

Institution: University of Portsmouth		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Transforming the complex legacies of John Ruskin for his modern-day heirs		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009-2013		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Mark Frost	Senior Lecturer in English Literature	21/09/2009 - date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Frost's research into the history of John Ruskin and the Guild of St George has built awareness of the Guild's past in order to shape its practice in the present. A prominent Victorian Utopian organisation, the Guild was created in 1871 by John Ruskin as an attempt to pioneer sustainable alternatives to a socially and environmentally exploitative economy. It thrives today as a charitable body with 300 international members involved in arts, crafts, environment, conservation, agriculture, social policy, and education. Frost's research helped the Guild successfully address the darker side of its Victorian heritage, while reaching out through exhibitions and public events to promote its enduring ideals. It was thus enabled to foster economic, cultural, artisanal, and community activities in and beyond the Guild's heartlands in Sheffield and the Wyre Forest, and to direct new attention to Ruskin's visionary environmental and social critique of Victorian modernity.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>The core underpinning research for this study was published by Dr Frost as the 2014 monograph, <i>The Lost Companions and John Ruskin's Guild of St George: a Revisionary History</i> (R4). Developing from an earlier body of work on Ruskin's social and environmental thought (R1-3), this is the outcome of four years of active research, involving extensive archival work in more than a dozen archives and special collections in the UK and US. It brings to light and reinterprets evidence about the people who worked for the Guild, the social history of the organisation, and its extensive, scattered correspondence. It was supported by a British Academy Small Research Grant for the period 2011-13 (G1).</p> <p>John Ruskin (1819-1900), primarily remembered for his leading role in the fields of art and architectural criticism, as well as his wide-ranging influence on the wider realm of Victorian cultural production, had an extensive interest in the 'social question' of his century, and became a staunch advocate of the moral value and dignity of labour. The Guild of St George, founded initially as 'St George's Company' in 1871, was his attempt to promote these goals within a broader framework of commitment to an ethos of moral hierarchy, and environmental conservation. Previous histories of this endeavour have treated it as a relatively anodyne series of well-meaning but ineffectual interventions. Frost's work has transformed this image.</p> <p>Centred around the remarkable stories of 'lost companions' of the early Guild, the book provides a considerably-expanded, authoritative, and seminal account of the genesis and history of the organisation's first decades. Ruskin envisaged using the Guild to create collaborative projects and communities across the country, and nearly a dozen projects began during his lifetime. The monograph demonstrated that far more practical work was undertaken by the early Guild than has been previously acknowledged, and that this included substantial agricultural activities that were hitherto unknown. Moreover, the history of the most significant of these - the Guild's agricultural estate at Bewdley - had been deliberately suppressed.</p> <p>Part of the monograph's analytical significance lies in its account of the reasons for the Guild's early failure to turn Ruskin's vision into practice. In particular, it highlights the class-based hierarchy of the organisation as a reason why early working-class participation and energy was wasted, leading to mistreatment and mismanagement. While Ruskin suggested the Guild would provide harmonious communities supported by schools, libraries, and wholesome dwellings, the</p>		

research demonstrates that the reality for early Guild workers was poor living standards, severe neglect, low or non-existent wages, and a failure to make them active agents in Guild projects.

Among the key discoveries of the research was the bringing to light of an article drafted in the early years of the Guild, highlighting the plight of working-class Guild companions. Leading Guildsmen conspired to suppress its publication in order to avoid damage to Ruskin's reputation. Thus, the monograph marks the end of a century-long cover-up. Building on this research, the case study focused on how elements of Ruskin's approach could still be helpful in guiding the modern Guild. Ruskin's emphasis on low-impact, small-scale, environmentally sustainable development, and on a sensitive but productive management of land, are particularly relevant in the present. The monograph is also important for historians of late Victorian Utopianism, radicalism, and voluntary communities, while its impact value lies in the continued existence of the Guild and the work that can be done to connect past, present, and future work.

