

Impressions: Brantwood

By Luke D. White

By the late 19th century, John Ruskin's mental state had deteriorated substantially with a condition that we would likely consider to be bipolar disorder today. While in London, he wrote that the waters of Lake Coniston would sooth his troubled mind and that he desperately wished to go. He decided to buy a house on the east side of the lake, a house he had never seen, and made his way north to the Lake District. He arrived, settled in, and quickly began renovations to make it suitable to his personal aesthetic. He brought along with him his cousin, her husband, and their children so that he would have company and receive care from family. Brantwood would remain his main residence until his passing. One can find fewer more beautiful places in England to find the peace of mind that Ruskin so desperately desired.

On June 13th, 2014, I made my way to Brantwood in hopes of reaching a deeper understanding of John Ruskin. From Lancaster, I took an hour train ride north to Ulverston. It was a temperate day with heavy overcast. The train sped past the rolling green farmlands of Lancashire, which eventually gave way to the more mountainous terrain of the Lake District. As we turned northwest, we rode along the sand bed coastline of Morecambe Bay. The waterways cutting through sand creates intricate patterns that resemble the lines one finds on the palm of their hand. A 150-mile boat ride past the bay would land you in Dublin. An hour ride north on this line would bring you to the Scottish border. We were now in the Lake District.

The train glides into the station of Ulverston, a town nearly 800 years old. A tower on a hill looms in the distance. I learn that it is the 100ft. Hoad Monument, erected in 1850, which resembles a lighthouse and was built to commemorate a local statesman. I cannot help but be reminded of the way Howard's Knob anchors the more picturesque views of Appalachian State's

campus back in Boone. Many of the buildings in this town have stood for over a century or more. I have some time before my cab is to pick me up to take me the rest of the way. As I meander through the cobblestoned streets, I stop and think about how Ruskin would have very likely travelled to and from his estate by way of this very village, and would have been greeted by these very same sights over a century ago.



Ulverston, England. Hoad Monument pictured on the hill.

I make my way back to the train station where a cab is waiting to bring me on a half hour drive north to Brantwood. We roll along past hillside pastures painted in rich greens. Low stone walls and farmhouses, which appear to be hundreds of years old, mark off one piece of land from another. Sheep dot these hills for as far as the eye can see. Low patches of fog shield the upper ridges of some of the mountains which surround us on our drive. The driver speeds through these bends and curves with ease and my normally strong stomach turns sour. The mix of mountains, farms, dilapidated buildings, and curving roads reminds me of my many drives from Boone to Tennessee or Virginia. He tells me that he frequently drives people to Brantwood; that it's quite a popular spot in the area. We finally reach the southern tip of Lake Coniston and the driver

apologizes for the weather. He says that I really should see it on a clear day, for it is remarkably beautiful. I quickly find the beauty in this area despite the overcast and fog.

We turn up the road that will wind through the forest, past the eastern side of the lake, and leads us to Brantwood. It is a long narrow road guarded on either side by an old stone fence. Cars have to slowly inch past one another in order to not hit each other, the stone walls, the trees, or fly off into the lake itself. I myself could not handle the navigation (partly because I have never driven on the left-hand side of the road) and am thankful that he is driving. He complains under his breath about how “bloody fast” the tourists drive their fancy sport cars on a road like this. Many of these cars and SUVs carry behind them very nice boats, or kayaks, or bicycles. This truly is the Lake District, known for centuries as *the* place to vacation in England. I try to cloud out all touches of 2014, so that I might clearly imagine what it was like for Ruskin to travel this, once undoubtedly dirt, path on horse or by carriage. I am struck by the thought that it must have taken him nearly a whole afternoon or more to travel the same distance to Ulverston that I have just travelled in around a half hour; not to mention a several hour train ride to get back to London. Truly Brantwood was an escape for Ruskin.

Finally, a bend in the road reveals the opening in the woods that I have been anticipating: the Brantwood estate. It is by far the most impressive house in the area but does not reach the impressiveness of large houses and mansions elsewhere in the country. It seems rather humble for a man of Ruskin’s fame and financial means, and certainly less ornate than his previous residence at Denmark Hill in London (the home where he and Effie lived with his parents). Still, it is rather breathtaking, and not just because of the home itself, but the entire landscape surrounding it as well. The home sits slightly up on the hill, about 30yd. from the water of Lake Coniston. Across the lake is the tiny village of Coniston. Small ferry boats traverse back and

forth throughout the day. Behind the village stands a grand ridge of mountains reaching into the low overcast, impressively chiseled by the sands of time. Though it is partially covered, it beautifully anchors the scene.



Left: Previous Ruskin Estate at Denmark Hill in London. Right: Brantwood Estate on Lake Coniston.

I made my way into the old home, now a museum and cultural center for the region. The front door now opens into a gift shop and information desk. Off this lobby is a room to view the introduction video which offers an overview of the life of the man whose influence continues to inspire to this day. It spoke of his legacy to the art world, his contributions to the establishment of the public health service and public library system in England, his championing of the welfare state, minimum wages, woman's suffrage, and environmental ethics. It proudly stated that people ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright to Mahatma Gandhi have cited Ruskin as a source of inspiration. This man was a true visionary.

