

# M340 Design for conversion of The Mystery House

## Introduction

In 1920 Mackintosh made sketch plans of this early 20th-century house with a view to its use by the Arts League of Service, probably as artists' studios. Nothing came of the scheme.

**Authorship:** Mackintosh's involvement is recorded in his diary and sketchbook.

**Alternative names:** Renaissance House.

**Alternative addresses:** Oakley Street

**Status:** Mackintosh's proposals apparently not carried out; building demolished

**Grid reference:** TQ 27254 77822

## Chronology

### 1920

18 February: Mackintosh draws a plan of the ground and first floors of the Mystery House in his Sketcher's Notebook. A plan of the second and third floors on the next page may be of the same date. <sup>1</sup>

19 February: Mackintosh records a visit to the Mystery House in his diary. <sup>2</sup>

27 March: Mackintosh meets Ana Berry, J. D. Fergusson and Margaret Morris at the Mystery House and shows them over the building, 'with a view to the Arts League of Service acquiring the property for their purposes.' <sup>3</sup>

April: Mackintosh draws a plan of the Mystery House in his Sketcher's Notebook. <sup>4</sup>

18 May: Mackintosh borrows plans of the Mystery House from 'Messrs Winn, 32 Lowndes Street'. <sup>5</sup>

20 May: Mackintosh visits the Mystery House and records in his diary: 'made survey from plans and took measurements'. <sup>6</sup>

20 December: Mackintosh records in his diary that he is 'to proceed with plans for Mystery House'. <sup>7</sup>

## Description

### Site

In 1920, Mackintosh became involved with several building schemes for a site in Chelsea bounded by Glebe Place, Oakley Street and Upper Cheyne Row. The site had been owned until his death in 1912 by the architect and collector Dr John Samuel Phené. <sup>1</sup> It had been the garden of Old Cheyne House, a dilapidated 18th-century dwelling that still stood at its W. end. Along the N. edge, facing Glebe Place, were some cottages, and at the E. end, on the corner of Oakley Street and Upper Cheyne Row, was the eccentric Mystery House.

Begun by Dr Phené in 1901, the Mystery House was intended as a re-embodiment – or 'renaissance', as it said over the door – of the Chateau de Savenay on the Loire, a demolished mansion once owned by his family. <sup>2</sup> It was encrusted with ornament, colourfully painted and gilded.

The Mystery House had been offered for sale by Messrs Tyler & Co. in November 1913 and again in July 1914. <sup>3</sup> It is not clear if it found a buyer at that time, but in October 1919 it was on the market again through Messrs E. D. Winn & Co., with the suggestion that it was suitable for conversion into flats. It was offered on a 74-year lease for £2500, with an annual ground rent of £13. <sup>4</sup> It was probably at this point that it came to the attention of the Arts League of Service.

### Client

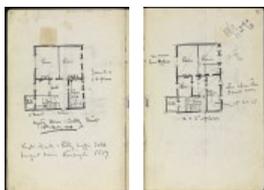
The League was a voluntary organisation established in 1919, 'To bring the Arts into Everyday Life'. <sup>5</sup> Its moving force was a dynamic South American

woman named Ana Berry, and among its supporters were the Mackintoshes' friends, the painter J. D. Fergusson and his partner, the dancer Margaret Morris.

One of the League's concerns was the shortage of artists' studios in post-First World War London, and at a meeting in May 1919, Miss Berry outlined an ambitious plan to build a block of studios in Chelsea. <sup>6</sup> Two months later, a notice appeared in *The Times* inviting 'artists and writers who have been, or are being, ejected from their studios or houses' to contact the League. <sup>7</sup> While still pursuing the idea of a new building, Miss Berry seems to have hit on the idea of converting the Mystery House into studios, and Mackintosh was brought in to see how this might be done.