3. References to the research

(R1) **Frost, M.** (2011). Of trees and men: the law of help in Modern Painters V. *Nineteenth Century Prose*, 38(2), 85-108.

(R2) **Frost, M.** (2011). The everyday marvels of rust and moss: John Ruskin and the ecology of the mundane. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 14 (Spring, special issue, Victorians and Environment), 10-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2011.10589078>

(R3) **Frost, M.** (2011). "The circles of vitality": Ruskin, science and dynamic materiality. *Journal of Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2). 367-83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150311000040>

(R4) **Frost, M.** (2014). *The Lost Companions and John Ruskin's Guild of St George: a Revisionary History*. Anthem Press, London.

Statement in support of underpinning research quality

All of the research items were published either in leading international peer-reviewed journals or publishers. Anthem Press has established a particularly strong reputation within the field of Victorian Studies. A back cover endorsement by Professor Francis O'Gorman (University of Edinburgh), commends the monograph as 'an exceptionally important book which is startlingly original in its historical inquiry' and which 'will have major significance for understanding Ruskin's political work'. Writing in *The Journal of The William Morris Society* (21: 2, Summer 2015), the celebrated Ruskin scholar, Clive Wilmer, deems *The Lost Companion* 'a work of considerable value and significance, and one which it is possible to recommend to anyone interested in the radical movements of the later nineteenth century'. In a review for The British Society for Literature and Science, Sarah Hanks (University of Oxford), describes it as 'a fascinating book both for those familiar with the traditional critical history of the Guild of St George, and for those who are new to Ruskin's social thought' and that 'it also draws attention to the fact that the Guild has been invigorated in recent years, and has become an important voice on such causes as environmental sustainability. Frost's dexterous use of new and existing material brings out the true complexities of Ruskin's experiment'.

(<https://www.bsls.ac.uk/reviews/romantic-and-victorian/mark-frost-the-lost-companions-and-john-ruskins-guild-of-st-george-a-revisionary-history/>).

Research grant funding

(G1) **Frost, M.** 'My Dear Graham': *The Lost Companion and John Ruskin's Guild of Saint George*, Funded by The British Academy, March 2011-March 2013, (GBP6,325).

4. Details of the impact

The knowledge content of Frost's research has directly motivated and supported public research and writing, leading to engagement activities including an exhibition, a drama performance, and memorial projects, and contributing to a major shift in the Guild's long-standing aims of raising awareness of Ruskin's work and its contemporary relevance. Frost's relationship with the Guild of St George began as part of the monograph research process, and has developed organically through years of co-working with its leaders and members, building a range of fruitful partnerships. The Guild's profile of activity as a charitable organisation has grown under recent leadership, and

it pursues an ambitious programme of cultural, economic, and social activities. These are centred primarily on its two major physical assets, the Ruskin Collection and the 'Ruskinland' estate in Worcestershire.

The Ruskin Collection is a major holding of art, sculpture, geological items, books, and other materials now leased to Museums Sheffield. Originally intended by Ruskin as a cultural gift to the workers of the city, it has been the centre of a programme of recent Guild events under the general label of **Ruskin-in-Sheffield**. 'Ruskinland' is a small landed estate of 100 acres (c. 0.4km²) within the Forest of Wyre, and under the label of **Ruskin-in-Wyre**, provides a focus for the Guild's rural-oriented and craft activities.

Frost's involvement in specific new Guild programmes arose because organisers identified his abilities to provide unique insights into how the Guild's early history and Ruskin's complex legacy of ideas can be negotiated in the present. Frost's work in this area has helped inform members and local communities about the history of the Guild (S7), but also highlighted the painful impacts of the contradictions at the heart of Ruskin's ideology. While making clear the damage caused by Ruskin's suppression of working-class agency, Frost's engagements have also emphasised the visionary status of Ruskin's ideas on environmental sustainability and cultural outreach, and the continuing resonance of these ideas for the Guild's present projects and future development (S3).

