

The Elgar Trail. A Short Illustrated Tour of Elgar's Houses.

Date of first

Residence

Address

Main Residences

2 June 1857	The Firs, Broadheath, Worcestershire (The Birthplace)
1859	1 Edgar Street, Worcester
1861	2 College Precincts, Worcester
1865	10 High Street, Worcester
1879	Loretta Villa, 35 (now 12) Chestnut Walk, Worcester
1883	4 Field Terrace, Bath Road, Worcester
28 May 1889	3 Marloes Road, West Kensington, London
July 1889	Saetermo, 7 The Lees, Gt Malvern, Worcestershire
29 September 1889	4 The Lees, Gt Malvern, Worcestershire
10 October 1889	Oaklands, Fountain Road (now Drive), Upper Norwood, London
24 March 1890	51 Avonmore Road, West Kensington, London
March 1891	4 The Lees, Gt Malvern, Worcestershire
20 June 1891	Forli, Alexandra Road, Malvern Link, Worcestershire
21 March 1899	Craeg Lea, Wells Road, Gt Malvern, Worcestershire
1 July 1904	Plas Gwyn, Hampton Park Road, Hereford
1 January 1912	Severn House, 42 Netherhall Gardens, Hampstead, London NW3
October 1921	St James' Place, London W1
April 1923	Napleton Grange, Kempsey, Worcestershire
7 November 1927	Battenhall Manor, Worcester
7 April 1928	Tiddington House, Stratford-on-Avon
3 December 1929	Marl Bank, Rainbow Hill, Worcester

Second Homes

March 1898-October 1903	Birchwood Lodge, Great Storr ridge, Worcestershire
7 March - 2 June 1910	Flat No 7, Kingsley Lodge, 58 New Cavendish Street, London
July 1910 - early 1911	Flat, Queen Anne's Mansions, London SW1
May - July 1911	76 Gloucester Place, London W1
May 1917 - August 1921	Brinkwells, Fittleworth, Sussex

During his lifetime, from the Birthplace Cottage at Broadheath to Marl Bank, his home in Worcester for the last years of his life, Elgar lived in some twenty-five houses or flats. And this does not include the numerous houses of close friends - notably Frank Schuster's house, The Hut, at Bray in Berkshire - that he often stayed at as a house guest, sometimes

for months at a time. The large number of properties and the impression of a restless soul always on the move is often represented as one of the psychological complexities of Elgar's character. It is true that the inspiration from which his compositions sprang was highly dependent on his surroundings, and two of the properties - Birchwood, at Storrige near Malvern, and Brinkwells, near Fittleworth in the Sussex countryside - was rented to provide the rural environment, close to nature, that Elgar found so conducive to composing. But a closer examination of the reasons for each move shows that none were made on a whim. Indeed, like most of us, Elgar detested the upheaval and disruption of moving house and left the bulk of the work - the finding and viewing of suitable properties, negotiating the lease or purchase, organising the packing, removal and unpacking - to his wife Alice.



The Birthplace Cottage

Elgar's parents had rented the Birthplace Cottage, at that time called The Firs, in 1856. Elgar's father William had an established music business in Worcester, some three miles from Broadheath, and only spent weekends at the cottage. It seems that the cottage in the Worcestershire countryside was the choice of Elgar's mother Ann who, having some artistic talent and an affinity with nature, preferred her children to grow up in rural surroundings. Edward had an elder brother, Harry, and two elder

sisters, Lucy and Pollie, so that Edward's arrival swelled the number of the cottage's occupants to six. With another addition to the family (Joe, born in 1859) expected, the family was clearly about to outgrow the cottage so William and Ann sought a larger home in Worcester. From 1859 to 1861, they lived at 1 Edgar Street before returning to 2 College Precincts, a three-story house still standing near the Cathedral, where they had lived for eight years before moving to Broadheath. Then in 1863 they moved to 10 High Street, to live above the shop that housed the family music business. It was here that Edward received his initial grounding in the various aspects of music making that were to substitute for a formal musical education. The shop has now been demolished but the Gifford Hotel carries a plaque to mark the approximate location of the shop.

Edward remained at 10 High Street until 1879 when he moved in with his sister Pollie and her husband William Grafton at Loretta Villa, 35 Chestnut Walk, Worcester. This was the period when Edward's compositional talents were first beginning to show through, the period of the wind quintet for which he attempted to provide a new composition or arrangement each weekend. While Elgar claimed to have composed his wind quintet music during sermons in the organ loft at St George's church, it seems improbable, given the effort required, that he could have done so and therefore likely that many of the compositions from around



The Shop at 10 High St, Worcester

1880 were composed in sister Pollie's house. The house, now renumbered 12

Chestnut Walk, still stands two minutes walk east of the town centre.

In 1883, the Graftons moved to Stoke Works near Bromsgrove, so Edward took up residence at 4 Field Terrace, Worcester, the home of his eldest sister Lucy and her husband Charles Pipe. Field Terrace runs off the Bath Road a short walk south of the city centre. Here Elgar was to remain until his marriage to Alice in 1889.

