Drakestone House

History researched and written by John Pinch in liaison with Hugh Mildmay

Estimated reading time: 15 minutes

(Throughout the article click on the words highlighted in red for further interesting information)



Drakestone House – The house in 2022

"This is a fascinating and important house. The contrasting textures of the materials, the changes in levels and the craft element embodied within its construction and decoration are clearly indebted to Gimson's involvement, to Milne's sympathy and understanding of his ideals, and also to the vision and creative inspiration of the clients. It survives almost unaltered as one of the best ***Arts and Crafts*** houses in the region."

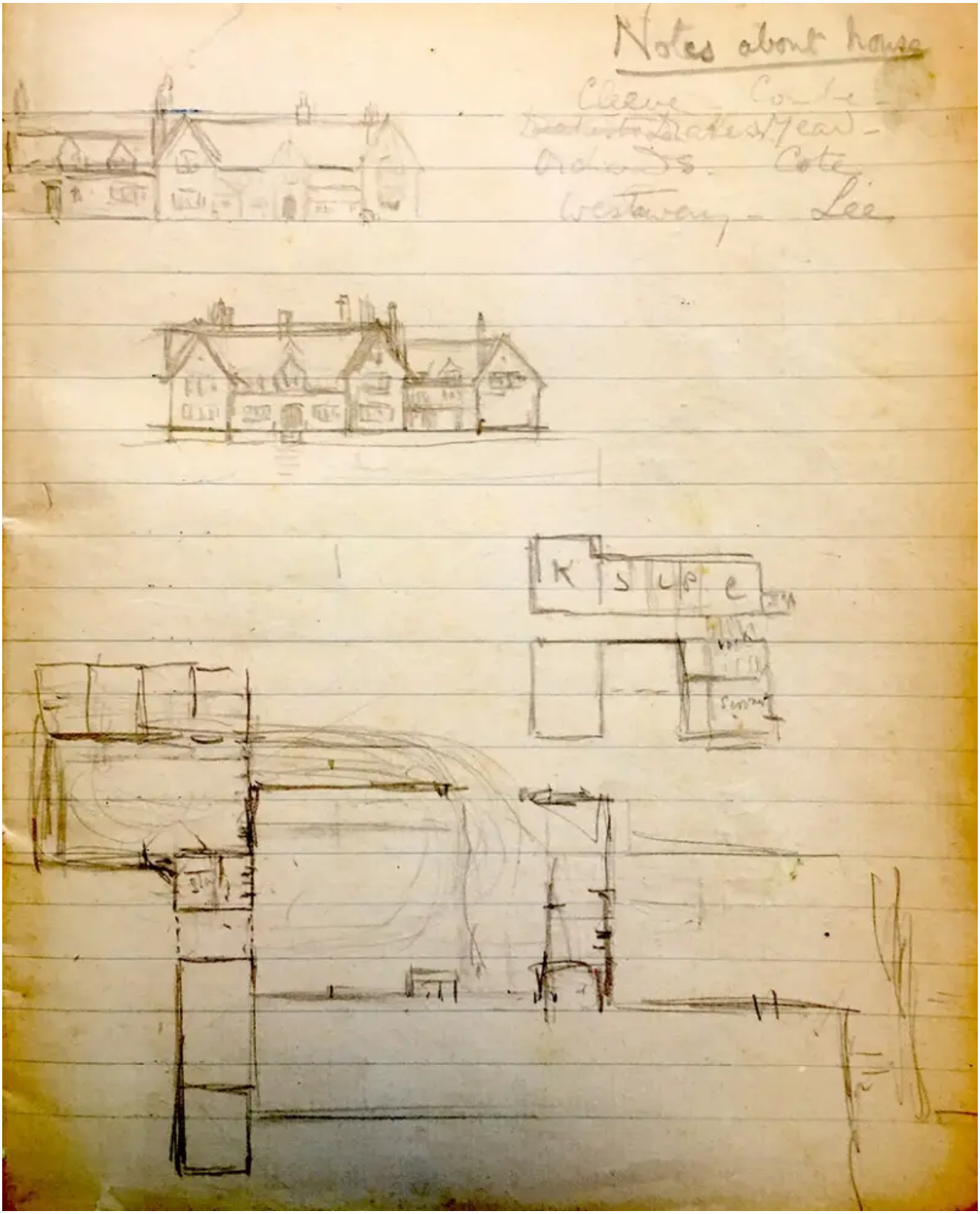
Cotswold Arts and Craft Architecture. *Catherine Gordon, 2009*
Isbn 978-1-86077-548-2

