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CLOUDS HILL, DORSET

By Duncan J. D. Smith

“A QUEER PLACE, BUT GREAT FUN.”

(T.E. Lawrence, 1888–1935)

When one thinks of Lawrence of Arabia it is often Peter O’Toole who springs to mind. Storming through the desert in David Lean’s epic film, the actor’s colourful portrayal has crystallised the Lawrence legend. But what of Lawrence after Arabia? Here was a very different man, and one best represented by Clouds Hill, his woodland hideaway deep in rural Dorset.

The circuitous path that led Lawrence to Clouds Hill is an oft-described one. Thomas Edward Lawrence was born in 1888 in Tremadoc, Wales, where his father, Thomas Chapman, was living in obscurity having abandoned an unhappy marriage in Ireland. Lawrence’s mother, Sarah Junner, was the former governess of his father’s first family. In 1896, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence (a false name used to conceal the couple’s unmarried status) settled in Oxford. Here ‘Young Ned’, as Lawrence was known, first came into his own. He spent long hours exploring the surrounding countryside by bicycle, visiting medieval churches and later writing up his adventures in a bungalow built in his parents’ back garden. This notion of ordinary accommodation in which extraordinary things occurred would find its greatest expression at Clouds Hill.

In 1910, Lawrence gained First Class Honours in modern history at Oxford. By this time his fascination with things medieval had shifted focus to the Middle East, where he wrote a pioneering thesis on the architecture of Crusader castles. A

year later his growing passion for archaeology took him to the British Museum’s excavation of the Hittite city of Carchemish, on the banks of the Euphrates in Syria. He remained there until the First World War, documenting finds in the dig hut, just as he had done in his bungalow in Oxford.

Lawrence’s life took a dramatic turn early in 1915. His knowledge of Middle Eastern geography and mastery of Arabic saw him posted to the



Left: Lawrence in uniform in 1918

Right: Clouds Hill in the Spring time (Image: © National Trust Images/Tony Gill)





British Military Intelligence office in Cairo. There he became an expert on the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Feeling great sympathy for the long-suffering Arabs, he sought ways to provoke a rebellion. This came to pass in the summer of 1916, when the Emir of Mecca took up arms against the Turks, sparking the Arab Revolt.

Once again Lawrence came into his own. Dispatched to the Hejaz to discover how Britain might assist the Arabs, the quality of Lawrence's reports and his success in uniting the various tribes against the Turks led to a long-term posting. He played a key role in devising the guerrilla campaigns that culminated in the capture of Damascus in October 1918 and the ousting of the Turks from the Arabian Peninsula.

Afterwards Lawrence returned to England, where he committed his energies to a long political campaign for Arab self-determination. This came to a head at the Cairo Conference (1921), where his pleas for self-government in Iraq (under King Faisal I) and Transjordan (under Emir Abdullah I) were heeded. Unbeknownst to him, however, British and French diplomats had long before drawn their infamous "line in the sand" ignoring any desire for pan-Arabism and instead seeking power for themselves in Iraq and Syria respectively. It would herald a period of unrest in the Middle East that still resonates today.

Lawrence's realisation that he may have colluded in the betrayal of the Arabs caused him great distress. This and the privations he had already suffered during his time in Arabia, the years of



Above, left: Archaeologist Leonard Woolley (right) and Lawrence at the excavations at Carchemish

Top: Lawrence in Arab dress in 1919

Left: Lawrence with King Abdullah of Jordan in Jerusalem in 1921

Below: King Faisal's delegation at Versailles during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, including Lawrence, third from right

Right, top: The rear view of Clouds Hill (Image: © National Trust Images/James Dobson)



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political campaigning, and the effort expended in writing up his account of the Arab Revolt (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) brought him to the verge of a breakdown. Despite having become an international celebrity, what Lawrence needed now was anonymity and a safe haven.

To escape himself, Lawrence joined the RAF under the assumed name ‘Aircraftman J. H. Ross’. He was soon exposed though and instead re-enlisted in the Tank Corps as ‘Private T. E. Shaw’. In March 1923, he arrived at Bovington Camp in Dorset. The posting made few demands on his intellect leaving him free to pursue his new ambition to become a serious writer. Friends at the time were urging him to issue a private subscription edition of *Seven Pillars* but to do this he needed somewhere peaceful to work. So it was that he first rented and then bought Clouds Hill, a derelict forester’s cottage a mile and a half from the camp. The secluded location at the foot of a hill was perfect, as Lawrence noted in one of his published letters: “*The cottage looks simple, outside, and does no hurt to its setting which is twenty miles of broken heath and a river valley filled with rhododendrons run wild.*”

The cottage inside was essentially a two-up two-down, with a central staircase. To pay for basic repairs Lawrence sold the ornate curved steel and silver dagger seen in portraits of him wearing Arab dress. In the larger upstairs room he installed a skylight to provide the light he needed to write. Known today as the Music Room, this is where he would work, entertain and listen to music. His distinctive views on interior design are clearly in evidence here, influenced by neo-medievalism and the design ideals of William Morris. Bare beams and wood panelling provide the backdrop to a simple desk, undyed leather furniture and an enormous gramophone on which he played Bach



Above left: The upstairs Music Room where Lawrence wrote, entertained and played his gramophone.

