

Ruskin in Wyre: Ruskin Land

JENNY ROBBINS

Revealing hidden secrets of Ruskin Land in the heart of the Wyre Forest, the **Ruskin in Wyre Project** has been all about rediscovering, revealing, and reinterpreting this special place. Throughout the project we have sought to tell the story of how Ruskin Land grew and developed, and to reinterpret Ruskin's ideas for a new generation today. The project has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Guild of St George, and it has been delivered by The Wyre Community Land Trust. The aim is to show how John Ruskin's vision for a place that is 'beautiful, peaceful, fruitful' can be re-energised and reinterpreted by communities in a practical and sustainable way today.

John Ruskin (1819 – 1900) was born 200 years ago to a wealthy family. He lived in London and the Lake District, studied at Oxford and travelled extensively in Europe. He was internationally famous and influenced many social reformers among them Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Canon Rawnsley (who formed the National Trust). He also inspired the formation of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), the Woodcraft People and Scouts, William Morris and The Morris Company. He became the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, and patron of the Arts and Crafts movement.

He wrote about nature and architecture, craftsmanship, geology, botany, Greek mythology, education - a dizzying variety of subjects. Driven by his deep faith in social justice, he established the Guild of St George in the 1870s to right some of the social wrongs of the day and make England a happier and more beautiful place in which to live and work.

He wanted everyone to see and enjoy the unspoiled, inspirational beauty of the world, both in nature and in art, and gave the Guild a substantial art collection for the benefit and education of the working people of Sheffield.

"The Guild was first and foremost an attempt to revive a healthy rural economy, not based on machinery, pollution and the oppression of the poor. It was also frankly utopian in concept, and Ruskin soon began proposing ideal social arrangements which the Guild's workers and their families would need – schools, libraries and galleries of art. The first such gallery – and in the event the only one – was St George's Museum in Walkley a village on the rural edge of Sheffield."
Clive Wilmer, Master, Guild of St George. 2019

In 1871 George Baker, local business man, mayor of Bewdley (1888 and 1890), and mayor of Birmingham, bequeathed Ruskin about 20 acres of woodland in

the Wyre Forest - known as Ruskin Land and marked as such on the modern Ordnance Survey map. It was a very different place to the Forest we know today, being an active oak coppice making large amounts of charcoal, oak bark for tanning and other products.

William Graham a follower of Ruskin cleared over twenty acres of woodland, made a road to the land, built some rough sheds, grew crops and planted an orchard. He was poorly treated, by Baker, and recent research has revealed the extent of his problems trying to fulfill Ruskin's ambition of a rural utopia.

In 1883 the Liverpool Ruskin Society was formed and members included the Fowler, Harley, Wardle, Watson and Quayle families, as well as Edith Hope-Scott. The Liverpool Companions were to be central to Ruskin Land and began to form the nucleus of a small community,

A Birmingham architect Joseph Southall was commissioned in 1885 to design a museum at Bewdley. *"It is proposed to erect at Bewdley in Worcestershire a museum to certain works of Art and other treasures collected by Professor Ruskin and given by him for the enjoyment and education of the people. It is estimated that to erect and finish the building will cost about £10,000."* From George Baker's notes of a meeting held in Birmingham



Proposed Bewdley museum - drawing by Joseph Southall
Guild of St George collection, Sheffield

In 1908 St George's Farmhouse was built at Ruskin Land, and in 1911 Fred and Ada Watson moved from Liverpool to the farm. The adjoining property Uncles, later Unclys Farm and 100 acres of woodland were acquired by the Guild of St George in 1930. Inspired by concern over conifer planting by the Forestry Commission, which had been set up in 1919, the Guild believed it was a threat to 'preserving the traditions and crafts of the forest'.

2019 is the bicentennial anniversary of Ruskin's birth, celebrated through a national programme of events. The Ruskin in Wyre Project, facilitated by the Heritage Lottery Fund, concludes in 2019. There have been national exhibitions in London, York and Cumbria among others, and extensive press coverage.

Seeing detail and promoting craftsmanship are a vital part of Ruskin's influence. His fascination with nature has inspired the courses and events of the project. Our crafts person in residence Alice Midmore has inspired many people to get hands on with our oak. Her first task was to make a sign board, made using oak from Ruskin Land, felled, milled and made within throwing distance from each other. Oak is both a durable wood, ideal for outdoor use and great for carving, making it the perfect material for the outdoor sign. Alice has run courses in spoon carving, gate making and leaf carving among others.



Under her skilled, patient supervision our community projects have been amazing. We worked with Riverside Park North in Bewdley, Bewdley Development Trust and Wyre Forest District Council to design, build and install an oak bridge to complete the accessible track around the pond in the park opening up the area for all to enjoy.

