

Dyrham Park

Space title

Learning Centre

Location

Dyrham Park, near Bath

Brief project description

An education base for activities focused on Dyrham Park, a 17th century historic house and gardens managed by the National Trust within the Trust's Wessex Region. Education provision takes place throughout Dyrham Park – in the house and grounds – and reaches a wide range of audiences, from Primary school pupils to Scout groups, family groups and garden enthusiasts of all ages including groups of young offenders.

Cost of project

Over the last four years, staff have spent time discussing options for developing the best kind of education space for the property. The Learning Centre was moved from an existing, smaller space one morning – in March 2003 – by six members of staff. A total of £360 was spent on flexible storage units and lighting from IKEA.

Participants

Dyrham Park is managed by Property Manager, Wendy Stott. Dale Dennehy is Garden & Park Manager. Susie Gay is part-time Education Co-ordinator, covering Dyrham and another local property, Lacock Abbey. Barbara Webber is Learning & Interpretation Officer at the Wessex Regional Office.

Timescale for the project

Four years to consider and develop the space; a morning's work to set it up.

Space location & dimensions

A suite of three rooms – a workshop (28m²), a meeting room (13m²) and a living-history space (19m²) – converted from an unused student flat located in the stable block of Dyrham Park.

Summary of the project brief

A flexible space providing a base for visiting schools and other educational groups; a safe space where students can make a noise, make a mess, leave bags and eat lunch.

Background to the project

Susie Gay was appointed four years ago as part-time Education Co-ordinator. When she arrived at Dyrham there was no desk for her to work at, and no dedicated space for education. Education took place on an *ad hoc* basis, with 'Arts in Trust' activities being housed in a temporary marquee.

Initially, discussion about the location of education activities at the property focused on the idea of using the Scullery, but there were problems: this space is located within the main house, raising issues of access, security and conservation. There was even a debate about what colour paint could be used on the walls. At this point, Susie decided that an alternative space would have to be found.

The need to provide access for groups of 45 to 60 educational visitors at a time – many of whom are school children – is a challenge for many National Trust properties, but particularly for a property like Dyrham where fragile tapestries and books, as well as delicate fittings, limit the number of 'light hours' in the house to 1,000 a year. Dyrham is one of only 13 properties cared for by the Trust with this level of restriction.

The development process

Dyrham Park is a late 17th century house with a Victorian kitchen and orangery. The history of the house does not fit very easily into the National Curriculum, in that it is a particularly complex period of history and tends to fall between key areas of study. Over time, and through a process of trial and error, Susie Gay has found that the property is well suited to work relating to the art and design curriculum, in that the quality of the interiors and of the craftsmanship involved in creating them provides inspiration for school children from Primary level through to GCSE and A-Level students: 'Working with children and getting them to understand about the history of the house ... actually looking at the architecture ... observing the way things are ... they do this much more successfully through art.' This focus on art and design activities required the development of a flexible space, close to the house and grounds, with access to water.

The arrival of Wendy Stott as Property Manager in 2001 led to a review of education provision. The property's first dedicated education space was in a room called High Chamber, in the stable block. This first space was not ideal, in that it was located at the top of a steep flight of steps and shared outside space with Dyrham's salvage area – the space reserved for rescuing valuable artefacts in case of a fire or other emergency at the property. However, the space was out of the main house and had access to its own toilet facilities. Most importantly, it provided Susie Gay with a base from which to start developing the property's education programme.

Any changes to the use of rooms within the house have to be approved by the Trust's curatorial staff, based at the property and in the regional office. To complicate matters, Dyrham receives a grant from the Historic Buildings & Monument Commission, which means that English Heritage also has to be consulted. Once the education centre was to be located in the stable block, concerns about conservation and access became less acute.



Features:

- The need to consider conservation and security issues in an historic house
- The need to take a 'whole site' approach to the delivery of a learning programme
- The possibility of developing effective learning provision through the creation of a learning space, using what is available as a starting place
- An education centre as a base for learning rather than the focus of learning activities
- The possibility – with determination and a willingness to improvise – of creating an effective learning space on a limited budget

In 2003, Wendy Stott and Susie Gay agreed to relocate the education space in an unused flat in another wing of the stable block. The flat provided more rooms and easier access, and the only person who needed to be consulted about the move was the Building's Surveyor who was able to confirm the load-bearing capacity of the floors.

The outcome

The Learning Centre was opened in March 2003. The Centre has a dedicated staircase – but no lift access – and its own bathroom. The main workshop space is converted from the flat's kitchen/dining area: the kitchen cupboards are used for storing art materials; the kitchen sink and draining area are used for washing up after art activities. The workshop space houses some art work created on site – currently a selection of colourful *papier mâché* bowls on display on the mantelpiece and a wood and metal chair created by one of the artists who regularly work with school groups.

As all of the Learning Centre is regularly used for meetings (in addition to learning activities), the kitchen area allows for the provision of on-site refreshments.

Natural light is plentiful in the workshop with a window into the stable block courtyard and, on the other side, into an internal garden area. The other two rooms have less natural light, with windows only into the courtyard. The living-history space is currently under development as a housemaid's bedroom; Susie Gay has been assembling a handling collection of furniture, fabrics and fashion from properties throughout the Trust.

Pupils at Key Stage 2 are the main educational visitors, although KS1 (House & Homes), KS3 (Glorious Revolution) and GCSE students undertaking course-work are also significant users. Young people with special needs are welcome, although students with limited mobility tend to use the Scullery or Orangery rather than the Learning Centre because of ease of access. Adult education is important to the property, particularly groups from the Workers' Education Association.

Lessons learned

It is important, in an historic house, to make the most of the setting. An education space is necessary, but as a base, not always as a place of learning in its own right – as Barbara Webber comments: 'The space becomes the base. It isn't the space for learning always, but is the base for the day.' Susie Gay notes that 'children ... remember a lot more about working in an historic house by working in the Scullery and the Orangery ... they get a special experience from doing that'. Working in a neutral space like the Learning Centre is 'a bit more like working at home'. Barbara Disney, an artist who works with children at Dyrham Park, confirms that using the historic spaces is 'a fantastic experience ... for the children and for me ... something completely other'.

Charman Flindell, a local Headteacher who has visited the property with her school, comments on the need for a variety of learning spaces: 'There isn't just one that's the way you'll learn ... I think that's the delight of coming to an old house or going to the beach ... they're both different and both very good experiences for children provided the right people are there working with them and actually bringing out the strengths of the place.'

Key factors

The approach to learning at Dyrham Park is flexible and improvisatory. As Barbara Webber explains, education spaces and education activities are tried out: 'Nothing is set in concrete ... it's all fluid and flexible depending on what the Trust's strategy is in terms of learning ... what the property wants to do.' Dale Dennehy notes that it is not a matter of choosing '... the ideal space, but quite often the available space'; of answering 'the need that arises at the time'.

The new Learning Centre is not seen as answering all the educational needs of the property. Dyrham Park currently receives more than 100,000 visitors of which approximately 1,600 are recorded as educational visits. The park and gardens have the capacity to take more visitors, but the house may be reaching its limit on visitor numbers; discussions are underway about converting a barn space in the Park as an alternative (and additional) base for outdoor educational activities.

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