

Tunnel plans see the light

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Today it was announced that Sunderland City Council secured initial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), paving the way for the development of a more detailed funding bid for in the next two years.

HLF also awarded the council development funding of £53,200 to develop an activity plan, conservation plan, further design and interpretation work and a management and maintenance plan.

The council announced plans to invest £1.35m in a rolling programme of restoration for 110 year old Grade II listed Roker Pier in February this year and work began to restore the lantern house in August.

The next priority will be to make a start on resurfacing the deck of the pier next year. But a successful bid for additional cash from the HLF would allow the council to deliver a comprehensive pier restoration scheme.

Welcoming the news, Cabinet Secretary, Councillor Mel Speding, said: "We're delighted to have secured initial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Pier.

"Roker Pier is one of Sunderland's best loved landmarks and were we to be successful, the additional £500,000 funding would make such a difference in improving and preserving the pier for future generations to enjoy.

"As well as allowing us to restore the lighthouse to its former glory, it would also mean we could press ahead with our ambitions to restore the tunnel that runs underneath the pier and open it to the public.

"There's a real sense of history down there and I think it's something that lots of people would be interested in experiencing. We'd also like to develop a range of resources to make the most of the pier's heritage and educational potential."

Explaining the importance of HLF support, Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund North East, added: "Roker Pier is an impressive example of Victorian engineering and played a crucial role in the creation of the wider Sunderland Dock, shaping the area as we know it today. Our initial support means that Sunderland City Council can develop their exciting and engaging plans to not only restore and enhance the historic fabric of the pier, lighthouse and underground tunnels, but also put it right back at the heart of the community, providing much-needed opportunities for social and economic regeneration."

The pier restoration is part of the bigger picture in terms of the ongoing regeneration of Sunderland's seafront, which is set to see £5m of investment over the next few years.

A second phase of promenade improvements at Seaburn is due for completion this Autumn and further promenade improvements are also underway at Marine Walk, Roker.

Notes for editors

The Heritage Lottery Fund have awarded a total of £21.5m to piers across the UK.

About Roker Pier

Built between 1885 and 1903, the Grade II listed Roker Pier and lighthouse was hailed as a 'triumph of engineering' when it first opened - no mean feat in an era which saw the construction of Brunel's Clifton suspension Bridge and Paxton's Crystal Palace.

The original lantern was gas powered, emitting a 45,000 candlepower reflected beam which was said to be visible for over 15 miles out to sea. Once complete, the pier extended 2,000 ft (609.60m) out to sea.

The pier was the brainchild of Henry Hay Wake, chief engineer of the River Wear Commissioners. It was built using granite faced blocks, each weighing up to 45 tons, constructed on shore in an area known to this day as the blockyard.

Concrete was poured into huge wooden moulds, which were then manoeuvred into place by a vast crane called the Goliath.

The crane was driven by gas engines, supplied by gas pipes running along a specially designed tunnel which ran the entire length of the pier.

It is this tunnel, later used by the lighthouse keeper to reach the lighthouse in bad weather when the waves would have been crashing over the deck, that the council hopes to open to the public.

Further information

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