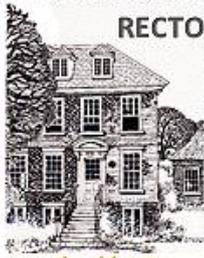


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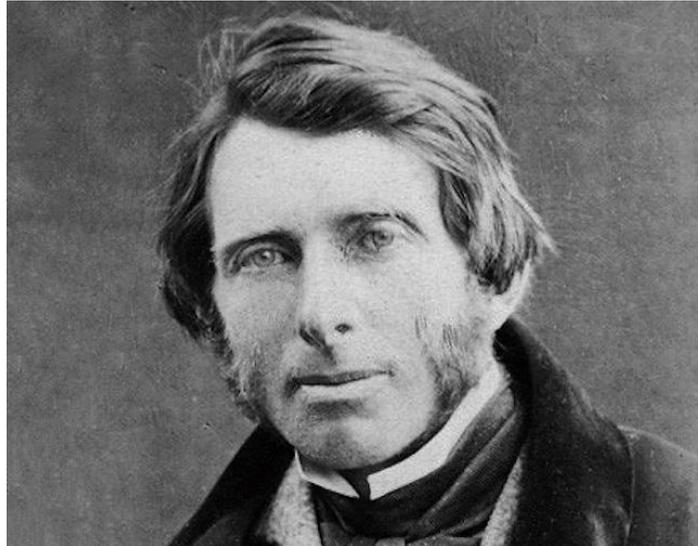


NEW VOICES

In response to our request for copy for the newsletter, Nigel Andrew sent us a piece he wrote in September 1973 for the then County Post-Times Herald newspaper. His article was about John Ruskin and Margaret's Well, in which Nigel asked for the pond to be restored. His plea fell on deaf ears.

You may remember that our May 2020 issue contained a reference to Ruskin and Margaret's Pool. Nigel's article is far more informative and it gives insight into Ruskin's passionate beliefs and endeavours in the 1870s. It is well worth a second showing. Unfortunately, because of abstraction, the water table is much lower today so the more environmentally friendly 'wilding' of Margaret's Well might be the only option - a return to the simple and natural.

John Ruskin



The Well without water - the garden without flowers

'The whole story of John Ruskin's involvement in the 'beautification' of the Well, and of Carshalton's century-old indifference to his efforts – is at once interesting and saddening, and demands that, for several very real reasons, something should now be done about Margaret's Well.

Of course hardly anybody actually reads Ruskin anymore; his difficult style and unrelenting seriousness are off-putting to the modern reader. But there has been in recent years a widespread revival of interest in this remarkable man, who in his day was considered one of Europe's very greatest critics and moralists. The renewed interest is largely centred on his social criticism, his impassioned onslaught on the industrial society, his expressions of the profound despair that was to culminate for him in 10 years of total insanity and silence. It was a despair at what he saw around him, what the disease of industrialism had done to human society and the human soul – and to the face of

the earth. A century before the 'environment' cult, Ruskin had named the enemies, and sensed with terrible immediacy the disaster which must result from the continued ruthless exploitation of man and nature in the name of 'progress'. His message could hardly be more relevant or important than it is today. It is a powerful poetic expression of those truths which have only in very recent years dawned on the scientists and specialists. Margaret's Well should be seen, then, as a memorial to a prophet – and its present condition as a small, but sad, bearing out of his own prophecies.

Ruskin first expressed his feelings about Carshalton Pool in the introduction to the *Crown of Wild Olive* (1869). Here, in passionate and sonorous prose, he describes the beauty of the Wandle springs 20 years previously and contrasts it to their present 'insolent defiling – by the human herds that drink of them.' The passage should be read in its entirety to gain the full force of Ruskin's indignation at the state of

the pools which he knew and loved from his childhood visits. But he realised that mere writing – even at this level – was not enough, and he decided to do something about it himself. The story of what happened then can be read, with some justice, as the inevitable failure of idealism when it meddles in the affairs of the ‘real’ world. Certainly there is something sadly comic about it.

