

Annual Report Elizabeth Gaskell's House 2019

2019 was another successful year in the life of the House. As well as the regular opening three days a week, we continued to welcome groups from far and near. The well-established programme of events, included the popular afternoon teas, sketching workshops, weaving workshops and photography workshops.

Naturally as a literary house, talks featured extensively in the programme, and they were further developed with free talks, added to encourage visitors at quieter times. They were mostly on literary or historical topics, with one talk, *Peterloo 1819-2019*, celebrating the 200th anniversary year of Peterloo. We were fortunate to have Professor Robert Poole giving the talk. Robert has written extensively on Peterloo, including two books; and he is a member of the Society and Friend of E.G.H.

The monthly Victorian Book Club, run by Dr Karen Laird, is regular feature and always popular. There is also the Sewing Bee which meets monthly now and has made many items for the House as well as the marvellous Manchester Quilt.

The House has received further help from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, in the form of a Resilience Heritage Fund grant. This has enabled the creation of two new posts, House Assistant and Wedding and Conference Coordinator, which have been filled by Dympna Gould and Ellie Algieri respectively. As part of her role Dympna has taken over from Arthur Roberts' responsibilities as volunteer coordinator, and she is already making her mark. She has organised several outings for the volunteers, to Manchester Cathedral, Holy Name Church and farther afield, to Sablesbury Hall; all with a view to giving them experiences in other visitor attractions. Ellie has been very successful in achieving many weddings and room hires.

Volunteers play an important part in the smooth running of the House, acting as room stewards, tour guides, working in the tearoom and gardening. Behind the scenes there are groups who are involved in conservation cleaning, cataloguing, food hygiene, fundraising and book repair. The success and hard work of the volunteer team was acknowledged in June 2019 with a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award that can be given to a voluntary group. Representatives of the volunteer group attended the award ceremony at Gorton Monastery to receive the award. More recognition followed when in July the hardworking gardening team won the Britain in Bloom Silver Gilt Award for 2019. No wonder they received an award, for the gardens are beautiful and frequently commented upon, by visitors to the House.

One of the most popular events of the year was the *Sound of Servants - the Musical*, which was developed by members of the Herizon Women's Group, theatre practitioners enJOY arts (who were both based at the House) and professional singer-songwriter Claire Mooney. It was performed promenade style and explored the stories of servants who worked at the house, bringing them to life through drama and original songs. There were four performances at the house, all of which sold out. The musical connected nicely with the *Servants Exhibition* which was on at the time.

After the Servants Exhibition closed, National Lottery Heritage Fund, once again supported the House, by awarding a *Sharing Heritage Project* grant, which resulted in a new exhibition, *My dear Mr Ruskin... Friendship, Inspiration and Scandal*. Celebrating the Ruskin bicentenary, it explores the friendship between Ruskin and the Gaskell family. The exhibition opened on 18 July 2019 and is still on.

The grant also funded an observational drawing project with local community group, TLC St Luke's, and salary costs for the Event Coordinator, Rachel Sills, for her to deliver creative writing

workshops and family activities. The family sessions which took place during school holidays proved very popular and the creative writing sessions were also much enjoyed by the participants.

The Friends of Elizabeth Gaskell's House also marked Ruskin's bicentenary, with a trip to Brantwood, Ruskin's former home overlooking Coniston Water. It was one of several events put on by the Friends, to raise money for the House (although the trip was not a fund raiser).

In March there was a wonderful talk and tour of the period rooms by Dorian Church, the curator responsible for period interiors, which are so loved visitors to the House.

There was a special fund-raising performance of *The Sound of Servants - The Musical* on Saturday 27 April for Friends, where tea and homemade cakes were provided.

The second Friends' Open Day took place on 2nd June and was once again a great success, with a mixture of talks, a garden tour and lunch; an added attraction this year were the cello recitals by talented young musician Harriet Taylor. There was also had the exciting announcement about the Volunteers Award, already mentioned.

In October Florence Nightingale was the subject of a fascinating talk by Aled Jones, which traced the life of this extraordinary woman. This was after a tasty chilli supper, cooked by our talented chefs Christine Willgoose and Pauline Eyre!

The Friends Christmas event this year was a little more low key than last year, as the Victorian Society asked the Friends to repeat the very successful Victorian Christmas event from last year, and of course this entailed a lot of work for those involved. So, on 30 November there was a Friend's Christmas Social with a mini Christmas market, gifts made by the Sewing Bee and a second-hand book sale. There was mulled wine and mince pies, and Christmas Carols in the Drawing room accompanied by Robert Nicholls on piano. A good time was had by all!

The Friends raise a considerable amount of money from events and subscriptions; however, we would welcome more Friends to join us, as the year ahead presents new challenges for the House. Having said that, I know that very many members of the Gaskell Society are already Friends, and without them the House would never have been saved, let alone brought to the wonderful state that it is in today.

Before I finish, I must mention, what for me was the most exciting event of the year, the launch of the Bedroom Project. When one of the tenants vacated the room that they were hiring, it was decided not to seek new tenants but to change around the rooms on the first floor, to allow one room to be restored as Elizabeth's bedroom. Work began to prepare the room in November and plans were made to launch a fund-raising appeal in the New Year. Something to look forward to in the future.

And finally, I would like to give a special thanks to Fran Twinn and her successors, Jenny Keaveney and Marie Moxon, who run the London branch of the Society, for all their members' help they give to the House from afar! Indeed thanks to all members of the Gaskell Society for all your support, which will be needed even in the year to come!

Ann O'Brien
Trustee of Elizabeth Gaskell's House