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HERITAGE

VIA ON-LINE PORTAL - E-MAIL application

London Borough of Camden
Heritage and Planning Officer

LBC: Covering Letter – HERITAGE STATEMENT

18 February 2021

Dear Sir or Madam

Blue plaque: Jim Henson (1936-1990)

The Proposal: I am writing to advise you that English Heritage's Blue Plaques Panel has approved the recommendation – subject to consents being forthcoming - that a blue plaque be erected to: Jim Henson, the renowned creator of The Muppets, with a blue plaque at **50 Downshire Hill, Hampstead, NW3 1PA, in the London Borough of Camden**. This is a listed Grade II building (ref entry 1078269), in the Hampstead Conservation Area.

BUILDING STATEMENT - The current building history:

Number 50 Downshire Hill, is a distinctive semi-detached house (paired with number 51 (consecutive)), and dates from the mid-nineteenth century, on a street first laid out with villas and terraces from 1818, when it had probably been extended to Willow Road. By 1826 building was apparently complete on the northern side, where there were 18 houses between the public house and the junction with John Street; on the southern side were St. John's church, opened in 1823 in the angle with John Street, and at least five houses (nos. 39-43). The first confirmed resident is noted in 1861. Number 50's neighbour, 51, is also listed grade II with similar window decoration on the Downshire Hill façade, but with recessed side-entrance wing. Number 50 is built of brick with painted plain render façade; three storeys plus basement; four bays wide; a central entrance doorway and porch; the ground floor has asymmetrical sized windows - the right-hand a French window, the left-hand a French window plus side windows; a first-floor running cast-iron decorative balcony with four French windows, three with pediments on scroll brackets, the far right window has been altered and the pediment now replaced with an inset sash window above; later alterations have also included an attic dormer above the cornice band. It is listed Grade II and lies in the Hampstead Conservation Area, sub-area 3.

The many varied and remarkable past residents of the area are celebrated by blue plaques, Downshire Hill currently has three English Heritage commemorated figures - at nos. 47 to John Heartfield; at 21 to Lee Miller and Sir Roland Penrose; at 25 to Sir Peter Medawar,

Step into Frankland's story



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The proposed inscription on the new blue plaque is:

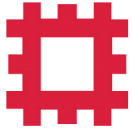
**JIM
HENSON
1936-1990
Creator of
The Muppets
lived here**

The inscription on the plaque does not give full dates of residency (1979-1990), as although it was Henson's main London base, due to British tax regulations he only spent a maximum of six months each year here, and the headquarters of his company was always in NYC.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY and reputation: of proposed figure Jim Henson:

Jim Henson is best remembered as the man behind *The Muppets* and *Sesame Street* and as a producer and director of a wide range of television programmes and films. A talented puppeteer, he was also skilled in storytelling, set-design and for his ability to spot and nurture talent and bring together the best people in the business. By all accounts, this created an entertaining as well as a creative working atmosphere which at different times included his wife and five children. Energetic and driven, Henson insisted he wasn't a workaholic because all he did was play for a living, and the huge body of work created by Henson and his team, and the impressive number of awards, is all the more remarkable for his untimely death at the age of fifty-three.

Born James Maury Henson (known as Jimmy at home) in Greenville, Mississippi, on 24 September 1936, the youngest of two sons of Paul Ransom Henson, an agricultural scientist, and his wife Betty, née Elizabeth Marcella Brown who brought up Jim and his brother Paul Jr as Christian Scientists. Henson's creative work with puppets began in 1954 when aged seventeen he started work as a marionette manipulator on CBC TV's short-lived *Junior Morning Show* and performing on NBC. Henson studied television design and production at the University of Maryland, where he also took the new puppetry course, and met his future collaborator and, later, wife, Jane Nebel, who was in the year above. In March 1955 they were hired as the puppeteers for a new *Afternoon* variety programme on WRC with their creation, The Muppets. Henson recalled later that 'for a long time I would tell people it was a combination of marionettes and puppets, but, basically, it was really just a word we coined'. Nine weeks after their *Afternoon* debut, Jim and Jane's five-minute show *Sam and Friends* aired in a late-night slot and very quickly gained a following. Among Sam's friends was a pale-blue character (not yet a frog) named Kermit. Over the next three years, Jim and Jane worked on the Muppets and Sam's Friends, creating sketches and commercials. In 1958 they formalised the business as Muppets, Inc., Jim taking a 60 per cent share to Jane's 40. They married on 28 May 1959, and set up home together in Bethesda, Maryland.

