Appeal launched to save Wedgwood Collection – £2.74m needed by November

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The Wedgwood Collection – one of the most important industrial archives in the world and a unique record of over 250 years of British art and history, is at risk of being broken up and sold on the open market unless the final £2.74m tranche of the full £15.75m required to save the collection is raised by the end of November 2014. Public donations will be matched pound-for-pound, thanks to the generosity of a private charitable trust.

Thanks to major support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the Art Fund and a small number of private trusts and foundations, over £13m of the £15.75m needed has already been raised. The collection is the principal asset of the Wedgwood Museum Trust, which inherited an estimated £134m of pension debt as an unfortunate consequence of the UK subsidiary of Waterford Wedgwood Plc going into administration in 2009. The debt transferred from company to museum because the two had been linked through a shared pension fund.

The collection contains over 80,000 works of art, ceramics, manuscripts and letters, pattern books and photographs covering the 250-year history of Wedgwood; it is also a unique archive of British politics, society, science and art. Developments in taste and fashion can be traced over three centuries: through the ceramics in the collection – always at the forefront of design; in the documentation of the manufacturing processes for the iconic black basalt, cream-coloured Queen's ware and blue-and-white Jasperware of the 18th century; and through the pottery's commissions to artists ranging from John Flaxman in the 18th century to Eduardo Paolozzi, Peter Blake and Patrick Heron in the 20th. Among the most valuable items in the collection are the family portraits painted by Stubbs, Josiah's friend and protégé. Josiah I and his wife, Sarah, were also painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, founding president of the Royal Academy.

This exceptional archive represents priceless evidence of one company's contribution and response to a world of fast-paced commercial innovation, scientific discovery, intellectual enlightenment, turbulent social history and global politics.

Why the collection is at risk

When the UK subsidiary of Waterford Wedgwood plc filed for administration in January 2009, the Wedgwood Group Pension Plan (WGPP) to which 8,000 current and former UK based employees belonged, held a liability estimated at £134m. The WGPP then approached the Pension Protection Fund (PPF), the industry body set up by the government to compensate individual pensioners in the event of a company insolvency. The PPF discovered that WGPP's members belonged to two companies: the UK subsidiary of Waterford Wedgwood Plc and Wedgwood Museum Trust (of which five employees were a part of WGPP). As a 'Last Man Standing' pension scheme, the rules rendered the remaining solvent company associated with it fully liable, making the Wedgwood Museum Trust legally and solely responsible for the entire pension debt.

As a result, the Wedgwood Museum Trust itself went into administration in April 2010. While the trust and its lawyers had believed the museum's collection was protected (and that it formed part of the trust's permanent endowment), this was disputed. The administrator instructed the courts to decide, and on 19 December 2011 the High Court ruled that the collection was not protected in a trust, and should be sold as an asset of the Wedgwood Museum Trust, in order to repay some of the debt owed. In March 2012 the Attorney General upheld this ruling.

Following negotiation with the Art Fund and other parties – including the HLF, PPF and Government – the administrator (Begbies Traynor) agreed to pursue a legal strategy intended to obviate the need for the collection to be sold. However, after exploring several legal avenues, all parties have now agreed that a sale is inevitable. The administrator, in negotiation with the creditors, has agreed the collection can be sold to the nation for £15.75m, provided the sale can be completed by the end of November.

The appeal

Now that the price of £15.75m has been agreed, they have until 30 November 2014 to raise the necessary funds. The Heritage Lottery Fund (major funders of the Wedgwood Museum's refurbishment in 2005 with £5.8m of support) has a charge over the Wedgwood Museum Trust's assets (equivalent to the value of its grant) that takes precedence over the other creditors' claims. The HLF has agreed to a transfer of the charge and has also agreed in principle to a further grant of up to £5million towards the purchase of the collection if the Art Fund is able to raise the outstanding amount. This, together with a £1m grant from the Art Fund, a further £1m from a private trust and donations of £150,000 from two private foundations, leaves £2.74m still to be raised by 30 November 2014.

