Lottery award to restore North Belfast landmark

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A Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant of almost £1million (£959,600) was awarded to the 174 Trust to restore the former Duncairn Presbyterian Church on the Antrim Road and transform it into a Centre for Arts, Culture and Heritage. Following its restoration the building will be used as the venue for an ambitious programme of community-focused events and activities.

Dating to 1862, the former church was designed by WJ Barr who was also responsible for well-known local landmarks such as the Ulster Hall and Albert Clock. In addition to being one of the few listed buildings in the North of the city, the site is of great heritage significance for its connections with, and proximity to, a host of historic locations and events. The church stands at one of the gateways into Crumlin Road Gaol, and is located close to Clifton House and Clifton Street Cemetery, where the graves of Mary Ann and Henry Joy McCracken and other key figures involved in the 1798 Rebellion are located. Also associated with the church is Thomas Sinclair, a close friend of Lord Edward Carson, whose son wrote the final text for the Solemn League and Covenant in 1912.

The site was acquired by the 174 Trust in 1995 and is currently used by local groups and organisations as a venue for activities as diverse as boxing, after school clubs, community physio therapy services and Irish Dancing classes. Over 800 people access these services, but the church building has suffered serious deterioration from weather damage and vandalism over the last ten years and is currently considered ‘at risk’.

The new project will restore the historic fabric of the church building and its linked Halls and Manse. Extensive conservation works will be needed to preserve the building and will include repairs to the Scrabo Stone exterior and the roof and floors, reusing existing materials where possible. The restored building will provide a new welcome area, tourist information point, café, exhibition and theatre space, office accommodation and activity rooms.

Informal and lifelong learning opportunities will be provided for the local community through design workshops, local history classes and genealogy events. The building’s architecture and artefacts, such as its memorial tablets and stained glass windows, which will be brought out of storage for reuse during the restoration process, will be interpreted and used to tell the story of the church and those who worshiped there. The histories of local figures whose contribution impacted upon the local and national stage will also be explored and featured.

Commenting on the award, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: “The restoration and reuse of this local landmark will help to make a real difference to the people of North Belfast. The project will maximise the potential of this shared space, creating a range of new facilities to provide enhanced educational opportunities and access to a range of arts, heritage and cultural events for the local community to become involved in, learn from and enjoy. We are delighted to award this grant which will preserve both the built and cultural heritage of the city for generations to come.”

The 174 Trust’s Director Rev. Bill Shaw is delighted at the HLF decision to back their restoration project that has been 10 years in the planning: “The Centre for Culture, Arts and Heritage will not only allow us to provide for the needs of an increasing number of local people but will provide an attractive venue for a whole new range of activities and events that will draw others from a wider geographical area into this part of the city. As an organisation that for almost 30 years has played a leading role in helping to build peace and promote reconciliation, this new Centre will enable us to continue to encourage the exploration of culture and identity through the arts and make our unique contribution to the creation of a

truly ‘shared future’.”

The restoration works will begin later this year; 150 years after the original building works to construct the church began, and once completed in 2012 this historic building will celebrate a century-and-a-half of service to the local community with its removal from the Buildings at Risk Register (BHARNI).

Today’s announcement comes as HLF begins planning its new five year strategic vision to shape the organisation’s funding priorities from 2013 to 2019. As part of this consultation process, HLF wants to hear from the general public and Lottery players in Northern Ireland about what is important locally and how, and on what, HLF money should be invested in the future.

To share your views on what matters most about Northern Ireland’s heritage go to the consultation page to fill in a short questionnaire. The closing date for responses is 26 April 2011.

Notes to editors

Since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £135million to projects across Northern Ireland.

Further information

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