

Boyhood home of Britten to host pop-up museum

Kathryn Bradley

kathryn.bradley@archant.co.uk

During the 1920s and 1930s, crowds would gather outside a cliff-top house in south Lowestoft to hear a young boy who lived there playing his compositions on the piano.

Next week this very same house on Kirkley Cliff, where Benjamin Britten spent his formative years, is being opened to the public as a "pop-up museum" to celebrate the centenary of his birth.

The property has now been converted into the Britten House bed and breakfast and has been booked out from next Friday until Sunday, November 24 by the Britten-Pears Foundation.

Exhibits from the Foundation's Bed House museum in Aldeburgh will be displayed in the property during the event, which coincides with celebrations taking place throughout the world.

For the first time since the 1930s, manuscripts Britten wrote there as a boy will return to his childhood home to be displayed alongside the nursery rocking horse later used in one of his operas.

Foundation staff will be on hand to help visitors around the house, helped by pupils from the Benjamin Britten High School.

Kevin Gosling, of the Britten-Pears Foundation, said: "We have got some lovely text from a memoir his sister Ethel wrote about the plays they used to perform in the nursery.

"It is a really good evocation of growing up in the house and the family life and the music making that went on there.

"We have got about 50 or so family photographs which will be running on a big screen and we have got

Town's link

Benjamin Britten was born and raised at 21, Kirkley Cliff Road – a smart, three-storey house overlooking Lowestoft's South Beach.

The ground floor served as the waiting room and surgery of his father's dental practice, while the family lived upstairs.

When he was seven, Britten was sent to a dame school, run by the Misses Astle. The younger sister, Ethel, gave him piano lessons – and in later life he said that he remained grateful for the excellence of her teaching.

In September 1928 Britten went as a boarder to Gresham's School, in Holt.

Although Britten lost his direct links with Lowestoft when his mother moved away after the death of his father in 1934, he had fond memories of the town and was thrilled to receive the Honorary Freedom of the Borough in 1951.

recordings of the manuscripts that will be on display so people will be able to hear the music that is written down.

"As he gets older, it gets more sophisticated and most of this is unpublished.

"The amazing thing is that Britten was a hoarder and never threw anything away. We have almost 1,000 manuscripts written from when he was six or seven until he was in his teens. Because he also wrote lots of letters and kept diaries, you can track his musical development month by month as he grows up. It is fascinating and you can't do that in great detail with any other composer.



■ Benjamin Britten as a child at home in Lowestoft. Right, the house today.



“One of the things we wanted to do in this centenary year was put Lowestoft properly back on the map as the place where Britten was born and where he really first learned music

Kevin Gosling, of the Britten-Pears Foundation

■ Britten House, at 21, Kirkley Cliff, will be open between 10am and 4pm from next Friday, November 22, to Sunday, November 24 and entry is free.

“Highly Commended”