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The Wedgwood Museum – A History

The £10-million Wedgwood Museum housing the majority of the Wedgwood ceramic archive and art collection has created a new museum of international significance.

Standing adjacent to the existing award-winning Wedgwood Visitor Centre, it houses the Trust's 8,000 strong historic ceramics collection, 75,000 manuscripts and items of correspondence, plus a fine art collection including works by Stubbs and Reynolds.

It's a unique record of the entire history of the Wedgwood ceramic company from the early 18th century to the present day.

Although, through the ages, individual members of the Wedgwood family maintained their own personal collections dating back to the Company's foundation in 1759, it was not until 1906 that many of these items were gifted or loaned to a fledgling company museum.

The spark for the creation of the early museum, based at the company's first purpose built factory in Etruria, was the discovery of a cache of early trials and experimental pieces in a dusty and forgotten storeroom at the factory. As a result of that discovery, the factory was scoured for other items of historical interest and everything was amalgamated into a display, which led to the formation of a Wedgwood Museum on May 7th, 1906.

The museum collection remained within the Etruria factory until the outbreak of World War Two, at which point it was carefully packed away and placed in storage for safekeeping, and the museum closed. Although Wedgwood moved its base of operations to Barlaston in 1940, it was more than a decade later before the company decided to once again make the collection available to public view. They created a special new display area within the factory complex, the Long Gallery, a 100 yard corridor packed with exhibition cases on each side. It opened to the public in 1952.

In 1975 all of the Wedgwood historical collections were once again relocated - this time to a newly created combined Visitor Centre and Museum. And in 2000, the company created a special stand alone £10m Visitor Centre, complete with interactive displays, a dedicated demonstration area, brand new shopping facilities, a cinema and restaurants. Visitors could also enjoy a unique factory tour, which allowed them to actually walk around the manufacturing areas of the company.

However, the footprint of the new Visitor Centre 'swallowed' the Museum which moved most of its exhibits into secure storage, leaving only a display area within the new complex to give a taste of its treasures. It was therefore decided by the Museum, an independent charitable trust, to begin fund raising to create its own stand alone museum at Barlaston.

The appearance of the Museum coincides with the build-up to the 250th anniversary, in 2009, of Wedgwood itself. Now one of the world's leading luxury lifestyle companies with customers in more than 100 countries around the globe, its 250th milestone will be celebrated by a series of celebrations which will draw together the heritage, history and art that have helped to make Wedgwood a household name since the 18th century. For further information, visit www.visitstoke.co.uk.

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