The future

Once the collection has been sold, the Wedgwood Museum Trust will begin the process of winding up. In order to protect the collection from ever being at risk again, the Art Fund aims to purchase it and gift it in title to the V&A, the national museum of art and design. The V&A has agreed in principle to take on this responsibility for the collection in order to safeguard it in perpetuity, and would continue to display it in Staffordshire. The V&A is therefore in discussions with Waterford Wedgwood Royal Doulton (WWRD), the company that now owns, manufactures and distributes the Wedgwood brand, regarding a long-term loan agreement to display the collection at its Barlaston site, where the Wedgwood Museum would lie at the heart of the major new visitor experience due to open in Spring 2015 as part of the £34m redevelopment scheme there.

The Art Fund is asking for donations to the Save Wedgwood campaign. Donations will be matched pound-for-pound, thanks to the generosity of a private charitable trust and can be received via:

- Save the Wedgwood Collection website
- Phone: call 0844 415 4100
- SMS: text WEDGWOOD to 70800 and donate £10

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: "For several years we have been working with partners nationally and in Stoke to find a way to save the Wedgwood Collection from being broken up and sold off on the open market. Having explored all options, we have now negotiated to buy the complete collection at a fair price, enabling us to keep it together and on display locally and ensuring it is never put at risk again. If we raise the remaining £2.74m needed by 30 November, we will be able to gift the collection to the V&A to display it long term in the existing museum in the redeveloped visitor attraction at the Barlaston site. If, with the public's help, we can raise the remaining funds (matched pound-for-pound with extra funding from a UK private trust) the future for the Wedgwood Collection has, despite all past difficulties, never looked brighter."

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "The Heritage Lottery Fund has been a long-standing supporter of the Wedgwood Museum Trust and we were shocked to learn that its collection had been put at risk. The Wedgwood Museum's collection is a window into the Wedgwood family's business and private life set within the context of the Industrial Revolution. It is, quite simply, one of the most extraordinary and rare collections of its type in the UK.

We have been working closely with the Art Fund since 2011 to find a solution enabling the collection to be protected in perpetuity, so I'm delighted that our Board of Trustees has agreed in principle to provide up to £5m to this fundraising campaign. We hope this will help ensure the collection can be bought as a whole and remain in its original home in Staffordshire."

Tim Reeve, Chief Operating Officer of the V&A, said: "Wedgwood has a unique place in Britain's ceramic history and in the industrial history of the nation. Josiah Wedgwood was a true pioneer, transforming British pottery from a minor craft to a major industry through a combination of scientific experimentation, development of new ceramic materials and techniques, excellence in design and a genius for marketing and business. The Wedgwood Collection contains not only some of the finest ceramics produced in Britain over the last 250 years but is also the most complete documentation of factory production in the country. It would be a tragedy for the collection to be dispersed and we sincerely hope the funds can be raised to secure it for the nation. The V&A stands ready to safeguard the collection for future generations."

Gaye Blake-Roberts, Director of the Wedgwood Museum, said: "The Wedgwood Museum contains several interrelated collections which together provide a unique insight into fashion, taste, connections and commerce from the middle of the 18th century onwards. The exceptional ceramic collections cover everything from initial experiments to objects of great beauty made in the heart of 'The Potteries'. The archive is arguably one of the best accumulations of documents on ceramic history in the world, and includes details of the social, manufacturing and commercial aspects of the Wedgwood Company history with an emphasis on the specific importance of 'The Father of English Potters'."

Anthony Jones, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of WWRD, said: "We are delighted to play a key role in the future of the Wedgwood Collection and in helping to ensure it remains on display to the UK public for generations to come. We are excited about the discussions ongoing with the V&A that would put the collection and museum at the heart of our magnificent new visitor experience scheduled to open in Easter 2015 following the £34million redevelopment of the Barlaston site."

Bob Young, one of the Joint Administrators from Begbies Traynor, said: "Begbies Traynor are delighted to have been able to broker a deal which aims to save the Wedgwood Collection and keep it in North Staffordshire, whilst securing a fair deal for creditors. This could be a great example of the rescue culture working through the medium of administration in securing a successful outcome for all parties. I would like to express my gratitude to creditors, in particular the PPF, and the Wedgwood pension trustees, for their patience whilst this package has been put together. It only remains for me to implore the public to donate generously to help get us over the fundraising line in order that we can complete this rescue."

Further information

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