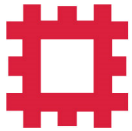


In the mid-1960s Henson began to experiment with film, and in 1969 a pilot educational show was released called *Sesame Street*, for which Henson created the puppet characters, including Ernie and Bert (voiced respectively by Jim and Frank Oz(nowicz)) and included Kermit (voiced by Henson and now firmly a frog). In London, Lew Grade commissioned a series of *The Muppet Show* for ATV at Elstree Studios, London, which aired from January 1976 and featured new characters, and a love interest provided for Kermit in the Oz-voiced Miss Piggy. May 1979 saw the premiere of *The Muppet Movie* in Leicester Square, with cameos from stars including Orson Welles and Richard Pryor, and a cast of 250 Muppets. It proved to be one of the most profitable films of the decade. Henson directed the second Muppet movie, *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981). The 120th *Muppet Show* went out in June 1980 and with that the five years' filming at Elstree ended. A third Muppet movie, *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, which concluded with the marriage of Kermit and Miss Piggy, appeared in 1984; *A Muppet Family Christmas*, featuring a host of Muppet favourites, aired in December 1987 to popular and critical acclaim.

Not everything that Henson created was a public success on the scale of the Muppets - a film project that eventually became *The Dark Crystal* (1982), Henson's first foray into the fantasy genre, divided opinion – it was known to some as Henson's folly – but it was also praised as the only all hand-puppet, all live-action extravaganza ever made; today computers or visual effects would accomplish much of what the team hand-crafted. *Labyrinth*, written by Dennis Lee, partly scripted by Terry Jones, with George Lucas as executive producer and starring David Bowie (who also wrote the soundtrack) was launched in 1986. Although this has since gained a cult following, the film, which Henson directed, was panned by most critics and did poorly at the box office. An anthology called *The Storyteller*, with Henson as Director, initially had low ratings but earned Henson an Emmy for Outstanding Children's Programme.

In August 1989 Henson entered negotiations for a merger with Disney. While the deal was being negotiated, Henson planned generous payments to all those who had assisted in his success. However, during the spring of 1990 an undiagnosed streptococcal throat infection worsened and, left untreated, Henson was admitted to New York Hospital with organ failure; he quickly became unconscious and died less than twenty-four hours later, on 16 May 1990, from septic shock. A memorial service was held in New York, and also in London at St Paul's Cathedral for Henson's British friends and colleagues. After his death, the Jim Henson Company would be controlled by the Henson children; final negotiations saw the sale of The Muppets to Disney fifteen years later.

Henson enjoyed creating fantasy worlds for children but was also driven to prove that puppeteering was not just child's play. As his early agent and later manager, Bernie Brillstein remembered, 'Sesame Street was for kids ... but Henson was not a kids' act. He was hip and slightly dark. He had cute little creations – and he liked to blow them up'. Among the negative responses to Henson's work at this time was the lack of female performers, which was rectified partly by the hiring of Fran Brill. Nevertheless, *Sesame Street* in particular was socially progressive, for instance in its



depiction of women in non-traditional roles and inclusion of children with learning disabilities and it changed early-years educational broadcasting. In the 1970s. Henson's work advanced the art of hand puppetry internationally, his character puppets are an enduring part of popular culture; in the 1980s, Henson Associates' workshops pioneered remote-controlled, animatronic creations for Henson-directed and others' films. Henson's increasing commitment to environmental causes led in the 1980s to public service broadcasts on clean water featuring Kermit and Fozzie for the US National Wildlife Federation and Kermit delivered the keynote speech at the Federation's annual meeting; Henson was later involved with the more overtly political Better World Society, for which Kermit became 'Spokesfrog'. Henson always believed in television and film as 'an influence for good; that we can help to shape the thoughts of children and adults in a positive way'.

