Boyhood home of Britten to host pop-up museum

Kathryn Bradley

During the 1920s and 1930s, crowds would gather outside a cliff top house on 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 Edward 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 tecking horse later used in one of his operas.

Foundation staff will be on hand to show 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 very early text from a memoir his sister letts 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 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"As he gets older he gets more sophisticated and most of this is unpublished.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.

"It is also a very accessible story. He is not like a young Mozart writing fully formed symphonies at an early age. Britten was a talented boy who had good teachers, a supportive family and worked hard at it."

Mr Gosling added: "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."

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

Kevin Gosling, of the Britten-Pears Foundation

"Highly Commended!"