

## **Project 14 - report on 2021/22 by Charlie Lambert, Chair, Norman Nicholson House Community Interest Company & Chair, Norman Nicholson Society**

What should we make of our project's achievements in the last 12 months – success, or disappointment? To be honest, I think the answer is: both. And that leaves us, in my view, at a crucial stage in which the next few months will be decisive in determining our ultimate success.

Let me quickly recap. It is now six years since the Society launched Project 14, our campaign to buy 14 St George's Terrace and turn it into a place which will be a worthy celebration of Nicholson's life and also make a positive contribution to the town of Millom. Two years ago we, the Society, set up a Community Interest Company to focus on the project and I have the honour of chairing the company as well as the Society.

Success AND disappointment. Let's address the disappointment first. That rests in the fact that another year has gone by and we have still not attracted the major funding we need to get cracking. It is not for the want of trying; it isn't because we don't know where to look or who to talk to; it certainly isn't for the lack of submitting applications and sweating on the response. But, we are still not yet there. That is disappointing and it's a test of our commitment.

And yet, this has been a year in which we have gathered more and more support; quite extraordinary really. Look what's happened. A generous benefactor who wants to remain anonymous has agreed to provide the complete cost of buying No 14. We have had an independent valuation carried out and the benefactor has accepted this without question. They would be willing to transfer the money to the Nicholson House Company tomorrow. But as of now we can't afford the cost of repairing the house, renovating it, and kitting it out to house a museum, a café and accommodation for a writer in residence and general tourists. Until we secure that funding, it would be folly to take ownership of the house. We wouldn't be able to sustain it.

But interest is out there. Support is out there. In this last year we have had wonderful backing from the Architectural Heritage Fund. They provided us with funding to commission a museum/business consultant, Jennie Pitceathly, to review our business plan and also devise a comprehensive strategy for the development of the museum, a really exciting intervention which means we are now approaching funders with a detailed proposal for a lively, engaging, authoritative museum using innovative digital technology as well as tried and trusted techniques. Jennie has worked with Wordsworth Grasmere, Blackwell and Windermere Jetty and it's great to have her as part of our team.

At the start of 2022 the AHF went one step further. They awarded us Crowdfunder Challenge status, which means that for every pound we raise through our GoFundMe campaign, the AHF matches it. So they double our money, to a maximum of £20,000, with a deadline of 31/1/23. The GoFundMe campaign is another success story of the last 12 months. It has raised, to date, £11,289, which with the AHF's match funding is actually worth £22,578. Donations have come in ranging in magnitude from £5 to £5,000. Wonderful! I would like to pay tribute and thank every single person who has contributed. The £5,000 was donated by Karen Seward in memory of her English teacher at school in Barrow, Wilf Kimber. Karen and her husband Stephen have been terrifically supportive and I'm only too pleased to highlight the memory of Mr Kimber. Thank goodness for inspirational teachers.

The last 12 months have also seen the progress of our walking trails app, another initiative by the Nicholson House company, with funding from the Millom Towns Fund. This was launched at the end of March 2021 and has so far received 301 downloads, the content at present consisting of two trails, plenty of information and images, plus audio of Norman himself reading his poetry, and we thank our member Mike Smith for giving permission to use the recordings that he made himself.

We have, from one source and another, raised over £126,000 towards this project. I think this is an immense achievement by a literary society. But the total cost is over £550,000 and we now need a major funder to commit to providing the lion's share of that.

I said at the start of this report that the next few months will be decisive. This is because it's now clear that only two organisations are viable options to supply the major funds we need at this time: the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Millom Town Deal. There are other funders who may well contribute smaller amounts, but the other two are the ones who hold the key. A big commitment by one or the other will make all the difference. We've got through the first hurdle regarding the Lottery Heritage Fund, which has accepted a formal Project Enquiry from us and is willing to consider an application for over £200,000. We expect to submit that application in the coming weeks. The Millom Town Deal is our other option and they have, at their own request, sent a surveyor, an architect and a heritage specialist to the house. This is obviously encouraging, but we are now in a situation where we need solid commitment, either from the Town Deal or the Lottery Heritage Fund.

If we succeed with one of those, then the Nicholson House project will be in good shape to proceed.

Charlie Lambert

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