenthal, OBE, Founder

*“The Summer Schools were amazing, not only a contribution to the life of the great house of Attingham, but enriching each of those who took part and for the rest of their lives”*

Sir George Trevelyan, Founder

The idea of a Summer School for American curators and architects to study the English country house, its collections and landscape setting, occurred over a cup of tea, not in an English country garden but in an American one, at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington DC in 1951. It was the brainchild of two formidable ladies, Helen Lowenthal, who went on to found the educational department in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Mildred Bliss, a charter member with her husband of the American National Trust. From there, the suggestion took shape, with the active encouragement of Lydia Bond Powell of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the positive support of Sir Joshua Rowley of the National Trust in England, and the enthusiastic participation of Sir George Trevelyan, Warden of Shropshire Adult College based at the great eighteenth century house, Attingham Park. The first Summer School was held a year later.

This article traces the history of Attingham Trust from those auspicious beginnings to the

highly regarded international institution that it is today. The Trust currently runs three annual residential summer programmes, primarily for people professionally engaged in the heritage field: the Attingham Summer School (18 days), the Attingham Study Programme (formerly Study Week – 9 days), and Royal Collection Studies (10 days). All three courses are now supported by museums, art galleries, universities, architectural practices, conservation workshops and historic preservation societies throughout the world.

The foundation of the Summer School occurred against a background of considerable upheaval for the country house. Despite the fact that Britain was so rich in country houses, covering a wide range of architectural styles with diverse collections, little was understood about their importance, particularly in America. Very few were open to the public on a regular basis – Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire in 1955 was one of the first. Those properties that had survived the Great War and the Depression of the 1930s had been requisitioned during the Second World War as hospitals, schools or army barracks. Many now lay empty and a large number were being pulled down as the severe economic conditions made it difficult for the owners to make them viable. The urgency of the situation was recognised in the Gowers Report of 1948 entitled *Houses of Outstanding or Architectural Interest*. One of its recommenda-

*All photos from Archiv of the Attingham Trust. / Všechny fotografie pocházejí z archivu Attingham Trustu.*

**Obr. 1.** Helen Lowenthal and Sir George Trevelyan, the founders of the Attingham Summer School, 1985. / Helen Lowenthal a Sir George Trevelyan, zakladatelé Letní attinghamské školy, 1985.

**Obr. 2.** Helen Lowenthal and Annabel Westmann at Knightshayes, Devon, 1982. / Helen Lowenthal a Annabel Westman na zámku Knightshayes v Devonu, 1982.

tions led to the passing of the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act of 1953 which gave grants towards the repair and upkeep of buildings with architectural merit, their contents and land. But progress was slow. The landmark exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1974 on the *Destruction of the Country House*, listed 600 country houses demolished since 1870, the majority pulled down before or after the Second World War.

The strain of these years and the distress felt by many families is evocatively told in the diaries of James Lees Milne, who acquired numerous properties for the National Trust during the 1940s and 50s. The wider concern is also eloquently expressed in Evelyn Waugh's preface to the second edition of *Brideshead Revisited* in



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1959, "It was impossible to foresee in the spring of 1944 the present cult of the English country house. It seemed then that the ancestral seats which were our chief national artistic achievement were doomed to decay and spoilation like the monasteries in the 16 century".

Thus the idea of setting up a course on the country house was an exciting new enterprise – there were no prototypes – and judging from the eminent sponsors listed in the 1952 Summer School brochure, it struck a deep nerve, for they included 'Mr Harold Nicolson, a member of the Executive Committee of the National Trust; Professor Anthony Blunt, Keeper of the King's Pictures and Director of the Courtauld Institute; Professor Pevsner (of Cambridge University); Professors Wittkower (of London University) and Geoffrey Webb, Secretary to the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments'. The brochure stated that places were limited to 60 and "Mr Trevelyan ... will himself supervise tutorial work, a library will be available and there will be a number of resident tutors. If desired, a written examination can be set". In the end, 20 came (and there was no exam). The British, accustomed to subsidized adult education, considered the three-week course too expensive at 150 dollars (£90) and the course, mainly attended by Americans, had to be self-supporting. (There are now 48 members and still no exam.)

