



£42,000 Heritage Lottery grant to secure archive of Surrey's forgotten artist whose talents were compared with William Blake

Coalminer turned illustrator, painter and caricaturist back in the limelight as trustees set out plan to guarantee gallery's future

Easter celebration for supporters over success of *Gallery Resurrected* campaign to rejuvenate and protect legacy of Sidney Sime in Worplesdon

A £42,000 National Lottery Heritage Fund (www.heritagefund.org.uk) will help secure the future of a unique archive of more than 800 works of art that have lain quietly in a Surrey village hall for more than 60 years.

The award, the result of a highly competitive campaign by the Sidney Sime trustees, will bring the talents of this extraordinary Victorian/Edwardian artist back into the limelight as they create a sustainable programme of funding and management to ensure that his legacy is preserved for the enjoyment and fascination of future generations.

Appropriately entitled *A Gallery Resurrected*, the campaign finally met success just before Easter.

The Gallery (www.sidneysimegallery.org.uk) was added to Worplesdon Memorial Hall in 1956, funded by the proceeds of the sale of the nearby former home of Sidney and Mary Sime. It houses all 800 of Sidney H Sime's (1865-1941) artworks, as well as letters, books and personal memorabilia in his wife Mary's possession, as a permanent memorial for future heritage, conservation, enjoyment and interest.

Subsequent acquisitions include personal letters and 36 caricatures of local men who frequented the New Inn pub nearby whom Sime drew.

A career as an artist, caricaturist, humourist, scholar, philosopher and illustrator must have seemed an impossible dream for the poverty-stricken young man from Manchester who spent his early years down coalmines, but his extraordinary imagination and raw talent led to him becoming a renowned illustrator of books and magazines following formal training at Liverpool School of Art.

Sime was patronised by wealthy aristocrats Lord Dunsany (book illustration) and Lord Howard de Walden (Theatre design), and his unique style, reminiscent of Blake, Rackham, Dulac and Beardsley reflects a fascination for the works of Edgar Allan Poe.

The legacy is important as a valuable international resource for research by experts with many articles in illustrated magazines and books available for examination. Art UK have catalogued and published all 132 of his oil paintings.

When first opened, the Memorial Hall Gallery attracted a rush of public interest, but then for more than half a century it opened on rare occasions with few people being aware of its existence. Sime effectively faded from public view, remembered only by enthusiasts and experts as his artwork fell out of vogue.

Then, since 2010, as fantasy art and illustration have become increasingly popular, a curator and a small subcommittee led by a Heritage Trustee have worked hard to establish the gallery as a focal point, viewing it as an important part of local heritage.

Efforts to restore Sime to prominence started by building links with the local church (where he is buried), schools and art groups, as well as creating an annual family workshop and group visits.

Interest spread as volunteers helped with research, giving talks, archiving or assisting at open afternoons. Then, in 2017, the trustees staged an exhibition of Sime's work at The Lightbox in Woking, sponsored by their chairman, local auctioneer Chris Ewbank, who has devoted time to assessing and valuing the artist's work. This, in turn, proved a catalyst for restoration, planning, writing a book on Sime, giving talks and holding a reception for 170 people as well as 7000 visitors during its six weeks display.

Next, an oil painting of a Scottish scene was selected for exhibition, at the International Arts Fair in London in January 2018 and In September 2018 a large fantasy oil painting was displayed in the Palazzo Roverella gallery in Rovigo, Italy as part of the 'Arte ed Magice' (Art and Magic) exhibition.

Whilst all of this was going on, however, the trustees realised that they had a problem: their work was supported by uncertain and irregular funding, while the scope of their powers and remit were based on a governance structure that was decades old. Combined, these two problems had the potential to threaten the stability and future of the Sime legacy.

"We realised that the existing governance structure, based on legal documents from just after the First and Second World Wars, did not meet modern standards," said Heritage Trustee Mary Broughton.

"The concern was that if we did not create and implement a well thought out strategy for the future and seek professional advice on how to provide proper infrastructure, revenue funding, increasing opening times, and improve trustee skills for its proper management, we risked the rapid decline of a valuable heritage asset affecting the local, national and international arts community."

So the trustees decided to act, appointing a legal charity expert to work with them on updating the governance structure. Meanwhile, Marilyn Scott, Director of The Lightbox, volunteered to act as mentor the trustees, guiding them through their application for a major grant to help secure the project's future.

Thanks to the grant, legal charity experts will work with them on updating the governance structure, which is a legally complex task, while other experts will help them secure the future of the collection within its existing home. The trustees have to ensure that any changes they make do not have any unforeseen negative impacts.

"Thanks to National Lottery players, the project will enable the trustees of Worplesdon Memorial Hall and Sime Trust to carry out a full options appraisal and governance review to secure the future viability of the gallery, and its collection of artworks and advise on how the gallery can become a local centre for heritage and illustrative art for all to enjoy and experience," said the trustees' chairman, Chris Ewbank.

“It’s heartening that, having been brought back into the light after all these years thanks to the efforts of the local community and their supporters, Sime now has the chance to secure his rightful place in the artistic pantheon.”

Marilyn Scott was equally thrilled: “I am absolutely delighted with the news that the National Lottery Heritage Fund have supported the Sime Gallery Trust in this way – Sime is an artist who deserves to be better known and the gallery will be significantly strengthened by this grant,” she said.

Trustee Mary Broughton expressed thanks to local groups who had supported the endeavour, including Guildford and West Surrey Area Arts Society, the Friends of Guildford House and Surrey Museums Committee.

“This is the most wonderful news after many months of hard work and working closely with HF,” she added. “It is the catalyst we needed to take the gallery into the 21st century and crucially, to explore the possibilities of how to promote the wonderful variety of artworks we have by this amazing and talented artist, yet little known still by many.

“The gallery must be placed on a sound footing with professional advisors and Lawyers to guide us in this process to ensure as trustees, we can create a sustainable future.”

About Sidney Herbert Sime (1865-1941)

Sidney Herbert Sime was born in 1865 and was one of the greatest imaginative artists since Blake, renowned for his book and magazine illustrations, paintings and drawings. His art was shaped by his journey from the coal pits of Lancashire to the world of aristocracy, of the artistes of the London clubs, theatres and music halls. Sime’s fascination with imaginary beasts, hell and the afterlife is in sharp contrast to his earlier Scottish landscapes and later quiet life in Worplesdon, drawing caricatures in the local inn.

All this can be traced in fine black and white illustrations, theatrical caricatures of actors comedians and singers, drawings of bogey beasts, dramatic oils of apocalyptic proportions, and humorous sketches of ordinary men doing everyday jobs in a marvellous display that has become an important local piece of social history.

Although his reputation languished for many years, and despite the encouragement of his two aristocratic patrons, Lord Howard de Walden and Lord Dunsany, to exhibit his works publicly, Sime’s reticence and desire for anonymity mostly prevailed. His philosophy of life resulted from a ‘profound inquisition into the minds of men’ and his great and active brain. His exceptional and original fancy, his penetrating invention and his delicious humour earned for him the distinction of ‘genius’.

‘I don’t like the idea of his being forgotten only to be rediscovered in a hundred years hence... I am determined that he should be recognized in spite of himself’ wrote Lord Howard de Walden following Sime’s death. The purpose-built Sime Art Gallery at Worplesdon Memorial Hall is home to over 800 items of paintings, drawings and memorabilia by Sime, bequeathed to the Trustees by his widow, Mary Sime.