

House and Home



In 1876, after a severe bout of bronchitis made worse by the damp Irish climate, Merton Russell-Cotes was advised to take a tour of the South of England for his health.

On this tour Merton and his wife, Annie, stayed at The Bath Hotel in Bournemouth. During their stay Merton became acquainted with Mr Arthur Bryant, the owner of the hotel. Merton later bought the hotel from him and the family moved in on Christmas Day, 1876

In 1878 the hotel was closed for extension and renovation. It re-opened in 1880 as The Royal Bath Hotel after Merton discovered that the Prince of Wales had once stayed. The hotel became a showcase for Merton's art collection and later collection of objects and curios brought back from the Russell-Cotes' extensive travels.

By 1896 the collection was outgrowing the hotel and it became clear a separate building was needed. Merton commissioned John Frederick Fogerty to design a building in the hotel grounds to house both the family and their vast collection of objects.

The house took many months of planning, during which there were many changes to the plans. An agreement was finally reached and building started in 1898.

Merton presented East Cliff Hall to Annie for her 65th birthday in 1901. In 1907 Annie made a gift of the house and contents to the town whilst Merton gave his fine art collection. The 'Deed of Gift' was signed in 1908 and the house officially opened as The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in 1909.

By 1913 the collections had outgrown the museum. The Borough was unable to provide funds so Annie made a gift of three further art galleries and also gave the freehold of the entire site to the town. The galleries were completed in 1919 and officially opened by Princess Beatrice on 1st February - the occasion of Merton and Annie's 59th anniversary.

Annie died shortly after the couple celebrated their Diamond Wedding anniversary in 1920. Merton only survived his beloved wife by a few months and was finally laid to rest on 1st February 1921, the couple's 61st wedding anniversary.

The museum was opened full time to the public in 1922. By 1926 the collection had again outgrown the museum. Merton and Annie had originally intended to add an entrance with an observatory, but it was clear more hanging space was needed so Merton and Annie's two surviving children, Herbert Russell-Cotes and Ella Stebbing, adapted the plans and a further gallery was added.