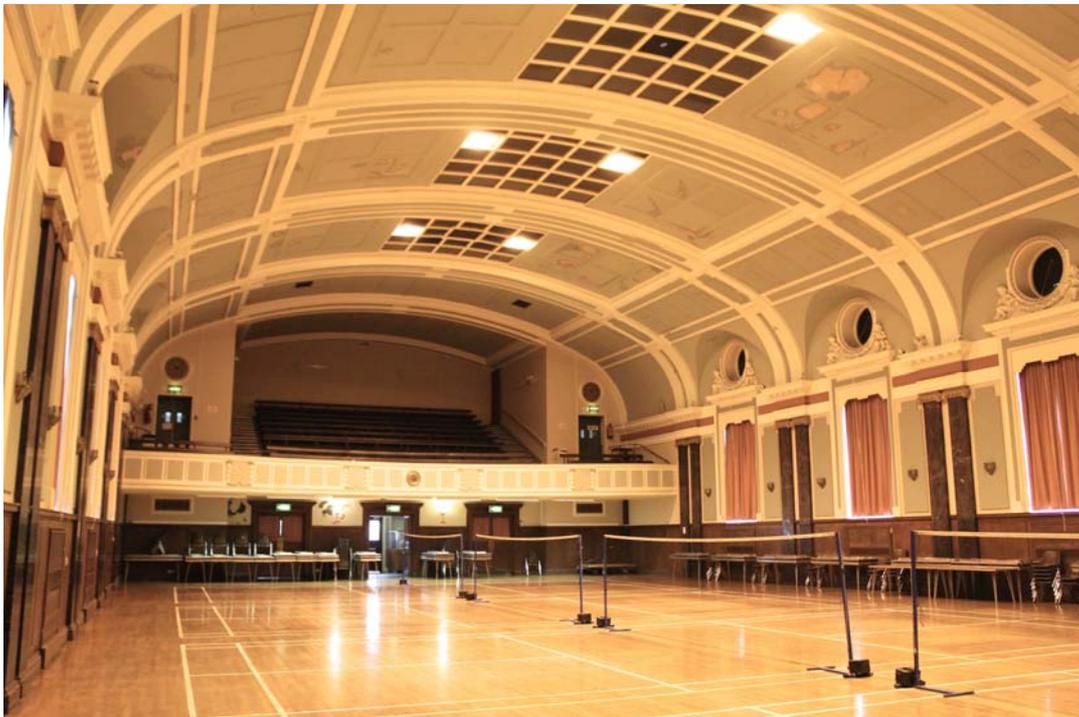


Torquay: In the Footsteps of Rudolf Steiner

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"We're getting wonderful lectures, and interesting surroundings with many traditions" (Ita Wegman, 1924, in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1061).



Torquay Town Hall interior (photo: J Paull).

Rudolf Steiner was clearly in a rather mischievous mood when he wound up his Summer School in Torquay, England in 1924. His wry reflection on the insalubrious venue, the Torquay Town Hall, was that:

"... some of the strength that lies in our friends' will to organise such gatherings ... has even been capable of paralysing the by no means occultly sympathetic or artistically inspiring atmosphere of this hall, for we have had no trouble in putting up with it" (22 August 1924, Torquay, in Steiner, 1998, p.281).

Steiner declared that the very fact that they had "no trouble putting up" with the Torquay Town Hall was "a kind of indirect proof - as they say in mathematics - of how very successful this event has been" (p.281).

In a similar vein, Steiner gently chastised friends absent from some of the eurythmy performances:

"I had the distinct impression that the physical bodies of anthroposophical friends were missing. Perhaps, I thought, this was a test to see whether one was capable of looking out for souls and spirits instead. So I looked around the hall for the spirits of our anthroposophical friends, and indeed found many - who were not there, despite the fact that they had been present at the lectures. Well, no doubt it was an occult exercise challenging us to prove that those who use occult sight can see those who are not there. As you see, I regard the matter entirely from an occult standpoint, and not from the obvious one!" (p.282).

