



Wyre Forest Study Group

RUSKIN, THE GUILD OF ST. GEORGE AND WYRE.

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"I have no time nor strength of life now to lose in attempts at ornamental architecture; and am going therefore, to build a perfectly plain gallery, comfortably and safely warm and dry, in the pure air of Bewdley, where these drawings may at once be placed and described, and from which those of minor value may be lent for the use of schools."

These words of John Ruskin were his vision for a museum which he wished to build, to house and display a wide ranging and disparate group of objects (not only drawings), for the benefit of the working men of Great Britain. What was it that brought him to see a need for this museum and indeed the Guild of St. George?

John Ruskin was a remarkable man, polymath, visionary, artist and arbiter of good taste, a social and political economist, and an acute observer of nature and society. He wrote on a bewildering array of subjects and had strongly held opinions on them all. His literary powers and intellect were formidable but above and beyond this he was guileless and transparently honest and would not allow his conscience to be blunted by his privileged position. He was, indeed, privileged materially.

His parents were Margaret and John James Ruskin - John James had been in business with Domecq, very successfully importing sherry from Spain. He had taken over a debt of £4000 from his own father and left £123,000 when he died in 1864, having given away £12000 [equivalent to £620,000 today] in the last 4 years of his life. John Ruskin himself was born in 1819, the same year as Queen Victoria, and died in 1900, the year before she died. He travelled to the continent with his parents in the 1830s, and in 1837 went up to Christ Church College, Oxford to read classics and mathematics, - and his mother went as well to look after him! Despite his wealth he had become acutely aware of the appalling living conditions of great swathes of people across England and it was this darkening vision which conditioned the Guild's objectives.

So it was that, in 1871, he embarked on a series of letters "To the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain" where he wrote (in the first letter), "Therefore, I will endure it no longer quietly, but henceforward, with any few or many who will help, do my poor best to abate this misery."

It was at this point that George Baker, a prominent Quaker business man from Birmingham (manufacturers of "Baker's Blacking"), comes into the picture as evidently he was reading Ruskin's letters which had been written to the workmen of

Great Britain and, having just bought a significant slice of the Wyre Forest together with surrounding farmland in the great Crown sale of 1870, was moved to give John Ruskin seven acres of woodland (part of Shelf Held Coppice). He added a further thirteen acres shortly afterwards making the 20 acres which is still known as Ruskin Land. In 1877, George Baker invited John Ruskin to Bewdley to view the building of Beaucastle and to visit the 20 acres of woodland and it was this visit which so captivated Ruskin's imagination. A few years later, in 1878, Ruskin was able to establish formally the Guild of St. George as a limited company with charitable objects and passed over the 20 acres to the newly-formed Guild.

So what is this Guild of St. George? Its objectives were to focus attention on the educational needs of the working man through accessible displays of beauty (paintings, books, manuscripts, the work of craftsmen and so on) to be housed in a museum, together with the provision of smallholdings to focus on the importance of honest labour away from the blackened steel mills of Sheffield. Ruskin had in mind to place his museum in Sheffield but in 1882 fell out with Sheffield Corporation when they insisted that the ownership of the collection should be handed over to them if they provided the museum building. Ruskin must have then thought back to his visit to Ruskin Land in Bewdley and decided to place his museum there. At this point, some of the forest land had been cleared by the Crump family (the same family who are timber merchants in Stourport today) for £67-3-5d and 190 fruit trees planted, but there was no house then. George Baker had a nephew, Joseph Southall, who had caught Ruskin's eye, having been shown some of his drawings. Joseph Southall had, incidentally, by patient and laborious experiment, rediscovered the technique of painting in tempera (using egg yolk rather than oil or water as the medium) which gives a distinctive matt and slightly chalky finish. There is a fine example of Joseph Southall's tempera work on the wall at the top of the main staircase at Birmingham Art Gallery.

Southall was thus summoned to Ruskin's home, Brantwood, by Lake Coniston, and given the commission to design the museum. As far as we know, Southall completed the designs and even some materials were prepared, including a number of oak trees which were felled, presumably nearby in Shelf Held Coppice, in readiness for the museum. Sadly the Southall designs seem to have disappeared and all efforts to trace them have been unsuccessful. It would be fascinating to see what we might have had built in the middle of the forest. In the event, Sheffield Corporation were thinking again and were able to



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offer a museum building to house the Guild's collection where it stayed until 1950.

Alongside the concerns for a suitable museum, there was emerging from Ruskin's mind a picture of a series of agricultural-based communities in which social classes are integrated, where work is healthy and meaningful, machinery driven by natural forces, and sound craftsmanship encouraged. The surroundings, he insisted, should be beautiful, with wildlife protected, and everyone should have access to examples of great art, workmanship, and literature. The project was launched with a gift of £7000 from the founder and a number of properties were acquired over a period of time. Ruskin's utopia never materialized in the way he imagined it would, but the idea was planted amongst the members of the Liverpool Ruskin Society in the 1880s. Very unusually, a number of Ruskin societies were formed well before Ruskin died and Liverpool was one of the most active. My grandfather was a founder member of this society and between 1889 and 1914, five families moved down to Bewdley from Liverpool to work the land and live by the principles Ruskin set out. The first family (and two subsequent ones) came

to St John's Lane. Next came the Watson family who moved into the newly built St George's Farm on Ruskin Land and finally my grandfather in 1914. He brought with him his wife, and their three children, the youngest of whom was my father (then aged 7) who came to live at Unclyls Farm, the nearest neighbour to the Watsons. These were remote holdings deep in the forest - they still are and even today they have no mains electricity. In those days, the work was hard and the returns modest, access was along a cart track - no motor vehicle was able to drive along the track until 1930. The forest was owned by the carpet manufacturer Peter Adam except, of course, for the 20 acres the Guild owned. My grandfather moved from Unclyls Farm in 1929 to Bowcastle Farm and coincidentally the following year, Peter Adam sold Shelf Held Coppice to the Guild who now own not only Ruskin Land but Unclyls Farm and St George's Bungalow, as well as 100 acres of the woodland, now all SSSI and National Nature Reserve.

Today, the Guild cares for this woodland and it is managed, together with English Nature, and the holdings are let on a basis which allows the land to be used lightly and carefully.

Editors Note – More details of this interesting subject may be found in the publication entitled **Ruskin and Bewdley**, written by Peter Wardle and Cedric Quayle