Dudley’s canal tunnel gets a new lease of life

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The Dudley Canal Trust (Trips), which operates public boat trips exploring the lost industrial underworld at Dudley Canal Tunnel and Limestone Mines, has been awarded a confirmed grant* of £989,200 to build a brand new Learning and Access centre.

To be known as the Portal, the new visitor centre will enhance the connection between the Dudley Canal and Limestone Mines and the Castle Hill Development Project including the nearby Black County Living Museum (BCLM), giving visitors to both attractions new opportunities to explore both sites. In addition to new car parking, a water borne swing bridge across the canal, and a covered area for people embarking on boat trips, there will be more volunteering opportunities for people to get involved in protecting, conserving and learning about the heritage of the area.

Reyahn King, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund West Midlands, said: “Visitor facilities at this special site are currently very limited and this much needed grant means that the Dudley Canal Trust (Trips) will now be able to maximise the heritage potential of the area, encouraging many more people to come and explore the delights of the Black Country Canals, Limestone Mines, and nearby Wren’s Nest Nature Reserve.”

In addition to the HLF grant awarded for the construction of the new Learning and Access centre, a variety of exciting exhibitions exploring local canal and mining heritage are also planned, for which Dudley Canal Trust (Trips) are currently awaiting the outcome of an ERDF grant.

Dudley Canal Tunnel and Limestone Mines currently welcomes approx. 75,000 visitors a year, many of whom also visit the BCLM. This project aims to increase that number to over 90,000 over the next five years through its new Portal and bringing to life four inter-linked Black Country histories at the new heritage hub:

- Dudley Canal Tunnel and Limestone Mines –the site forms part of a vast network of complex underground tunnels and some of the largest man-made caverns in the UK originally created by mining limestone for use as a flux in smelting iron ore in hundreds of local blast furnaces during the Industrial Revolution. Built in the 1770s as a branch from the Birmingham Canal at Tipton to Lord Dudley’s limestone mines beneath Castle Hill, Dudley Canal Tunnel had over 40,000 boats a year passing through by the 1850s, before finally closing in 1962.

- Black Country Canals – the project also aims to tell the wider story of the canals in the area, from the physical, built and natural heritage, to the culture of the time and the social histories of engineers, navvies, carriers, boatman and their families.

- Wren’s Nest Nature Reserve – in close proximity to the Todd’s End site, the project will explore the significance of the first urban geological NNR and its importance as the site of rich deposits of fossils in Silurian limestone laid 420 million years ago.

- Geological Mapping and Mining – Castle Hill in Dudley and the Black County Canals offer a fascinating glimpse into the relationship between geological mapping and mining. The project will examine this through the role of William Smith, a canal surveyor who produced the first geological map of Britain in 1815.

Jeff Luesley, Chairman at the Dudley Canal Trust (Trips), explained further the importance of the lottery award and what it will offer the site, its heritage, and visitors: “We’re thrilled that the vision of a Portal building, to serve as a new ‘front-door’ for the Dudley Canal Tunnel and Limestone Mines, is at last becoming a reality. This will provide a hub for new activities to attract a wider audience and a welcome for all visitors in-keeping with a unique gem of the Black Country, otherwise hidden underground and only accessible by boat.”

Notes to editors

The HLF grant to the project Dudley Canal Tunnel and Limestone Mines Learning and Access Hub is for £989,200 (42% of project costs) and is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.

Dudley Canal Trust website

Further information

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