Helen Lowenthal and George Trevelyan were the joint directors and the structure of the course, based in three centres, is still followed today. In 1952, it started at Attingham Park in Shropshire, followed by a week in Derbyshire to include such houses as Chatsworth, Hardwick and Kedleston, with the final days spent visiting Blenheim Palace, Oxford, and the area around Stratford-on-Avon and Bath. Since then, the last week is spent in a different location each year. The programme was perhaps more leisurely than today but many private visits were included, supported by lectures given by several of the sponsors, including John Summerson (author of *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* first published in 1953). Accommodation was basic, particularly at Attingham Park. The 1959 Joining Instructions noted, "There are only a very limited number of single rooms but it should not be necessary to have more than three to share the large cubicled rooms, so all have ample space ... There are no private bathrooms at Attingham" – hardly a welcome for those who would have made the journey by ship from the United States before plane travel became more commonplace. But the privations of sharing rooms was more than made up for by the glorious views from the windows of the attic storey and the receptions and parties given by the owners of the houses visited – still an essential ingredient of the course today.

**Obr. 3.** *Attingham Park, Shropshire, the great 18 century house designed by George Stewart in 1785, where the Summer School spent its first week from 1952–1983. The Trust was named after this property. / Zámek Attingham Park, Shropshire, významné sídlo z 18. století, navrhl roku 1785 George Stewart. Letní škola zde pobývala v prvním týdnu kurzu v letech 1952–1983 a Trust byl po tomto zámku pojmenován.*

The first group included the keeper of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the chief advisor to the Winterthur Museum in Philadelphia, the director of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and other individuals in distinguished institutions or in private practice. Their influence over the following years ensured that there was a constant stream of members from architectural, heritage and conservation institutions. By the early 1960s it was commented that "the majority of those in the US who were engaged in Restoration and Preservation today are alumni of Attingham ... and have profited immeasurably from what they have learned in England". It led to the founding of the American Friends of the Attingham Summer School in 1962, which became responsible for selecting the American members, raising scholarships and promoting the course throughout the States. In 1980, as more British and European members started to attend the



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course, the Trust set up a Scholarship Committee in the UK to select the non-US participants and help market the course.

Until 1984, Attingham Park, from which the Trust derives its name, was used as the venue for the first week but when it ceased to operate as a residential college and became the regional headquarters of the National Trust, the course moved to enjoy the first few days in the splendour of West Dean College in Sussex, originally a Jacobean house, but considerably extended in the nineteenth century. One young museum curator from Hungary who attended in 1988 commented, "I feel at times like a participant of a fairy tale, first of all, for the possibility of living in country house like West Dean. Maybe that was my deepest impression, not only to study a house, but to spend one whole week in these historical surroundings, to have tea in the Oak Hall and to walk in the early morning in the garden. I will never forget the first evening: after a thunderstorm, the electricity was lost, and we saw the original colours everywhere without electric light, as it were really going back in time".

It was in the mid-1960s, through Helen's determined efforts, that the first participants started to attend from the eastern block countries – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, followed by Poland, Roma-

nia and Yugoslavia. After 1992, when travel restrictions were lifted, Russia and the Baltic countries were brought into the fold. Today, there are usually about three or four members from these countries who join a group now made up of 50 % Americans and 50 % from the rest of the world. In the 1960s, however, the majority were still Americans with a sprinkling of other nationalities. Candidates from the "iron curtain" countries needed to be invited – they could not apply – and the Attingham Trust had to provide official documentation through the British Embassy to enable them to travel. They could only attend for the duration of the course and not a day longer. Dr. Olga Pujmanova, former curator at the National Gallery in Prague, was the first Czech to attend in 1967. Her story is similar to many others. "When in June 1967 I found myself on the boat heading towards the White Cliffs of Dover, I considered it a miracle. Those responsible for this miracle were Sir George Trevelyan and Helen Lowenthal. Both of them, especially Helen, whom I had met a year before in Prague, expended enormous energy trying to get me to England. Not only did they secure the financial side of my stay (for I couldn't even take a Czech crown out the country) but they also had to send me an invitation which was indispensable for getting permission to leave Czechoslovakia.

