

Lews Castle and Museum

Visitors of all ages will be able to enjoy a cinematic tour of the Outer Hebrides and first-hand accounts of life on the islands today and in the past. Interactive exhibits will appeal to younger visitors while the main gallery includes a range of fascinating objects from a selection of the world-famous Lewis Chessmen on long-term loan from the British Museum to the Stornoway blacksmith’s door engraved with decades of croft identity marks.

A stunning covered courtyard over the former service quarters of the Castle provides a café and shop leading through to the main corridor and the public rooms of the Castle which have been painstakingly restored to their former grandeur.

The operation of the new facilities will be carried out through a partnership between the Comhairle’s Heritage Service and Natural Retreats who will be responsible for all the commercial operations in the Castle, including catering, retail, functions and accommodation.

The doors opened to the public at 10.00am on Thursday (14 July). Work on the upper floors of the Castle to create luxury accommodation is expected to be completed later in the year. Visitors are therefore asked to take care and respect safety notices around the approaches to the Castle and the contractor’s compound.

Comhairle Leader Angus Campbell said: "Opening the doors of the museum and the Castle to the public is a major milestone for the Comhairle, our partners in the project and for the community. It is a unique project which I believe will have tangible positive impacts right across the islands. The official opening later in the year will be an opportunity to

recognise the many local and national partners who have helped to deliver the project. Although there is still some work to be done, for the moment it is right that the community and visitors to the island have the opportunity to see it and enjoy it."

Jilly Burns, Head of National Partnerships at National Museums Scotland, said: “We are delighted to support this exciting new museum development in Stornoway. Nearly one third of the material on display is on long-term loan from our national collections, from spectacular Viking hacksilver hoards to a vintage 1923 Morgan 3-wheeler car which was driven on the islands until the 1950s.

“The opening of the Lews Castle Museum on 14 July will provide an exciting new visitor attraction for the Island, attracting visitors from across the UK and beyond. We are sure it will prove to be hugely popular and look forward to continuing our support for Museum nan Eilean.”

Susan Raikes, Head of Learning and National Partnerships at the British Museum, said: “We are extremely pleased that the Museum nan Eilean and redevelopment project of Lews Castle will see its first visitors from the 14th of July. The Castle is a major museum site for the island and six of the Lewis Chessmen from the British Museum are now on long-term loan to the new galleries.

“It has been rewarding working in partnership with Museum nan Eilean throughout the project and this work continues a relationship between the British Museum and Museum nan Eilean that extends back 20 years. This latest long-term loan represents the commitment of the British Museum to maintain and extend access to its collections, building on the 7.7m people who saw our loans across the UK in 2015/16.”

Lucy Casot, Head of HLF Scotland said: “Thanks to National Lottery players, Lews Castle is now set to become a major tourist destination regenerating the local economy through a boost in visitor numbers.

“It will also provide a base for the cultural heritage not only of Lewis but of all the islands across the Outer Hebrides, celebrating and sharing the history and stories of this amazing part of the world.”

Rachel Mackenzie, area manager at Highlands and Islands Enterprise, said: “This is a very exciting project which will increase the number of visitors to the Outer Hebrides and further develop the Outer Hebrides as a world-class destination. The new facilities will be a major attraction for visitors to the islands and we are delighted to have supported the transformation of the castle and to see it becoming a cultural and economic asset for the island.”

Martin Fairley, Head of Investment at Historic Environment Scotland, said: “We received some very strong applications for the latest round of Building Repair Grant funding, and were happy to be able to support urgently needed repairs in seven buildings across the country. One of those was recipients was Lews Castle, the funding of which will help rebuild, repair and protect the wall, the Porter’s Lodge and the Boatman’s lodge, making them accessible to members of the public.”

David Boag, Director of Language Planning and Community Developments at *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* said: “The new Museum nan Eilean at Lews Castle along with its community heritage links, will encourage the use of Gaelic amongst fluent speakers and learners at local, national and international level. The use of Gaelic in the museum will reaffirm the importance of Gaelic culture today.

“Bòrd na Gàidhlig welcomes the new Museum and Archive as a facility of great influence for the area, which will demonstrate the importance of the Gaelic heritage to Scotland’s economy.”

Matt Spence, founder of Natural Retreats, said: ”We are so excited to be opening the doors at our latest retreat on the Isle of Lewis. Lews Castle is a stunning addition to the Natural Retreats portfolio, and we are privileged to be part of the next chapter in the history of such an iconic building. When we opened our first site in the Yorkshire Dales back in 2006, our ambition was to allow people to experience luxurious accommodation in breath-taking locations – and Lews Castle will deliver every bit of that amazing experience.

“Whether you’re a visitor looking for a delicious lunch lovingly made with local produce, or an eager explorer searching for a stunning base to explore the island, Lews Castle offers something for everyone. We are proud to attract even more people to this spectacular corner of the Great British Isles, and showcase all that Lewis has to offer.”

Notes for editors

National Museums Scotland

National Museums Scotland has worked extensively with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, supporting this project through collection loans and access to a wide range of specialist skills and expertise.

National Museums Scotland looks after museum collections of national and international importance and provides loans, partnerships, research and training in Scotland and internationally. Their individual museums are the National Museum of Scotland, the National Museum of Flight, the National Museum of Rural Life and the National War Museum. The National Museums Collection Centre in Edinburgh houses conservation and research facilities as well as collections not currently on display.

The British Museum

The British Museum has worked in partnership with Museum nan Eilean throughout the project and this work continues a relationship of loans and collaboration between the British Museum and Museum nan Eilean that extends back 20 years.

The British Museum is a national presence and each year works with hundreds of UK partner organisations through its wide-ranging National Programmes activity. This includes single-object Spotlight tours, touring exhibitions, partnership galleries, short-term loans and long-term loans, with the lead support of the Dorset Foundation in memory of Harry M Weinrebe. In 2015/16, over 3,000 objects were loaned to nearly 170 venues in the UK, reaching 7.7m people. The Museum will continue to develop partnerships across the UK as part of its commitment to sharing the collection as widely as possible.

Funding partners

The overall project has been funded through a partnership led by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar with external funding from HLF, Historic Environment Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Government, the European Regional Development Fund and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Further information

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