

THE WEDGWOOD MUSEUM PREDICAMENT

AN APPEAL TO THE GOVERNMENT

The origins of the modern Wedgwood Museum can be traced to Josiah Wedgwood himself. In 1774 he wrote:

'I have often wish'd I had saved a single specimen of all the new articles I have made, & would now give twenty times the original value for such a collection. For ten years past I have omitted doing this, because I did not begin it ten years sooner. I am now, from thinking, and talking a little more upon this subject ... resolv'd to make a beginning.'

That resolve led to the formation of a large informal collection of wares and other historic items which was finally organised into an official museum in 1906. During the years that they still owned the company, Wedgwood managers of the 20th century kept remarkably few of the wares they produced (or, indeed, inherited) in their own hands, preferring prestige pieces to be held by the museum so that, where possible, they could be shared with the public.

In 1962, at a time of heightened takeover frenzy, the museum was made into a trust specifically to prevent it being used as a realisable asset by any future predator. Josiah Wedgwood and Sons became a public company four years later.

In 1986 Wedgwood was taken over by Waterford. But the Museum was safe. Whatever financial difficulties were encountered by Waterford, they could not – even when they faced insolvency – gain access to the Museum assets. Wedgwood enthusiasts around the world were reassured that the Museum was protected by the force of law and could not be lost. With this reassurance, many people continued to donate generously with both cash and collectors' items. When the Museum gained Charitable Trust status in 1998, its long term future seemed absolutely guaranteed. And it was on this basis that an ambitious plan to create a new building to house the collection received financial support from all sides. The Heritage Lottery Fund contributed more than £5 million, and a similar amount came from other granting bodies, businesses and individuals. This resulted in a magnificent new museum which opened to the public in 2008, and won the Arts Fund Prize in 2009.

Yet new government legislation has made the museum vulnerable after all and the predator it faces is none other than a body instituted by the government itself: the Pension Protection Fund. In 2005 a new pension law resulted in the Museum being held responsible for the £134 million deficit of the Wedgwood Pension Fund simply because five of the museum's staff are among its 7,000 members. This law, which is being enforced by the Pension Protection Fund, had the laudable objective of preventing companies from fraudulent misuse of pension funds. It was not intended for *bona fide* charities – but charities are suffering the unintended consequences.

The Wedgwood Museum is now under administration.

It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that this is simply the result of the 2005 legislation. There is no other reason. Later this year a court case will decide whether or not the assets of the Museum Trust can be appropriated in this way. If the ruling goes against the Wedgwood Museum, the whole collection could be auctioned off and scattered around the world. This would be a national tragedy.

We urge the new Government to amend this shoddy pension legislation immediately to protect charitable trusts from its unintended consequences. Supporters of the Museum from all around the world, and members of the family who have invested so much in it, appeal to the Government to take action.