

# UNDERSHAW'S CONVERSION TO STEPPING STONES SCHOOL

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A brilliant home that went into disrepair is now transformed: observations of change.

Our taxi cab driver drove us up the hill from the train station in Haslemere to Hindhead. A lifelong resident of Haslemere, he was very familiar with Undershaw. Arthur Conan Doyle with his friend and architect Joseph Henry Ball designed and built Undershaw, and Conan Doyle lived in this house from 1897 to 1907. Approximately a third of the Sherlock Holmes stories were written at Undershaw, among those being *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. Also written there were *The Great Boer War*, *The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard*, and *Sir Nigel*. Conan Doyle was visited at Undershaw by numerous literary guests including Bram Stoker, Sidney Paget, Bertram Fletcher, E. W. Hornung (Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, married to his sister Connie), Churton Collins, J. M. Barrie, Virginia Woolf, Gordon Guggisberg, and William Gillette.

This photograph of Undershaw shows the setting that Conan Doyle described when writing to his mother, "If we could have ordered Nature to construct a spot for us we could not have hit upon anything more perfect."<sup>1</sup>

My wife Victoria Risko and I were interested in visiting this historic residence and were dismayed at its decrepit state



Figure 1. Undershaw, c. 1900. Conan Doyle's children Mary and Kingsley living there from 1897 to 1907. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undershaw>

when we first arrived on July 23, 2012. We were greeted by a linked chain stretching across a driveway to signify no trespassing.

1. Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, Charles Foley. *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), p. 353. Letter to Mary Doyle, May 25, 1895.

The taxi driver told us to disregard this infringement and to walk around the property, and that he would be back for us in half an hour. Walking down the driveway, we had this view of the home.



Figure 2. Undershaw, July 2012

Conan Doyle's once well-kept home was now a place of boarded windows, cracked pavements, and an abundant overgrowth of grass and weeds spreading throughout the property. Steps leading to the front door were decrepit, casting a shadow of abandonment.



Figure 3. Steps leading to the front door

A home with the name "shaw," a Scottish term meaning "a grassy place under hanging trees," was now a dilapidated structure waiting for demolition. The house was under threat from property developers in the area who wished to divide it into three separate units and build a further five alongside. We had noticed that just behind what once was the carriage house had been developed townhouses located on a space of land now called Holmes Place. The Undershaw parcel of land with the historical home now occupied two and a half acres of property that the developers hoped to procure as part of their expansion project.

During the Victorian era, Queen Victoria mandated that trains make scheduled stops at Haslemere.<sup>2</sup> It seems that Alfred Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate to the Queen, lived south of Haslemere at

Aldworth House and required transport to and from London. The distance from the train station to Hindhead was approximately three miles. Conan Doyle's friend the writer Grant Allen, who had pulmonary problems of his own, suggested that Hindhead would be a location beneficial for Touie's health. Hindhead, near Haslemere, became an attraction for Conan Doyle. In a letter to his mother Mary, in 1895, he described the setting where Undershaw would be built and Touie would be comfortable and healthy: "Because its height, its dryness, its sandy soil, its fir trees, and its shelter from all bitter winds which all agree to be best in the treatment of phthisis."<sup>3</sup> He further described the property and its value by writing that

2. This statement is attributed to the taxi driver who shared the local folklore that had developed over the years. A message from the Haslemere Museum replied, "One of our library team was treated to the same story from presumably the same taxi driver! However, we have consulted our records both factual and anecdotal but cannot find any references to this actually taking place." Michael Gunton, Senior Archivist, Library and Archive Service at Portsmouth Library replied, "I suspect that the story you heard from the taxi driver is just a 'local legend.'"

3. Lellenberg, Stashower, Foley. p. 353. Letter from Conan Doyle to his mother while in Davos, Switzerland, May 25, 1895.

he had bought four acres of land for under £1000, with the cost of building the home at £2200 and an additional £300 for fences and paths. This estimate was undervalued, a later letter to his mother stating that the final cost would be approximately £6000 to £7000 “without mortgage or encumbrance of any kind.”<sup>4</sup> In a letter to his mother, Conan Doyle included a drawing of the rooms that would encompass the home.<sup>5</sup>

The drawing shows a dining room, study, drawing room, kitchen and cabinets,

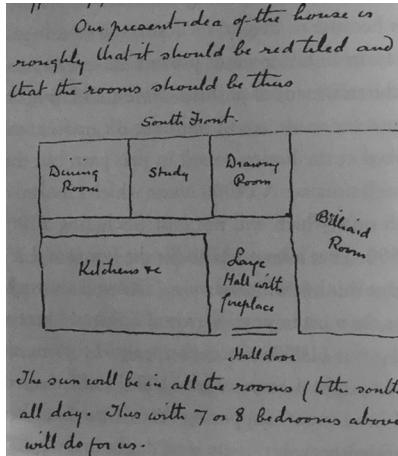


Figure 4. Drawing of rooms.

hall with a fireplace, and a billiard room. The house was designed so the sun would be visible in all the rooms all day. Upstairs would be seven or eight bedrooms. Upon our second visit in 2016, we noticed that the stairs leading to the second floor had a depth and size unevenly constructed in such a way as to accommodate Touie’s climb.

