

TELEGRAPH HERITAGE

Ruskin's inspiration for the fantastic future we need

Festival exploring ideas to build hope takes place amid backdrop of a new generation fighting for urgent change to combat climate emergency

SPECIAL REPORT

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In the past few months it feels there has been a renewed sense of hope and belief that we can live differently.

Schoolchildren have taken to the streets and Extinction Rebellion shut down four major thoroughfares of London for over a week in April. An urgent sense of the need for change has rippled through the political spectrum, and whilst the battle is certainly nowhere near won, perhaps it has, at least, begun.

While young people, artists, the elderly and passers-by turned activists transformed Waterloo Bridge into a garden, I went to have a conversation with Clive Wilmer, the current Master of the Guild of St George.

The Guild of St George began as a utopian project devoted to the arts, craftsmanship and honouring nature, founded by the Victorian theorist and art critic John Ruskin in 1871. I have been working with the guild for a number of years as part of Ruskin in Sheffield.

My conversation with Clive began, predictably, with John Ruskin, who believed that wealth could not be measured in financial terms: "that country is richest which supports the greatest number of noble and happy human beings" (from *Unto This Last*, 1862).

Ruskin also supported and inspired numerous utopian projects across the world. Not least in Sheffield itself, where Ruskin founded the St George's Museum in Walkley in 1875 to provide a space for reflection and learning for the workers and craftsmen of Sheffield.

Ruskin hoped that with access to the eclectic collection of minerals and artwork from across Europe which he donated (and is still housed at Millennium Gallery), visitors to the museum would be inspired to see the world around them differently—



John Ruskin, whose 200th anniversary is being celebrated in Sheffield



with renewed appreciation of art and nature.

However, mostly my conversation with Clive was not about these utopian projects of the past, it was about the future. Each thread of our conversation ended up in the here and now: how we live well today and into the future.

We briefly questioned the contemporary relevance of a Victorian man but the answer was obvious: the motivations of those on Waterloo Bridge, and the chants of the school strikers, they are the same as John Ruskin's.

Ruskin's most famous quote, 'There is no wealth but life', was recently stencilled across a huge billboard in Walkley, just next door to where the museum once

stood. This was not a commission by the guild, but graffitied there by Extinction Rebellion Sheffield.

Perhaps the fundamental difference between Ruskin's time and now is this: urgency. But in our urgency, we must remember and acknowledge that we are not the first to argue for these things—we stand on solid shoulders here in Sheffield.

This is the inspiration for A Future Fantastic festival which will take place at Theatre Delicatessen in July, 200 years after Ruskin's birth, as part of the Ruskin in Sheffield bicentenary celebrations.

For the festival, we have curated a series of events, each designed to start conversations based on the ideas of

Ruskin and focused on the future. And, taking our queue from Ruskin himself, we have mixed together talks, performance, installations and practical workshops—often within the same event—as we acknowledge that reflection, conversation and exchange have many different starting points.

At the end of our conversation, having inevitably diverged toward Brexit, inequality and tree felling, Clive returned us to Ruskin, picking out a quote which summarised the motivation behind the Guild of St George, and perhaps, could just as easily explain our current need for A Future Fantastic in Sheffield.

"I have listened to many in-

genious persons, who say we are better off now than ever we were before. I do not know how well off we were before, but I know positively that many very deserving persons have great difficulty in living in these improved circumstances and that we cannot be called, as a nation, well off whilst so many of us are living in beggary. For my own part, I will put up with this state of things, passively, not an hour longer" (from *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, 1871).

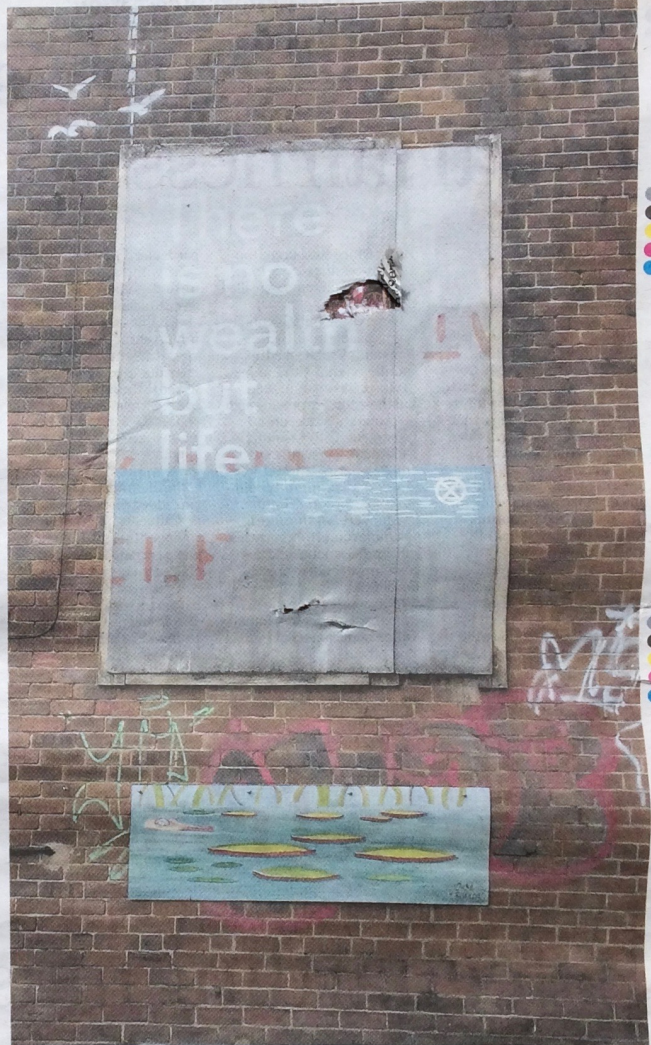
Snippets from my conversation with Clive and many other fascinating insights from other thinkers, activists and artists can be found as part of *The People's Palace of Possibility*, The Bare Project's



Using a clay table to explore ideas



Cartography is used in a display for A Future Fantastic



Extinction Rebellion graffiti quoting John Ruskin's most famous saying, next to the former base of his museum

central installation piece for A Future Fantastic.

For information about the festival and tickets visit www.theatredele.co.uk/blogs/future-fantastic.

The John Ruskin: Art & Wonder exhibition can also be seen at Millennium Gallery until September 15.

■ Malaika Cunningham is the artistic director of The Bare Project, who are co-curating A Future Fantastic Festival. She regularly works with other theatre companies including Invisible Flock and Cardboard Citizens. She was a founder of the Sheffield Creative Guild and is studying for a PhD at the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (University of Leeds).



St George's museum in Walkley



Tying a tag on to a bandstand where people can contribute thoughts and ideas