Accompanied by one of the staff members of the home who graciously offered to give me a private tour, I began to meander through the parts of the house that have been kept in their

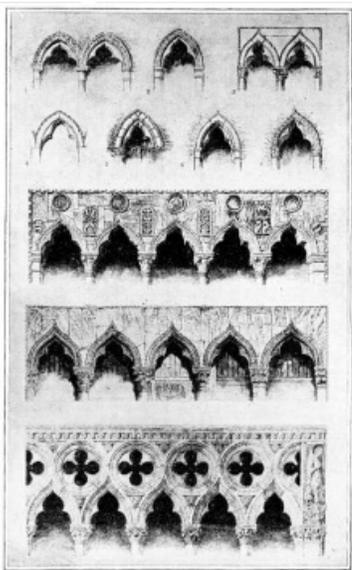
original state from the time Ruskin lived here over a century ago. My first observation was this very curious wallpaper used in nearly every room of the house. A small sign made note of it, showing that Ruskin took the pattern from a 1500 painting by Marco Marziale titled *The Circumcision*. In the painting, a priest performing the circumcision on the infant is wearing an elaborately embroidered cloak from which Ruskin copied the pattern. It is a rather minute detail in the painting, and hence, one cannot help but wonder what drew Ruskin to this particular design from this particular painting – so much so, in fact, that he would cover his whole house with it.



Top: *The Circumcision*, with pattern enlarged. Bottom: Ruskin's custom-made wallpaper in Brantwood.



Two books that brought Ruskin fame were the *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, in which he hailed gothic architecture as being the most beautiful for the sacrifice and meticulous skill it took to carve the stone and wood. This led to a gothic revival in Britain in the 19th century. It should come as no surprise then, that there are elements of his ideals in his own home. Many of the rooms in the household had beautifully carved marble fireplaces installed. The most striking example, however, is the stone window in the dining room on the southwest corner of the home, which bears a resemblance to a Venetian Gothic window sketched in *The Stones of Venice, Vol. II*.



Left: Ruskin's Venetian Gothic window sketches in *Stones of Venice*. Right: Windows in Brantwood dining room.

On the wall next to the gothic window hang portraits of Ruskin's father and mother, as well as the portrait of him as a child. I notice that he takes more after his mother in appearance. It is pointed out to me that the soft blue ribbon depicted in his portrait as a child, is something he carried with him into his old age. He was often seen wearing a scarf of the same color around his collar throughout much of his life; many later portraits of him depict this as well.



As evidenced by the wallpaper and the gothic windows, John Ruskin loved to be surrounded by that which he considered beautiful. He proclaimed the idea that everything should be made to be beautiful, even practical things. (This was an idea which would inspire the Arts & Craft movement.) I am shown the china which bears the Ruskin family crest and the silverware - made according to his design. They did not give off an air of ostentatiousness; rather, they possessed, in my opinion, a modest elegance. In fact, I would characterize the majority of Brantwood with this description: modest elegance.



It is not surprising that the primary living spaces of the home are all located on the western side of the home, the side facing the lake with its spectacular view. The next room with this view after the dining room is the study. Beautiful polished wood desks, shelves, and cabinets would have held all of his manuscripts, sketches, watercolor paintings, and other various collections. In his time, it would have been absolutely cluttered with various papers and letters, as well rocks, minerals, shells that he found.

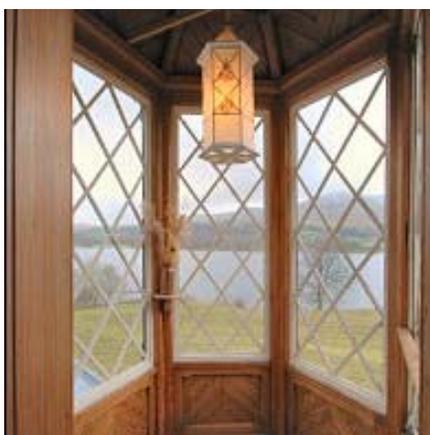


Shown are north and south views of Ruskin's study at Brantwood.

The living room is on the same hall and currently holds many of Ruskin's personal belongings. It contains many instruments, some of which John himself invented for his own personal amusement. There is also a display of various beautifully crafted items. My guide told me that, stemming from his beliefs that practical things should be beautiful and his environmental views on sustainability, he taught the local men and women how to beautifully and practically make goods with their local resources in a sustainable manner. Their work became quite noteworthy in the region.



Up the stairs is his original bedroom which is just above the dining room on the southwestern corner of the household. If Ruskin liked to be surrounded by that which he considered beautiful, than it is quite telling that the walls of his bedroom were covered in various Turner paintings and drawings. Many of the originals are now in various museums around the world; reproductions stand in their place. The most intriguing element of this room, however, is the fact that Ruskin installed a hexagonal turret in the outermost corner of the room. With an excellent view of the lake and nearby mountains, I am told that Ruskin, ever concerned with the environment long before many others caught on, would use it to observe atmospheric conditions. He was convinced that the many smokestacks springing up in his country were polluting the air, and would track the sky's changes in color and appearance.



