



FAIRFIELD HOUSE

STUDENT CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW

Fairfield House was once home to the Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, exiled from Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. The emperor stayed in this 19th century Italianate house with his family before buying it outright. Today, it is home to the Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association (BEMSCA) and where the Rastafarian communities and members of the Ethiopian churches celebrate important occasions.



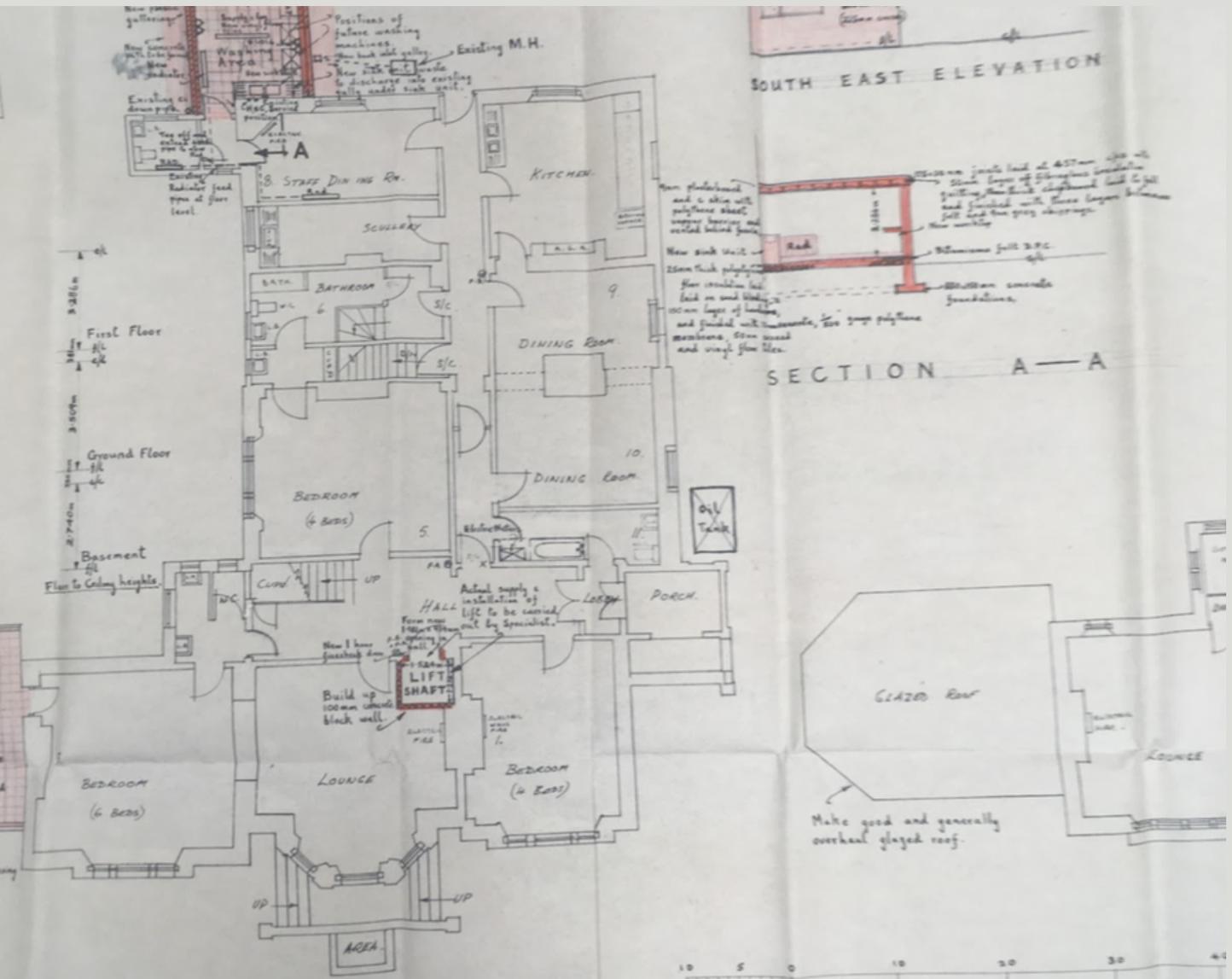
EMPEROR MENEN, WIFE
OF HAILE SELASSIE, BY
THE FIREPLACE IN
FAIRFIELD HOUSE

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Fairfield House is an English Heritage Grade II listed building which was built between 1840–50 in city of Bath, probably by prominent Victorian architect James Wilson.