Introduction

The house sits under the edge of Drakestone Point, an area of significant archaeological value on ***Stinchcombe Hill.***

Hugh Mildmay's grandparents, Walter Paulet St John Mildmay and his wife Mabel, who were both talented artists and fervent admirers of the Arts-and-Crafts movement, built the classic Arts-and-Crafts house. The couple commissioned the famous architect and designer, ***Ernest Gimson***, to design the house for them but Walter and Mabel had firm ideas about the character and quality of the house of their dreams. It is likely the idea was hatched a few years earlier, but it was in 1908 that the commission was formerly proposed and accepted.

Ernest Gimson



A Page from Walters Notebook

Gimson had grand ideas for the house and his original designs illustrated a stone building with the largest thatched roof in England. He was passionate that the stone for the walls would be quarried locally and hewn with the blunt edge of an axe. The stones were to be of a rough texture and set on mortar

with wide joints, inspired by the vernacular cottages in Stinchcombe village.

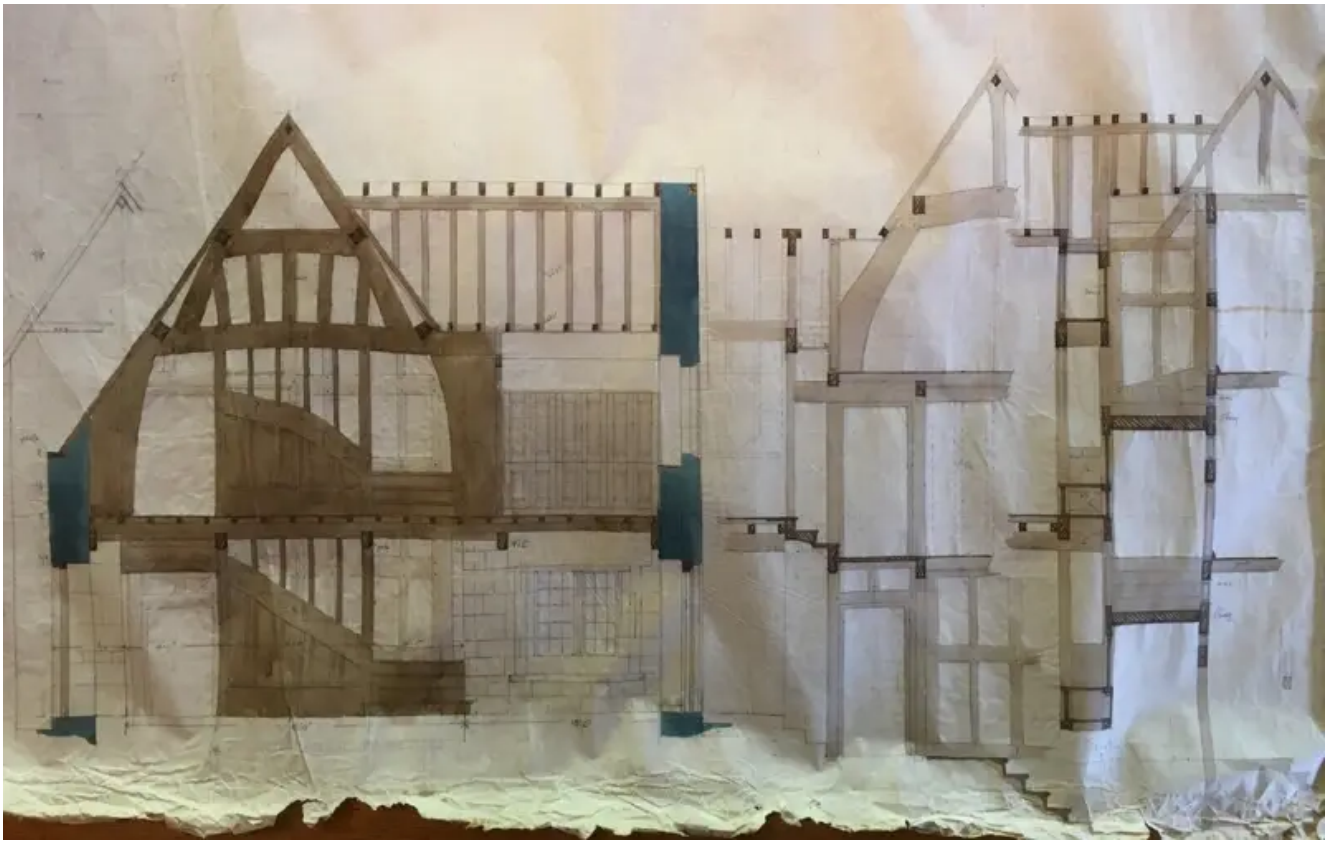


One of Gimson’s original designs for Drakestone House



A subsequent perspective sketch by Gimson that more closely resembles the house as we see it today

Larch for the roof structure was to be felled before 13 March 1909. The four trusses in the playroom were to retain the natural curves of the trees and the eaves were to project six inches and the verges four inches.”



Ernest Gimson’s original sectional drawing showing the timber structure

The two thatched cottages that were to provide accommodation for staff completed by Gimson in 1909 were built before the main house. On completion of the main house two years later, the first people to reside in Cottage No1 were the coachman, Thomas Perry and his wife Eva, and Smith the gardener with his wife Ellen lived in the second cottage.

More information on Ernest Gimson can be found at the Wilson, ***Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum***.



The two thatched cottages shortly after completion. (note the two children in front of the door, possibly Michael and Lorna, Hugh's father and aunt?

Craftsmen from Stinchcombe village built the house and cottages and a piece of headed notepaper illustrates sketches made possibly by Walter to explain some detail to C.Malpass, one of the local builders.

TELEGRAMS - C. MALPAS, CAM.