## Mackintosh's involvement

Mackintosh visited the Mystery House in mid February 1920 and made sketch plans. <sup>8</sup> Then, on 27 March, he met Miss Berry, J. D. Fergusson and Margaret Morris on site, and showed them over the building 'with a view to the Arts League of Service acquiring the property for their purposes.' <sup>9</sup>



It was probably to the Mystery House that the *Athenaeum* referred on 9 April, when it reported with approval a scheme being developed by the League, 'by which one or two large houses should be bought for the sole purpose of providing artists with accommodation and thus establishing the nucleus of an artists' quarter in London, whence they cannot be evicted by persons with a larger bank balance, but infinitely less claim on the consideration of a civilised community.' <sup>10</sup>

In April Mackintosh made a further sketch of the house, and on 18 May he borrowed plans from Messrs Winn, with the help of which he carried out a survey of the building on 20 May and took measurements. <sup>11</sup>



On 20 December he noted in his diary that he was to 'proceed with plans for Mystery House & get grant if possible', and on 3 January 1921 he gave the key to Miss Berry, but after this, nothing more is recorded. <sup>12</sup>

In the meantime he had taken on a number of architectural projects for other parts of the Chelsea site: a large block of studios and studio flats for the League on the site of Old Cheyne House; a studio-house for Arthur Cadogan Blunt, a studio-house for Harold Squire and a building containing studios for Francis Derwent Wood, all in Glebe Place; and a second studio block for the League, also in Glebe Place. He had also designed a theatre for Margaret Morris, which was almost certainly intended for part of the same site. Except for Harold Squire's studio, which was built in a much simpler form than Mackintosh had originally envisaged, none of these schemes got off the drawing board.

## People

### Clients:

- Arts League of Service
- Ana Berry

### Other:

- Margaret Morris

## Job Book

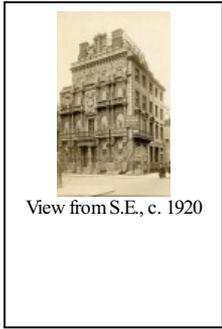
The job books of Honeyman & Keppie (later Honeyman, Keppie & Mackintosh) are now held by The Hunterian, University of Glasgow and include four volumes related to the Mackintosh period. The books were used by the firm to keep a project-by-project, day-by-day record of contractors, suppliers and expenditure. The name of a project and/or client is usually at the top of the left-hand page, followed by information about tradesmen who tendered. The name of the measurer (quantity surveyor) is usually at the top of the right-hand page, followed by information about payments to contractors and suppliers. All of the data for M340 is entered in the tables below.

Page numbering is not consistent in the job books. Sometimes a single number refers to a double-page spread and sometimes each page is individually numbered. Here, each image of a double-page spread is identified by the number given at the top of the left-hand page. (Images of all of the pages from the four job books can be found at [Browse Job Books](#), [Visit Book and Cash Book](#).)

The following information about M340 has been extracted from the job books:

# Documents

## Images



## Bibliography

### Published

- Alan Crawford, 'Lost and found: architectural projects after Glasgow', in Pamela Robertson, ed., *C. R. Mackintosh: The Chelsea Years, 1915–1923*, exhibition catalogue, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, 1994, pp. 8–9
- Pamela Reekie, 'The Chelsea Years', in *Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society Newsletter*, 20, Autumn 1978
- *Athenaeum*, no. 4693, 9 April 1920, pp. 469–70

### Unpublished

- The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408

### Notes:

- 1: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: GLAHA 53015/50 (M340-001).
- 2: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 3: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 4: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: GLAHA 53015/48 (M340-003).
- 5: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 6: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 7: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 8: Alan Crawford, 'Lost and found: architectural projects after Glasgow', in Pamela Robertson, ed., *C. R. Mackintosh: The Chelsea Years, 1915–1923*, exhibition catalogue, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, 1994, pp. 8–9.
- 9: Thea Holme, *Chelsea*, London: Hamilton, 1972, pp. 241–2.
- 10: *The Times*, 1 November 1913, p. 14; Sale Particulars, 8 July 1914, Kensington Central Library.
- 11: *The Times*, 14 October 1919, p. 7.
- 12: Eleanor Elder, *Travelling Players: The Story of the Arts League of Service*, London: Frederick Muller, 1939, pp. 1–7.
- 13: Eleanor Elder, *Travelling Players: The Story of the Arts League of Service*, London: Frederick Muller, 1939, pp. 5–6.
- 14: *The Times*, 16 July 1919, p. 9.
- 15: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: GLAHA 53015/49 (M340-002) and GLAHA 53015/50 (M340-001).
- 16: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.
- 17: *Athenaeum*, no. 4693, 9 April 1920, pp. 469–70.

18: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Sketcher's Notebook, GLAHA 53015/48 (M340-003); Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.

19: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Mackintosh's diary for 1920, GLAHA 52408.

## Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning

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