The International Summer School of the Anthroposophical Society was held at Torquay over twelve days (11-22 August, 1924). Torquay is a seaside resort town, 90 km (55 miles) due south of London. The region is billed as the 'English Riviera'. There were about 200 attendees (Torbay Herald, 1924a). Many were British, there was a sizeable contingent from Dornach, Switzerland, and at least two delegates were from Italy (Rosa Genoni and her daughter Fanny Podreider).

Steiner delivered three series of lectures - all in German. Each lecture series was later published in English, translated from shorthand transcriptions. In the mornings, Steiner delivered the lecture series: 'True and False Paths of Spiritual Investigation' (11 lectures) (Steiner, 1924f). He began with the proposition that "The World is Maya [illusion]" (p.xv). One reporter described proceedings as "baffling" (Torbay Herald, 1924d).

In the early afternoons, Steiner delivered the education series of lectures (7 lectures), later published as 'The Kingdom of Childhood' (Steiner, 1924c):

"I am endeavouring to give a kind of Training Course to the teachers of the school that is being formed in England after the pattern of the Waldorf School. I try to throw light upon the attitude necessary for teachers and educators, and upon the frame of mind indispensable to the exercise of the art of education" (Steiner, 1924d, p.82).

Next was the lecture series for members (6 lectures). "I spoke of the way in which human beings, on passing through repeated earth-lives, carry over the results of one epoch of history into another" (Steiner, 1924d, p.82). These lectures are published as 'Cosmic Christianity - Karma' (Steiner, 1924b). One journalist described Steiner as giving a "fascinating peep" into "life after death" (Torbay Herald, 1924b).

In addition to these three series of lectures, Steiner squeezed into his hectic schedule some lectures of the First Class. These lessons were for anthroposophists of good standing who had applied in writing to Steiner to join the (then new) School of Spiritual Science. The First Class lecture course (26 lectures) was delivered in Dornach beginning early in 1924 (Paull, 2016).

There were also five eurythmy performances scheduled for Torquay (Steiner, 1924d). Twenty trained eurythmists along with "a special orchestra" had travelled from Dornach, Switzerland (Torbay Herald, 1924a). One newspaper account reported that:

"The large audience was thrilled with the wondrous beauty of the spectacle - the girl dancers, attired in soft but many-coloured draperies, dancing gracefully, first to the strains of the small orchestra and then to recitation [by Marie Steiner], giving a hint of the spirit world - and the wonderful harmonizing effect provided by the delightful lighting effects" (Western Morning News, 1924).

The Torbay Herald reported "Girls in Gorgeous Dresses" and "It is difficult to describe the impressions gained at the performance. The soul is stirred beyond measure, and in this Dr. Rudolf Steiner partially achieves his object" (Torbay Herald, 1924c).

Eleanor Merry, an organiser of the event, recalled:

"There was a very large Town Hall, and the accommodation it provided was excellent. We divided the big ballroom into two. In one half we had comfortable

chairs in which we could really rest, and an exhibition of paintings, and in the other half we had the lectures” (1987, in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1034).

Marie Savitch’s memories of Torquay are less favourable:

“The performances and lectures took place in an ugly, tasteless building ... What was chiefly available was a single big hall. Everything was inside it: rehearsals, lectures, bookstall, discussions! Everything disrupted everything else! The rehearsals were noisy, as the bookstall had to be kept open and people were going in and out ... During the eurhythmy performances half the audience went for a swim, as performances had been arranged at the best swimming time! Everything was difficult!”(1965, in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1057).



Torquay Town Hall, exterior (photo: J Paull).

The critics of the venue had a point. The Torquay hall is a drab concrete-grey squat pile, set right on the street, with neither aspect nor location to brag of. It is more work-horse than glamour venue. It served as a War Hospital for recuperating soldiers in WW1 (British Red Cross, nd) and for training air crew in WW2. English halls that had hosted Steiner previously, included the Hippodrome at Stratford-on-Avon, the beautiful Arlosh Hall of Manchester College, Oxford, and the grand dining hall of Keble College, Oxford (Paull, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). The Torquay Town Hall is a much more modest affair.

