

# Hall's well that ends well as listed site opens its doors

Almost 1,000 visitors attend open-day celebration of Meersbrook Hall after community takeover to create workspaces, playgroup and café

## SPECIAL REPORT

By DAVID BOCKING  
@shefftelegraph@sheffieldnewsletters.co.uk  
@shefftelegraph

"You must love the creation you work in the midst of," wrote John Ruskin in 1859, advice not noticeably heeded by Sheffield Council officers of the late 20th century who inserted a series of plasterboard cubicles into the former Ruskin Museum in Meersbrook Park. Meersbrook Hall, a Grade II listed building, dates back to the 18th century at least, said Friends of Meersbrook Hall heritage lead Rhiannon Thomas. Possibly the estate of a gentleman farmer in the 1700s, the hall was expanded by a series of wealthy owners until Sheffield Corporation bought the building and park in the 1880s, before installing the Ruskin Museum in 1890. An older visitor to the Heritage Open Day at the hall on Sunday remembered



Artist Russell Stearman of Insurrection Comic sketching the hall, above; Will Ferraby carves a wooden knife with Emily Buykx, aged eight



visiting the museum as a schoolgirl in the 1940s, and being particularly delighted by the stuffed peacock in the window, said to be a relic of a previous owner. There were almost 1,000 visitors to the Celebrating Meersbrook Hall event, many of whom were excited to hear how the hall has finally been brought back into line with Ruskin's vision, which did not include plasterboard. "This building had been utterly vandalised," said Andy Jackson angrily, in a magnolia corridor. The city council's parks department moved into the hall in the 1950s, and eventually moved out earlier this year due to a council 'cost

management' exercise. Andy, manager of Heeley Development Trust, stepped in after meetings of hundreds of locals called for the Heeley and Meersbrook community to take over the hall, rather than it being sold. The strength of feeling, and the interest in the building and what it has to offer, leads Andy and many of his colleagues to believe the ideals of Ruskin are as relevant now as ever. "It's damn well common sense," he said. "You can't have a city that's just houses and roads, you need space where people can go outside and meet and breathe and talk to each other. A city without that is a city without quality."

Ruth Nutter from the



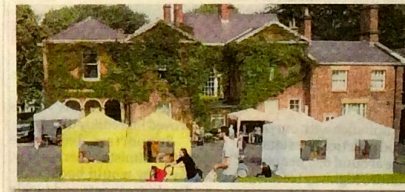
Jasmine and Otis Stevens, four, in the walled garden.

Guild of St George and producer of the Ruskin in Sheffield annual programme of events, is equally enthusiastic about the city's grass of

Ruskindom. "We're joining up with Heeley Development Trust and the Friends of Meersbrook Hall to 'make better lives' in this community," she said, citing one of the great man's guiding principles. "There were Turners and Carpaccios here, and imagine how amazing it would have been for the local community to walk round here, visit the displays inside and then look out onto the park, all in your neighbourhood. There were 61,000 visitors in the first two years. Now, what we want to do is to use the history of the building to help the future of it, and it's important people understand the Ruskinian values embedded here of arts and



Sarah (Fauographic) working on a heron mural watched by Geraldine Thornton, right



Meersbrook Hall, above left; Harriet French choosing ribbons with mum Naomi Benoist

crafts and access to nature." Certainly the families wrapping trees, carving wooden knives and playing in the sunny park were enjoying those values, as Ruth's year of Ruskin promotion concluded. This year's events had been a 'whirlwind' she said, as the 'Make Good Livelihoods' programme combined with the city's Year of Making to get everyone talking about craft, art and gardening and discovering people building solar panels to power their sheds, said Ruth. The whirlwind of the hall's ownership has also been resolved, with Heeley Development Trust and The Friends of Meersbrook Hall signing a 'licence to occupy' with the council, and becoming

the new managers of the building as a 'community hub.' Adult learning classes now run from the former museum, and a Heritage Lottery Fund bid for £2 million is going in soon to reverse the plasterboard and associated damage and renew the building as a heritage resource for the city," said Andy Jackson. If successful, it will be at least two years before work can start on the building, he added, but in the meantime Meersbrook Hall will at least be occupied and providing a service to local people. The longer-term plan is to rent rooms in the restored 'heritage resource' to local writers, content providers, humorists, craftspeople and artists - this century's 'little

masters' as Andy described them. "I think it's more important than ever to do stuff like this," said Ruth Nutter. "If you look around the world, there's a lot of breaking up of things, so to put on an event where people are pulling together to create genuine wealth and prosperity in the way Ruskin meant it feels very heartening." "You've got to be optimistic," said Andy Jackson, in the midst of adult learning students. "You've got to spread a message of hope, and that working together is the way forward." More info and to sign up as a Friend of Meersbrook Hall: <http://meersbrookhall.org.uk>