

In this feature in each issue we look at one of the winners of National Heritage's Museum of the Year Award and what has happened to them since...

The Museum of Lakeland Life

...at Kendal, Cumbria

The Museum of Lakeland Life was the first museum to be awarded the National Heritage Museum of the Year Award in 1973, two years after its opening by HRH Princess Alexandra. Thirty-two years on, it holds fast to its founding principles of preserving the past, depicting the present and providing a unique educational resource by telling the stories of the industries and lives of those who worked to shape the Lakeland landscape and economy over the past 200 years.

It is ideally placed to do so, just outside the Lake District National Park in the market town of Kendal, often referred to as the Gateway to the Lakes.

Housed in the stable block of the grand Georgian edifice of Abbot Hall Art Gallery, the Museum of Lakeland Life makes up the trio of historic buildings, with Holy Trinity Church, that punctuate the townscape of Kirkland, the oldest part of Kendal.

The Lake District Museum Trust was formed in 1967 to co-ordinate the conversion of Abbot Hall's stable block into a museum, and two years later the work began. It wasn't until after its opening, however, and a Civic Trust award to the architects for the innovative conversion, that the acquisition of objects began.

Families and businesses from all over Cumbria offered items ranging from exquisite 18th century court dress and an 18th century Barber grandfather clock to bobbin making and threshing machines. Rag rugs and quilts, examples of 19th century craft and folk art, were housed in the same building as industrial machinery, demonstrating the diversity of the Lakeland economy so that the cottage industries of the Arts and Crafts movement were depicted side-by-side with the extraction of the raw material from the mountainous terrain.

In the 21st century, the Museum of Lakeland Life is one of three venues owned by the Lakeland Arts Trust, along with Abbot Hall Art Gallery and, since its opening in 2001, Blackwell, the Arts and Crafts house overlooking Lake Windermere. Workshops are run by the education department at all three sites and a growing number of schools take part in sessions at the museum focussing on the home life of the Victorians. There are now three period rooms: a bedroom, a parlour and a kitchen which offering the atmosphere of a nineteenth century farmer's Lakeland home. Object handling is a large part of the education process with children experiencing the hard labour of washing clothes in a dolly tub or wearing stiff corsets and tight collars.

Since its opening, the museum has developed an innovative programme of temporary exhibitions throughout the year, highlighting elements of the permanent collection and allowing stored objects to be seen – access to the collections is a central part



of the museum's focus today, with ropes and barriers banished.

Stories of industries and of the home and hearth sit side-by-side with vernacular activities such as mining, farming, tanning, swill-making, coppicing and charcoal burning linked by the wool from the sheep farmed high on the fells and the bobbins from the wood, for instance, to the hearth and home.

The wool is spun by firelight in the evenings to make, perhaps, the local "kendal green" cloth, made famous in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I*. The museum today invites the visitor to extend this link with the display of Arts and Crafts material from local makers dating from 1883.

The Arts and Crafts movement in the Lake District benefitted greatly from the great social

reformer John Ruskin living nearby, and the museum has a great collection of lace from the Langdale linen industry set up with his influence. Indeed, the Arts and Crafts revival began in Cumbria before the meeting of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1886, the recognised beginning.

Langdale lace is presented alongside pieces from the Keswick School of Industrial Arts and items from Annie Garnett's collection from The Spinnery based in Windermere in which traditional spinning and sewing techniques produced exquisite fabrics and embroidery, shunning the machinery fast becoming prevalent. Furniture from Simpsons of Kendal and Stanley Davies is also displayed, all confirming the movement's attention to detail and an inimitable style.

So what encapsulates the Museum of Lakeland Life in the 21st century? The three founding principles prevail, with the industrial displays alongside the period rooms and arts and crafts pieces making connections and revealing the astonishing industriousness of the Lake District people.

A Guardian journalist wrote in 1971 of the bedroom upstairs: "A heavy clock ticks slowly on the wall, and you could imagine that the owner has just got dressed, just gone out, and you half expect to trip over slippers left lying on the floor, or to see a toy fallen from a baby's hand". It could have been written yesterday.

Visit www.lakelandmuseum.org.uk for more information.