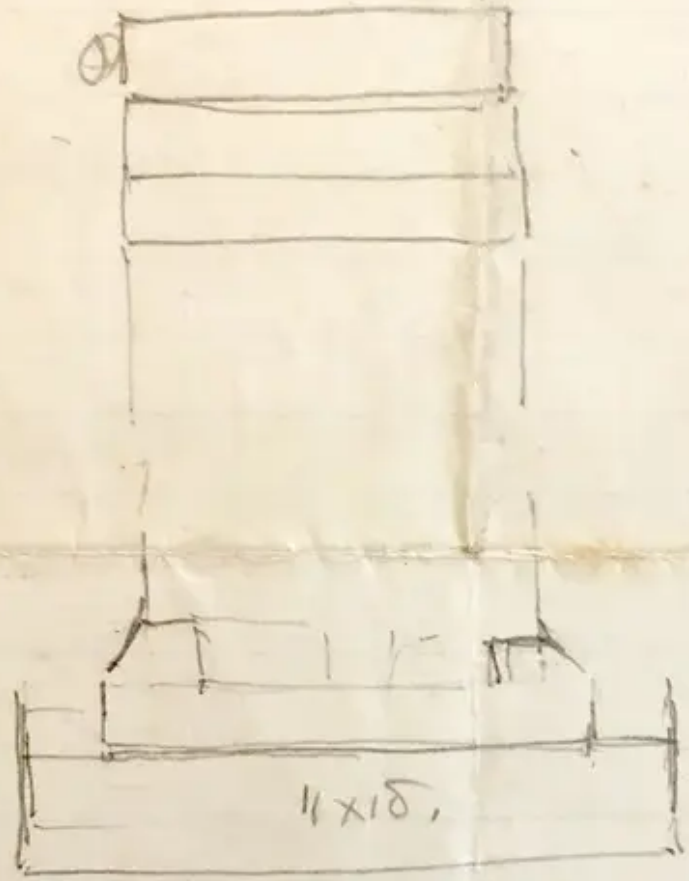
C. MALPAS,

Builder & Contractor

THE QUARRY,

NR. DURSLEY

Glos. 19



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A sketch on the builder's headed notepaper

Oswald Milne

After one year into the venture many compromises had to be made. The costs were becoming prohibitive and eventually, Gimson felt he was no longer able to complete the work and he abandoned the project. It may well have also been that Gimson had just accepted another commission for a house in Budleigh Salterton, and was eager to spend more time on this new project. Whatever, it was an amicable arrangement and another architect ***Oswald Milne*** took over the work, producing what we see today.

Milne was also a famous architect and was briefly a former pupil of Sir Edward Lutyens, but left in 1905 to set up on his own, but with the help of his father. Milne was obviously inspired greatly by his former mentor, as well as by Lutyens's patron and collaborator, Gertrude Jekyll. This influence can still be seen today in the complementary design of building and gardens.

More information on the life and work of ***Oswald Partridge Milne***, a student of Edwin Lutyens, including Coleton Fishacre, Claridges and Cheltenham College can be found on the link in red above.

Apart from reducing the size of the servants facilities in the main house Milne made very few other changes to Gimson's original plans but maintained the same attention to detail in both the selection of materials and their application.

The architectural character of the house is evident in the steeply pitched roofs with their stone tiles, the massive external chimneybreast and the classic Gimson loggia, that I was privileged to complete with windows incorporating gothic tracery to form a conservatory in the 1980s.

Writing in Country Life in 1919, the magazine's architectural editor, Lawrence Weaver, cites Drakestone House as,

'…a good example of the success which comes from the right handling in the simplest way of materials beautiful in themselves'.

William Morris would have been in absolute agreement with these sentiments.

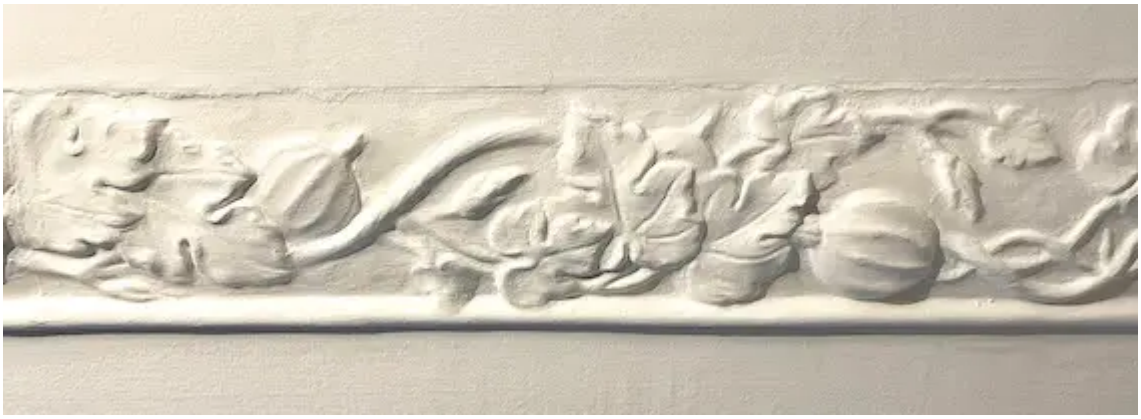


The house under construction in 1910

The Mildmay's move in

Walter Paulet St John Mildmay and his wife Mabel moved into Drakestone on its completion in 1911. The couple were living in Stouts Hill in Uley during the building work but made regular visits to inspect the progress and add their input to the décor of the house. The original drawings from Walter's notebook show his initial ideas for the house.

