

For a Plaque on Ruskin House, Walkley, to celebrate the foundation of St George's Museum, 27 June 2015

In 2010, shortly after I became Master of the Guild of St George, I happened to meet a young woman who worked in the museum world. She had grown up in Sheffield in the 1980s and 90s and become interested in art as a result of visiting the Ruskin Gallery, then in Norfolk Street. I was fascinated and asked her how as a child she had discovered the Gallery. 'My parents used to take me,' she said. 'And what sort of people were your parents?' I asked. 'They were foundry workers,' she replied. I confess I had expected her to say they were teachers or artists or professionals of some kind, and I thought rather ill of myself for that automatic reaction. She was, after all, telling me something I should have expected, for Ruskin had created the Collection – St George's Museum, as it originally was – not for those who already know about art, but for the working people of Sheffield, above all metalworkers.

Ruskin created the Museum in this very house, now known as Ruskin House, in 1875. He had founded the Guild of St George four years before in despair at the condition of England, blighted (as he saw it) by industrial capitalism. He was appalled by the operations of the market that had made the nation theoretically wealthy and left most of its people in poverty, oppressed by mechanical labour and living for the most part in inhuman conditions, often without access to clean water and fresh air. He was equally appalled by the impact of industry on nature itself – the pollution of air and water and the violation of natural beauty. Ruskin wanted to restore a flourishing rural economy in which working people lived in a healthy relationship with the world around them.

But the Guild was also concerned with art and craftsmanship. Ruskin believed that beauty in design was only possible if the craftsman was acquainted with natural beauty. Great art and fine craftsmanship derived from appreciation of the world God made for us. The collection in St George's Museum was a teaching collection, designed above all to teach the workman by example and, in so doing, to satisfy his need for fresh air and green fields, beauty and justice, all of which he saw as related to one another. '*The mountain home of the museum,*' he wrote – meaning the hills of the Rivelin valley (he was fond of such exaggerations) – '*was originally chosen, not to keep the collection out of the smoke, but expressly to beguile the artisan out of it.*'

In 1875 he paid a visit to his friend, Henry Swan, who had recently moved from London to this house. In the late 1850s and early '60s Ruskin had taught drawing at the Working Men's College in London. The College had been founded by philanthropists like himself to provide free education for men who through poverty had missed out on education. Swan was a journeyman engraver who had turned up in Ruskin's class and the two men became friends. Ruskin not only liked Swan but admired him too, and it was in his house that the setting for his Museum first came to him. He had been thinking about it for some time and had drawn up plans to build it in rural Worcestershire, where the Guild has land, but he had begun to consider that an industrial city – particularly the rural edge of an industrial city – would be more appropriate. The setting here, with the Rivelin valley visible from the windows and smoky Sheffield far down the hill behind it, seemed to him almost ideal, especially when he realised that Swan and his wife Emily would be willing to run it for him. Sheffield was right too. The hills around the city reminded him of Florence and even – rather extraordinarily –

of the Alps, and he had long been an admirer of Sheffield craftsmanship. The little mesters making cutlery in their workshops were the public he most valued.

So the Collection was set up here, and metalworkers made their journey up the Bellhag Road to see it in large numbers, their names recorded in the Visitors' Book. Among the most frequent visitors, to give a notable example, was a young knife grinder named Benjamin Creswick. Swan soon discovered that Creswick wanted to be a sculptor and recognised real talent in his work. He recommended him to Ruskin, who commissioned a bust from him, and then recommended him to friends in Birmingham. Creswick soon moved to Birmingham, where he became famous as a sculptor of public monuments and got involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement in London and elsewhere. He founded a small dynasty of artists, one of whom, his great-granddaughter Annie Creswick-Dawson, is with us here today.

What we have sought to do with the project called *Ruskin-in-Sheffield* is show that that same Sheffield spirit which Ruskin called forth in 1875 is alive in Sheffield today. I think we have succeeded in doing that. That we have done so is a huge tribute to the project producer, Ruth Nutter, but it is also due to the people of Sheffield who are still ready and willing to campaign for beauty and justice.

