

Hall looks to future while keeping an eye on its past

What would Genevieve Pillee have made of the makeover of Meersbrook Hall this week?

SPECIAL REPORT

WORDS AND PICTURES
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The curator of the hall's Ruskin collection between 1924 and 1949 developed a method of handling gold lettering to become one of the country's finest creators of illuminated certificates and manuscripts, despatching them from the city's representatives to congratulate royalty and other celebs before twitter speeded up the process.

She'd have recognised the furniture made by local craftsman Arthur Hayball, and the carefully selected examples of Ruskinian art-work, geology and natural history. But what would she have made of the computer projections onto the hall's exterior, and the team of over a dozen Sheffield University architecture students born all over the world, now trying to find out how local people want to see Meersbrook Hall develop in future?

"In the UK we have this engagement with people during consultation, which I think works better than



Ruth Nutter drawing in one of the museum chairs made by craftsman Arthur Hayball.

is often the case in my own country," said Celine Chan, from Hong Kong. "This is an important concept for me, if people are not involved you don't have their trust."

This year, thanks to a £18,700 Heritage Lottery Fund grant, Ruskin in Sheffield producer Ruth Nutter unleashed a team of volun-

tary history researchers to find out more about the people who looked after the Ruskin Museum at Meersbrook Hall between 1890 and 1953.

"They learned about Genevieve Pillee, and also found out how much this collection was a source of civic pride to the local captains of industry," said Ruth. "The city's industrialists seemed to really appreciate Ruskin's artisan approach to life. This year's Ruskin advocacy work included Y6 pupils at Carfield School, who were inspired by local birdlife to produce art works on display during the Ruskin Museum Makeover week at

Meersbrook Hall this week, which continues until Friday.

And the Sheffield University students said they were also interested in the movement and circulation of Meersbrook Park birds, designing a series of wooden cut-outs of local species and then stringing them around the park with a 'return to Meersbrook Hall' sticker.

Over 700 people attended the hall and park over the Makeover Week's first weekend, and the students' initial findings were that people wanted to see a public cafe and toilets on site, and that many locals were very interested in the connec-

tions of the building with the surrounding nature of Meersbrook Park - which is all very Ruskinian, noted Ruth Nutter.

"The students are thinking about the Ruskinian principles of peaceful, beautiful, fruitful places, and how that relates to the building's future uses."

After spending several decades steadily losing its internal architectural interest under a compartmentalisation programme by the council's parks and countryside department officers, the Hall is now run by Friends of Meersbrook Hall and Heeley Trust under a temporary

'licence to occupy' arrangement, with the Ruskin charity the Guild of St George also running events on site.

Although the building is structurally fairly sound (with parts dating back to the 1400s, it was recently discovered), the aim is to gradually restore as much as possible of the Hall's older beauty while improving access and facilities for modern users. Renting out spaces for businesses, craftspeople and local groups will provide income for the Hall's sustainable future, said Andy Jackson from Heeley Trust.

The Trust's adult learning classes at the building and the Hall will continue to be used whatever the state of its internal architecture, he said.

The consultations with locals this week will be analysed by the Sheffield University architecture students and their findings will inform further discussions with the council about a more permanent lease arrangement.

"Ideally we'd like to start renting out space next year," said Andy Jackson. "But these things take time, so let's see."

Ruth Nutter said the turnout this week shows how interested local people are, both in the Hall and the ideas of Ruskin.

"A lot of people are saying, how do you enjoy your life when there's not as much financial wealth around?" she said. "There's an interest in shared spaces to help people feel connected. People really want this to work. But it takes time."



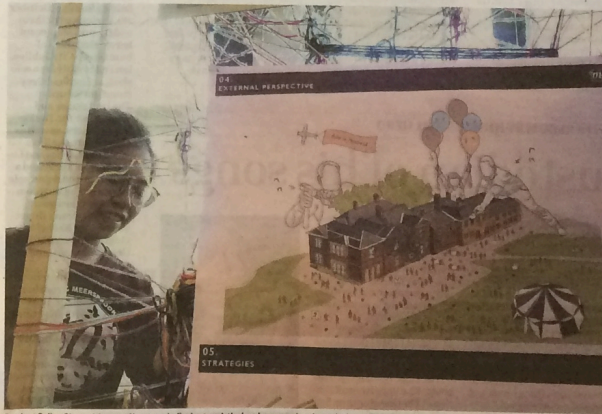
Bird-inspired art by pupils from Carfield School, above; architecture student Jamie Rest with prints of original lantern slides, left.



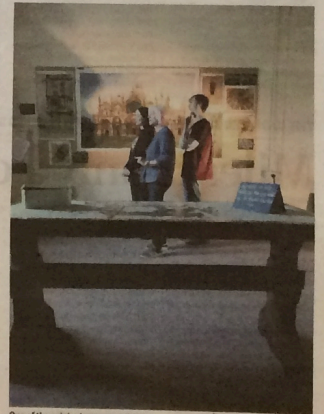
Rhian Thomas from Friends of Meersbrook Hall with student Sanjukta Jitendhar looking at the poster panel celebrating the hall.



Students Christie Tan and Will Capps with one of their displays outside the hall



Student Celine Chan with part of her team's display to ask the local community about the hall's future



One of the original museum tables.