The couple contributed much to the interior design of the house, including the delicate plaster mouldings of the ceilings. Walter designed the mouldings in the drawing room that form a border of wild roses, rose hips and honeysuckle with the date 1911 incorporated in the corners. In the dining room, his wife Mabel included a more unusual border design comprising entwined pomegranates.



A section of the moulding described above

Mabel not only contributed to the interior design of the house but was also responsible for the design of the ***war memorial*** in Stinchcombe. However, it was reported in the Gazette, that Mabel had emphasized she had adapted the design from a very old cross.

I was originally informed that tragically, Walter died in 1913 from a heavy bout of influenza but that Mabel continued to live in the main house at Drakestone for a short time afterwards before moving into thatched cottage No1 with her daughter, Lorna. Lorna was also a very accomplished artist who taught art at ***Rosehill School*** in Alderley but never married. A helper named Louie Cobb came to clean and maintain the home for the two women. Smith, the gardener and his wife Ellen still occupied the adjoining cottage, No2 and he continued to work on the estate until his retirement.

However, since writing this account, a descendent of the family's coachman Thomas Perry has provided me with further information regarding Drakestone, and this can be found by

*following **this link**.*

Michael (Walter and Mabel's son) and his wife Joan with their two boys, Walter and Hugh never lived in the house at Drakestone because he was the resident head teacher at ***Aymestrey School*** from 1933 until 1948, which is where Hugh spent much of his adolescent life.

Hugh's father Michael Mildmay (1901 – 1993) returned to Drakestone after Joan died and took up residence in the second thatched cottage, next door to his sister Lorna. Here he stayed here until his death on 28th April 1993, eight days before his 92nd birthday. Michael played an important part in village and parish affairs. He was buried in the family grave at St Cyr's, where his mother had been interred in 1950.

A Prep School

Between the two World Wars the house was let out but in 1940 a private prep school moved out of London and took up residence at Drakestone until 1945. The headmistress was a Mrs Marshall, and the school was known as Mrs Marshall's school! The group of approximately thirty pupils made use of the whole house as well as the stables. Some years later when Hugh and Crystal opened the house to bed and breakfast guests, one such visitor reminisced of the time when he was a pupil living at Drakestone, and in the evenings a group of them would stand at one of the south windows and watch the illuminations in the sky as Bristol was bombed.



The view towards Bristol seen by the schoolboy as described above

Richard Wright

In January 2024 Pip Farquharson discovered interesting information in the diaries of his recently deceased stepfather, ***Richard Wright***. Richard was also a pupil at 'Mrs Marshall's' school, and he wrote in his diary about the bombs going off in Bristol. While passing in a car en route to Stinchombe from Sidmouth Richard, who was 9 at the time, also witnessed the bombing of The Bristol Aeroplane Company's works at Filton, just north of Bristol and encountered "a string of bombs" on the road ahead.

He also said the food at Drakestone in Stinchcombe was

“frightful” and as being “mostly slices of dubious galantine and sliced raw cabbage”!

After 1945

In 1945, the staff and pupils returned to London by car in small groups over a number of weeks.

Once again, the house was rented out and the new tenant was Mr Kelly who dealt in ex military and government surplus stock and used the lawn and grounds to store his purchases. Hugh reminded me of the times that one or other of his children would find memorabilia secreted under hedges and in nooks and crannies around the gardens.

Percy Woodlands, the Headmaster of Rednock School with his wife Eve and their two boys were the next tenants following Mr Kelly. It was while the family were resident at Drakestone that both boys died, one after another of the hereditary respiratory disease, cystic fibrosis.

