Elgar and Hampstead

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Hereford to Hampstead

The story behind the Elgars’ move to Hampstead in January 1912 began 23 years earlier. They were married in May 1889 at the Brompton Oratory; both were keen to escape from the west country and start their married life in London, he to free himself from the grind of teaching and she to move away from relatives who had disapproved of her marriage. The London venture failed for several reasons and in 1891 they returned to Worcestershire where they remained until 1904 when they removed to Hereford. Alice always looked to return to London for ‘she always had his career at heart and it was she who persuaded him to leave … Malvern for Hereford and Hereford for London. She picked him as an outsider, put her money on him, groomed her shaggy country colt, used spur and curb to train him, and brought him to the show-ring of London’.2

As Elgar was increasingly required to visit the capital, in January 1911 Alice started looking for houses around London, including one in Church Row, Hampstead. While looking at this property, Elgar and Alice Stuart Wortley found a large house on the market a few streets away, 42 Netherhall Gardens, called Kelston. Elgar liked its appearance. They were unable to look inside but Alice Stuart Wortley did so a few days later and wrote a ‘clear & exact description’ to Alice Elgar.3 In February Alice Elgar returned to London and spent four days looking at houses; she liked Kelston best. In February she wrote that although there were financial difficulties ‘Edward loved the house … if he really likes it, which he does, I feel he must have it. & a proper room to dream dreams of loveliness in. So we are going on …’.4

One factor which may have tipped the balance in favour of a London home, was that on 17 February 1911 Elgar was approached by the Chairman of the London

1 This is a revised version of a lecture given at the Friends’ Meeting House, Hampstead on 17 April 2010 for the London branch of the Elgar Society. Although no specific reference to it is made below, the prior work of Helen Lawrence, Elgar in Hampstead 1912–1921 (Hampstead: Heath and Hampstead Society, 2004) is acknowledged.


4 The Windflower Letters, 78.
Symphony Orchestra to become their principal conductor on the retirement of Hans Richter in the spring. Alice Elgar felt that the family should enjoy the social and intellectual stimulation of London, where they had many friends. Elgar would benefit from being nearer to his publishers, and would be more readily able to meet conductors and the movers and shakers of the musical world. The difficulties related to the price. All their previous homes had been rented, but this would have to be bought with a mortgage. To raise the deposit and some of the purchase price Alice had to find capital. This she did by seeking to break the trust set up by her mother’s will in 1887. This had given her an annual income following the sale of her family home Hazeldine House in 1892. The capital from the trust and other sources totalled about £5,000, which produced an annual income of about £150.00. If she was to forgo this she had to have the agreement of the trustees to alter the terms of the trust.

Well before they moved – but having decided on the new name – Elgar wrote to a friend ‘I wish you could see Severn House! We have been up today and it gets lovelier (and more expensive) every time’. Rosa Burley realised this when she was shown the house by Elgar: ‘He clearly took a natural pride in the importance of the house with its fine panelling, its long music room and its great staircase at the head of which Alice would stand to receive her guests. But on the other hand he wanted equally to make me feel that his success meant nothing to him and that there was always some lovely thing in his life which had completely eluded him’. This ambivalence is clear from other comments. To Canon Gorton he wrote ‘I ape royal state under my wife’s kindly direction’ and to Dorabella, who remarked on seeing the house that he must be in clover, he replied ‘I don’t know about the clover – I’ve left that behind at Hereford…’.

By July 1911 Elgar had decided not to retain the name Kelston. He wistfully re-named it Severn House even though negotiations were continuing. These dragged on until December when they had ‘a satisfactory interview about the house’ and it became theirs on 22 December. They moved in on 1 January 1912.

Severn House

The house was the second to be designed by Norman Shaw (who was assisted by William Lethaby) for the painter Edwin Long, and was built in the westernmost part of the garden of Long’s first Shaw house, 61 Fitzjohns Avenue. It was built in 1887–8 and was the last and grandest of Shaw’s Queen Anne type of studio homes (fig. 1).

6 McVeagh, Edward Elgar, 58.
10 The Windflower Letters, 94.
No expense was spared; the front doors were of beaten brass (fig. 2), to a design by Long, with panels of men in armour on horse and on foot, and the vestibule contained a Roman mosaic, said to be over 2000 years old. There was a Spanish mosaic in the bathroom; the 60-foot long stately corridor became a picture gallery; and on the first floor Shaw built a magnificent panelled studio with a massive fireplace containing marble columns from Siena (figs 3, 4). Outside were stables, a coach house, a heated conservatory, and a garden with a pond and fountain.