At the time of their marriage, Alice was already renting a property, *Saetermo*, in Great Malvern, but Elgar believed he could only make his name through a closer involvement in the London musical scene. This meant taking up residence in London. Their marriage was thus followed by a period of domestic turmoil as Elgar tried - and eventually failed - to establish himself in the capital. After honeymooning at Ventnor in the Isle of Wight, they took a short lease on a property in Marloes Road, West Kensington. When that lease ran out, and with little income, they returned to Malvern to live first at *Saetermo*, where a few months of Alice's earlier lease remained unexpired, and then for two weeks at a nearby property in The Lees.

In October, they returned to London, to Upper Norwood, close to Crystal Palace which at that time saw regular orchestral concerts at which Elgar hoped to get his compositions played, and then, with Alice pregnant with Carice and needing a larger flat, to West Kensington. But the winter was bitter, Edward was making little headway in establishing himself in London and it was clear that he could make a better living, if not in the manner of his choosing, by teaching the violin back in his native Worcestershire. After a year of hardship in West Kensington, Edward advertised his availability to give violin lesson in Worcester and prepared to return home.



Forli

This they did in March 1891, lodging for a few weeks at 4 The Lees while they looked for a more suitable property. They found a solid semi-detached house up a short track off Alexandra Road at Malvern Link, at the Worcester end of Malvern, which they named Forli. It provided a stable environment for Elgar almost to the end of the century. Here he completed *The Black Knight*, revised and published the *Serenade for Strings*, and composed *Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands*, *The Light of Life*, *King Olaf*, *The*

Banner of St George, much of *Caractacus*, and the *Enigma Variations*, an impressive list of

works which reinforced his local reputation and expanded it into a national one.

But despite the music that flowed from Forli, Elgar found it lacking in one important respect: it was essentially an urban property. Despite its proximity to the Malvern Hills and the Worcestershire countryside, it had clear views of neither. Elgar found the countryside - the peace and quiet, the views, sounds and smells - inspiring and, early in 1898, began to look

for a cottage in the countryside to use as a retreat from the pressures and disturbances of Malvern. The property they found, at Great Storrige, some four miles north west of Forli and just across the border into Herefordshire, was Birchwood Lodge. Elgar loved Birchwood beyond any of his other homes apart from the Birthplace itself. His letters to Jaeger frequently refer to the sense of escape he found there. He had a Broadwood piano installed in a bedroom in April 1898. Here he completed Caractacus, itself set among the hills that Elgar could now gaze upon from his study window, four of the Sea Pictures (In Haven, the second of the songs, having been composed two years earlier) and essentially the whole of The Dream of Gerontius.



The Elgars outside Birchwood



Craeg Lea

In 1899, possibly motivated by Edward's increasing fame and a desire to reflect that status, the Elgars decided to quit Forli for something grander. They chose a house on the Wells Road about a mile south of the centre of Malvern. They named the house Craeg Lea, an anagram of C(arice), A(lice) and E(dward)Elgar. The substantial house is set on a bank high above the Wells Road and, as at Birchwood, Elgar chose a room on the upper floor for his study, giving him tremendous views across the Severn Valley and the Worcestershire countryside. But, despite the

obvious attractions of Craeg Lea, the choice was perhaps a mistake.



Craeg Lea - interior view

Firstly, Craeg Lea is a good deal further than Forli from Birchwood. As fame brought increasing demands on his time, Edward found it increasingly more difficult to get away to Birchwood, which remained his first love. Eventually, Edward accepted the folly of renting a property they rarely visited and relinquished their use of Birchwood in October 1903. Within a few months, however, the Elgars got wind of a proposed property development across the road from Craeg Lea which Edward feared would ruin the views from his study window. It is clear to anyone visiting Craeg

Lea today that Edward's fears were totally unfounded - the views remain spectacular. But the Elgars did not wait to find out. Betraying his lingering feelings for Birchwood, Edward made enquiries to see if it would be possible to purchase the cottage, but was told that it was not for sale. They therefore looked elsewhere and eventually settled on Plas Gwyn, a house on the eastern outskirts of Hereford.

The choice was a rather odd one. Although a rather grand house on the edge of the city, it is set back from the road in enclosed grounds, with little by ways of views. And for a now well established national personality with heavy commitments in London and the main provincial centres, Hereford is an even less convenient base than Malvern. But perhaps therein lay the attraction, providing something of the isolation Edward needed to continue composing. If so, it proved to be a notably successful choice, for here Elgar completed *The Kingdom*, arranged the *Wand of Youth* suites, and composed both symphonies, the violin concerto, the *Introduction and Allegro for Strings*, two more *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches and a mass of smaller works. Not since Forli had Elgar produced so many works from the same house.