**Obr. 4.** West Dean, Sussex, which is now a college, is where the Summer School has spent the first week of the course since 1985. / Zámek West Dean, Sussex, je nyní školou s internátem, od roku 1985 se zde odehrává první týden kurzu Letní školy.

**Obr. 5.** Helena Hayward giving the silver seminar at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, 1987. / Helena Hayward přednáší na semináři o sbírce stříbra v zámku Chatsworth, Derbyshire, 1987.

**Obr. 6.** A group of Summer School students discussing furniture at Arundel Castle, Sussex, 2008. / Skupina studentů Letní školy diskutuje o nábytku v hradišti Arundel, Sussex, 2008.

**Obr. 7.** Members of the Attingham Summer School on the roof of The Royal Pavilion, Brighton, 2007. / Účastníci Attinghamské letní školy na střeše královského paláce Royal Pavilion v Brightonu, 2007.

The correct wording of the invitation made all the difference. I still feel very emotional when I remember how many times Helen re-worded it until it fulfilled the capricious conditions of our bureaucracy.”

Back in England, Attingham, by now an educational charitable trust (non-profit making), had very little money and was dependent upon donations from friends and colleagues for grants. Helen, always resourceful, persuaded both the British Council and the British Association for Central and Eastern Europe to play a part and throughout the 1960s until the late 1980s, their support was invaluable as they became personally involved with the work of the Trust. Eva Žiková, also from the National Gallery in Prague, who attended in 1980, wrote in her thank you note, “The great boon for my work in the education department is not only the studying and working aims of the course but also the personal contacts with my colleagues from different museums, galleries and universities”. Her words were echoed by other participants from similar countries, “Attingham offered us the possibility to build up personal contacts with foreign colleagues. Usually this comes only after several decades of professional activity and not at the beginning of one’s professional career”. In today’s world of easy communication and internet access, this aspect of Attingham – the life-long friendships that are made both professionally and socially among the alumni – remains just as important. To date, there are 29 Czech alumni who form part of this group.

Helen Lowenthal remained the Director of the Summer School for 25 years. She was succeeded in 1976 by Helena Hayward, a distinguished furniture and silver specialist, who in turn was followed by Dr Geoffrey Beard, a leading art historian and prolific author, director from 1986–1994. During these years, they both expertly guided the course, consolidating its success and increasing the high academic standards it now enjoys. The teaching evolved with changing demands. Mark Girouard’s *Life in the English Country House*, (1978) (still on the reading list for the Summer School) triggered the inclusion of more social history; Merlin Waterson’s *The Servants’ Hall* (1980), helped to develop differing approaches to display; and with the early encouragement of Nikolaus Pevsner (who in the 1960’s suggested doing a lecture on Victorian houses) and others including John Cornforth, a close adviser to the Trust, nineteenth century properties – not a fashionable subject at the time – were included in the programme. But the general theme running throughout the course was the encouragement of

a greater understanding and appreciation of the house in its entirety. As Helen succinctly stated in 1982, *the course is a cure for narrow specialisation*.

This holistic approach to education was echoed in the setting up of two further courses by the Attingham Trust: the Study Week in 1986, and Royal Collection Studies, ten years later. Both take 30 members each year. The Study Week (formerly the “Special Week” and renamed this year as the Study Programme) was created to satisfy the increasing demand of alumni wishing to attend the last week of the Summer School. The extra numbers were making the Summer School unmanageable so it was decided to create a separate course that would concentrate on specific regions of Britain with the occasional trip abroad. It is the only course currently run by the Trust that members can attend more than once. The decision has worked well and over the past 23 years the course has visited most regions in the UK and Ireland as well as Paris, Stockholm, Holland, Venice and the Veneto, Madrid and this year, Dresden and Berlin. Royal Collection Studies, on the other hand, was set upon behalf of The Royal Collection and is based in Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park. Directed by Giles Waterfield, architectural historian and former Director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, since its foundation, it studies the patronage and collecting of the Kings and Queens of England from the fifteenth century onwards with visits to palaces, in and around London, lectures and tutorials. The course is organised on broadly chronological principles and concentrates on the individual strengths of each period.

