



RICHARD JEFFERIES
MUSEUM

The Richard Jefferies Museum Trust – An Introduction

1. RICHARD JEFFERIES – more important today than ever



Richard Jefferies was a Victorian writer with a passion for the countryside and the richness of nature he saw around him. He was born at the farmhouse at Coate on 6th November 1848, and died at the tragically early age of 38 in 1887. He produced a huge array of literary works, including detailed accounts of his beloved countryside and its people, essays, novels, children's books, articles for local/national press, and even post-apocalyptic fiction.

Although Jefferies explored differing literary genres, it is his conviction in the importance of nature that underlies everything he wrote. His work has been so well received that he has been compared with the great English nature writer, Gilbert White. BBC presenter Matthew Oates described Jefferies as the first and truest nature conservationist, referring to Sir David Attenborough as one of his successors. As a pioneer ecologist, as concerned about the environment as we are today, Richard Jefferies' writing has been a source of inspiration for many who have followed, including Arthur Ransome and Henry Williamson and, more recently, Richard Mabey and Robert Macfarlane. The opening piece of last year's BBC Proms was a specially commissioned work based on Jefferies' words. He continues to inspire.

2. THE GRAND IDEA – a place for people today

Our small museum is a unique gem. It brims with history in its fabric, and its collection of books, pictures and artefacts relating to Victorian writer Richard Jefferies. But it could be so much more, because of what Jefferies left behind. He was a nature writer, passionate about the environment, but he was also a visionary, a prose poet and an observer of human behaviour and society. Celebrating these subjects is not about the study of the past (or even the author); it is about living in the present. Jefferies' thoughts, ideas and imagery are as fresh, exciting and valid today as they were two hundred years ago. It is the art of Richard Jefferies that is important, not the static display of his closed books.

Since taking over the museum as a charity two years ago, we have focused on delivering arts events around these ideas, being fortunate to have gardens, outbuildings and internal spaces perfect for this approach. With a Grant for the Arts, and two volunteers becoming qualified Arts Award Advisors, we have had children's writing and drawing events, adult writing classes, sculptures, poetry, celebrity writer workshops, and student art projects. We have discovered that as a 'cultural hub' the site draws more visitors in, engages with them at much deeper levels, and ensures their speedy return and word-of-mouth promotion to others. Equally important to the increase in numbers is the diversity of our visitors now. The museum attracts people from local communities, families young and old, tourists, passers-by, people from different backgrounds, disadvantaged people, elders, school groups, and more volunteers too. And it still works for the literary fans who used to visit previously. Now we have established evidence that our approach works (and will continue doing so throughout this year – even hosting the Swindon Festival of Poetry in October), we wish to turn it into a full business model.



3. THE TRUST – a community investing in its own future

The Richard Jefferies Museum Trust (RJMT) is a registered charity which was created to take on the development and running of the Museum. With a board of trustees chaired by Dr David Thackray (recently retired from the National Trust) the Trust has overseen a two year period of change, all following best museum practice, and with a growing team of dedicated volunteers from the local community. Through facilitated workshops and with the help of local Museum Development Officer, Elizabeth Neathey, the Trust has developed a rigorous management framework, complete with all documentation as required by Arts Council England's professional museum Accreditation standard. The Trust's mission statement is:

'To create /share a unique environment of discovery that will enrich peoples' lives and inspire adults and children through the home, writing and thoughts of Richard Jefferies'



3.1 CHANGE – it's already happening...

When the Trust first became involved in the Museum, a successful application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to improve and broaden access to the Museum and gardens where the Victorian author, naturalist and agriculturalist was born. Primarily through recruitment of new volunteers and improving educational aspects, the resulting project, which was called 'Old House, New Life', was designed to help to turn the place into a site for local people and outside visitors to enjoy, celebrate and learn about the topics that were important to Jefferies: what we today call ecology, relating to the workings of the natural environment and our relationship to it.