Above, right: His cowhide covered divan in the Book Room. (Both images: © National Trust Images/Dennis Gilbert)



before bedtime. The Arts and Crafts wrought iron fender and candle-holder slung over the main roof beam were designed by Lawrence and made by local craftsmen.

During these early days, the smaller room alongside the Music Room served as a modest pantry (Lawrence slept and ate his main meals at Bovington and so was unperturbed by the lack of a bedroom or kitchen). If visitors called they were given tea and tinned food. The main downstairs room was damp and unused, with the room next door containing little more than a washstand. Water had to be fetched from a nearby spring, and to answer the call of nature a spade and several acres of woodland were provided!

In this less than half-finished condition, Lawrence finished work on his subscription edition, and in August 1925 was accepted back into the RAF. After first being stationed at Cranwell he was sent out to India, where he remained for three

and a half years. During this time he let Clouds Hill to family and friends. The carefree lifestyle he had found here is represented by the Greek inscription over the door lintel, ού φροντίς, which translates loosely as 'Why worry'.

By the time Lawrence returned to Clouds Hill in January 1929 there had been changes in his life. His *Seven Pillars* had garnered significant praise and an abridgement (*Revolt in the Desert*) had become

Above: The Book Room with its fireside armchair designed by Lawrence (Image: © National Trust Images/ James Dobson)

Below: The Greek inscription above the front door which reads 'Why worry'





Far left: The surprisingly luxurious bathroom at Clouds Hill (Image: © National Trust Images/James Dobson)

Left: Portrait of Lawrence in 1919 by Augustus John

Below: Lawrence on his beloved Brough Superior motorcycle that he called *George V*



a bestseller. He gave the proceeds to charity and wrote a new book, *The Mint*, about his time in the RAF. He also translated Homer's *Odyssey* for an American publisher and used the advance to pay off the purchase price of Clouds Hill. Finally he was shaking off his reputation as a man of action in favour of that of a man of letters.

His *Odyssey* proved to be another bestseller and this time he spent the proceeds on completing the renovation of Clouds Hill. Outside he had a 'convenience' built and a thatched garage for his beloved Brough Superior motorcycle. Inside he had the main downstairs room properly damp-proofed and lined with bookshelves. By the end of 1933 these were filled with his precious books, including many fine press editions from publishers such as the Doves Press and William Morris' Kelmscott Press. They were his most treasured possessions and he admitted that he'd "rather keep them than anything else I've ever had".

Like the Music Room, what became known as the Book Room, bears the unmistakable stamp of Lawrence's simple but practical taste in design. For reading during the day he created what he called a "proper lying-place" in the form of a huge, cowhide-covered divan placed in front of the window. On it today lies his great sleeping bag embroidered with the Latin MEUM (Mine) to distinguish it from another embroidered TUUM (Yours), for guests. This was used by visiting literary giants such as George Bernard Shaw, E. M. Forster and Robert Graves.

For reading in the evenings and during cold weather, Lawrence designed a boxy, modern-looking armchair with a stainless-steel book rest supported on the arms (the sheepskin cushion kept the sitter warm and comfortable). As in the Music Room, Lawrence designed the wrought iron fender in front of which he must have spent many a happy hour reading. "*I covet the idea of being sometimes by myself near a fire*", he wrote.

The success of the *Odyssey* also enabled him to transform the small room alongside the Book Room into the Bathroom. Lawrence's letters written in the services reveal how in successive camps he had always contrived to heat water for washing. "*Give me the luxuries*," he said "*and I will do without the essentials*". He excelled himself at Clouds Hill by dreaming up an ingenious water system. A small hydraulic ram fitted to a spring

Below, left: Lawrence's modest grave at St Nicholas' Church, Moreton (Image: © www.duncanjdsmith.com)

Below, right: Memorial near the crash site, close to Lawrence's cottage at Clouds Hill

over the road drove water up into a large tank above the cottage staircase. This then fed a water heater, which supplied hot water to Lawrence's surprisingly grand enamel bath (he acquired it from his former supply officer in Aqaba, who now ran a plumbers' supply business in London). Cork tiles on the walls for warmth and various chrome-plated fixtures and fittings complete the scene.

