

Arthur Eric Rowton Gill (1882–1940)

David Jones (1895–1974)

Piggotts, Near North Dean, High Wycombe HP14 4NF

The artists

Eric Gill was one of the artists who were ‘pioneers of modern British sculpture’, revolutionising their field ‘in a burst of daring creativity’ in the years before the First World War (Cork). To this Gill added a strong religious ethic, operating within Catholic communities that he himself founded, as well as being notorious for his strong sexual appetites and unfettered sexual exploration. He was often asked to speak to left-wing gatherings in the years leading up to the Second World War.

For much of his life Gill lived as part of an artistic community, first at Ditchling in Sussex, then Capel-y-ffin in Wales, and he spent the last 12 years of his life at Piggott’s Farmhouse (often called ‘Piggotts’). The community included his wife, Ethel Moore (1876–1961), whom he married in 1904, his three daughters and their partners, an adopted son, grandchildren, and a range of assistants and apprentices.

Some principal works: Stations of the Cross for Westminster Abbey; ‘Prospero and Ariel’ for BBC Broadcasting House (1932); ‘Creation of Adam’ sculpture at the League of Nations building in Geneva (1938); design of ‘Gill Sans’, ‘Perpetua’ and other typefaces; decorations for Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Four Gospels* (1931), published by his Golden Cockerel Press; and *Twenty-five Nudes* (collected wood engravings (MacCarthy; V&A), the Hague and Gill Press (at Piggotts with son-in-law René Hague) (Berona).

The house

Piggotts House (Grade II), as it is called in the HE List, dates from the 18th century. It is situated on the beech-ringed Piggott’s Hill in the Chilterns near North Dean, a hamlet 6km (3.75 miles) north of High Wycombe and the same distance south-east of Princes Risborough. It is a former farmhouse reached up a single track on a wooded south-facing slope above one of the valleys leading south-eastwards towards Hughenden. Gill bought the farm, which included 16 acres (6.5ha) of grassland and a one-acre orchard, for £1750 and moved with his family on 11 October 1928 from the remote Capel-y-ffin (Breconshire). He created what he called ‘a cell of good living’. He continued to live and work there until his death from lung cancer on 17 November 1940 at Harefield Hospital (where the Brompton Chest Hospital had been evacuated) (MacCarthy).

Piggotts comprises farm buildings ranged round a rectangular courtyard (this was muddy in Gill’s day but today is grass) (stoneletters.net/), its longer axis orientated north north-east/south-west with the farmhouse at the south-eastern corner. There are high barns to east and west and a single-storey range across the northern side. The 1874 25” OS shows all the current enclosing buildings as well as a long enclosure extending to the south-west, dotted with trees of orchard type, and two smaller featureless rectangles immediately south of the farmhouse.

The brick pigsties in the centre of the courtyard did not exist before c.1925. Gill and his family occupied the farmhouse; one of the barns was used as Gill’s stone workshop, part of the house was

used as the engraving workshop. the single-storey range as a printing press and the former dairy as a chapel (HE List entry).

The garden

It is assumed that the Gills made use of the south-western enclosure as a garden – some 100m long and max 50m wide. Mary Ethel, his wife, used to visit the Chelsea Flower Show and a published photograph shows the family, friends and collaborators enjoying tea in the garden (MacCarthy). The garden was used for growing flowers and vegetables.

There is a story of Anthony Foster (one of Gill's assistants in the 1930s) singing 'Green grow the rushes-o' while flinging his urine as collected in a jam jar from his window on to his mushrooms below (MacCarthy).

Google Earth shows the southern part of the south-western area currently cultivated for vegetables with trees closer to the farm building and fringing the garden immediately south of the farmhouse.

Many of Gill's free-standing illustrations and book illustrations and decorations feature stylised plants and vegetation, for instance his iterations featuring 'La Belle Sauvage' and his margin decorations for editions of Chaucer as published by his Golden Cockerel Press.

David Jones was a painter and one of the first-generation of British modernist poets. As a painter he worked chiefly in watercolour, painting portraits and animal, landscape, legendary and religious subjects. He was also a wood engraver and designer of inscriptions. As a writer he was considered by T.S. Eliot to be of major importance, and his work *The Anathemata* was considered by W.H. Auden to be the best long poem written in English in the 20th century. His inspiration came from his Christian beliefs and Welsh heritage (Wikipedia).