The Italianate Villa style is limestone ashlar with Welsh slate roofs.

Today, the main rooms of the ground floor remain largely unaltered, whilst the upper floor rooms have been divided up. The staircase consists of twisted iron balustrade and a mahogany rail, with two stair windows on the west wall. Most of the joinery and fireplaces have survived, but all the decorative treatment has been heavily over painted with institutional gloss paint.



COMMUNITY PROFILE

HOW IS THE SPACE USED BY THE COMMUNITY? WHAT DOES IT SERVE THE COMMUNITY?

Rastafarians regard Haile Selassie I as God because of Marcus Garvey's prophecy - "Look to Africa where a black king shall be crowned, he shall be the Redeemer". Haile Selassie never regarded himself as God, nor did he adhere to Rastafari. However, his residency at Fairfield House means that the site retains spiritual significance, with many celebrations taking place there. Travelling there has been considered a kind of pilgrimage for those from the Rastafari faith.

Fairfield House reflects a legacy for Ethiopians, as well as all other peoples of African heritage, and has sacred significance to the Rastafari faith. Whilst Bath's historic relationship with people of African descent has been one of enslavement, the house acts as a transformative and unique mediation between different cultures, interest groups and traditions.

Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association (BEMSCA) offers services for local elderly people, fulfilling the original wish of Haile Selassie I to gift the house as "a home for the aged".



HAILE SELASSIE I - EMPEROR OF ETHIOPIA

USE

HOW HAS THE COMMUNITY USED THE SPACE IN THE PAST, TODAY AND HOW WILL IT BE USED IN THE FUTURE?

PAST

When Haile Selassie I was due to return to Ethiopia, he gifted the house to the city of Bath on the provision that it be used exclusively to look after the older community of the city. It was used as a nursing home for babies from 1943 until 1946, then subsequently housed the elderly citizens of the city.

PRESENT

Today, the building supports the elderly community of African and Caribbean heritage as a day care centre, with a museum and venue space. It's currently undergoing a 'community asset transfer'. While the museum exhibits Ethiopian artefacts, there is also a contemporary art gallery on the first floor which holds exhibitions every four months which showcase history on African diaspora discourse. Teaming up with various local initiatives, like the Arts Trail and Bath Fringe Festival, this enables the house to hold music and poetry events, as well as a radio station.

FUTURE

The house serves as a base for community interest company Fairfield House Bath, and currently faces the possibility of being sold off by the council as private flats. The committee are in the process of taking it over from the council in an asset transfer situation, applying for funding of around £32,000 a year to keep the lights of Fairfield House on. They are also looking to recruit a project manager to run the House, and in the process of fundraising are talking to philanthropists, universities, organisations, and other cultural partnerships.



REFLECTIONS

HOW HAVE COMMUNITIES OF DIERSE ETHNIC HERITAGE HAD A VOICE IN THE PLANNING AND DESIGN OF SITES THAT ARE SIGNIFICANT TO THEM?

Dr Shawn Sobers, Trustee of Fairfield House, describes the significance of the House for Haile Selassie I and its importance for future Ethiopian, Rastafari and other groups of African diasporas today. He reflects on the way in which the house was used as a sanctuary for the emperor, his family and advisors, as well as other Ethiopian refugees. It has continued to serve as a community and home for marginalised communities in Bath, and with the community forming a group to keep it alive, it is able to remain present.

"Looking through the window reminds (Haile Selassie I) of the view of Harari, which is where he was governor of Ethiopia when he was aged fourteen, when he was a duke. In the museum space, I made a little poster, stuck it in a frame, with a view of Harari and I put that next to the window, so people can look through the window and see the views of Ethiopia and of Bath.

For me, it's like ghosts of history, the fact that you can walk through somewhere and someone has been there before you. So I really love the idea that Haile Selassie was sat there, looking at the view, and now we can kind of do the same thing and see that similar connection. I like those links with the building in relation to the narrative and the story that he attaches to the spaces in the building."

- Shawn Sobers, Trustee of Fairfield House

