St Mark's Church, Broomhill, St Mary's Church, Walkley, and By the Book Drama Group present

RUSKIN COMES TO TOTLEY



A play in two acts by David Price and Frances Gray to be performed as a rehearsed play reading at Dore and Totley United Reformed Church,
On 21 November 2026

Characters in the order of appearance.

John Ruskin, 1st narrator **Richard Carwardine**
Joan Severns. Ruskin's cousin and secretary **Linda Kirk**
David Downs, Ruskin's gardener **Joe Forde**
Edward Carpenter, 2nd narrator **John Schofield**
Alderman Bragge **Frances Gray**
Matilda Swan, the Swans' daughter **Victoria Wassall**
Leonard Swan, the Swans' son **Thomas Wassall**
Emily Swan, wife of Henry Swan **Naomi Wassall**
Henry Swan, Ruskin's agent in Sheffield, Curator of Walkley Museum **John Newman**

The 'Communists'

Edwin Priest, spectacle manufacturer, President **Mark James**
George Shaw, boot and shoe maker P**hilip Booth**
John Maloy, blacksmith **Dez Martin**
Mary Anne Berry, later Mrs Maloy **Sue Newman**
Harry Richardson, fork manufacturer **Paul Harrison**
Mrs Elizabeth Richardson **Lucy Harrison**
George Dawson, draper and phrenologist **David Price**

James Burdon, farm worker **Frances Gray**
William Harrison Riley, socialist journalist **Roger Lasko**

There will be an interval of about 20 minutes with refreshments on offer.

This play was first performed at St Mary's Church Walkley on 13 June 2026.

Historical Background

In 1875, John Ruskin was 55. He was not only Britain's most celebrated art critic. He was also one of Britain's most forceful critics of capitalism and industrialisation. In 1871, he had founded the Company or Fund (later the Guild) of St George as a vehicle for improving people's lives. He was Master of this new organisation. His personal life was difficult. His marriage to Effie Gray had been annulled. He was devoted to a young woman called Rose La Touche but in 1875 she died, pushing him into depression. As he recovered, he decided to create a museum in Sheffield.

He chose Sheffield partly because he admired its cutlery tradition but also because one of his disciples, a man with remarkable skills, Henry Swan, lived there. Henry introduced him to a group of 'Communists'. Sheffield had long been a radical town. These 'Communists' were highly skilled people influenced by the ideas not of Karl Marx but of the earlier socialist, Robert Owen. Though conscious that Ruskin did not share their socialist and democratic ideas, they asked him to buy a farm in which they could establish a commune. Ruskin eventually agreed and bought a farm in Totley for the 'Communists.' Act 2 of the play is about the tensions between the 'Communists' and Ruskin that ensued.

One reason why a farm commune seemed so attractive to the 'Communists' was that Sheffield in the 1870s was an environmental disaster area. There was appalling pollution from the large steel works and the many cutlery works. Edward Carpenter, who settled in Sheffield around this time, later called for action to curb pollution but this was not achieved until the 1950s. In this play, he has recently given up his life as a Cambridge don and clergyman. Instead, he has chosen to live 'with the people' and to learn about socialism.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

At the end of the performance, please join in the singing of this song – the words and music are by Edward Carpenter: |

England arise! The long long night is over.
Faint in the East behold the dawn appear
Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow-
Arise, O England, for the day is here;
From your fields and hills, Hark the answer swells –
Arise, O England for the day is here!

As the audience leaves, there will be a collection for the funds of St Mary's Church and St Mark's Church.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge their debt particularly to:

- Mark Frost: The Lost Companions and Ruskin's Guild of St George. Anthem Press. 2014;
- Sally Goldsmith: Thirteen Acres: John Ruskin and the Totley Communists. Guild of St George. 2017.
- Stuart Eagles: Ruskin's Faithful Servants: Henry and Emily Swan 2024. Stuart has also shared with us his latest research into the Totley Communists.

We are grateful to Andrew Sanderson for help with the music and to Dez and Jennie Martin for help with the costumes.