

## Ruth Ash

Ruth was the daughter of Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, the founders of Dartington Hall. Born in 1926, a year after Leonard and Dorothy were married and shortly after they purchased the Dartington Hall estate, Ruth was largely in the care of a nanny/governess and two nursery maids. She saw little of her parents, who were busy establishing Dartington or travelling or entertaining luminaries involved in the arts, crafts, agriculture and politics.



Later, Ruth was a boarder at Foxhole (the senior school at Dartington Hall) and revelled in the freedom offered there. At the outbreak of World War II Ruth was on holiday in the USA and she stayed in New York with her brother, William, and their governess, for the duration of the war. Having completed her education at Sarah Lawrence College and developed an abiding love of music, Ruth returned to Dartington in 1946.

Ruth married Maurice Ash in 1947. Their first home was at Dartington and it was here that Ruth began the work she would later take further: spinning, dyeing and weaving. Ruth and Maurice moved to a farm in Essex in 1950 and for the next twelve years Ruth was contentedly busy: creating a lovely garden, establishing a nursery school and raising their three daughters, and a son who died at a young age.

Ruth and Maurice bought Sharpham House and estate in 1962. Ruth again created a beautiful garden and took up weaving once more. She also became actively involved in The Dartington Hall Trust: as a member of the board of Trustees, as Chair of the Gardens Committee and as a devoted member of the Dartington Community Choir. Ruth had many talents but had little confidence in her abilities and always, at Dartington, felt herself in the shadow of her parents. She probably never realised how much, in her own right, the people of Dartington loved and respected her.

In the 1980s, their daughters having flown the nest, Ruth and Maurice wrestled with the dilemma of what to do with an historic house and 550 acres of land, which none of their daughters were able or willing to continue running. In 1982 Ruth endowed the Sharpham Trust as an educational charity and a programme of seminars and activities was developed.

It would be true to say that the activities of the Sharpham Trust were more Maurice's interest than Ruth's. She was more content to pursue her own interests and talents, which were rich and varied, and included her teaching spinning, dyeing and weaving wool at local adult education classes. Ruth was always drawn to the natural world, being a knowledgeable gardener, a creative flower arranger and a keen birdwatcher – she was always the first to spot Sharpham's regular and seasonal visitor, a lone osprey. She was also very interested in the natural health movement and was a co-founder of the Totnes Natural Health Centre. Her daughters were very willing guinea pigs during her training to become a practising reflexologist.

In 1985 Ruth became ill with motor neurone disease and died, aged 60, in 1986. Maurice continued to live in Sharpham House until his death in 2003.