Giles Waterfield also co-directed the Summer School with me between 1995–2003, and was followed by Lisa White. We have continued to build on the experience and achievements of our predecessors, maintaining the academic integrity and intensive art historical teaching, as well as developing the itinerary to reflect the increased interest in areas such as management, conservation and interpretation. Our particular concern for all three courses has been to broaden the geographic spread and develop scholarship funding to ensure academic excellence. Participants now regularly come from Australia and New Zealand, an increasing number of European countries including from Turkey, and we have recently welcomed our first candidates from India. Many members, particularly on the Summer School and Royal Collection Studies, receive full or partial financial assistance, funded by charitable foundations, institutions and heritage bodies, private individuals, and the Attingham Trust itself. None of this could have



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Obr. 8. Member of the Summer School in the garden at Parham House, Sussex, 2007. / Účastnice Letní školy v zahradě zámku Parham House, Sussex, 2007.

Obr. 9. Royal Collection Studies at Osborne House, Isle of Wight. / Studia královských sbírek v paláci Osborne House na ostrově Wight.

been achieved, however, without the encouragement of John Lewis, the Trust's Chairman since 1988, whose steady hand at the helm has significantly improved the Trust's finances to ensure its future continuity.

Other activities have also been undertaken in recent years. In 2002, the Trust held its 50 Anniversary conference in London on *The Country House in Europe in the 21 Century* with the aim of pushing forward on a cross-national basis the barriers of education, knowledge and research about the country house, its collections and estates. Over 500 alumni attended from all over the world. Doc. Josef Štulc, then Director of the State Institute for the Care of Historic Monuments in Prague, gave an impassioned speech on the wealth of the great houses in the Czech Republic and their future. Giles Waterfield has also edited an Attingham Trust report entitled *Opening Doors – Learning in the Historic Built Environment* (2004) which presented an overall picture of what was being achieved in the UK and Irish Republic using case studies and examples of good practice. It was directed at policy makers in the heritage sector and received sponsorship from various bodies including government departments. Further ideas are being planned. There will be an additional course in Spring 2010 on the London House and, in a new venture, the Trust is collaborating with the Yorkshire Country House Partnership, an energetic organisation of ten Yorkshire houses and the University of York formed in 1999, to hold a Sculpture Weekend as a forum for the latest research.

In essence, the Trust remains true to its founders in promoting a unique, if strenuous, approach to art education for museum curators, architectural historians, conservationists and teachers. As Helen had wanted, it has created an international network of enthusiastic professional alumni which is drawn together by a spirit of camaraderie, enjoyment and fun engendered from the memories of their Attingham experience. As one alumna wrote in her report, "the 18 days of the Summer School was like a special time and space capsule, where we have almost forgotten what day and time it was, and measured the passing time with the upcoming lectures and country house visits. The Summer School gave us the rare present of forgetting all the noisy world spinning around us and to have a chance to concentrate on only our art history studies, on art and on its understanding, on its reception and on its interpretation".

For further information, please refer to the Attingham Trust website, [www.attinghamtrust.org](http://www.attinghamtrust.org), which also gives details of its publications.

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Obr. 10. *The Study Week at Burghley House, Lincolnshire.*  
/ *Studijní týden, zámek Burghley House, Lincolnshire.*

Obr. 11. *A group photo of the Summer School in 1987.*  
*Geoffrey Beard is in the centre of the second row. / Skupinová fotografie Letní školy z roku 1987. Geoffrey Beard stojí uprostřed druhé řady.*