But the strain of constant travelling to and from London and prolonged periods away from home was beginning to tell. From March 1910, the Elgars rented a series of flats in Central London as *pieds-à-terre* for Edward's commitments in the capital. And in the latter months of 1911, they eventually decided that the only satisfactory solution was to take up permanent residence in London. Alice Stuart-Wortley, Elgar's *Windflower*, helped them find a suitable house - 42 Netherhall Gardens, off Finchley Road in Hampstead, North West London. They moved in on New Year's Day 1912.

The house, an imposing mansion in Queen Anne style, they called Severn House. It had its own music room large enough to hold a recital for a small audience, and Edward turned another room into a billiard room. It was probably the dream house to which Alice had always aspired, but it was a huge drain on their finances, forcing Edward to take on extensive conducting engagements to pay the mortgage. And though the house's surroundings were in those days surprisingly rural, the house was also conveniently placed for an endless stream of visitors from Central London. This in part explains Elgar's limited output from Severn House. The wartime conditions for a significant part of their time there, and Edward's determination to play his part in the local war effort, first as a special constable then in the Hampstead Home Guard (then called the Volunteer Force), did not help. And so, as the war dragged on into its third year, Alice, accompanied by Carice, set out to find another country retreat, to serve Severn House as Birchwood had served Forli.

The retreat they found was a cottage deep in the Sussex countryside near Fittleworth. It had wonderful views and plenty of woods nearby for Edward to walk in. It was called Brinkwells. Elgar loved it, and in quick succession composed the violin sonata, string quartet and the piano quintet (although much of the cello concertowas composed at Severn House). But the pleasure was short-lived. While they were at Brinkwells, Severn House was burgled. In Summer 1919, they returned from Brinkwells to find that a neighbour had begun building a garage close to the music room of Severn House. They admitted to themselves that they could not afford both properties and put Severn House up for sale. Alice, now turned

seventy, was becoming increasingly frail and, after a succession of minor illnesses, took to her bed in March 1920. She died the following month.

Elgar was naturally distraught. As with Birchwood some twenty years earlier, he sought to buy Brinkwells but, after some prevarication, the landlord decided not to sell. Elgar relinquished his use of Brinkwells in August 1921 and of Severn House later the same year. At first, he remained in London, taking a flat in the West End. But the withdrawal from public life following Alice's death reduced his commitments in London, his links with Worcestershire remained strong and, perhaps above all, he had Alice buried in St Wulstan's Church, Little Malvern, a short distance down the road from Craeg Lea. In April 1923, he returned to live out his remaining years close to his roots.

He first took out a lease on Napleton Grange, another rather grand mansion at Kempsey, close to the Severn below Malvern. In Autumn 1923, he went on a cruise up the River Amazon. He continued to live a somewhat peripatetic existence, spending extended periods at friends' houses where he composed spasmodically. He became a regular race-goer and, with his close friend Billy Reed, took to revisiting the places of his youth which continued to hold sentimental attractions for him. He always attended the Three Choirs festival, regularly conducting performances of his own works. And yet he remained inwardly lonely and unsettled.

In the latter half of 1927, he relinquished the lease on Napleton Grange. He moved first into Worcester renting Battenhall Manor, on a hill a short walk to the south-east of the city centre, then, five months later, to Tiddington House, Stratford-on-Avon, where he was able to attend performances of Shakespeare plays at the memorial theatre. Two more grand mansions, but neither of them could Elgar truly call 'home'. And so, in December 1929, he bought Marl Bank, a large house of solid appearance set on a bank to the east of the city centre with a good view of the cathedral.

With the passage of time and the acquisition of a more permanent home, Elgar appears to have regained the inspiration to compose, for the music began to flow again: the Severn Suite, a fifth Pomp and Circumstance March, the Nursery Suite together with a number of shorter salon pieces. And an opera - *The Spanish Lady* - and a Third Symphony were to follow. But it was not to be for, in October 1933, Elgar was diagnosed as having terminal cancer.

He spent much of his last few months in a Worcester nursing home, often drifting in and out of consciousness, but on 1 January 1934, his doctors allowed him to return home to Marl Bank to live out his remaining days. Here, on 22 January, he made a unique contribution to a recording session taking place at EMI's Abbey Road studio over 100 miles away. Telephone lines were laid from the recording studio to Elgar's bedside to allow him to hear the orchestra rehearsing and recording excerpts from *Caractacus*, and to feed back comments on their playing. Three weeks later, he died in the same room.

Marl Bank and Severn House have since been demolished, but many of the other properties, including Chestnut Walk, Forli, Birchwood, Craeg Lea, Plas Gwyn, Brinkwells and, of course the Birthplace itself survive in much their original condition. A well-signposted Elgar Trail has

been constructed linking most of the surviving properties and other locations associated with Elgar in the Worcester, Malvern and Hereford area - a leaflet describing the Trail can be obtained from Tourist Information Offices in the area. And the late Gordon Lee's Elgar website provides a pictorial guide to many of the places that Elgar loved to visit.