

Gateshead home of women's rights pioneer and social reformer to be restored

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The project, run by Gateshead Council and Bensham Grove Community association (BGCA), will restore the early 19th-century building and its most historic features alongside running an extensive programme of learning and community activities centred on the fascinating history of the house.

Ivor Crowther, Head of the HLF North East, said: "Bensham Grove began life as a buzzing cultural centre for the Arts and Crafts movement in Gateshead and attracted the great minds of the time including William Morris and Conan Doyle and has continued that tradition until the present day. This HLF grant will rejuvenate and repair this important building back to its former Victorian splendour and ensure that it continues to play a key role in the community, acting as a creative hub for local people and carrying on what the Spence-Watson's started."

Following the deaths of the Spence-Watson's, Bensham Grove became an Arts and Crafts education settlement, used by forward-thinking members of the local community. Bringing this vision into the 21st century, virtual tours, heritage workshops and open days will create an engaging way for visitors to explore the building, its Victorian architecture and discover more about the interesting events that went on there.

Volunteers, local architecture students and school groups will have the chance to take part in a wide range of interactive activities and training including learning conservation skills, ceramic restoration, and metalwork. Activities will be based on four themes: the history and architecture of the building; the work of Robert and Elizabeth Spence-Watson; the development of the education settlement; and the house's many high-profile visitors over the years.

Careful conservation work will concentrate on the library, drawing room, dining room, entrance hall and stairs – repairing the historic fabric, features and overall Victorian feel. A DVD and website will be produced and stand as a permanent record of the project and its successes.

Shirley Brown Chair at Bensham Grove said: "We are absolutely delighted with the news of the Heritage Lottery Fund grant. There have always been inspirational people and ideas at Bensham Grove and this project will enable the whole community to make a real contribution to its future. There will be lots of opportunities for people to learn traditional and new skills, which Bensham Grove has an excellent reputation for - we are very excited."

Further information

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