

## Wordsworth Grasmere, Dove Cottage, Grasmere, Cumbria

Romantic poet William Wordsworth and the land that inspired him are vividly brought to life. By *Lynda Jackson*

# Poetry in motion



Above: exhibits give visitors a real connection to Wordsworth and his life

Right: the garden at Dove Cottage seen through the window



Dead poets can be a hard sell. Arriving at Wordsworth Grasmere, I wonder if the museum team might have shied away from the poetry as “too difficult” or have gone for a Disney-style retelling of the romantic movement of which the poet William Wordsworth was a part. Perhaps a tempting thought, given the global appeal of this corner of the Lake District.

I step into the famous Dove Cottage for some “plain living and high thinking” (Wordsworth’s sonnet London, 1802 is quoted in the introductory film) and my concerns dissolve into the early 19th-century atmosphere. The candlelit

Right: Wordsworth’s home was a place for ‘plain living and high thinking’

Below right: exterior view of Dove Cottage



kitchen with teapot and sugar tongs left out on the poet’s original table give the impression that Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy have just left and are now striding around Grasmere lake before they return home to pick up their quills again. The site has been curated to the finest detail, but it still feels like a family home, albeit one that belongs to one of the greatest writers in English literature.

Wordsworth had no dedicated working space and wrote all around the house. A soundscape brings occasional child’s laughter or noise of housekeeping, while facsimile manuscripts (thankfully with transcriptions) lie





ALL PHOTOS GARETH GARDNER

everywhere. The poetry manuscripts give a flavour of the writer at work while the journal entries evoke life at the cottage. I look out from the window across the lakes and read Dorothy's journal describing the swallows nesting on the ledge.

One of the strengths of the redevelopment is to highlight the two women in Wordsworth's life: Dorothy and his wife Mary. Both copied his manuscripts out, and the former's journal provided inspiration for his work, most famously the "host of golden Daffodils" in *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*.

The visitor experience is relaxed and authentic –

Wordsworth's original furniture and period items sit cheek by jowl with new pieces handcrafted by contemporary local makers. It is noticeable that there are no interpretive labels or "don't touch" signs anywhere in Dove Cottage. The tension between visitor experience and conservation is a real challenge in historic houses and the approach here feels like a happy medium that could blaze a trail for other museums.

Head out into the garden and the message is clear – this isn't a memorial to a long-gone poet, it's an opportunity to share that same sense of place. Wordsworth's words are everywhere; written on





Above: the main colour in Gallery One is inspired by slate from the local quarry Loughrigg Fell

Right: the museum brings the outside in to highlight Wordsworth's love of nature

garden slates, carved into the ground, on gallery walls and used very effectively in the introductory film.

The museum building is in stark contrast to Dove Cottage – transporting visitors back to the 21st century with slick design, stunning lighting and clever use of audiovisual elements. The four galleries are thematic, but each one takes a chronological approach to explore Wordsworth's life and love of nature, his revolutionary masterpiece *The Prelude* and his Lakeland inspiration. An immersive film completes the four sections.

One of the museum's most successful elements is the feeling of bringing the outside in. On entering, I catch a glimpse of film showing green ferns and running water and there is intermittent bird song and poetry throughout. The space is split by two huge windows revealing the landscape, while steps lead up onto a platform for views across the valley.

My favourite objects were Wordsworth's walking stick and the family postbag.



The stick immediately conjures up images of the poet roaming the landscape for inspiration while the mailbag gives a nod to the importance of correspondence with his fellow writer and founder of the romantic movement, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth's thick glasses and bluestone (to rub on his inflamed eyes) show the reality of his poor eyesight

– what would it be like for a writer who could not easily read his own words?

Much of Wordsworth's work is about what it is to be human, the natural world and childhood. The most poignant display is that of the letter written in 1812 by Dorothy to tell William and Mary the terrible news of their three-year-old daughter: "Catherine died this

#### Focus on Diverse voices

Reimagining Wordsworth was a collaborative endeavour and it has been greatly enhanced by the diverse range of people who have helped to bring it about.

Visitors to the museum will hear, alongside noted actor Ian McKellen and poet laureate Simon Armitage, the voices of people for whom Wordsworth has been a source of inspiration or comfort – teenage members of a poetry writing group, bereaved parents, and people living with disability.

The Woodland, a new outdoor space, has been opened up by young people from Barrow-in-Furness and University of Cumbria students.