The proximity to Portsmouth within an hour’s journey and to the surrounding area offered Conan Doyle several sporting activities that included golf, cricket, fishing, and riding. And the grounds and surrounding area provided many opportunities for Conan Doyle to imagine unrealized possibilities. One such vision is the Devil’s Punch Bowl near his Hindhead residence. Although our view that day was clear, the taxi driver assured us that this was unusual as the fog usually served as a covering for this picturesque location.

Local legend has it that Conan Doyle walked the Hindhead Commons that served as an inspiration for *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. While there are some sim-



Figure 5. Devil’s Punch Bowl

ilarities between the terrain of Hindhead and the countryside around Undershaw, and the descriptions of Dartmoor, there is no evidence that Conan Doyle used this setting for writing this story. However, when the Bowl is shrouded in fog, it does provide an eerie feeling and a tacit association with the dreaded hound. It is not inconceivable that this location reminded Conan Doyle of his visit to Dartmoor with Fletcher Robinson and their touring of the moors. Conan Doyle had met Robinson on the voyage from Cape Town to Southampton, returning from the Boer War, and the following year while on a golfing outing in Cromer, Fletcher told Conan Doyle of the Devonshire legend about a hound that served as the motivation for writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Undershaw served well Conan Doyle, Touie, and the children over the ten-year span of their residence. But over the years, subsequent home owners and what followed became part of the bitter quest and tug of war by developers who wanted to demolish the house and those who wanted it restored and preserved. After a series of court entanglements, the permission for development of Stepping Stones School was approved by the Waverley Borough Council in September 2014. The judge concluded that a proposal to expand Stepping Stones School would be in the best interest of the Undershaw property to provide “educational and training facilities for part of the disabled community at the same time as (a) preserving and protecting an important heritage asset from continuing dilapidation, and (b) enabling public access to it at appropriate times.”<sup>6</sup>

### Stepping Stones School

Stepping Stones School was established as a registered charity by parents of children with special educational needs who were not flourishing in a mainstream school environment. The school’s primary aim is to provide a first-rate education for young people to benefit from a mainstream curriculum delivered in a special school setting. Stepping Stones was first opened in 2004 by two parents, Larry Sullivan and Sandy Seagrove, who were looking for an alternate school for their daughter. They purchased a deconsecrated church building and started the school with three students. On September 9, 2016, the school was divided into a Lower and Upper School site. The Lower School is located on Tower Road, and the Upper School moved to the renovated Undershaw home.



Figure 6. Undershaw and Stepping Stones School sign at top of driveway.

Sixty-four students at the Stepping Stones School, Upper Division, at Undershaw were enrolled in the 2017-2018 academic year, with a staff of thirty-six qualified full-time special-needs educators. Stepping Stones aims to promote the rights, needs and aspirations of students who have special needs, through the provision of high-quality education, training, therapy, and care in order to achieve students’ maximum progress and attain-

4. Ibid., p. 391. October 12, 1897.

5. Ibid., p. 354. Conan Doyle describes the floor plan for Undershaw in a letter to his mother from Davos, Switzerland, May 25, 1895.

6. *Public Law Today*. “Council wins Planning Court battle over former home of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.” Monday, January 4, 2016.





Figure 7. Stepping Stones School 2016.

ment. Creativeness is the cornerstone that defines the school; not in words, but with opportunities afforded students as they use their talents in meaningful ways to engage their skills and intellect and achieve self-worth in a variety of circumstances.

Provisions of support include speech and language therapy, life skills and occupational therapy, sensory integration, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, and alternative therapies. Rooms for these sessions are dedicated, as is a swimming pool and lockers.

Each student has an engagement plan designed to support and encourage their learning, development, and behavior. Therapists at the school also work in conjunction with a local Educational Psychologist and with other teachers who advise

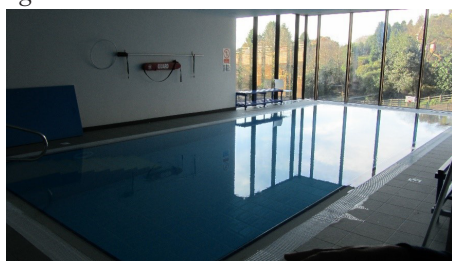


Figure 8. Indoor pool.

on support with hearing, visual impairment, and physical disabilities.