Ruskin-in-Sheffield

The Guild of St George and Museums Sheffield collaborated on a wide-ranging programme of activities under this label between 2014 and 2019. Frost contributed to the programme's success by bringing an innovative historically-based direction to key events. [Text removed for publication], notes that Frost was invited because of *"his groundbreaking research into the organisation's early history"* (S3). Focused on an agenda connecting environment, sustainability, community and wellbeing, Ruskin-in-Sheffield secured almost GBP150,000 in funding from local and national agencies, including a GBP67,100 Heritage Lottery Fund grant, and an Arts Council England award. This supported more than seventy-five distinct events in communities in and around Sheffield, engaging some thirty community groups, 150 professionals and volunteers, and an estimated 25,000 audience participants. The programme organisers summarised the events as having *"engaged diverse audiences with where they live and involved them in their local futures; fostered new community connections to build resilient local networks; liberated new possibilities for interpretation and engagement with the Ruskin Collection; increased the number, diversity and capacity of the Guild's network of Companions, extending the Guild's impact and reach; [and] transformed perceptions of John Ruskin from local heritage figure to globally relevant, radical thinker"* (S5).

In 2015, Frost helped to spark initial local interest by taking the lead in a campaign to restore the grave of the Guild Museum's first curator, Henry Swan, and to create memorial plaques, one for Swan and one on the building of the original Guild museum (Britain's first museum for working class people). The museum's early history was complex. While Ruskin provided unprecedented free access to culture for the working folk of Sheffield, his wider ideology was inimical to working class agency. [Text removed for publication] say of Frost's research: *"its detailed coverage of the Guild's deep roots in Sheffield and nearby Totley, its focus on the engagement of local, working-class people [...] and its radically revisionary account of the organisation's structures, ideology, and practices was an exciting resource in terms of feeding an already-strong interest in Ruskin in the city"* (S3). As part of Ruskin-in-Sheffield events in May 2015, Frost gave two public talks on the underpinning research in Sheffield and Totley (S7).

Frost also worked extensively with local historians keen to follow up the monograph research at a local level. One of these, [text removed for publication] produced a walking theatrical performance, 'Boots, Fresh Air, and Ginger Beer', which again drew directly on the monograph research (S6). The purpose of the performance was to present aspects of the early history of the community at the time and the way that it depicts the Sheffield working class culture. The performance offered a greater understanding about the austerity context and how the Guild fits in it. As [text removed for publication] observed, *"It was due to Mark that not only was I able to put more flesh on the bones of the story but for the first time had the names of the original Sheffield people involved in the experiment. This meant I was able to build biographical detail for characters in the play. Mark*

shared many previously unexamined primary sources with me. The play had 4 performances in June 2015” (S4).

Inspired by Frost’s research, and again in close liaison with him, [text removed for publication] then undertook a detailed study of the Guild’s early Sheffield projects, *Thirteen Acres: John Ruskin and the Totley Communists* (Sheffield: Guild of St George, 2017). This study built on Frost’s monograph by focusing on local social history and investigating the lives and experiences of those involved in the Guild project. As [text removed for publication] notes, *“throughout the research and writing, Mark generously shared more sources, discussed questions which arose, and generally encouraged my work. We were in email contact, sharing insights throughout the research and writing process. Mark also helpfully commented on my draft manuscript. The book – written as accessibly as possible for the uninformed reader as well as the academic – has been a best seller for the Guild of St George. Mark’s research and generosity has been invaluable for my own contributions to Guild history” (S4, see also S10).*

Ruskin-in-Wyre

Frost’s research has also been key to the success of a range of projects between 2014 and 2019, illuminating and contextualising the historical development of the Guild’s estate. His discovery of the deliberately hidden history of William Graham, who had farmed at Ruskinland for eight years before leaving after his protest at mistreatment was suppressed, significantly shaped an exhibition at the local Bewdley Museum in 2014. [Text removed for publication], credits Frost’s input with a major role in *“the authenticity and presentation of the exhibition as a whole”*, and particularly notes that *“the new information uncovered by Dr Mark Frost about the companion William Graham enabled Ruskin and the Guild’s links to the Wyre to be viewed in a new light” (S1).*