Hugh and Crystal move in

Hugh, the grandson of the original owner of Drakestone with his wife Crystal with their children moved back to the UK in 1974 to a house in Brimscombe, near Chalford after working for the British Council in Senegal and Cameroon. A year later during the cold winter of 1975/6 they took up residence in the family home at Drakestone.

Apart from removing a partition wall to enlarge the kitchen and carrying out general decoration and maintenance, Hugh and Crystal saw no reason to change the house, described in its 1984 English Heritage listing as ‘a very splendid and restrained example of the Cotswold Country House style of the period, virtually unaltered’.

It was mainly due to the property being used as a school that

the garden suffered from serious neglect. However, thanks mainly to Hugh Mildmay, the gardens have now been restored largely to their original design. The impressive square lawn on the south of the house is partially surrounded by the imposing yew hedging that was the annual clipping task for Hugh. Steps to the west of the lawn lead down to a small pool and on to what were the kitchen gardens and ultimately to the two thatched cottages.



The steps leading down from the lawn to the pond



… and as it is today (2022)

A new beginning

Drakestone house was sold recently for the first time in its 110-year history, and comprised about 10 acres of gardens and paddocks beneath a bank of well-established woodland. It is available to hire through the ***Drakestone House*** website:

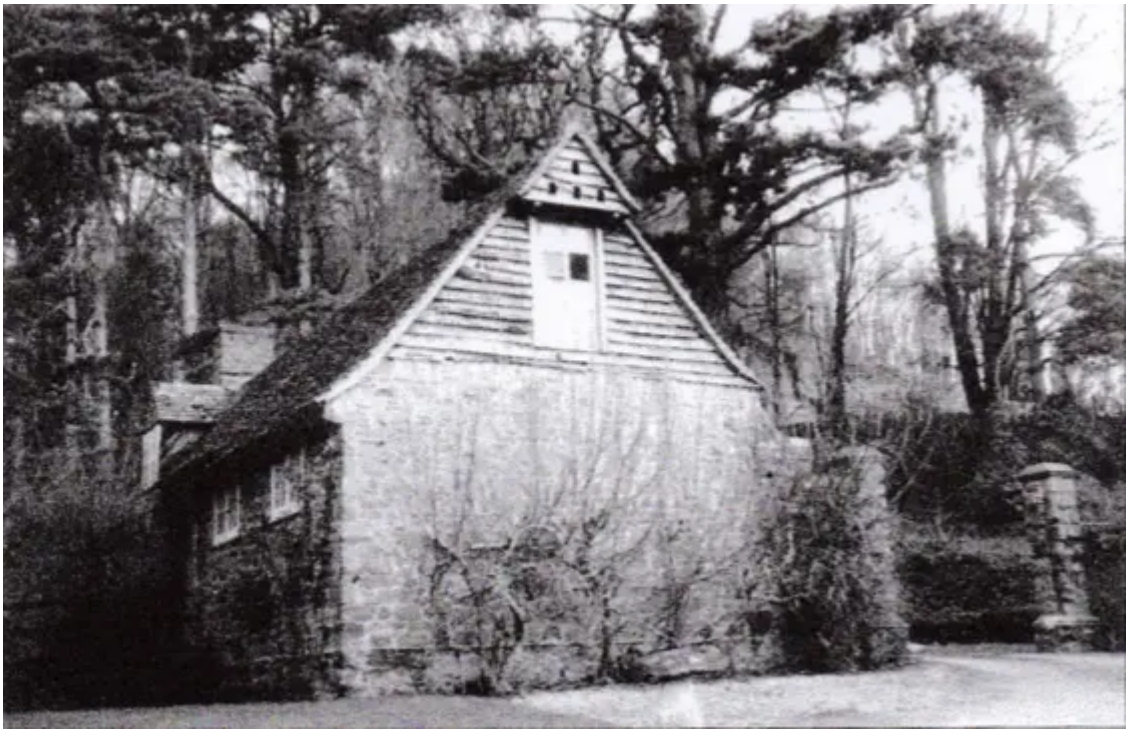
The house comprises three main reception rooms, pretty garden room, large kitchen, eight bedrooms, four bathrooms and various ancillary rooms linked by staircases at different levels. Outside the grounds include a tennis court.