We have worked with Birchen Coppice Primary School, which is in one of the most deprived areas of Kidderminster, to reconstruct a walkway across their pond to improve access for their forest school. The Wyre Community Land Trust staff and volunteers played a key hands-on role in delivering the project.

Studio in the Woods, conceived by architects Piers Taylor and Kate Darby has been run in various woodlands over the past 10 years. This was the first time oak had been the material for the build. I have been a volunteer on the Ruskin in Wyre project since its inception but had little idea what was about to unfold. Hard work throughout May and June by the



weekly volunteers achieved stunning improvements to the site. The pig sty was repurposed as toilets and an indoor kitchen area. Tables and benches were produced, compost toilets and showers were installed. The barn was reinvented as a lecture space. Everything was looking wonderful and the heatwave of summer 2018 continued to complete the idyllic setting for participants as they arrived in Ruskin Land.

The groups were led by well-known architects who gave their time for the weekend to help the participants get hands on with wood to design and build something extraordinary. There were six groups who used oak to construct very different structures.

'Shadows and light' used outlines caused by shadows cast by existing buildings from dawn to dusk. This produced a wooden grid that depicted the movement of light and gradients of the movements of shadows. 'The Melaphone' explored the properties of oak as an instrument. A recording of the sounds of the forest was played using a pliable membrane on the end of the robotic arm and was played down a large wooden megaphone and reflected off a sound wall 10 metres away woven from thin pieces of wood. Another group set out to create a structure around a

single tree that could be accessed internally to give a new perspective on the canopy.

Another team tied bent back saplings to pull back their small canopies to open up a space for light to fall on the central sapling and onto the forest floor. Uniform oak strips were tied together with string making a structure that was a pentagon in shape - the ancient shape that contains the spiral of growth. The largest structure was a pivoted 18 metre bridge. The design based on a Belfast Truss using small pieces of timber to make a very large structure.

Another structure provided a space for social gathering both in a shaded and sunny area created using whole untreated logs salvaged from the forest management process, woven and bound together. Pegs were made from sticks, and then their insertion holes made to fit them, rather than the other way round. The structure took on a spiral nature that produced a natural entrance; an existing root becoming a threshold to the structure. A natural central circular raised area was covered in ferns to give a focus to the space. Situated adjacent to a public footpath it is easily accessible.

Today, the Guild of St George owns Ruskin Land which covers about 60 hectares in the heart of the Wyre

Forest and, with The Wyre Community Land Trust, continues to uphold Ruskin's vision in managing the land sustainably. The beauty and peace of Ruskin Land continue to be nurtured, building a new sense of place and rich wildlife around a thriving community. People are able to share this wonderful place through volunteering or working on the land or in the workshops and by attending events or courses.

Since 2007 The Wyre Community Land Trust (WCLT), a social enterprise, has been managing land and woodland in and around the Wyre Forest. We work to demonstrate that land management can be people focused and environmentally excellent, but also economically viable. The partnership with the Guild of St George is using Ruskin's original vision as inspiration for the future.

The WCLT manages about 350 hectares. This is mostly fragmented wildlife habitats including ancient woodlands, and all needs careful and sensitive management. We work in partnership with many different land owners, and our conservation grazing is carried out by our herd of 55 Dexter cattle. We also sell delicious pasture-fed beef.



Studio in the Woods in Ruskin Land

Jim Stephenson



Dexter cattle in wood pasture in Ruskin Land

Jenny Robbins

We aim to link our working landscape to livelihoods, creating employment and keeping forest skills alive using raw materials to create products. Adding value to our oak and beef helps underpin our work, and we reinvest every penny. Ruskin believed that even everyday things we use should have an intrinsic beauty and value, and we strive to achieve this.

Part of our work is to encourage people to be creative, and to experience the fun and reward of making things, from fences to furniture, pictures to poetry. It is a core part of our vision that we welcome people to use Ruskin Land as an inspirational place for creativity and cultural development. Over time we hope that we shall build a body of new work about Ruskin Land and the broader Forest.

"If I had expected to find a larger-scaled more 'institutional,' problem-solving approach to environmental challenges, I quickly came to appreciate the way in which concerns about the environment in Ruskin Land had been deeply integrated into the special needs and character of the forest, of the place itself, and into the life and needs of the local Bewdley community. This struck me as profoundly Ruskinian – this emphasis, not on abstractions or abstract solutions, but on the needs and opportunities of a specific place and the challenges of living in community with it."
Gabriel Meyer, Executive Director of The Ruskin Art Club Los Angeles 2018

Ed: Jenny Robbins is a Director of the Guild of St George, a Director of The Wyre Community Land Trust, Chair of the Friends of Bewdley Museum, and one of the Projector Directors for Ruskin in Wyre.



Sculpture by Henk Littlewood from steam-bent Wyre oak

Jenny Robbins