By increasing numbers of volunteers, and creating fresh interpretations and narratives connecting the Museum to the present and to the communities of Swindon, this project developed what was already there: huge potential for activities, things of beauty and interest, space for children and adults alike to enjoy, education and history, local interest, and a will to do something about it all.

The two years of 'Old House, New Life' has seen the Museum transformed into a bright, focussed, welcoming cultural centre that promotes Richard Jefferies the writer and his values, and inspires visitors in their own creativity. This work has included, for example:

- The contents and rationale of Museum, cottage and gardens being more focused on Richard Jefferies, with items not directly relevant to either the writer, his vision, or the times he lived in, being disposed of or re-homed (work still in progress).
- A strict design ethos and updated brand has been applied to new signage, exhibitions and all marketing and educational material.
- Where applicable, and within budget constraints, the Museum and cottage have been stripped back and redecorated.
- A process has been established to photograph and digitise the Museum collection and put it online.
- The garden has been cleared of weeds; new nature and horticulture features have been created such as a pond, raised beds, insect and bird houses and compost bins.
- Exhibitions, displays and nature trails have been created for both Museum and garden with the flexibility for some displays to tour to other venues.
- An ambitious programme of events from children's art clubs to poetry classes have brought both Richard Jefferies enthusiasts, novices and families to the Museum and is building a reputation as a welcoming, family-friendly cultural centre.
- Partnerships have been forged between local organisations and schools and the Museum has been set up as an official Arts Award centre with two qualified Arts Awards trainer/advisors.
- Promotional material, improved signage, a shift of entrance away from the busy main road to Coate Water, more regular opening hours and a Sunday afternoon teashop have attracted more passing visitors.
- All improvements have been achieved through volunteers, some task specific, some more enduring; others via locally-based businesses such as Nationwide, Thames Water and Intel; some who help out in the tea shop, and some who have become trustees of the board.



More examples given on next page...

Created gallery (painting, decorating and woodwork). Stripped and redecorated tearoom. Created shelves to make small shop. **Turned upstairs cottage room into office.** Acquired furniture, IT equipment and printer. Washed up and cleaned (floors, toilets etc.). **Two new museum cabinets.** Managed rubbish and recycling. Cleared woodshed. Exposed floor of original cowshed. Cleared many parts of garden of weeds and rubbish. Built fire pit and held regular fires. Acquired palettes and made into composters. **New displays for sitting room.** Cleared out stable, raked mud from between cobbles. Stripped living room and redecorated. Painted cottage floors. Bought shelves for storage. Maintained vegetable plots, lawns, hedges and trees. Cleared huge spaces of brambles and nettles. **Re-kitted kitchen. Vintage crockery.** Gathered all rubbish and hired skip. Cleared paths, weeds etc.. Copse cleared. New station halt designed for miniature railway. Ivy cut from around trees. Orchard given 'meadow' treatment. Hedges/brambles outside property maintained. **Five star hygiene rating.** Composting area created. Held family events. Bought equipment for education. Prepared spaces and children's den. Prepared work plans/sheets. **Ran museum tours.** Taught musical Mondays. **Wrote education strategy.** Held grandparents' tea party. Developed open space learning events (literature based). Held regular after school clubs. Held wild flower story hunts. Hosted/taught home education group. **Held school visits from local schools.** Joined the Wild Network. Applied successfully for grant from Co-op. Arranged children's vegetable planting. Built bug hotel with children. Printed I-spy sheets. Designed and created six Wood Magic displays for gardens. Series of Magic Monday open days. **Visits by low ability children.** **Created 16 plot 'allotment' for community use.** Acquired two greenhouses. Grew hundreds of vegetables. Purchased new camera for photographing artefacts. Undertook Modes training. **Applied successfully for ACE grant for Modes & new IT equipment.** Recruited two specific volunteers. Started to digitise scrapbooks in library. Instigated data input of all book and image artefacts into Modes. Selected items for downstairs displays. Trips to other museums including: Gilbert White, Avebury Manor, Alexander Keiller, Chippenham, Devizes, Cardiff National, Corinium, British Museum, Imperial War Museum. **Built new website covering different elements of Museum.** Created blog that all trustees can access. Created online calendar that all trustees can access. Kept Facebook updated. **Enabled website to take online donations.** Signed up to PayPal for invoicing and mobile payments. Hosted regular Blue Gate poets meetings. Hired space for regular Saturday poetry workshops. Organised and held open poetry nights/readings. **Hosted five art exhibitions (e.g. Open Studios).** Participated in literature festival events. Talks and displays in other places. **Outreach to elders groups.** Participated in Poetry Festival events. **Hosted professional guitar workshops.** Hosted regular guitar group. Booked out space for regular Artswords events. Gallery rented to groups. Two pieces of music composed relating to Bevis and Wood Magic. **Achieved Arts Awards Centre status.** Worked with Swindon Heritage magazine for launch and articles. **Developed relationships with Intel, Nationwide and Thames Water.** Regular CSR group volunteer days. Recruited over 40 new volunteers for teashop and Museum. Developed documentation for Accreditation. Advertised through Volunteer Centre and Volunteer England. **Branded fleeces and T-shirts.** Designed and printed A4 folders. Applied successfully for Arts Council grant to create Mulberry Arts. Multiple events with music, art and literature. Regular adult writing classes. **Master classes from world class authors.** Area cleared for nature trail. Developed new 'corporate' look and feel. Created glossy visitor brochure. Designed leaflets/flyers for all events. Drew map/plan of Museum and site. Designed signs for exterior/garden. Created large welcome sign for new entrance. **Developed and designed RJ clock display for sitting room.** Designed Bevis display for attic room. Created Bevis game. Designed new posters, information signs and big banner.