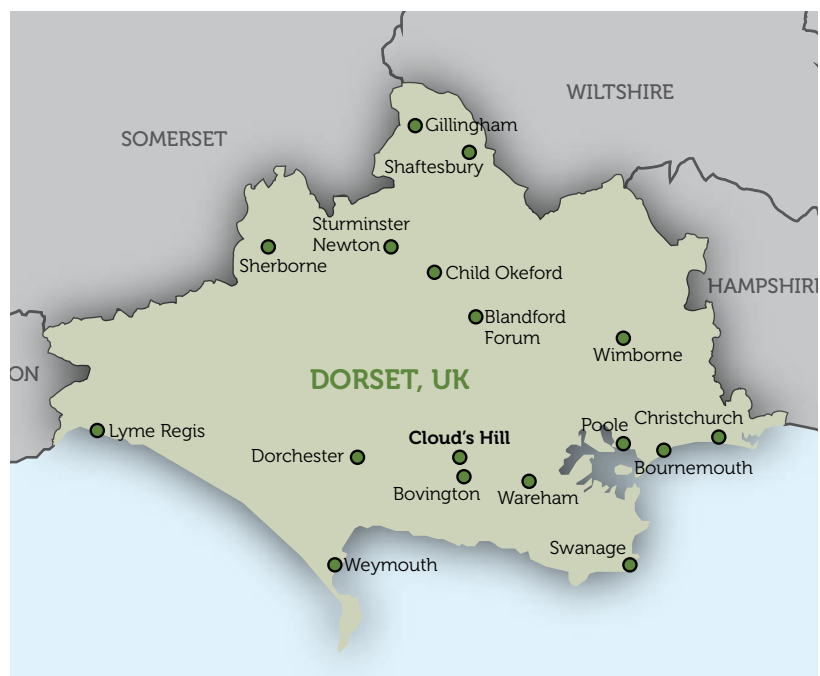
By the end of 1934 most of the remodelling of Clouds Hill was complete. Only the little upstairs pantry remained untouched. This he got around to redecorating in 1935 lining it with aluminium foil to keep out the damp. As there was barely any storage space in the cottage, he constructed a bunk-bed here, with drawers underneath and a mattress on top. His last endeavour in what became known as the Bunk Room was to insert a porthole for ventilation, which a friend had salvaged from the breakers of the 1914 battle cruiser *HMS Tiger*. It was an eccentric final effort wholly typical of Lawrence as a designer.

Just a few days later Lawrence suffered severe head injuries in a motorcycle accident close to Clouds Hill. Driving fast without a helmet, as was his wont, he had swerved to avoid a delivery boy's bicycle. After lingering in a coma for six days, Lawrence died on 19th May 1935 in the hospital at Bovington Camp. He had only recently completed his enlistment with the RAF and still had much to look forward to. Instead his remarkable life was cut short aged just forty-six.

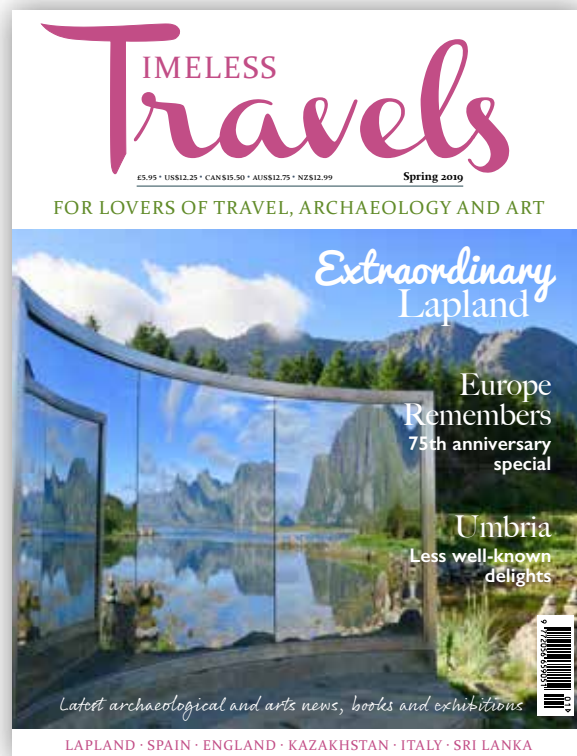
Lawrence's simple but well-attended funeral took place in the nearby village of Moreton, where one of the mourners was a tearful Winston Churchill. The following year, Lawrence's heir and brother, Professor A.W. Lawrence, gave Clouds Hill to the National Trust. Since then it has remained essentially unchanged giving visitors the feeling that the great man has just stepped outside for a moment. The novelist E. M. Forster summed the place up best when he wrote that *"To think of Clouds Hill as T. E.'s home is to get the wrong idea of it. It wasn't his home, it was rather his pied-à-terre, the place where his feet touched the earth for a moment, and found rest"*. ●



Clouds Hill is located on King George V Road, Bovington, near Wareham, Dorset, BH20 7NQ, tel. 01929 405616. It is open 1st March to 31st October 11am to 5pm. Further details at www.nationaltrust.org.uk.



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