

Starman of the suburbs

Bowie's early home to open to the public

Laura Snakes

On the evening of 6 July 1972, thousands of kids across the UK had their lives changed when the sight of David Bowie performing Starman on Top of the Pops was beamed into their living rooms.

Come the end of 2027, Bowie fans will be able to tread the floorboards where the young David Jones had his own Damascene cultural conversion, when his childhood home in Bromley, south London, opens to the public for the first time.

Before the 10th anniversary of Bowie's death this weekend (he would have turned 79 yesterday), the Heritage of London Trust announced it has acquired the two-up, two-down house at 4 Plaistow Grove where Bowie lived from 1955 to 1968.

Bowie's small teenage bedroom - approximately nine by 10 feet - will offer an immersive experience for visitors. In 1990, he recalled: "I spent so much time in my bedroom. It really was my entire world. I had books up there, my music up there, my record player. Going from my world upstairs out onto the street, I had to pass through this no-man's-land of the living room."

Just standing in the room today, said Geoffrey Marsh, who co-curated the V&A's David Bowie Is exhibition in 2013 and will curate the restoration, feels "extraordinary. You think, someone who didn't have any big advantages, who came from an ordinary family, went to an ordinary school - what was it that went on there which created this driving ambition to succeed, to want to be a star, and which took him right through to it?"

The house experience will include never-before-seen archival items, including Bowie's copies of Observer's books on music and architecture. "In one of them, he's written his exam results in the back," said Marsh. "He's also written his name in as David Jones Jr because he went through this phase of loving Americana, so he



◀ David Bowie in 1974. Above, family photos of the young David Jones and his mother, Margaret. Below, 4 Plaistow Grove, in Bromley

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gave himself the Jr title to show his allegiance. That's very magical."

One artefact originally shown at the V&A was a photograph of Bowie's hero Little Richard that he cut out when he was around 10 or 11 and stuck on his bedroom wall. It followed him throughout his life, and the restoration will bring it back to its original spot.

"He always had that on the wall in his flat, until he died," said Marsh. "What's remarkable is that it's an instant connection back to the late 50s and Little Richard as this extraordinary star."

Living friends including the artist and musician George Underwood, who punched Bowie at school and left him with his immediately identifiable mismatched irises, and the actor

Dana Gillespie have helped provide memories of visiting the house.

"Dana remembers going there and being served tuna sandwiches," said Marsh. "She came from kind of a posh upbringing, so I think she had quite a shock."

Funding for the project has started with a £500,000 grant from the Jones Day foundation, and a public fundraising campaign will start this month.

Marsh, the trust and the conservation architects Julian Harrap - who previously worked on Sir John Soane's Museum and Pitzhanger Manor and Gallery in Ealing - will restore the house to exactly how it looked around 1963, when Bowie was 16 years old.

The house will also host creative and skills workshops for young people, inspired by Bowie's Beckenham branch of the Arts Lab movement and run by the trust's Proud Places scheme, which has involved more than 10,000 young Londoners in heritage projects.

A public consultation will have to take place on the proposals. Marsh is hoping for strong local support: "They've already got one famous house there: Charles Darwin's."

Newer works will have to be undone: when Bowie's older brother Terry was kicked out, the two upstairs bedrooms were knocked into one; a 1970s extension will also be taken down. "And of course," said Marsh, "in the 1960s it wouldn't have had an internal lavatory or bathroom, so all that's got to be removed."

The house was acquired from owners who lived in the house from 1970 until recently - the "incredibly steep staircase" was no longer tenable, said Marsh - who offered it directly to the trust.

Was Bowie happy at Plaistow Grove? "That's a very tricky question," said Marsh. While Bowie's father, Haywood, was supportive - having had some experience in the arts running a club in Soho in the 1930s - he had different challenges with his mother, Margaret. "He used to say he would retreat to his bedroom to get away from the living room. And I think that's part of why he got this huge ambition - sitting in his bedroom, often alone. His schoolfriends would often ask him out and he'd say no, I'm going to stay at home and think and work."

Seeing photographs of Bowie aged 16, said Marsh, spoke to his unusual sense of direction. "He's looking straight through the camera lens at you. It's just incredible for a 16-year-old, in an age before boybands and all the rest of it, stylists and fashion people. He created his own hairstyle, sets, made all the decisions about clothes; he thought everything through from his early teens."

Marsh encouraged the public to scrutinise photos of the young Bowie at home: anyone with matching rolls of wallpaper in the attic is invited to come forward.

He said: "The other thing is that Mrs Jones gave away and sold items in 1970 when she left the house. So if anyone in Bromley, or indeed anywhere else, has got anything they know from the house, we'd be very interested."