Unhappily Long enjoyed his palatial home for only three years. He died suddenly in 1891, but his widow lived there until 1907 and following her death the house was emptied and put up for sale. Negotiations over the purchase price and the breaking of the trust were protracted in that they took almost nine months, but so determined was Alice to acquire this grand house that well before completion was achieved in December 1912, she closed their Hereford home Plas Gwyn. So for several weeks the Elgars were homeless, their furniture and possessions in store, before they were certain that the house was theirs.

11 Warm thanks to Arthur Reynolds for supplying these illustrations and fig. 5 [ed.]
Hampstead in 1912

Hampstead in 1912 was more rural than urban even though the West End was fifteen minutes away by bus or taxi. Farmland was nearby, cattle were taken to market down the High Street, ducks, geese and hens were in evidence, and sheep grazed on Hampstead Heath where Elgar often took long walks. The Heath went some way to compensate Elgar for the loss of the country round Hereford. Trees were important to him and one favourite haunt was an ancient tree-lined avenue on the edge of West Heath, Judge’s Walk. He wrote the name at the end of the manuscript of *The Music Makers*, one of the first works to be written at Hampstead, and in 1931 recalled that it was his ‘“spiritual home’ for some years...’."12 Three days after moving in he found the house ‘divine, so quiet, quieter even than Hereford ... The heating apparatus we can’t manage yet & get too hot. (I think, entre nous, it was designed for the comfort of Long’s nude ladies!)’."13 An interesting idea, but as Long had died 21 years earlier it does not follow that Elgar could blame the vagaries of the heating system on him.

Alice Elgar wrote: ‘The whole house appeals to him in every way ... it is so lovely

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13 *The Windflower Letters*, 95.
to see E. so happy and in a setting which seems to have been waiting for him.\textsuperscript{14} Friends rallied round and helped purchase furniture and bookshelves, which were specially designed for the study (fig. 5). Elgar sold a violin to buy a billiard table, and above the stables he had a workshop. Soon they started entertaining guests and had regular Sunday afternoons 'At home'. Thus over the years Elgar came to know many distinguished people – the Russian bass Chaliapin, the Polish pianist Paderewski, the American novelist Henry James. Bernard Shaw came to Severn House in 1919 and here Elgar entertained the conductors Henry Wood, Adrian Boult, Thomas Beecham, Hamilton Harty and Leopold Stokowski. Composers sought his advice – including John Ireland and the young Arthur Bliss who recalled:

My appeal to Elgar for an autographed photo met with a chilly printed refusal, and it was not until 1912 that through the kindness of a mutual friend I was allowed to meet Lady Elgar and then the composer himself. The Elgars were living at Severn House ... and I received an invitation to tea. I tired up Netherhall Gardens and asked a passer by where the house was. 'Oh! The composer man,' was the reply, 'big house at the top on the right.' I nervously rang the bell, and wondered what I could possibly say to Elgar that would interest him. Luckily he had his own subject and I was at once put at my ease. His subject was Falstaff, the Symphonic Study at which he had been working. After tea in the imposing music-room, he took me into his study, where books on Henry IV, essays on Falstaff and histories of the period were strewn about everywhere.\textsuperscript{15}

Bliss was invited back to Severn House on several occasions and after the war turned the pages at a private performance of Elgar's Violin Sonata when Elgar played the piano part. Another visitor was the young and beautiful pianist Harriet Cohen, who became a lifelong friend. In her memoirs she remembered her student days:

Passengers in the omnibus trundling down Finchley Road in north-west London were often to see a small girl, holding an enormous music case, talking to a military-looking gentleman with an iron grey moustache; both were so deeply absorbed in their conversation that those in the know, for there were many musical people living in Hampstead ... came to the conclusion that the mighty Sir Edward Elgar was propounding nothing less than The Art of Fugue to the little girl. The truth is that the great man was telling me what he thought would win the 2.30 race that day.\textsuperscript{16}

The first music written at Severn House was the masque The Crown of India, followed by the intensely personal choral work The Music Makers and, in 1913, the masterly Symphonic Study Falstaff. A number of part-songs were written commemorating drives into the country to the north of Hampstead – to Mill Hill, Totteridge and Hadley Green.\textsuperscript{17} The move to London also enabled Elgar to become

\textsuperscript{15} Arthur Bliss. As I Remember (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Harriet Cohen, A Bundle of Time (London, Faber and Faber, 1969), 26–7.
involved in the fledging recording industry. He was introduced to the managing director of ‘His Masters Voice’ Gramophone Company and in January 1914 in City Road he made an acoustic recording of Carissima. Within four days of the recording the Gramophone Company delivered a gramophone to Severn House. Alice’s diary records Elgar’s delight and for many weeks all the friends who came to the house ‘were much taken with the gramophone’.18