The physical structure of the school consists of a main hall with accessible stage, science laboratory, art room, hydrotherapy pool, classrooms, an area for independence training, a library, and a social area. The outdoor grounds have a Forest School, and a Multi-Use Games Area that includes tennis and basketball courts. The academic subjects are enriched by other curricular activities that include residential trips to Europe, visits to the theatre and a recording studio, rowing, and other after-school enrichment programs through

clubs. Among the residential trips, students enjoy traveling to Italy and staying at a hotel while learning how to ski. They also travel to the New Forest in southern England, west of Southampton, where they stay in a boarding house and engage in outdoor activities while simultaneously building team spirit and communication. Boating takes place at Frensham Pond Lake, north of Hindhead, where students learn seamanship.

Students are also afforded opportunities to engage in employable work experiences related to their interests with employers who live locally. For instance, some of these work-related opportunities are located in stables, a cookie bar, and a beauty



Figure 9.

Photo Courtesy of Stepping Stones School

parlor. Stepping Stones is a part of the National Association of Special Schools.

During a visit to Stepping Stones School in 2016, my wife and I met Melissa Grigsby, Executive Head Teacher, who introduced us to a staff member and a student for our tour of the school. The purpose of our visit was twofold: to observe the conversion that had taken place since our first visit; and to pursue an opportunity to involve students in a cross-cultural literacy project with Mrs. Shannon Carlisle and her students at Moore

Elementary School, in Franklin, Tennessee. The literacy project would focus on the history of Undershaw, Conan Doyle, Stepping Stones School, and the Sherlock Holmes stories.

At the entrance, a wall-hanging, Welcome to Undershaw, provides an introduction to A. Conan Doyle, his Sherlock Holmes stories, his reason for moving to Hindhead, and the cost of building the house.

We were impressed immediately when entering the main hall and looking up to see the stunning stained-glass windows on which were the ACD initials and



Figure 10. Welcome to Undershaw

multiple drawings of family coats of arms. Next to this wall of windows was a reproduction of a portrait of A. Conan Doyle by Henry Gates that sets the stage for those who enter the school, and might reminisce about the house's past history and its famous resident.<sup>7</sup>

As we walked the hallways and entered rooms, now classrooms, that were once inhabited by Conan Doyle and his family and friends, many features of the historical home were in evidence. These included fireplaces in the classrooms, and that stairway with uneven steps and dimensions that were built for Louise Conan Doyle to walk to the upper floor and that now serve a similar purpose for some of the students.

When meeting the teachers, we came to understand that the school curriculum was mediated by these educators and staff in a compassionate manner, putting the students at ease and promoting and situating learning activities that were achievable and doable. Students were actively

7. The original portrait is displayed at the National Portrait Gallery, London, Room 31.





Figure 11. Stained Glass and ACD Portrait

engaged in a mainstream curriculum of mathematics, science, English, art, history, and technology. Also, students are able to receive assistance provided by specialists for science, physical education, and design technology at other local school locations. The curriculum is demanding, but the teaching of its content is accomplished by inviting students to express their ideas, meeting individual academic levels, and providing meaningful lessons, opportunities, and experiences.

As we walked the hallway we came upon a group of students accompanied by a dog. These students engaged eagerly with us and were proud to show us the



Figure 12. Steps to Second Floor

newsletter that was being prepared for publication. The dog seemed to be one

of the group and no mention of him was made by the students. We were impressed with the casual atmosphere and a sense of responsibility and pride that the students exhibited.

The school was evaluated in 2016, and a report assembled by the Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).<sup>8</sup> Among the findings were that its teachers engage students by developing lessons that are practical and best meet the needs and abilities of the students in subject-areas such as science, drama, and geography. The curriculum is designed to meet the diverse needs of the students using differentiated instruction. Also noted were individual therapies included within the curriculum and individualized student educational plans designed to provide opportunities for students to achieve their goals in both life and learning skills.

We were curious when we came upon a large representation of Sherlock Holmes on a bulletin board and a display entitled "The House System." The House System represents a core value of the school. The student body places "Pay it Forward" as a key responsibility for each individual and the expected ripple effect of good can truly make a social change. "Paying it Forward" is the act of repaying good deeds that have been done to them. Each House is named after the three original students: Harmon House, Parson House, and Sullivan House. Students earn merit points

8. Ofsted, *Raising Standards, Improving Lives Report*, June 14-16, 2016.

from their peers when they exhibit and model good conduct and take on social responsibilities in their daily interactions with other students, teachers, and staff members. There are also House competitions among students in areas from Poetry to Sports throughout the year, reflecting the goals for shared meaning, a caring attitude, and respect for one another.

