



## SHAW'S CORNER

AYOT ST. LAWRENCE · HERTFORDSHIRE

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PRICE 3D.



SMOKING IS NOT ALLOWED

Photograph by Studio Lisa

1952

## SHAW'S CORNER

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW was fifty, and had been married eight years, when (in 1906) he came to live in The New Rectory at Ayot St. Lawrence, renaming it Shaw's Corner. In the same year *The Doctor's Dilemma* was first performed. *Arms and the Man*, *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, *John Bull's Other Island* and *Candida* had already established Shaw as a leading playwright in England and America. *Pygmalion*, *Man and Superman*, *Heartbreak House*, *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan* were still to come.

At Ayot St. Lawrence there is a tombstone to 'Mary Anne South. Born 1825. Died 1895.' 'Her time was short' the stone further records, no doubt measuring some seventy years in terms of eternity. The discovery of this tombstone—or so the story goes and it is apparently a true one—prompted the dramatist to buy The Old Vicarage, envisaging in a parish so favourable to longevity a full and fruitful old age. He was not deceived. Ceaselessly active, and creative to the last, he lived at Shaw's Corner until the age of ninety-four and died there in November 1950.

Shaw's Corner was left to The National Trust in 1944, and the rooms where the dramatist worked and lived are now preserved for the nation.

The visitor on entering finds himself in the HALL. Shaw's famous hats, a noble collection, hang here above his glove box and his sticks. His attachment to his hats was unshakable. The imposing wide-brimmed fawn felt remained with him for sixty years, and an old hat of his housekeeper's achieves unorthodox distinction beneath his black bee-keeper's veil. To the left is the basket chair where he sat every morning to put on his shoes before going out. Against the wall is his Bechstein piano. After the drama, music was the branch of the arts that meant most to Shaw, and it was under the pseudonym of Corno di Bassetto that in 1888 he began his literary career as the brilliant and provocative music critic on *The Star*. Over half a century later, when air-raid sirens wailed over Ayot, Shaw would often sit down at this piano and sing Italian opera to his own accompaniment. Near the piano hangs

the picture by his friend Dame Laura Knight depicting the front row of the stalls on a First Night.

The STUDY was Shaw's workroom, where at the large encumbered desk before the window he sat down to write, with extreme regularity, at about 10.15 every morning. His desk remains exactly as he left it with his pens and gear, and the pocket dictionaries—French, German and Italian—and the tiny biographical and historical dictionary, which he used for immediate reference. On one side of his desk hangs a photograph of his friend, Philip Wicksteed, whose economic ideas at one time considerably influenced Shaw; on the other a photograph of William Morris, whom Shaw described as 'four great men rolled into one', and whose beautiful daughter, May Morris, he so much admired. Below the photograph of William Morris is a reading desk on which lies the record of the award of the Nobel Prize to Shaw in 1925, the master key of the Festival Theatre, Malvern, and the bronze medal that he received from the Irish Academy of Letters in 1934. The smaller desk on the left of his own was reserved for his secretary, Miss Patch. Against the bookshelves which formed his compact working library stand photographs of Gene Tunney, whom he knew well, and of his fellow-dramatist, Sean O'Casey with his family. The filing cabinets on the left are arranged with meticulous care, and one drawer bears the characteristically Shavian label 'Keys and Contraptions'. Shaw was a competent and enthusiastic photographer and for over fifty years he was inseparable from his cameras. Two of them are to be seen, where he always kept them, on top of one of the filing cabinets.

At the head of the couch, with the small green neck-rest, where he sometimes lay down, hang an original cartoon by Bernard Partridge of Shaw rehearsing *Arms and the Man* at the Avenue Theatre in 1894 (a drawing associated with Aubrey Beardsley's poster, dated 1894, for the Avenue Theatre, which hangs on the left of the door), and a number of photographs with interesting associations. Among the latter are photographs of James Barrie and Sidney Webb; photographs of two of his friends and compatriots, W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, whom Shaw referred to as 'the Irish Molière'; and a surprising group of Lord Howard de

Walden, William Archer, Barrie, Chesterton and Shaw dressed as cowboys, when acting in an incomplete film by Barrie. It is appropriate that both William Archer, the dramatic critic, and Sidney Webb should hang on Shaw's study wall. With Granville-Barker, they were perhaps his closest friends, and it was William Archer who in 1885, through his influence with *The Pall Mall Gazette*, got Shaw his first work as a journalist.

The DRAWING ROOM, next to the Study, was very much Mrs. Shaw's room, and her portrait by G. A. Sartorio, painted in Rome three years before her marriage, hangs over the chimney-piece. After her death in 1943 it was very little used by Shaw except when he had visitors. On the chimney-piece are a statuette of Joan of Arc, the 'Oscar' awarded for *Pygmalion* as the best film of 1938, and a Staffordshire figure of Shakespeare which Shaw bought in a curio shop at the seaside. The embroidered cushion lying on the armchair beyond is worked, unexpectedly enough, with the Shaw arms and motto *Te Ipsum Nosce*. In the bay window at the far end of the room are three bronzes by Prince Paul Troubetskoy. The centre bronze represents Shaw in 1926, while that on the left is of Rodin. In front of a small stool is a marble of Shaw's hand by Sigmund Strobl. On the white bookcase is a bronze bust of Shaw for which he sat to Rodin daily at Meudon when Rilke was there as the sculptor's secretary. Another head by Rodin stands on top of the lacquer secretaire. The landscapes on the walls are by Sartorio.

DINING ROOM. Shaw used this room a good deal. His habit of reading with his lunch—he was a vegetarian—sometimes protracted the meal for as long as two hours, and in the evening after an early dinner at 7.30 he would sit in the armchair by the fire, again reading or listening to the wireless, until he went to bed. This, in his last years, was rarely before midnight or one o'clock in the morning.

Links with Shaw's early life are the views of Dublin on the walls and the framed parchments recording him a Freeman of Dublin and St. Pancras. He was a vestryman of St. Pancras in 1897 and played an active part in the Town Council at the turn of the century. The magnificent oil portrait is by Augustus John, and the

charcoal drawing is by Leon de Smet. The photographs on the chimneypiece, interesting since so representative of Shaw's sympathies, represent from left to right Gandhi, Djerdjinsky (one of the early Bolsheviks), Lenin, Stalin, Granville-Barker, 33 Synge Street, Dublin (Shaw's birthplace), and Ibsen, whose photograph Shaw sent away to be framed just before his last illness. It was in this room that he died the day after the picture returned.

From the Dining Room the visitor passes into the GARDEN. The animal figures on the terrace are by Prince Troubetskoy, and the statue of St. Joan in the lower part of the garden by Clare Winsten. Winter and summer, and in all but the most violent weather, Shaw used to take a short walk soon after five o'clock in the evening, either round his garden or in the direction of the village. In the summer he also wrote a great deal at the bottom of the garden in the revolving summer-house. There, where he could find complete quiet, safe alike from the interruptions of friends and admirers, the wicker chair in which he worked is still pulled up to the flap-table, the unpretentious tools and accessories of a writer's trade are spread out, and the naked foolscap still seems to await the imprint of that brilliant and tireless mind.

R. F.





## ADMISSION

Open to the public on Wednesdays to Saturdays  
inclusive 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. and on Sundays  
11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Admission 2s. Members of The National Trust free.