Charles Dickens Museum re-opens following £3.1m transformation

04/12/2012

The £3.1million Great Expectations project, funded substantially through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), is the most significant legacy of Dickens's bicentenary, securing the future of the building for generations to come and offering a brand new visitor experience for the 21st century. The re-opening of the Museum is a fitting finale to a year of worldwide Dickens celebrations; the museum has been a key player in Dickens 2012, from organising a Royal Visit to the museum and a bicentenary commemoration at Westminster Abbey in February – to coincide with Dickens's birthday – to the opening of Dickens's Kent home, Gad's Hill Place, over the summer.

As well as restoring the house at 48 Doughty Street - Dickens's home at the start of his career and the birthplace of classics Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby – and opening the house's attic and kitchen for the first time, the museum has expanded into neighbouring 49 Doughty Street. The adjacent building has been converted into a state-of-the-art visitor and learning centre with rooms available for formal and informal learning events, study and reading facilities, IT terminals for access to the digitised collection and databases, and improved storage and office spaces.

The redevelopment project has given the Museum the once in a lifetime opportunity to conserve and improve the historic building at 48, restoring the Grade I listed house to its original early Victorian splendour with the help of heritage specialists and literary scholars.

The adjoining centre houses a temporary exhibition space, education and study areas, a café and the National Dickens Library and Archive. With two education rooms dedicated to hands-on activities, the museum can now offer an enhanced experience to schools and families, including workshops and tours led by costumed guides. The new extension to the building and a lift in No 49 also mean hugely improved step-free access to the original house at 48, opening it up by 80% through hidden access doors on the basement, ground, first and second floors.

On their tour around the new museum, visitors will be able to walk around rooms decorated as Dickens would have known them. Each room reflects a different part of Dickens's world; his reading desk can be seen in the drawing room, where he would have entertained guests with readings from his work, whilst the master bedroom will display personal items that have never been on display before. The second bedroom, where his sister-in-law Mary died at 17, reflects on Dickens's relationship with mortality and will feature the museum's latest acquisition, an extremely rare set of photographic prints showing the 1865 rail crash Dickens was involved in. In the attic, visitors can learn more about Dickens's difficult childhood and his literary and social legacy, before moving next door into the new wing at No 49 to explore further collections of Dickensiana and, on short loan, costumes from the recent adaptation of Great Expectations, including Helena Bonham Carter's Miss Havisham and Ralph Fiennes' Magwitch costumes courtesy of Number 9 Films.

The Great Expectations project has been made possible with generous support from funders including HLF, English Heritage, the City Bridge Trust, City of London Corporation, the Foyle Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, the John S Cohen Foundation, the Wolfson Foundation and many other trusts, as well as hundreds of donations from individuals.

The museum is re-opening in time for a traditional Dickensian Christmas and will host a number of exciting events during the festive season. It will be the only London museum open to visitors on Christmas Day. Further information on events can be found via the Dickens Museum's website event page.

Mark Dickens, the author's great great grandson, said: "The reopening of the Charles Dickens Museum, following this major renovation, has been a triumph of planning and preparation. It is very exciting to realise that we will now be able to see 48 Doughty Street as my great great grandfather would have lived in it. I can think of no more fitting way to round off this fantastic year of Dickensian activities and I know he would have heartily approved."

Dr Florian Schweizer, Director of the Charles Dickens Museum, said: "This has been the most exciting year in the museum's history and I am sure Dickens would have been delighted about this transformation of his former home for his 200th birthday. Our Great Expectations project will give our visitors an inspiring opportunity to experience literary history in beautifully refurbished period rooms and to find out about one of the world's greatest storytellers. The restoration of the fragile buildings means that the museum will continue to serve visitors in the future while the new interpretation scheme brings to life the amazing story of Charles Dickens, from his traumatic childhood memories to his remarkable career. Thanks to the support from our funders, and in particular due to the generosity of the Heritage Lottery Fund, London now boasts Britain's most accessible literary house and a place where more people than ever can engage with one of the nation's favourite figures: as visitors to the museum, as learners in our new education spaces and as volunteers to help us look after the world's finest Dickens collection. The bicentenary has demonstrated just how many people enjoy Dickens's works; we are extremely pleased that the refurbished museum with its extensive programme of activities is ready to take on the legacy of the bicentennial as a permanent site for the celebration and appreciation of Charles Dickens."

Wesley Kerr, Chair of the London Committee Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "In this remarkable house - behind this famous front door - many seminal events in Charles Dickens' family and personal life took place, prompting some of his most evocative and powerful writing. The Heritage Lottery Fund is thrilled that the public can cross the Dickens threshold into his beautifully restored four storey home, packed with personal items and possessions. No British writer is more influential than Dickens, with his unforgettable characters, searing prose and profound social conscience. The museum's atmosphere is Victorian, but the relevance of Dickens, and the outstanding new study facilities and cafe are very contemporary. This marvellous project will delight tens of thousands of visitors and inspire new generations to read his incomparable novels and journalism. It's as perfect as a Christmas carol."

About the Charles Dickens Museum

The Charles Dickens Museum is housed in the only surviving London home of the celebrated author. 48 Doughty Street in Bloomsbury was his family home for two years (1837-1839) whilst he rose in prominence in London society.

The Georgian townhouse, a Grade I listed building, was opened as a museum in 1925 and has welcomed more than one million visitors over 80 years. With a collection of over 100,000 items including manuscripts, rare editions, personal items, paintings and other visual sources, and the outstanding Suzannet Collection, the Museum has been a popular attraction for Dickens enthusiasts from all over the world.

The museum has been a leading partner during the 200th anniversary celebrations of the author's birth (7 February 1812), which have seen a wide-ranging programme of exhibitions, film festivals, literary and art commissions, live performances and an educational campaign.

Great Expectations refurbishment in 2012

This exciting redevelopment project aims both to preserve this important heritage site for the benefit of future generations and to promote it to a more diverse audience. Key changes include hugely enhanced disabled access (90% of the building from 10%; 100% with virtual tour); more objects added to the collection and the kitchen restored to its original state and the attics on display for the first time.

Key improvements to the museum include:

- The conservation, repair and interpretation / fit out works to Nos 48 and 49 Doughty Street
- A lift at the rear of 49 Doughty Street
- Creation of a learning centre including two education rooms on the lower ground floors (one of these doubles as the kitchen of Dickens's house), an events and meeting room on the first floor, and a library on the second floor
- A comprehensive events and education programme

Notes to editors

Dr Florian Schweizer, Director, Charles Dickens Museum and the Dickens 2012 bicentenary, is available for comment through Four Colman Getty

For further information about the Museum and forthcoming events visit Dickens Museum website.

Further information

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