

The History of the Ruskin Society

Key dates

1878: First Ruskin Society formed in Manchester

1896: J.H.Whitehouse is founder member of Ruskin Society in Birmingham

1900: Ruskin Union formed in London

1919: Ruskin Centenary Council co-ordinates a year of commemorative events

1931: Ruskin Society formed at a meeting at the Royal Society of Arts

1932: First Annual Birthday Dinner on 8 February held at English Speaking Union

1985: Foundation of the Ruskin Society of London by Lord Lloyd of Kilgerran

1997: Formation of the present Ruskin Society

The Ruskin Society, in its present form, was founded in 1997, under the chairmanship of Sir Richard Body, MP, to bring together enthusiasts of the Victorian art and social critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900). The Society hosts a programme of lectures, meetings, visits and events, mostly held in London, to discuss Ruskin's life and work. The anniversary of Ruskin's birthday (February 8) is marked each year with a celebratory dinner and lecture, a revival of a tradition established by an earlier Ruskin Society.

1878: The first Ruskin Society (The Society of the Rose) formed in Manchester

The earliest Ruskin Society, known also as the Society of the Rose at Ruskin's suggestion, had been formed in Manchester in December 1878. Branches were established in other cities, including Glasgow and Aberdeen (1879), Sheffield, Birkenhead and London (1881), Liverpool (1883), Paisley, Douglas (Isle of Man) and Birmingham (1896). Many leading figures lectured at the societies, and issues of national significance as well as local interest were debated at speaker-meetings that continued late into the first decade of the twentieth century.

An effort to expand the societies' influence was made by means of extension lectures, which gave members the opportunity to address co-operative societies, labour and youth clubs, working-men's organisations and other groups. Several of the societies, notably those in Glasgow and Liverpool, engaged in practical works to improve social conditions and enhance civil society, in an effort to promote Ruskin's values at a time when Ruskin himself had been forced by deteriorating mental and physical health to withdraw from public life. As a token of their esteem, the societies co-operated in preparing an illuminated birthday address. The finest of these was presented to Ruskin in 1899, when he turned 80, by a group including a young John Howard Whitehouse, who visited him at Brantwood, his home overlooking Coniston Water. Whitehouse later purchased the property, opening it as an international memorial to Ruskin in 1934.

John Howard Whitehouse (1873-1955)

Born in Birmingham, John Howard Whitehouse was a life-long devotee of Ruskin. He read Ruskin as an evening-class student, and was a founding member of Birmingham's Ruskin Society in 1896. He was its secretary, and later the editor and publisher of its influential journal, *Saint George* (1898-1911). His career placed him at the heart of organisations where Ruskin's influence was keenly felt: at Cadbury Bros., the Carnegie Trust in Dunfermline, the University Settlements in the East Ends of London and Manchester, and even in Parliament, where he represented the constituents of Mid-Lanark, on a Liberal ticket, from 1910 to 1918. He was an insatiable collector of books, prints, artworks, manuscripts and everything connected with Ruskin. For most of the twentieth century, these

treasures were displayed in the specially built Ruskin Galleries at Bembridge School, the school for boys Whitehouse had founded on the Isle of Wight. For nearly forty years, the Galleries were diligently and expertly curated by James S. Dearden, a former pupil at the school, and a prominent Ruskin scholar who is a member of the Ruskin Society today.

It was largely owing to Whitehouse's influence and energy that Bournemouth was selected in 1902 as the location for a memorial hall - the Ruskin Hall - that acted as a village art gallery and library. (It is now the Bournemouth Centre for Visual Arts.) Nearly three weeks after Ruskin's death (which took place on 20 January, 1900) the Ruskin Union was formed in London to co-ordinate efforts to mark his death and commemorate his life. It endured for more than a decade. An annual lecture was held, and Whitehouse played an increasingly prominent role in its organisation. He also became a Companion of Ruskin's utopian Guild of St George, and eventually a Trustee.

Ruskin Society revived owing to the Ruskin Centenary Council

Before the First World War, all the Ruskin societies and the Ruskin Union (but not the Guild) had ceased their activities. But in 1919, the centenary year of Ruskin's birth, Whitehouse co-ordinated a series of celebratory lectures and exhibitions, calling on many of his numerous eminent friends to serve the Ruskin Centenary Council. On 20 June, 1920 Whitehouse informed his colleagues that it had been decided 'to continue the Council in being for the purpose of holding each year on Ruskin's birthday a lecture or some other commemorative gathering.' No such plan

was realised until February 8, 1932, when the new, national Ruskin Society met for the first time.