The first plan for the restored Margaret’s Well – by the architect George Gilbert Scott – involved an elaborate fountain of Italian marble. Fortunately, however, Ruskin favoured native stone and natural forms; so he had seven tons of boulders bought down from Lake Coniston and arranged and planted out by his own gardener. By now he had had the waters cleansed and the bottom of the pool concreted, but dirty water was still being washed off the road into it. Ruskin wanted the site protected by a wooden fence, but his agent in Carshalton insisted on iron railings, claiming that the village’s population of vandals would make short work of anything flimsier. Despite Ruskin’s angry protest: ‘I hate everything of iron as if it were made of dead men’s bones,’ the area was quickly enclosed with iron railings.

Perhaps the saddest part of the whole affair, though, is the history of the stone tablet. To begin with, the inscription intended by Ruskin as a dedication to his mother as well as to God – was altered and abridged without the author’s knowledge. Then the tablet was almost immediately taken down from its place on the wall of the old police station – apparently by an over-officious policeman – and removed to a builder’s yard opposite. Here it was later spotted by a local property owner who thought it would look good in his garden.

So it no doubt did, until the Council reclaimed it some years later, taking it away to their own yard. The stone received its ultimate indignity when it ended up being used in a pavement repair on Carshalton Road. But fortunately the council’s workmen set it with its inscription uppermost, it was quickly noticed and after considerable public outcry, was removed, re-inscribed and restored. But for those workmen’s remarkable tactlessness – or foresight? – The tablet would never have been seen again.

But to return to the 1870s – Ruskin’s disillusionment with his project was soon to be completed. One day his agent, mismanaging the sluices, inundated a neighbouring householder’s garden with a sea of mud, and according to one report, the cottagers’ living-rooms were also being flooded. But even without such catastrophes, Ruskin had too much to contend with – to the villagers, the pool was still a convenient refuse tip, the local job-master continued to wash his cabs in it, and it was still being polluted by dirty water from the road. Ruskin sacked his agent and ordered the stone tablet to be removed – not knowing that it already had been. He realised that his vision of beauty had come to nothing, destroyed by the ineptitude of his agent, the obstinacy of the Road Commissioners (who would not divert the road away from the muddy pool), and the massive indifference of all concerned – especially the villagers of Carshalton. His practical involvement in the scheme ceased forthwith.

The memory of the Wandle springs, however, remained a source of inspiration. The first section of his autobiography *Praeterita* (written in his last intervals of lucidity) is entitled *The Springs of the Wandle*, and in it Ruskin speaks lovingly of childhood pleasures in Carshalton and Beddington and the other villages of the area. Despite everything, Carshalton still had a special place in his heart. But what of Ruskin’s place in Carshalton’s heart? Yes there is Ruskin Road and the Ruskin Hall, but Margaret’s Well remains the only viable and appropriate memorial. I say ‘viable’ because now it is viable.

In the 1870s it could not be a thing of beauty for the simple reason that it served, and had to serve the practical needs of those who lived around it – in the course of which it was inevitably polluted. In the 1970s this is obviously no longer the case. If the Well was filled again with clean water there would be no threat of pollution from household slops, or washing or muddy roads. Potentially, Margaret’s Well is one of Carshalton’s greatest beauties. Its charm has not been destroyed – rather, it has been allowed to go to waste. Cleared of rubbish, refilled and replanted, it could now be, and remain, what Ruskin intended it to be. Margaret’s Well must be restored – not only in reparation for past indifference, and not only because Carshalton

would gain (or rather regain) a thing of considerable beauty, but because it is a unique memorial to a great man. Perhaps with the ravages of the twentieth century around us, we

have begun to appreciate the importance of that man's message. Certainly, we of Carshalton are uniquely placed to respond to it.'

Nigel Andrew 1973



THE NEW YEAR - 2021

We all fervently hope 2021 will be a GOOD YEAR, with no nasty surprises but how will the Old Rectory fare? Will the council be tempted to offload the house as quickly as it can now the country is up to its ears in debt? Perhaps, but on the other hand, the long 2020 hiatus might have softened the powers-that-be towards our Grade II listed property. They may now see it as an asset worth keeping and investing in for the future. After all, if all our treasured possessions are let go, there will be nothing left for our children's children to enjoy.*

Thank you for your ongoing support and enthusiasm for the Old Rectory. We look forward to a more 'normal' year next year and hope finally to be able to meet you again at one of our events.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

We'd like to hear from you. Your comments and suggestions would be very welcome.

Email: savetheoldrectory@gmail.com

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