

FRIENDS OF GORDON RUSSELL DESIGN MUSEUM

Newsletter no.1 Spring 2017

WELCOME

The Trustees launched a Friends Group on 7th April 2017 to spread awareness of the museum and of Gordon Russell's design philosophy. Not only will the Friends support the museum financially but will act as ambassadors, lobby on its behalf and help provide a resource of contacts and information.

A new website will also be launched in April (www.gordonrusselldesignmuseum.org) where Friends will be able to download booking forms for planned outings and other activities. Three visits have already been arranged for 2017: the first visit will be in June when the Friends will visit Madesfield Court near Malvern to see the Arts and Crafts aspects of the interior, including a wonderful library designed by C.R. Ashbee; a rare surviving example of an Edwardian suburban villa, with a seven acre garden inspired by Gertrude Jekyll, is the subject of an outing in July. See Christopher Hotten's article below about what Friends can expect from their visit to Winterbourne House and Gardens. The third outing will take place in September when the Friends will visit Buscot Park where they will be given a private tour of the ancestral home of Lord Faringdon. There will also be an opportunity to see the extraordinary Portwell Bench in the nearby village, and the day will conclude with a visit to Coxwell Barn, which was much loved and much visited by William Morris.

Further information on the Friends can be found on the new website or by writing to Christopher Hotten, Friends Organiser, c/o Gordon Russell Design Museum, 15 Russell Square, Broadway, Worcs WR12 7AP or email: friends@gordonrusselldesignmuseum.org

Focus on Friends' Visit to Winterbourne House and Gardens

On Wednesday 19th July 2017 twenty fortunate Friends will have the opportunity to visit a rare surviving example of an Arts and Crafts suburban villa. Winterbourne House, now part of Birmingham University's campus and the Historic Houses Association, was built for the industrialist John Nettlefold in 1902-04. *Country Life* reported that the architect, and a champion of the Arts and Crafts style, Joseph Lancaster Ball had 'devised it on those simple and reasonable lines which so surely achieve success, while there is everywhere evidence of thoughtful design, expressed in a reticent way'. A seven acre garden was created in the grounds by Mrs Nettlefold inspired by Gertrude Jekyll's books and designs.

Ball most probably received the commission to design Winterbourne House following his work on the Eagle Star Insurance Building (1899-1900) in Colmore Row, Birmingham for Joseph Chamberlain as Nettlefold's wife, Margaret was a niece of this prominent figure. Lead architect on this project was William Lethaby (1857-1931). For the sake of his family in Birmingham, Ball declined Lethaby's offer of a partnership in his London office.



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Those of us blessed by living in the Cotswolds will perhaps have visited All Saints Church in Brockhampton, Herefordshire designed by Lethaby which can truly be said to be a 'total work of art'. Sir Gordon Russell noted, in his biography *Designers Trade*, that many of those who had been inspired by William Morris to produce interesting furniture had trained as architects. Lethaby received particular praise: 'Art is not a sauce added to ordinary cooking. It is cooking itself, if it is good'.



Lethaby's influence can be seen in Ball's plan for Winterbourne. The external facades are all of brick – there is no stonework – and the gables are high and pointed (see Phillada Ballard, ed, *Birmingham's Victorian and Edwardian Architects*, 2009). A monogrammed plaque with the initials JSN and the date 1904 can be seen on the first floor ceiling, and a full length portrait of Margaret Nettlefold by John Listom Byam (1904) hung at the foot of the staircase.

Appointed President of the Birmingham Architectural Association in 1906 Ball's design for Winterbourne was well received, featuring in *Country Life* in 1911. He continued to design one-off houses and this brings us neatly back to the Cotswolds, and to Broadway in particular.

In 1909 he designed and commenced building Furze Hill, on the escarpment above Willersey, for a Mr Hookham. More in the style of a small medieval manor house Furze Hill soon changed its name to Foxhill Manor. Today it is a 'boutique' hotel and part of the Farncombe Estate. From the 1930's the house was in the ownership of the Maudslay family and home to



Squadron Leader Henry Maudslay, the youngest of the Dambuster pilots to complete their mission. He reached his target and deployed his bouncing bomb but sadly on the return flight to England his Lancaster was shot down and he lost his life.

There will be much to ponder on our visit to Winterbourne House.

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MY FAVOURITE PIECE



Ray Leigh, former Design Director, Managing Director and Chairman of Gordon Russell Ltd, and founder Trustee of the Gordon Russell Design Museum explains why he chose two plan chests, designed by Gordon Russell in 1927 as his favourite piece on display in the museum.

It might seem that the obvious choice would be the Paris Cabinet. It is, without doubt, a quite superb Cabinet which represents the very best of the Arts & Crafts Movement in terms of design and craftsmanship. It never fails to give pleasure when talking to visitors about the skills deployed and the materials. Winner of a Gold

Medal at the Paris Exhibition in 1925 just 3 years after the workshops first opened, it was a triumph for Gordon.

A close contender for my favourite piece was the Glove Box, recently acquired from America which had been lost to us after it had been exhibited in London in 1992. For it to have surfaced in a `yard sale` is remarkable. The inlay is a delight, and much admired for the quality of workmanship.

However, on reflection I think the two plan chests, designed by Gordon in 1927, when seen together are quite outstanding and are my favoured choice. The robust use of solid English Oak, the exposed dovetails which with age have become tactile to the touch, and the rhythm of the modelled handles which combine so well with the numbering and the touch of background colour, all combine to make this a splendid piece.

It always gives me pleasure to open the drawers and to be reminded of the 1,000 design drawings they once contained of furniture, metal and glass designed by Gordon. These chests ensured that we retain to this day every one of his drawings. For someone who left school at the age of 15, the drawings themselves are outstanding. It is without doubt a veritable treasure chest!

I also reflect on his achievement as a Designer, averaging ten designs every month for eight years from 1922-1930, whilst building a respected Company employing 100 of the finest craftsmen in Britain. For me these plans chests embrace every aspect of a quite remarkable man, who I knew as a friend and a mentor.