4. A SUSTAINABLE MODEL

The Richard Jefferies Museum Trust (RJMT) applied, in 2015, to Swindon Borough Council to take responsibility for running the Museum under a lease. A Tenancy at Will has been created, and a curatorial agreement has been drawn up by SBC staff at Swindon Museum and Art Gallery.

During its first year of operation the Trust embarked on a number of professional museum schemes in order to create a sustainable model based on current best practice in the heritage sector. As well as meeting the requirements of Arts Council England's Accreditation standards, the Trust joined the South West Museum Federation's Sustainability Scheme, participating in a series of professionally-led activities and events to benchmark the Museum's current state (in all aspects from management to curation), and outline ways forward. Furthermore, through facilitated workshops, a clear set of guiding principles, aims, objectives and actions was identified, and a full Strategic Plan created for the period 2013-2018.



This business plan is designed to run with the Strategic Plan, to fulfil the requirements of the final lease agreement, and it identifies the financial responsibilities of the RJMT in running the Museum on behalf of the Council. This will be supported by an ongoing fundraising plan to address the need for financial sustainability for the Museum. It is the intention of the Trust to ensure that by the end of the Plan period the Museum will have created a range of activities that will produce an adequate income to enable the Museum to develop into the next plan period (2018 -2023).

It should be noted that the RJMT has successfully delivered over **£50,000 worth of grants** for the Museum and delivered a remarkable transformation from its state of low maintenance and under-investment with small number of visitors to a successful and thriving Arts and Heritage Venue.

*'The Heritage Lottery Fund grant was to kick-start the regeneration of the Museum - to take it from a place of increasing decrepitude and reliance on an ever decreasing pool of people and clean it, rationalise the collection, fulfil its potential as an inspirational place and attract a new generation of volunteers to run it.'*¹

The grants received to date have been to make essential, initial changes and establish new methods for delivering activity, raising awareness and increasing visitor numbers. This has been done primarily through new displays, volunteer recruitment, plus delivery of arts, education and museum-related activities. Such grants do not tend to cover routine administrative and maintenance costs, including utilities (currently paid for by SBC) insurance and housekeeping. The Trust is now working towards grants that include Full Cost Recovery to help to generate enough income (approximately £5,000 per annum) to cover these costs.

Entry to the Museum will be free of charge.