On the Sunday of the Summer School (17 August), into this punishing schedule of lectures and performances, Steiner injected a side trip by car to Tintagel, site of King Arthur legend, on the Cornwall coast (Paull, 2012b). It is a location offering spectacular views along the rugged coast and out across the Atlantic Ocean, and, apparently for Steiner, glimpses of Arthurian derring-do of days past.

The press reported that the lectures were “translated by a Cambridge graduate whose mother was an Australian and father a Carpathian or German” (Torbay Herald, 1924a). Steiner singled out his translator for praise:

"I thank out dear friend [George] Kaufmann, who has been so visible beside me all the time in making sure in the most self-effacing and accurate way what I have had to say could be adequately understood" (1998, p.282).

Torquay was "the last trip by Rudolf Steiner in this life on earth" (Wachsmuth, 1989, p.563). This was just two months after the Agriculture Course at Koberwitz. There were no lectures at Torquay devoted to agriculture. However, key figures that would shape the future of biodynamics were together at Torquay and at the side trip to Tintagel (Paull, 2012a). There were at least two attendees from Koberwitz; Dr Guenther Wachsmuth, who would write the Preface to the first English translation of the Agriculture Course (Steiner, 1924a), and Dr Elizabeth Vreede whom Steiner nominated at Koberwitz to "give expert assistance from the Goetheanum in the guiding of the experiments" (Steiner, 1924e, p.10). There was George Kaufmann who would be the first translator of the Agriculture Course (Steiner, 1924a). There was Eleanor Merry, who has been described as "one of the founder members" of "the Biodynamic Movement" in Britain (Mier, 1956, p.1). And there was Marna Pease who would be a founder and President of Britain's Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation and who typed the numbered issues of Kaufmann's English translation of the Agriculture Course which were issued in typescript to Anglo members of the Experimental Circle (Mier, 1947).

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Advertisement for the Victoria and Albert Hotel (1931).

Steiner stayed at the Victoria & Albert (V&A) which was described as "Torquay's most comfortable first-class hotel". It is less than 700 metres walk to the Town Hall. The hotel bragged of "Luxurious hot and cold water basins in every bedroom". The hotel is now 'TLH Victoria Hotel'. Steiner brought his own cook who used the hotel's kitchen to prepare his special meals. By this time, Steiner was not eating in public and he would have taken all his meals in his own suite. He was struggling with his digestion since the poisoning episode at the start of the year

Dr Ita Wegman, Steiner's doctor, colleague and confidante, commented: "Three lectures every day; I find it far too many, and fear it won't do the Doctor any good. Next year we want to arrange things quite differently" (11 August 1924, Torquay, in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1038).

The Torquay Summer School proceeded despite Steiner's ill health. "Steiner was of course pretty ill at the time. I remember him getting onto the platform, not actually tottering but looking pretty weak and white. And then he lectured himself into vigour and health" (Owen Barfield in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1068).

Another delegate recalled: "it was clear to us all that Rudolf Steiner was seriously ill. But when he spoke we forgot it, for the fire of the spirit which burned within him could overcome, for the time, all physical weakness. His voice was strong and eager, and he seemed full of vigour" (Helen Fox in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1047)

Steiner was on a mission and he carried on stoically: "He did not allow anything of his pain to be known by people around him, and made no mention of it" (Guenther Wachsmuth in Villeneuve, 2004, p.1047)

Steiner's bout of ill health dated from 1 January 1924. At a gathering for eurythmists at Dornach, Steiner stumbled declaring: "I have been poisoned" (Prokofieff, 2014, p.728). His health never recovered from this blow. He struggled on through 1924, maintaining a punishing work schedule of 421 lectures and travel. That travel included the Agriculture Course at Koberwitz (Kobierzyce), as well as visits to Prague, Stuttgart, Paris, and Arnhem (Netherlands). After Torquay there was no more travel. After 28 September 1924 there were no more lectures. Steiner retreated to his sick bed. He passed away on 30 March, 1925.

As Steiner observed at Torquay: "Many things that might still have been said will have to be saved up for some future time" (22 August 1924, Torquay, in Steiner, 1998, p.283).



Victoria & Albert Hotel, Torquay, exterior (photo: J Paull).

Acknowledgements

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