Frost was invited to join the Ruskin-in-Wyre Steering Group from 2014 in order to provide insights into the Guild’s history that would shape the nature of its present activities, working to fulfil Ruskin’s pledge *“to make some small piece of English Land, beautiful, peaceful and fruitful”*, and, in the words of the organisers, *“to provide opportunities for working people to cultivate land and reconnect with nature”*. Frost’s work was pivotal in shaping the direction of travel of the project and in the realisation by the organisers that *“Ruskin’s ideas remain relevant today and it is our mission to reinterpret them in meaningful, creative and productive ways for a new generation” (S8).*

In recent years, Ruskinland has been the site of a series of major projects involving farming, heritage orchards, conservation management, woodworking groups, architectural projects, and cultural projects. These have led to the involvement of many workers and volunteers, as well as members of Worcs County Council, and the creation of art installations, museum exhibitions, and an ongoing series of workshops and weekly events (S9).

Frost’s research-based input was particularly significant to Ruskin-in-Wyre’s successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid for ambitious activities relating to forest management, farming, orchards, arts, and crafts. He wrote the historical background component of the bid, and had a significant advisory contribution to the whole document. As [text removed for publication], writes in his testimonial, *“The information and insights contained in Mark’s thorough and revealing piece of research were to become an important influence in developing the Ruskin in Wyre project and associated funding application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The application was successful in unlocking around GBP90,000 of funding which has enabled the delivery of a 2-year programme of activities which began in April, 2017 to reveal and revitalise Ruskin’s legacy in the Wyre Forest” (S2).*

These activities have included the installation of a sawmill and the creation of workshops for architectural students from Hooke Park School of Architecture (whose students regularly work in the forest) and local woodworkers and craftspeople. Other activities centre around sustainable farming, orchard work, conservation management, and artistic workshops (S9). [Text removed for publication] goes on to say that *“Mark’s role has been vital [in] the development of the Ruskin in Wyre project by ensuring it was informed by a sound academic understanding of the origins of the Guild of St George and the previously unexplored complexities and controversies surrounding its early supporters. Without this important contribution, I very much doubt the project would have been as rich and valuable” (S2).*

In October 2019 a commemoration project came to fruition with the creation of a memorial stone at the grave site of the Guild's earliest agricultural companion in Bewdley, William Buchan Graham (c. 1846-1909), author of the suppressed article on the Guild's mismanagement, and a leading critic of its failures. In parallel with the restoration of Henry Swan's grave in Sheffield, this concrete impact of Frost's research will preserve and communicate the memory of these significant figures into the future.

Due to Covid-19 impact activities came to the end of a cycle. However, Frost plans to reactivate these as soon as possible, and in particular to continue work on the creation of a walking trail in the Wyre Forest and Bewdley, and to further elucidate the Guild's history there via a linked booklet and phone app.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Letter from [text removed for publication], Bewdley Museum and Guild of St George.

S2. Letter from [text removed for publication] Ruskin-in-Wyre [text removed for publication] 10/02/2018.

S3. Letter from [text removed for publication] Ruskin-in-Sheffield 15/08/2018.

S4. Letter from [text removed for publication], poet, author, and performer.

S5. The Ruskin-in-Sheffield Project Impact Summary 2017

S6. The walking drama performance that drew on my research:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyTOWZtHnN8&t=11s>

S7. Two public engagement lectures linked to the ICS activities in Sheffield

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK5yPPLnHNU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDdk3ZfvLjs>

S8. Ruskin-in-Wyre website: <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/projects-places/ruskin-land-in-the-wyre-forest>

S9. News from Ruskinland blog: <https://neilsinden.wordpress.com/author/neilsinden/>

S10. News reporting of [text removed for publication] Thirteen Acres 28/09/2017.