Henson has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (one for him, one for Kermit), a museum dedicated to him in Leland, Mississippi, and the Museum of The Moving Image, New York, contains a permanent Jim Henson Gallery. The Jim Henson Foundation, established in 1982, continues to promote the art of puppetry in the USA and there are also collections of Henson puppets at the Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, Georgia, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. The Jim Henson Company Archives are responsible for many international touring exhibitions. Brian Jay Jones's biography of 2013 builds on earlier accounts of Henson's life and career by Christopher Finch and Matt Bacon; there is also a body of academic literature on The Muppets and contemporary culture. A six-part documentary series by DefunctTV, launched on YouTube, demonstrates ongoing popular interest in Henson's legacy.

Connection of 50 Downshire Hill to Jim Henson:

Number 50 Downshire Hill, was Jim Henson's London home from 1979; Rate books place him there from 30 April, and in June he threw an Elizabethan-themed housewarming party to celebrate the success of *The Muppet Movie*. For the first three years here, it was the family home for Jane and the children, three of the Henson children went to the American Community School locally. However marriage difficulties led to separation and when *The Muppet Show* ended in 1981, Jane returned to America and thus the Hensons' time together at Downshire Hill was their last as a couple. For half the year, when not working at Elstree, Downshire Hill was also his work place, holding board meetings and production parties in the house.

Henson's connection to Hampstead and Downshire Hill is further strengthened as in the same year he purchased number 50, he also bought through The Henson Organisation, 1B Downshire Hill, originally built as a postal sorting office in 1891, Henson transformed it into offices and workshop and renamed Jim Henson's Creature Shop. While the Muppets continued to be created in the New York workshop, the Hampstead 'Creature Shop', focused on the many contracts to make puppets for outside clients – that included the animatronic mice and Angelica Huston's prosthetics for *The Witches* and some of the most advanced animatronics yet for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990); and specifically for Henson's films - *The*



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Dark Crystal (1982); *The Storyteller* (1985) and *Labyrinth* (1986). The workshop is now the NHS Keats Group Medical Practice.

Henson's first link to Hampstead, was from 1 June 1977 until 21 November 1978 when he lived in a flat at 12 Froggnal Gardens. Henson evidently liked Hampstead, as a lousy cook, he was a great frequenter of the restaurants locally. Henson also spent time with friends and colleagues walking and picnicking on Hampstead Heath – the local rabbit population is said to have inspired the hand-puppet special, *The Tale of Bunny Picnic* (1986). He dedicated a bench to the memory of his late friend Don Sahlin, on Hampstead Heath, Henson's own name being added in 1990. A blue plaque at 50 Downshire Hill would be widely seen and highlight Henson's London connection and be a popular addition to the scheme.

Our proposal for the positioning of the inset mounted blue plaque is for it to be sited at ground floor level, to the right of the entrance door and centred symmetrically between the entrance door and right-hand window; the vertical height centred on the top window pane of the long window door; located as shown on the attached surveyor orthophotos, scaled 1:50, and oblique views. The submitted surveyor orthophotos take the role of architect drawings and the square-on view at 1:50 scale will print to scale at A1. The size of the plaque is the standard 19.5-inch diameter, inset into the stucco and brickwork by a depth of 50mm. The materials and methodology for the installation of the plaque are considered under accompanying documents.

Consents

50 Downshire Hill is still owned by Henson's surviving children; recent consultation with them has resulted in positive support and their final approval for the design and positioning of the blue plaque as shown attached. The Historic England Conservation Architect has confirmed that he is happy with the proposed location, that the building is structurally sound to support an inset plaque, and has approved the methodology of fixing the inset mounted ceramic plaque.

I should be grateful if you would let me know whether you have any observations on our proposal. If you would like to discuss the matter further, or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully

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