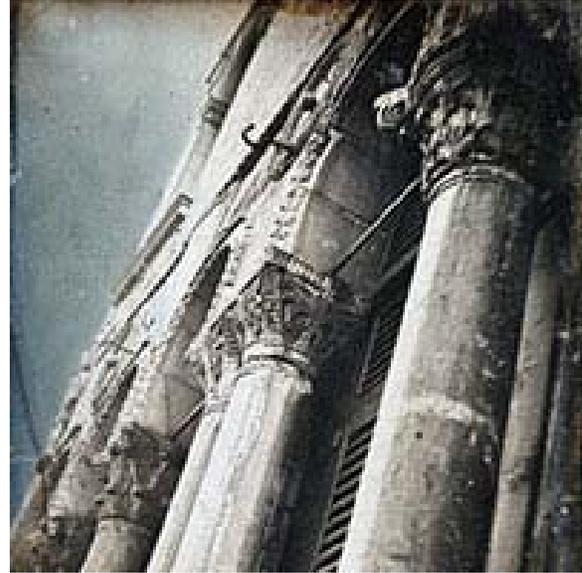
My guide also mentions that this is not the room Ruskin slept in for the majority of his time at Brantwood. He suffered a debilitating breakdown in the room, moved all of his things out of it and into another room, and never slept in it again. As previously mentioned, it was primarily his mental state which led him to Brantwood in the first place. He sought the serenity of this beautiful place, and one does not need to look hard to find it.



While I waited for a specially arranged meeting with the director, I took a walk through the various trails and garden which extend up the hill from the house. It seems perfectly fitting that just a few yards from the house one can truly as Ruskin once wrote: “Go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning.” Having toured city after city across England and France over the previous few weeks, this was my own first connection with nature in quite some time. It was perhaps, the first instance of true silence I had experienced in some time. I can only imagine how a walk through his own lusciously green wooded backyard must have soothed the unrest in Ruskin’s mind, for one look past the gaps in the trees to the lake, the quaint village, and the chiseled mountains in the distance immediately dispelled any unrest in my own.



Interestingly enough, as I found out in my discussion with Howard Hull, the Director of Brantwood, it was not the impressive view that captured Ruskin's attention and drew him back down to Earth. It was a pebble, a blade of grass, a leaf. He once wrote: "For a stone, when it is examined, will be found a mountain in miniature." Howard was gracious enough to speak with me for nearly an hour and fleshed out the man whom I had been studying intensively the previous week. Obviously, he was a man with an impeccable attention for detail, but Ruskin also loved children and could entertain them for hours, as he often did with his cousin's children who lived with him at Brantwood. He had a terrific sense of humor. He loved to make his audiences laugh during lectures. When I asked Hull about the marriage to Effie, he assured me that Ruskin was in love with her for much of the marriage, but added that no one will ever truly know what ended the marriage.



Shown are two of Ruskin's daguerreotypes. Left: The Alps. Right: Architecture in Venice.

Intrigued by my dramaturgical project regarding *The Countess*, he walked me through the, then, current exhibition at the house: *The Mirror's Magic Sights' John Ruskin and the Daguerreotype*. Introduced by Louis Daguerre in 1839, daguerreotypes, the precursor to photographs, were silver-coated copper photographic plates. Ruskin immediately made use of the new technology and brought it with him on his tours of Venice and the Alps with Effie between the years 1840 to 1850; and incidentally took some of the earliest known photographs of those places. Hull told me that Effie helped to produce many of these photographs. Hull then pointed me to another item of particular interest. It was in the back room of the museum. It was a large canvas about 3ft. X 6ft. on which a large flower was painted. Hull told me that this was one of Ruskin's lecture materials. In a time before projections, one had to produce large poster-like materials to demonstrate something visually to a large lecture crowd. One of the more lavish of these canvases was produced in the cabin in Scotland for Ruskin's Edinburgh lecture by himself, his wife, and Millais. Hull asked me to consider what it must have been like to produce the large canvas in the cramped cabin, which would have been laid out on the floor, requiring the three to

get on their hands and knees to make it; John and Everett drawing the design, while Effie gilds.

What sort of tensions may have arisen in those moments?



The finished lecture canvas for Edinburgh. Found in *The Works of John Ruskin, Vol. 12*.

Howard Hull had to get back to his important task of running the Brantwood estate, and my cab was due at any moment to bring me back to Ulverston. The clouds opened up a little bit more by this time and I was able to take in more of the mountains across the lake. The air was so crisp and clean, a light breeze rolled off the lake, and a sense of fulfillment came over me. This was the closest one can come to time-traveling and meeting the man himself, and I am so thankful for the opportunity to experience it. His spirit permeates every nook and cranny of this charming lakeside estate and if I could go back, I would take a boat across the lake to pay my respects at his grave in Coniston. He truly was a remarkable human, and I would like to thank him for a remarkable afternoon.