Starring role for Victorian fire station as it secures



Old Fire Station in West Norwood

Grade II listed, the Old Fire Station in West Norwood, a rare surviving example of a fire station designed for horse-drawn fire engines, will now be restored thanks to an HLF grant of more than £1.6million.

The money will mean that the South London Theatre Building Preservation Trust (SLTBPT) will be able to carry out vital repairs to the building and restore its Victorian splendour - opening up its original main front doors for the first time in 100 years and making the building fully accessible to the public.

Built in 1881, the building has a colourful past. For 35 years it housed 26 firemen, their families and two horse-drawn fire appliances before falling out of use in 1916 with the advent of motorised engines, which were too big to fit through the doors. It then served the Lambeth community as a church hall, stood strong through the Second World War as an observation tower and was brought out of disuse by the South London Theatre Company in 1967.

The historic building, perched on the hill in the vibrant area of West Norwood, is now home to over 400 members of the prolific South London Theatre, putting on a staggering 22 shows a year. This major restoration project will now secure the future of the Old Fire Station as a working community building while taking a look back into its past.

Expected to take 12-15 months, the programme of extensive repairs will see the building taken off the English Heritage Buildings At Risk register and complement a whole host of regeneration currently underway in this area of Lambeth. The project will see it retain its original Victorian charm, character and features including its octagonal tower and front-facing wooden fire doors while being opened up to the community with increased opening hours, disabled access and new community spaces. The restoration project is timed to complete in advance of the community theatre celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2017.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “Fire stations of this age and condition are extremely rare and full of character and we’re delighted to play a part in giving it a new lease of life. South London Theatre Old Fire Station will become the first Victorian fire station to have interpretation and tours around it on a regular basis. The theatre company already successfully operates here and it will be fantastic to see the building throwing its doors open for even more people to enjoy.”

In addition to capital works, the South London Theatre Company and their partners will also play a key role in uncovering and interpreting the history of the building as the restoration takes place. From exhibition displays, hard-hat tours, costume archiving, an ‘I remember when…’ project recording the oral histories and memories of 40 local people - to rhyme-time with under-fives and plays on the history of fire-fighting, 190 volunteers will bring the heritage of the building to life, developing conservation and heritage skills along the way.

Lee Ridgeway, Chairman, SLT, said: “Having been a member of SLT for ten years and Chairman for two, I can honestly say that I am immensely proud of the work that has been put into this bid. Over the years I have gathered many fond memories because of SLT. The Lottery funding will mean the theatre can continue and will allow generations to come to gather their own memories that I know they will cherish forever.”

Hans Rossbach, who joined the SLT youth group many years ago, and now, at 18, is about to go to drama college, added: “SLT has benefited me by giving me the chance to work with many different talented people. The Old Fire Station is a great building with a fantastic creative community attached to it. Giving it an upgrade will improve the building structure, giving its character a boost and it will keep the shows going which lets us carry on producing good shows and experiences!.”

The South London Theatre Old Fire Station project is expected to start in summer 2015 and the building will reopen in 2016.

Notes to editors

South London Theatre
The South London Theatre, based in West Norwood, south east London is Britain's busiest community theatre with a new show every fortnight. A member of the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain. The theatre was founded in 1967 in an old Victorian fire station and has been thriving ever since. Everyone is welcome to join and get involved, whether on stage, behind the scenes or just relaxing in the cosy basement bar. View their Facebook page or follow them on Twitter: @sltheatre.

South London Theatre Building Preservation Trust
The SLT has set up a new charity, the SLT Building Preservation Trust, dedicated to advancing the project. It has a board comprising members of the SLT and the Industrial Building Preservation Trust who bring experience of many successful restoration projects. For more information see the SLTBPT page.

Further information

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