Cornwall’s Victorian Silicon Valley secures over £1.5m for bold new heritage development

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Thanks to an injection of £125,000 from the DCMS/Wolfson Fund and a further £1.44 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), Porthcurno Telegraph Museum in Cornwall’s beautiful far west can finally roll out an ambitious development project, preserving and celebrating its unique heritage.

Following the landing of the first undersea telegraph cable there in 1870, Porthcurno became one of the most strategically important communication points linking Great Britain to America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. Thousands of miles of telegraph cables were laid under seas and oceans, converging in the cable hut on Porthcurno’s sandy beach and then on to the cable station further up the valley.

During WWII the site was deemed so critical to allied communications that Cornish miners were employed to excavate secret bomb-proof tunnels to house the telegraph cable station, protecting it from attack.

The award of £125,000 from the DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund was announced earlier this week, and together with £1.44million Heritage Lottery Fund grant announced today, brings the Museum significantly closer to its £2.68million target to fund the bold development project due for completion in 2014.

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of HLF, said: “Porthcurno Telegraph Museum is the unassuming home to what was once the centre of Britain’s technological development and the site that linked Britain to its Empire through thousands of miles of underwater cable. The Heritage Lottery Fund’s investment will bring alive the story of this internationally significant museum, the people that worked there and the revolutionary work that took place.”

Since 1998 the historic buildings have housed the independent museum where visitors can explore the telegraph and early wireless and their impact past and present. The only museum concentrating on science education west of Bristol, it also covers themes including WWII, the global & social impact of telecommunications, and the story of Porthcurno itself which sprang up around the cable station. The buildings, object collection and archive form a heritage of global significance and interest. The museum’s ‘Developing for the Future’ project will see this heritage preserved for future generations, enabling the museum to tell its story in ways that “aim to inform, surprise, inspire and delight visitors from all over the world” it says.

Improved visitor experience is at the centre of the museum’s grand designs; a new Introduction Gallery will open up the core themes to visitors, whilst additional gallery space will accommodate new permanent and temporary exhibitions and events. The museum’s interpretation will be revisited, and by layering information the core themes will become more accessible to their diverse audiences. A purpose-built Learning Centre will provide space for formal and informal learning and community-led activities. A new café and improved visitor facilities will not only enhance the general visitor experience but help to secure the long-term financial sustainability of the museum.

Museum Director, Libby Buckley, commented on the project: “We are delighted by this result. The heritage we have

here is so important, not only to Cornwall, but globally. We're often told that we're a great small museum, and that we punch above our weight, and I think today's news certainly supports that. The exiting thing is that this funding will enable us to get even better, and take our story to even more people. Just like Cornwall's famous mining landscape, the telegraph story is a huge part of Cornish and British heritage that deserves to be celebrated."

The impressive collection and photogenic location hasn't gone unnoticed by the media either; the BBC's 'What the Victorians Did For Us', 'Coast' and most recently Professor Jim Al-Khalili's 'The Story of Electricity' have all featured the museum. Not that the museum wouldn't welcome more exposure, Rachel Webster, Marketing Officer, said: "The telegraph story really is a gripping and surprising one. The science and technology is fascinating, but it's just the tip of the iceberg. It's a story filled with adventure; pioneering telegraph engineers sent to exotic, remote locations all over the world. Ultimately it's a story about people and our intrinsic need to communicate, overcoming huge geographical and technological hurdles in the process. It would be wonderful to bring the telegraph story to life through film or radio. After all, our world would look very different without it."

The project will also provide high-tech storage for the museum's collection; the only collection in Cornwall officially recognised as being of national and international importance. Containing thousands of historic objects and documents the archive facility requires special atmospheric conditions to ensure its contents survive for future generations. It also provides a rich resource for research; there are currently 4 PhD students working at Porthcurno and the archive is frequently accessed by local and family historians and overseas researchers.

Just as the museum's collection is treated with care, so too are the museum's historic buildings. Built in 1904 to accommodate the growing Eastern Telegraph Company cable station (predecessor of Cable & Wireless), Eastern House is the iconic home to the museum's main galleries. Short of ideal as a modern family-friendly museum, the Grade II listed Edwardian building will now undergo a sensitive redevelopment.

Development project manager Henrietta Boex explained: "We are extremely proud of our beautiful Edwardian buildings, but they were built to accommodate a busy cable station, not a buzzing museum, which means they don't work as well as they could for our growing number of visitors. By sensitively redeveloping them we will not only be able to accommodate more visitors, but to make visiting even more enjoyable, even more fun. It is about making the most of the wonderful assets we have and coaxing them gently into the 21st century."

The museum has secured further funding for the project from a number of sources including Cornwall Council, the Clore Duffield Foundation, the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Edith Murphy Foundation, The Headley Trust and individual donations. The museum also receives support from Cable & Wireless Communications and Cable & Wireless Worldwide, successors of the Eastern Telegraph Company.

Despite their most recent successes the museum still has some way to go; Libby Buckley, Director, commented further: "Today brings us within touching distance of our fundraising target. We are extremely grateful for the financial support we've received to date and are confident of raising the remaining £395,000. We hope that our visitors, local communities and everyone passionate about British heritage will support us in this final push to reach the target and secure the plans."

The independent museum, a registered charity that relies heavily on volunteer support, is committed to its ongoing work with local communities, ensuring the development project supports wider aims of economic and cultural regeneration in

an area that suffers high rural deprivation.

As part of the project a Learning & Community Participation Officer will be recruited to spearhead ongoing community consultation, engaging a number of community groups to develop new interactive exhibits, pilot virtual volunteering projects and to consult on issues such as accessibility.

Henrietta Boex, Development Project Manager added: “The improvements will enable visitors, whatever their age or ability, to enjoy the museum more than ever, leading them to recommend the museum to family and friends, and ultimately to return again and again.”

You can support the museum and follow its progress online.

Further Information

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