

Heritage Lottery Fund grant for Lews Castle brings economic optimism to the Hebrides

22/11/2011

Sitting in a commanding position overlooking Stornoway, Lews Castle will be restored to create a new museum and archive for the Outer Hebrides as well as stunning hotel accommodation for tourists to the islands.

The museum, which will be the first in the UK to use Gaelic as its first language, will form a key visitor destination and gateway to a unique heritage network across the 15 inhabited islands of the Outer Hebrides. It will display the collections of Museum nan Eilean (MnE) while enhancing the work of over 20 community heritage organisations which have been actively preserving and promoting the language and local culture of their Gaelic communities for the last 30 years and have collected photographs, documents and memorabilia on a scale unparalleled elsewhere in the UK.

The establishment of the islands' first ever civic archive facility will mean that collections currently held at the National Archives of Scotland can return to the islands while state-of-the art museum facilities will allow collections from the British Museum, such as the Lewis Chessmen, and the National Museum of Scotland to be exhibited there. There will also be new learning and community facilities which will open up exciting opportunities for schools and community groups.

The HLF grant brings the Fund's total investment in the economy of the Outer Hebrides to over £10m. Over 75 projects, including the Stornoway [Townscape Heritage Initiative](#), have received much-needed funding across mainly rural island communities. Through preserving and celebrating their heritage, they have brought about benefits in terms of education, employment and tourism.

Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland, said: "The transformation of Lews Castle has the potential to make a real difference to the economy of Lewis and indeed the Western Isles through job creation and tourism. Breathing new life into this grand castle will breathe new life into Stornoway itself. It will provide a safe and accessible home for the collections and artefacts that make these wonderful islands what they are today while providing support to the network of heritage societies and local museums that exist across the Outer Hebrides.

"The innovative combination of providing a new-build museum combined with the restoration of the castle as a high quality hotel is an example of partnership working on many levels, and is a new model that we may see more of in the future."

Welcoming the HLF announcement, Angus Campbell, the Council Leader and Chairman of the Lews Castle Trust Steering Group, said: "This is a hugely significant and exciting moment for the Comhairle and the communities of the Outer Hebrides. This award from HLF puts us within reach of delivering a generational project which will have benefits throughout our islands. Culture and heritage are one of our most important assets and the new museum and archive will allow more

people to enjoy and appreciate these, bringing benefits to visitors and local communities across the Outer Hebrides.

"Lews Castle and its grounds are unique in being community owned since the 1920s and the whole community looks forward to the castle coming back to life and being a focus for cultural, social and economic activity. The Heritage Lottery Fund has recognised the significance of the project and the major economic benefits that it will deliver. The Comhairle has also demonstrated its commitment with an investment in excess of £4.5m. We now seek the support of the other funding partners to finalise the funding package and enable us to begin work on this long-awaited project as soon as possible."

Alasdair Allan, MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, commented: "Today's announcement from the Heritage Lottery Fund is an important step towards revitalising, not only Lews Castle, but the wider tourist economy in the islands. The Comhairle and other agencies locally have been working tirelessly to progress plans that would ensure Lews Castle becomes both a cultural and economic asset to the islands. I will be working with them to get us to the next stage in this process, which is Lews Castle providing both museum and hotel facilities of which the Western Isles can be proud."

Currently vacant and on the Buildings at Risk register, Lews Castle was built in 1847 for James Matheson who made his fortune in the Chinese opium trade. It changed hands in 1918, a year before the Iolaire disaster, when William Lever, Lord Leverhulme, of Lever Brothers/Unilever acquired the island. He invested in the castle introducing central heating, electric lighting and internal telephones and extended the ballroom to accommodate his parties. He then gifted it to the people of Stornoway in 1923.

During World War II it served as a naval hospital and accommodation for the air and ground crew of 700 Naval Air Squadron who operated a detachment of amphibious bi-planes from a slipway in the grounds. After the war, the Castle was used as a technical college and school for over 30 years.

Further information

Shiona Mackay, HLF Scotland on 01786 870 638 / 07779 142 890 or Laura Bates, HLF Press Office on 020 7591 6027 / 07973 613 820.

Nigel Scott, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar on 01851 822 622 or 07884 236 103.