The First World War

The Elgars were in Scotland when was declared on 4 August 1914. Elgar joined the Special Constabulary at Hampstead police station and became a Staff Inspector. The streetlights were darkened in anticipation of air raids. After one of his tours of inspection Elgar wrote: ‘How beautiful it is in the still quiet streets without the trying brilliant lights; all seems so muffled – a muted life to me and so sweet & pure; I do not like the idea of garishly lit roads & streets again – I love them so much, so much as they are’.19 London suffered its first Zeppelin raid on 31 May 1915 and on 7 September Alice and Carice watched another raid from the upper windows of Severn House. The following day Alice wrote in her diary:

Evening came – all in bed except A. Suddenly Boom, Boom, wonderful deep sound. A. ran to window & then fled out to look through other windows; when C. called her,

19 The Windflower Letters, 141.
and from C’s window strange & awful sight. The sky lit by flying searchlights – part of a Zeppelin visible like a gilt bar, & star-like shells bursting more or less near it & and boom of guns sounding! 20

There is another account of the same raid; D.H. Lawrence (who was living in the Vale of Health) wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell on 9 September 1916:

Last night when we were coming home the guns broke out, and there was a noise of bombs. Then we saw the Zeppelin above us, just ahead, amid a gleaming of clouds:


Fig. 4: Severn House, interior
high up like a bright golden finger, quite small, among a fragile incandescence of clouds. And underneath it were splashes of fire as the shells fired from earth burst. Then there were flashes near the ground - and the shaking noise. It was like Milton - then there was war in heaven. But it was not angels. It was that small golden Zeppelin, like a long oval world, high up. It seemed as if the cosmic order were gone, as if there had come a new order, a new heavens above us: and if the world in anger were trying to revoke it. Then the small long-ovate luminary, the new world in the heavens, disappeared again.21

Elgar did what he could for the war effort by writing music for Belgian and Polish charities, he sought escape by producing a delightful score to The Starlight Express, wrote ballet music (The Sanguine Fan), set Kipling for The Fringes of the Fleet, and over a protracted period wrote his wartime masterpiece, the moving, elegiac Spirit of England. These projects kept him busy as did touring and conducting but his energy was slowly sapped. The effect of the war and living in London can be summed up by his comment in a letter to Alice Stuart Wortley of 18 September 1917: 'Yes: everything good & nice & clean & fresh & sweet is far away - never to return'.22 And in another he wrote 'I think of the old days here - how happy we were before the war!'23 and 'I long for the country ... I think all the time of it'.24

Even though he escaped from London to Worcester and the Lake District as often as he could he needed a more permanent rural refuge and in 1917 Alice Elgar found such a retreat - an isolated cottage deep in the Sussex countryside called Brinkwells - and thus their time was divided between Hampstead and Sussex.

War's End and after

In spite of this Elgar's health continued to be a cause for concern. In December 1917 he wrote: 'I am just the same alas! But I have stopped all medicine & take long walks, lovely. I went up to Judge's Walk - & people are skating on the pond'.25 Later he commented 'The Doctors say nothing the matter: but I am not well'.26 His ill health continued, as in March 1918 he underwent difficult and protracted surgery for the removal of infected tonsils. He spent much of the summer recuperating at Brinkwells and with the end of the war in sight he resumed composition by starting work on a Violin Sonata and String Quartet. The Elgars remained in Sussex as long as they could but by October he wrote: 'I have had - at the thought of town life - a recurrence of the old feelings & have been just as limp as before the nursing home

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22 The Windflower Letters, 190.

23 The Windflower Letters, 177.

24 The Windflower Letters, 191.


26 The Windflower Letters, 196.
episode'.27 However on 7 October Alice recorded in her diary ‘Suddenly at dinner he said ‘I feel all right again’ – & seemed so’.28 Shortly afterwards, they returned to London to re-open Severn House after an absence of six months. Alice had not been well and she underwent an operation herself, but on Armistice day they returned to Sussex. However Alice’s ill health continued necessitating travel back to Hampstead. Before leaving Sussex Elgar wrote:

It means another interruption & the future is dark as A. poor dear is not well & ... is bored to death here but I am in the seventh heaven of delight: so we may only return here to clear up – we shall see. But it means that if I have to live again at Hampstead composition is ‘off’ – not the house or the place but London – telephones etc all day and night drive me mad!29

After Alice’s consultation, which seemed positive, they returned to the cottage but when news that Severn House had been burgled reached them she returned alone to assess the losses. Louise Eickhoff, then a child in Hampstead, later wrote:

Severn House asked to be burgled. We children passing on sunny days thought it uninhabited. He left the house in charge of an old servant who lived out and informed the Police, as did others in the area whose houses were also plundered by the caretaking officers of the law using jemmy, pick-lock and two bits. Two skeleton and 150 other keys were found in their possession when apprehended.30

Silver was stolen, and Elgar’s clothes – shirts, suits, trousers, braces and shoes – and a host of everyday items. Two policemen were charged with theft and sentenced to five years penal servitude in 1919.