He worked with Gill in Ditchling and later visited Capel-y-ffin. In 1922 he became engaged to Gill's daughter, Petra, a skilled weaver, but the engagement was called off after three years (BBC). He was a regular visitor to Pigotts, often staying for months at a time, and his drawings and paintings provide a record of the garden.

Music Camp

Physicist and musician Bernard Wheeler Robinson moved to Pigotts in 1963 and set up 'Music Camp' (a movement begun in the 1920s) there in 1966. Following his death in 1997 the camp has since been run by his son, Nick.

Music Camp is a place where musicians congregate to explore a wide range of music, living simply and occupying additional buildings for communal activities, that the 'Campers' have themselves erected round the buildings of the original farm courtyard largely from second-hand materials. These are principally a performance room and a sitting room, both attached to the outside of the barn on the east side of the farm quadrangle which is used for dining.

See also separate report on Anthony Foster ('B' list).

References

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Photographs of Pigotts from the early 1990s



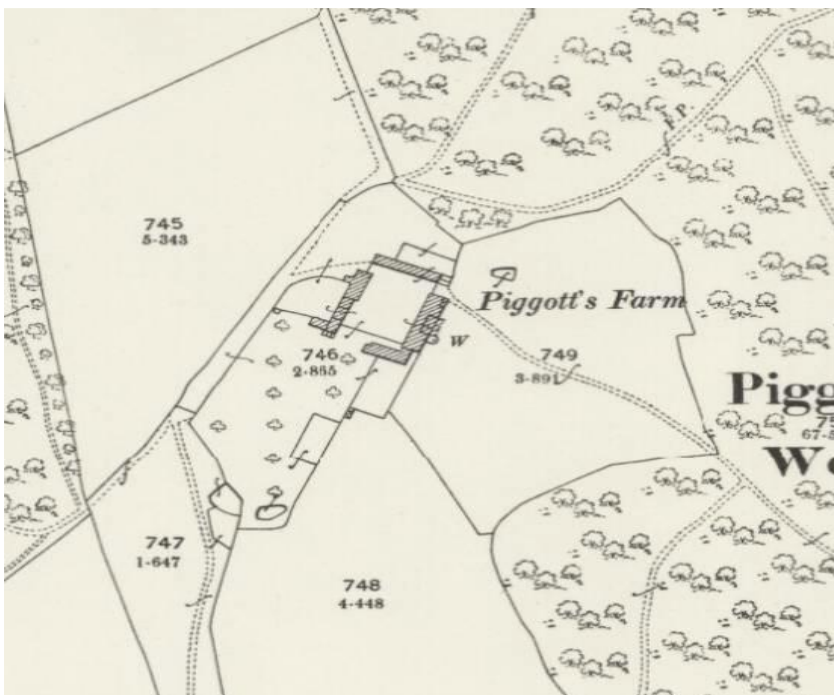
The farmhouse from its private garden to the south



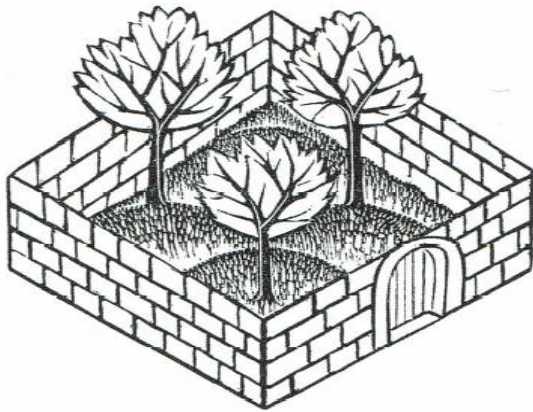
The west side of the farm courtyard looking south



Pencil sketch of the kitchen garden at Piggotts, David Jones (Buckinghamshire County Museum)



Piggott's Farm: 2nd edn OS surveyed 1874 Revised 1897 Published 1898



ERIC GILL: A Garden enclosed



55 The Knight's Tale
1928
The Canterbury Tales

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