1931: The Ruskin Society formed with J.H. Whitehouse as President

Whitehouse's Ruskin Society was established at a meeting at the Royal Society of Arts in December 1931. *The Times* reported on December 22 that: 'An annual dinner will be held on the anniversary of Ruskin's birth (February 8, 1819),' a tradition which is upheld today. It went on: 'Plans are under consideration for promoting the study of his works. Lectures by eminent men will be given before the society, and exhibitions of his works will be held.' The newspaper reported further that the honorary secretary was Mr Neil Rocke, with Whitehouse elected President.

In reality, the Ruskin Society met each year to celebrate the anniversary of Ruskin's birth. A dinner, held at a London club, was followed by half a dozen or so short speeches by eminent men acknowledging their debt to the Master.

8 February 1932: First Annual Birthday Dinner

Among the speakers at the first annual Ruskin birthday dinner, which took place at the English-Speaking Union, an international educational charity based at Dartmouth House, was the Union's founder, Sir Evelyn Wrench (1882-1966) editor of the *Spectator* (and a companion of the Guild of St George); the artist Sir William Rothenstein (1874-1945); the Liberal MP Isaac Foot (1880-1960); and the historian,

Dr G. P. Gooch (1873-1968). Over the years, addresses from the birthday dinners were transcribed for posterity and many of them were published. *

Several public figures agreed to serve the Society as Vice-Presidents: Wrench; Rothenstein; Michael Sadler (1861-1943) the educationist; Dr Josiah Oldfield (1863-1953) the lawyer, physician, writer on health and committed vegetarian who studied under Ruskin at Oxford; Albert Rutherston (1881-1953); the artist; Kenneth (later Lord) Clark (1903-1983) then the youngest ever Director of the National Gallery; the veteran war journalist Henry Nevinson (1856-1941); and Lord Conway of Allington (1856-1937) the former Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge and a Unionist MP.

Although the birthday dinners were suspended during the Second World War, the Society resumed its meetings between 1946 and 1953, the year Whitehouse turned 80. That year saw the last of this series of birthday dinners, as Whitehouse was struck in the eye by a cricket ball at Bembridge and never recovered his health, dying two years later.

1985: The Ruskin Society of London founded by Lord Lloyd of Kilgerran

Bembridge School continued to be a centre of Ruskin enthusiasm after Whitehouse's death. As a result of the efforts of Rhys Gerran Lloyd, Lord Lloyd of Kilgerran QC (1907-1991), who had briefly been a teacher at Bembridge, and had become a prominent Liberal, the Ruskin Society of London was formed in 1985, at a meeting at the Royal Institution. The Whitehouse Collection was removed from

Bembridge, which closed, to the purpose-built Ruskin Library at Lancaster University in 1997, the year the present Ruskin Society was founded...

The present Ruskin Society was formed as a result of - FILL IN HERE

Scholars, enthusiasts and invited guests from around the world continue through the Society to discuss and celebrate Ruskin's life and work in the twenty-first century.

Stuart Eagles

*See, for example, *To the Memory of Ruskin* (1934), *Ruskin: Renascence* (1946) and *Ruskin: Prophet of the Good Life* (1948) (pictured).

Further Reading

- Dearden, James S., *Ruskin, Bembridge and Brantwood: the Growth of the Whitehouse Collection* (Ryburn, 1994).
- Dearden, James S., "Whitehouse, (John) Howard (1873-1955)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, first published 2004; online edn, Jan 2010, 1455 words, with portrait illustration (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/52644>)
- Eagles, Stuart, "The Ruskin Diaspora: A History of the Ruskin Society" in idem, *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920*, pp. 148-198 (Oxford UP, 2011).
- Eagles, Stuart, "The Wilderness Years: Ruskin's Influence and the Ruskin Society, 1931-1955" in *The Friends of Ruskin's Brantwood Newsletter* (Spring 2009) pp. 9-14.
- Wildman, Stephen, *Keeper of the Flame: John Howard Whitehouse, 1873-1955* (Ruskin Library, 2005) (with contributions by Stuart Eagles and James S. Dearden).

Useful Links

- The text of the 1991 Ruskin Society of London lecture, “Ruskin and Mountain Landscape” by Gordon Stainforth.

(<http://www.gordonstainforth.co.uk/eyehill/pdfs/RuskinLecture1991.pdf>)