¹ Evaluation for the Heritage Lottery Fund project 'Old House, New Life' prepared by Louisa Davison July 2015

4.1 POWER OF THE COMMUNITY 1 - Volunteers

The Trust is realistic about the need for a steady income, generated by a sustainable funding strategy, but it also knows that hard cash in itself is not going to be the 'engine' that drives the Museum. The underlying power of our plan lies in people, in the community that the Museum is part of, and that it creates for itself. The Museum has been kept open for many years simply through the dedication of a few people. The Trust has taken this idea and is growing it constantly with volunteers via: local estates; Volunteer Action Swindon; local companies (e.g. Thames Water, Intel, Nationwide, Wickes); the museum network; advertising through grant funding; the local press; and through people who come to our events and get a taste of what we do and how enjoyable it is.

It is not easy to estimate the value of volunteers. However, using the Heritage Lottery Fund's valuation of different daily levels of contribution (£50 for simple tasks, £150 for skilled, £350 for professional) in 2014/15, the Museum received over 750 days of volunteer help, giving total financial values of: Simple tasks - **£67,500**, Skilled - **£37,500**, Professional - **£17,500**.



4.2 POWER OF THE COMMUNITY 2 - Owners

The Museum's future lies with it becoming a resource that the local community not only engages with as 'consumers' (visitors, customers, audiences), but also as its owners. Ultimately the Trust believes that if it gets its model right, the Museum will be adopted by the people of Swindon, and its sustainability will be assured. To this end, the Museum has been trialling numerous events to target different community groups: families; elders; Jefferies fans; readers and writers; nature lovers; vulnerable adults; visitors to Coate; schools. In particular, we have focused much attention on bringing the Museum and Jefferies' appeal to local children and young people – who bring a vibrancy to the Museum; an energy that warms and promotes everything the Museum is about.



4.3 BIG PLANS

As the Museum moves into the future, the Trust is aware that it will need considerable investment, of both time and money. The following list outlines some of the activities that it has identified will require investment and is already working towards.

- Employ on contract a Director/Manager to ensure that high business and curatorial standards are met for the future. A museum management fund is required to support the staffing and administration of the Museum.
- Provide support for the recruitment, development and training of a strong volunteer cohort actively engaged in the work of the Museum. This requires well managed and motivated volunteer support to carry out the majority of administrative and managerial activities required to sustain the Museum, to support events and deliver a vibrant and enjoyable experience for visitors. And, of course, to do the 'hard graft' behind the scenes.
- Appoint a part-time Education/ Arts Officer to grow the potential of the Museum to deliver high quality educational, arts and learning events for people of all ages. Importantly, these will promote understanding and love of the countryside and its conservation, its landscape and wildlife and the environment and their interpretation through the arts and the writings of Richard Jefferies
- Secure funds to develop high curatorial standards, including the conservation and display of the collections that will attract and grow visitor numbers. This will include high standards of interpretation that inform and excite visitors' interests in Richard Jefferies.
- Develop a publication fund that will enable the Trust to reprint key, out-of print books and other texts by Jefferies to enable his work to become more widely known. In addition, we need to resource the preparation of guide books and other important printed material to enhance our interpretation and support our visitors.
- Ensure support for the preservation and conservation of the historic fabric of the Grade II Listed Museum Building; (SBC is responsible for the management of the building fabric, but not its internal decoration, which includes important historic treatments that need careful protection).
- Constantly improve our catering and retail activities, upgrading toilets and other visitor facilities and creating appropriate retail space of a high quality and conforming to appropriate H & S and other visitor management standards – we have refurbished the kitchen and been awarded a five star hygiene rating.
- Potential development of historic farm buildings or, in the very long term, maybe a new build to provide new interpretation and arts facilities for our visitors.
- Reconstruction of the former Summer House in the garden plus consideration of the new railway halt.
- Management and enhancement of the Museum gardens in order to provide outdoor activities for people of all ages that reflect the importance of Jefferies' work.
- Building of an endowment fund that will enable the Museum to provide appropriate levels of contribution or match funding for other grant applications for the future.