A sound installation is voiced by residents of Grasmere and Langdale. Local volunteers welcome visitors, animate the galleries and maintain the new Sensory Garden in which an artistic interpretation of the Wordsworths' moss hut offers a template for schools and community groups to create their own Wordsworthian spaces for conversation, creativity and reflection.

Still Glides the Stream, the opening exhibition, brings together local artists, history societies and primary schools in an exploration of Wordsworth's 1820 collection of sonnets, *The River Duddon*.

It will be followed by an exhibition to mark Dorothy Wordsworth's 250th birthday that will include the perspectives of refugees from parts of the Middle East and Africa and members of the Barrow Blind Society.

Contributions from these and many other project partners have helped achieve a major aim of the Reimagining Wordsworth project: to show how his poetry can help us understand our lives today, whoever we are and whatever our background.

*Michael McGregor is the director of Wordsworth Grasmere*





morning.” Miniature portraits show little Catherine and her older brother Thomas, who died aged six years old, just six months after his sister. Alongside is a printed edition of the poem Surprised by Joy, including the line, “Knowing my heart’s best treasure was no more”. This display blurs the line between Wordsworth the writer and Wordsworth the man – his personal grief and the inspiration for his poetry are brutally laid bare.

The challenge of displaying 200-year-old manuscripts to a modern audience largely unfamiliar with the work has been met with mixed success. The notebooks and original materials are beautifully lit, but perhaps it could have given visitors a closer look at one his poems – possibly using new technology to enable them to explore at their own leisure.

The labels use a strong social history approach to focus on the story each item tells rather than its literal description. This works well, but the actual descriptions at the bottom of labels may be

slightly too small for the visually impaired and I’d be interested to know if wheelchair users can view everything in the cases.

The short videos of contemporary poets and researchers are a very successful approach to interpreting the collection and I particularly enjoyed the film of poet Nick Makoha talking about his connection to

Wordsworth. His discussion of the work clearly shows the shared thread from romanticism to contemporary writers today. Visitors can also try their hand at writing using a quill and ink in this gallery and everyone is encouraged to be creative.

On leaving the museum I walk out into Wordsworth’s much-loved landscape. After the year we’ve all had, a visit

to Wordsworth Grasmere feels like a chance to exhale. The site refuses to patronise visitors and very successfully uses the original poetry to tell the story of a life in literature.

I’ll leave the last word to the great man himself. After all, perhaps if we all had a bit more confidence in the power of our collections... “O gentle Reader! you would find, A tale in every thing.”

Visitors can sit and reflect on a window seat in a pause space

Project data

<b>Cost</b> £6.5m	<b>Basebuild</b> Parkinson	<b>Hargreaves McIntyre</b>
<b>Main funders</b> National Lottery Heritage Fund; Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport; Wolfson Foundation; Linbury Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; Foyle Foundation	<b>Project manager/quantity surveyor</b> Appleyard & Trew	<b>Public relations</b> Four Communications Group; Jeanette Edgar
<b>Architect</b> Purcell	<b>Landscape consultant</b> Open Architects	<b>Mounts</b> Colin John Lindley
<b>Exhibition design, wayfinding and branding</b> Nissen Richards Studio	<b>Main contractor</b> F Parkinson	<b>Access</b> Access-Enable
<b>Exhibition fit-out</b> The Hub	<b>Conservation and conservation planning</b> Crick-Smith; Purcell; Victoria Stevens	<b>Showcases</b> Armour Systems
<b>Graphics</b> Leach	<b>Historic paint analysis</b> Crick Smith	<b>AV Hardware</b> DHD Services
<b>Clerk of works</b> Hyde Harrington	<b>Business planning</b> Amion Consulting	<b>Interactives</b> Unusual Projects
<b>M&amp;E</b> Max Fordham	<b>Evaluation</b> Jane Davies & Associates	<b>Lighting</b> DHA Designs
<b>Structure</b> Civic Engineers	<b>Fundraising strategy</b> Impact Fundraising	<b>Sound</b> Carolyn Downing
	<b>Market research</b> Morris	<b>Introductory film</b> Nick Street
		<b>Slate signage</b> Gordon Greaves Slate
		<b>Outdoor art commission</b> Charlie Whinney Studio
		<b>Admission</b> Adults £12, Concessions £8.50, Under 16s £5, Under 5s Free



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