The south and east facing dining room

The Stable block

On the north side of the house, a square forecourt was laid out, partly enclosed by a range of stables and sheds. Provision was made to house a combination of horse drawn carriages and other farm vehicles, with stabling for the horses. The groom lived on one of the thatched cottages.



The stables in the 1960s

The Listing of Drakestone House

*"**DRAKESTONES HOUSE** AND ATTACHED STABLE BLOCK, AND WALLS, WOTTON ROAD*

*Grade II**
*Detached dwelling. Oswald P Milne. 1911. Squared and coursed marlstone, stone slate roofs. T-plan main house plus service wing, and on the north side, courtyard formed by low wing, walls, gate iers, and L-plan stable block forming second smaller courtyard. South elevation two storeys and attic, 3-windowed, plus one-windowed to projecting gable, right, and 3-windowed to service block. All wood casements with glazing bars and tile-crease cills, variously 2, 3 or 4-light, **voussoirs** over. Two ridge stacks, and large eaves stack near left hand end. Entrance through projecting 2-storey porch on north side, set in swept down main roof slope and with gable to right containing 2, 3 and 4-light **transomed** casements. To right of porch, bell hung to small dormer. Over door, coat of arms with motto 'ALLA TA HARA'*.*



The *coat of arms is the Mildmay family crest and the motto, ‘Alla ta hara’ was originally a war cry or slogan, translated from Latin into English as ‘God my help’.



St John-Mildmay “Alla ta Hara”

Plain wall return, left, and second return to square piers c3 m high and stable block; also, from north-west corner of main block run of c14 m wall 2.7 m high, stone slate capping, containing one square door opening.

Interior not viewed, but reputed to contain original decorations and fittings.

House should have been designed by Gimson, but his costs too high, according to information from Mr Mildmay, son of the original client. A very splendid and restrained example of the Cotswold Country House style of the period, virtually unaltered.'

Sadly, the Listing contains a misspelling of the main house, 'Drakestones'. There is also another major inaccuracy insomuch that the house was most definitely designed by Gimson, contrary to the Listing description.

Again, the Listing of the cottages refers to an Ernest Grimson and not Gimson…

Listing of the Cottages

DRAKESTONE COTTAGES

Grade II

Pair of dwellings. Ernest Grimson. 1909. Marlstone rubble, thatch roof. L-plan, return gable at left-hand end, half-hipped ends, two stacks. 1½ storeys, 1+3-windowed, 2-light wood casements with bars, one 3-light at ground floor in gable; thatch raised over two dormers. Large plank door, right, also second entrance in facade to road, and modern entrance and outbuilding on north side. Interior: original simple oak stair with tight winders, stick balusters and flat handrail; plain stone fire surrounds with mantel. Plank doors with forged latches and fittings.

These are very convincing C20 essays in the vernacular, built as coachman’s and gardener’s cottages to Drakestone House (q.v.).

Bibliography

Background to Drakestone House from “COTSWOLD ARTS AND CRAFTS ARCHITECTURE” by Catherine Gordon

The book, “SMALL COUNTRY HOUSE OF TODAY” Volume II second edition (1922) by Sir Lawrence Weaver, has early photos of Drakestone as well as floor plans.

“GARDENS OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT” by Judith B Tankard



The montage of nine photographs taken in 2022 illustrate from top left:

1. The original room bell system for the maids
2. The bell and small dormer window above the front entrance
3. The original front door bell
4. The original Delft tiles surrounding a bedroom fireplace
5. One of the original sitting room plaster mouldings designed by Walter and Mabel
6. A view of the inside of the original oak front door
7. The main staircase leading up to the bedrooms

8. The shell alcove in the sitting room
9. The passageway leading to the first floor bedroom