I would like to express Guild's thanks to several people:

- to Ruth Nutter for the wonderful work she had done under the banner of *Ruskin-in-Sheffield*, and to those who have worked with her
- to John and Joy Smith, landlords of Ruskin House, for their willingness to accept this plaque and, indeed, their enthusiasm for it
- to John O'Brien, building manager of Ruskin House, for his constant willingness to help and his interest in the project
- to Richard Watts, who worked for many years on planning the public spaces of central Sheffield, for designing and carving this beautiful stone, very much in the traditions of craftsmanship which Ruskin taught
- to Marcus Waithe, who set up the website *Ruskin at Walkley*, for providing the words on the plaque and contributing skills as a scholar and lecturer to *Ruskin-in-Sheffield*
- to the tenants of Ruskin House for their tolerance and understanding, and especially to Jonathan Rawling for his ongoing support of the *Ruskin-in-Sheffield* project
- to everyone in the Walkley community who has supported *Ruskin-in-Sheffield* from the outset
- and since what we are celebrating is something that lives on after its founder's death, to John Ruskin, who created St George's Museum, bought this building to house it and lives on in the values of this city and its people.

For a Memorial on the Grave of Henry Swan, Walkley Cemetery, 27 June 2015

There's a fresco in Siena called *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. It's by the fourteenth-century artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Ruskin admired it a great deal. A crucial section of the picture shows how good government is associated with a healthy, productive interchange between city and countryside, and the picture at that point focuses on the place where the city ends and the country begins. I am reminded of the picture by this place: when you come here, you feel you have reached the limit of the city and you look out across the trees and the fields. I think it was precisely that feeling that Ruskin had when he looked from Swan's house to the hills beyond, now of course covered with building.

Appropriately enough, this is where Henry Swan is buried. It's a pity he is not here with his wife, Emily Swan, because as Dr Mark Frost has shown us, she was very much his co-curator at St George's Museum, but she died long after him and in another place. The Swans had four children, one of whom is buried here with his father – Laurence Swan, who died sadly young.

Swan was a bit of an eccentric – some people thought him a crank – but he was warm, humorous, loyal, original and careless of the opinions of others. When he met Ruskin at the Working Men's College he was a journeyman engraver. In that role, he had worked for Isaac Pitman, the inventor of shorthand. He was interested in spelling reform and new systems of musical notation. He was also a skilled illuminator. He was, by contrast, keen on innovations – on photography, for instance – and he was one of the first people to own a bicycle. Unlike Ruskin, he was a Quaker, a pacifist and a vegetarian.

For many years the site of this grave was unknown. It was only recently discovered by the Revd. Ron Frost, Mark Frost's father. Mark had been studying the working-class men and women who worked for Ruskin and the Guild, and his father, a retired clergyman who lives in Sheffield, decided to help. The gravestone he found was broken in two, the ground had subsided and the lettering on the stone had been effaced beyond recall. We in the Guild decided that the grave should be restored, the soil built up again and a memorial placed over the stone to record Swan's presence there, with tribute duly paid to one of the Guild's earliest and best employees.

In some sense this recovery and restoration of Swan's memorial and the plaque set on the wall of Ruskin House are symbols embedded in the programme we call *Ruskin-in-Sheffield*. They signify that though Ruskin and Swan were forgotten or disappeared for periods of time, they are present among us here in Sheffield: present in the good work they did and present in the continuing life that drew that work out of them. The social and economic climate of their time was harsh, and they stood against it. They spoke out or acted for the needs and dignity of common people, who have a right to claim beauty and justice as human needs. As the life of our time grows harsher, as I believe it is doing, they continue to stand for those values as these stones do for them.

On behalf of the Guild of St George and *Ruskin-in-Sheffield*, I would like to thank the following:

- the Revd. Melanie Fitzgerald, Irving Smith and Hugh Waterhouse for their support, help and enthusiasm, and the work they did to secure permission for the new gravestone
- Ruth Nutter of Ruskin in Sheffield for leading this effort and my colleagues in the Guild for supporting her
- Richard Watts, again, for designing and carving a beautiful stone, a model of fine craftsmanship
- Ron Frost, for discovering the stone, and his son Mark for writing the text that is carved upon it, as well as lecturing for the *Ruskin-in-Sheffield* project
- Mick Searcy, for restoring the grave and mounting the new stone
- everyone in the Walkley community who has supported *Ruskin-in-Sheffield* from the outset
- Henry and Emily Swan for living and working among us. Let us remember them with honour and gratitude.

Clive Wilmer
Master of the Guild of St George