All this did not help Elgar’s mood. In January 1919 he was heard to say ‘this is no home for me!’31 He complained to Alice Stuart Wortley: ‘Oh! It is so difficult to keep up with London. No music & interruptions by the thousand – I think of the holy peace at Brinkwells in the early morn’.32 And again: ‘I long for Brinkwells’.33 Difficulties increased in that post-war fuel shortages left them with insufficient coal to run the central heating system and they had to wear coats inside the house. Alice went to Hampstead Town Hall that January to plead for a greater coal allowance as Edward was ‘sitting in an ice cold studio with no food’.34 Her advocacy succeeded as that evening she recorded that ‘a much augmented allowance was notified’.35

27 The Windflower Letters, 213.
28 Moore, Creative Life, 728.
29 Moore, Creative Life, 732.
31 Alice Elgar’s diary, 16 January 1919, in Moore, Creative Life, 736.
32 Moore, The Windflower Letters, 221.
33 The Windflower Letters, 222.
35 ibid., 137.
Alice even stowed away logs with her own hands as they were cheaper than coal. An indication of their relative poverty was that Elgar painted his own staircase at Severn House, while Alice and Carice planted bulbs in the garden, which no other resident in Netherhall Gardens would have done.

The Elgars remained in Hampstead for much of the first six months of 1919 where Elgar started serious work on his Cello Concerto. In the summer they repaired to Brinkwells where the work was completed. They later discovered that neighbours in Hampstead had cut down a row of trees between the two houses, and a garage was to be built under the music room window. Alice consulted her solicitor cousin William Raikes, but nothing could be done to prevent it. The increasing financial burden of running the large house forced her to go to the estate agents on 2 September to indicate ‘we might sell the beloved house’.\(^{36}\) It was advertised at £7,000.00.\(^{37}\) Prospective purchasers viewed it but as W.H. Reed recorded ‘every ring of the bell plunged poor Elgar into melancholy, and if he heard … the shuffling of strange feet … he ran out of the house incontinently by a side-door that had been used by [Long] … as an entrance and exit for his models’.\(^{38}\)

No buyer was forthcoming and the sale was held in abeyance when Alice’s health declined. In November 1919 she was confined to her room and even though she rallied Reed noticed: ‘She was getting mysteriously smaller and more fragile. She had never been big in stature, but now seemed to be fading away before ones eyes. Elgar was greatly worried, but thought it was all the financial trouble about Severn House that was making her ill. But when she was suddenly taken really ill and took to her bed he was almost beside himself with foreboding.’\(^{39}\)

After she died, on 7 April 1920, Elgar divided his time between Severn House and Brinkwells for the rest of the year, seeking distraction with his microscopes. But it was clear that the house was too large for him and he no longer had any wish to live there. His daughter’s forthcoming marriage in January 1922 made the move inevitable and he and Carice started to clear the house. As no purchaser had been found it was to be sold at auction on 8 November 1921 but it appears that even then there was no acceptable bid. Eventually it was sold for £6,500.00.\(^{40}\) He moved into a flat in St James’s Place. On his last day at Severn House 15 October 1921, he wrote to Alice Stuart Wortley who had been instrumental in finding it 10 years earlier:

I feel reconciled to the change – things here seemed to become more sad & hopeless – I could not help feeling, until about … a few weeks ago that my dear A. wd. be sure to come back & take charge of things – I cannot explain, but I never touched anything without feeling … that I was responsible to her for every movement. Now I feel the desolation & hopelessness of it all & curiously, feel more satisfied – not happy but calmer over the situation. It must be: … The end of Severn House was more radiant

\(^{36}\) Alice Elgar’s diary. 2 September 1919. in Moore, Creative Life, 745.

\(^{37}\) Hampton’s sales brochure, Camden Local Studies Archive. I am grateful to Philip Petchey for a copy of this.

\(^{38}\) W.H. Reed, Elgar (London: J.M. Dent, 1939), 129.

\(^{39}\) Reed, Elgar, 130.

\(^{40}\) Moore, Creative Life, 760.
The house was demolished in 1937. The final word is given by Alice Stuart Wortley’s daughter Clare who recorded: ‘I was there to the last. I went to buy the panelling for Carice. I saw his, Elgar’s studio being demolished. Alas!’

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42 *The Windflower Letters*, 339.