

# Imogen Holst: a life in music

## Early years



Imogen surrounded by the nymphs and shepherds from the dance she composed and produced at school, 1920.



Imogen Clare Holst in her pram, 1907.

Imogen Holst was born on 12 April 1907, at Richmond in Surrey. Her father, the composer Gustav Holst, soon wrote to a friend that the new baby 'is practising coloratura – the sort that foghorns usually perform.'

With encouragement from her father, Imogen's interest in music deepened at school. At the age of 14, she composed and produced a *Dance of Nymphs and Shepherds*. Gustav proudly noted: 'I wish I could have written anything as good at that age.'



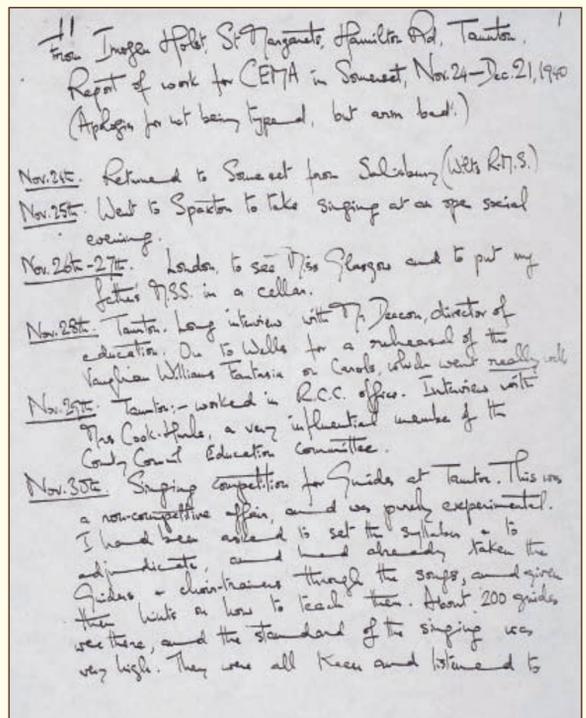
Imogen in the porch of Thaxted Church, 1919.

## Country dancing in Thaxted

In 1921, Imogen started at St Paul's Girls' School in London, where her father taught. By then, the family home was in Thaxted, north Essex.

Here, she discovered 'the astounding fact that there is country dancing three times a week in the Vicarage garden... We dance in a graceful though mildly immoral manner until it is too dark to see...'

Imogen joined the English Folk Dance Society in 1923, aged sixteen. The same year, she first visited Aldeburgh, attending the Society's summer school. These early experiences sparked a lifelong passion for folk music and dance.



Imogen's report on her wartime work around Somerset in late 1940.



Imogen at Dartington Hall.

## 'A present from the Government'

After the Royal College of Music, Imogen spent the 1930s travelling around Europe, and establishing a wide-ranging professional career as a performer, composer, arranger and teacher.

In 1939, she became involved in a project that sent 'music travellers' across rural England to inspire and organize community music-making, and so preserve English traditions through the war years.

While touring around Devon in 1942, Imogen accepted an offer from Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst to base herself at Dartington Hall, where they had set up a model community.

After the war, she stayed at Dartington as Director of Music until 1950, using her experience to create a pioneering course for rural music teachers.

## A renaissance of English music in Aldeburgh

Although she loved working at Dartington, Imogen was aware of the danger of neglecting her own professional development without regular contact with musicians of her own calibre.

Among the occasional visitors who prompted this realization were Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, who gave a recital at Dartington in 1943. Within days, Imogen wrote to Britten:

*Your music seems to me the only reliable thing that is happening today... I was brought up to believe that there would one day be a renaissance of English music... And now it's all right.*



Mourners at Imogen's funeral, Aldeburgh churchyard, 1984.

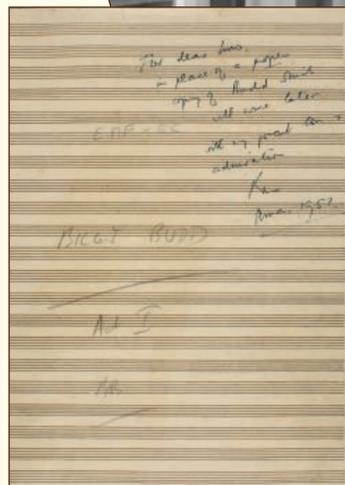
Photograph: Britten-Pears Foundation.



Imogen's house in Church Walk, Aldeburgh.  
Photograph: Nigel Luckhurst.



Imogen with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, mid 1950s.



The composition sketch of Billy Budd, Britten's present to his new assistant for her first Christmas in Aldeburgh.

Imogen's conviction, that Britten's music was the fruition of her father's dream, explains her decision to move to Aldeburgh in 1952. She became music assistant to Britten until 1964, and a driving force behind the Aldeburgh Festival, the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies and many other aspects of Aldeburgh's musical life.

Imogen Holst died, at home, on 9 March 1984. She was buried in Aldeburgh churchyard, near Britten. The journal *Early Music* summed up her impact on the town she made her home for over thirty years.

*Her presence will always be felt in Aldeburgh Parish Church, especially at night, when with the usually forlorn North Sea in a groundbass in the background, the lights in the church throwing shadows against the white walls, the dark woodwork and the stained glass, IH would appear, [and] stride to the rostrum purposefully...*



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