Additionally, we noted that etched on the windows are quotations taken from the Sherlock Holmes stories. One of the more recognizable phrases cited in six stories from the Canon reads: "eliminate

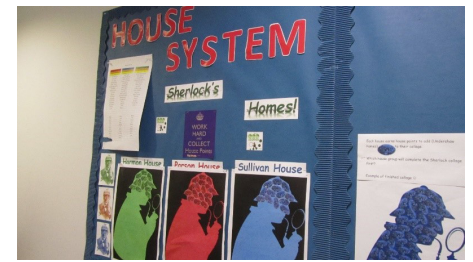


Figure 13. The House System

the impossible."<sup>9</sup> The inspiration for the etchings came from Mark Goodchild, the school's architect, and quotations were selected by members of the DFN Charitable Foundation who own the building.<sup>10</sup>

Upon returning from our tour we again met Melissa in her office, the same room that was once a study occupied by Conan Doyle. One could not resist sitting in the chair behind the desk, looking out the window onto the grounds, and imagining the thoughts that might have been in Conan Doyle's mind as he wrote his stories.

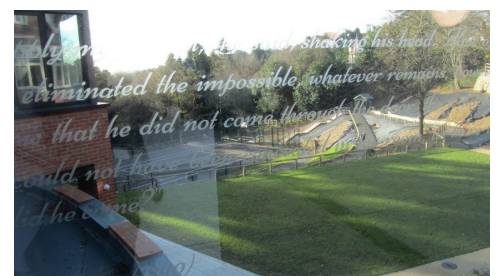


Figure 14. Etching on the window

In this study, there is also a hidden door that was discovered during the renovation. It now leads to nowhere. Such a door evokes questions and provides a setting for a mystery to be solved.

9. *The Sign of Four*, "The Beryl Coronet," "The Blenheim Soldier," "The Bruce-Partington Plans," "The Priory School," "Silver Blaze."

10. David Forbes-Nixon and the board of the DFN Charitable Foundation.





Figure 15. ACD's Study with Melissa Grigsby

booklet with these photographs, and sent them to Mr. Hyett. The students from both schools are studying stories of the Canon, and exchanging email and live visual communications, while learning about each other's hobbies and interests.

It is fitting that a school has evolved within the surroundings that once were visited by many literary luminaries, one of whom was J. M. Barrie, Conan Doyle's friend and author of *Peter Pan*, displaying a fantasy of curiosity and imagination. This sense of being and self-worth practiced daily by the students gives credence to Sherlock Holmes's pronouncement "Beacons of the future!"

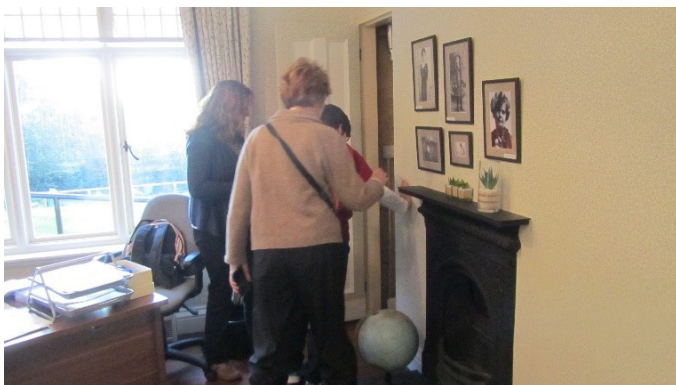


Figure 16. Secret door in ACD's Study?

This historical literary home, once scheduled for demolition, is now a thriving school with students who are learning about A. Conan Doyle, his writings, and the residence's past. At the school's grand opening on September 9, 2016, Richard Doyle, great-nephew of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, representing the Conan Doyle Estate, and Mayor Sahran Abeysundara of Haslemere were invited to unveil the blue plaque commemorating the home of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. This plaque is prominently displayed on the school's outside wall.

Upon returning from England, I visited Mrs. Carlisle's class and shared photographs of our visit to Undershaw in 2012 and its conversion to Stepping Stones School in 2016. Students from Mrs. Carlisle's class are engaging in the cross-cultural literacy project with Mr. Nicholas Hyett, Head of Curriculum – Primary/Upper School.

Her students' correspondence with Mr. Hyett resulted in an exchange of messages and photographs. Mr. Hyett sent photographs to Mrs. Carlisle's students of Undershaw and Stepping Stones School. Two students, Piper and Milena, prepared a report on the life of Conan Doyle as a



Figure 17.  
Richard Doyle and Mayor Sahran Abeysundara  
Photo Courtesy of Jean Upton



Figure 18.  
Photograph taken on our visit to  
Stepping Stones School



Figure 19.  
Comparing visit to Undershaw  
in 2012 with that of 2016

## SOURCES\*

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\*All photographs with the exception of those credited to others were taken by my wife and me.