

Fort Walney site in Barrow-in-Furness Copyright Lawrence Hill

Led by artists and involving the local community, the project will focus on the remains of a pre-First World War British Army training camp in the North Walney Nature Reserve.

Art Gene unveiled the plans for the project that will start in the summer. Artists, archaeologists and community volunteers will work together to uncover, document and interpret a rare First World War practice trench and a rifle range on Walney Island. These features were part of the training camp established in 1911-13, adjacent to land that was used to test-fly airships designed by Barnes-Wallis (of bouncing bomb fame) for Vickers Ltd.

Art Gene will produce artwork that interprets these features and the history of Fort Walney including a digital map and smart phone app to guide visitors to the site.

Set among the sand dunes in and around the National Nature Reserve, in an area of wild, natural beauty, these features have no signage or interpretation to direct or educate visitors around the site and so are easily overlooked. Furthermore, they are vulnerable to continuing erosion and damage.

A consultation commissioned by Natural England in March 2013 demonstrated that many residents and visitors to the site were unaware of the military heritage but when told, were keen to learn more and get more involved in the site.

Commenting on the award, Maddi Nicholson, a director of Art Gene, said: “We are thrilled to have received the support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Fort Walney is a significant but hidden asset for the people of Barrow-in-Furness and indeed, the North West. We are confident the project will help residents and visitors to understand their heritage and the role Barrow played in the First World War.”

Stuart Bastik, Art Gene’s co-director, said: “The heritage is being eroded year by year and this is a vital chance to involve different artists and other experts, along with the community, to document what was there and to interpret it for future visitors. We will be asking local people to get involved in all different aspects of the project, from mapping the site to exploring the trenches.”

The project will be delivered with the support of the landowner (BAE Systems) and in partnership with Natural England.

Sara Hilton, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund North West, said: “It’s incredible to know that hidden within this area of historic natural beauty are the remnants of a training camp in use 100 years ago and the unexplored stories of the hundreds of soldiers who were trained here. The Heritage Lottery Fund has already invested £46m into projects – large and small - that are marking the global First World War Centenary enabling even more communities, like those involved with Art Gene, to explore the continuing legacy of this conflict.

“It’s also great to see this project happening in Barrow which, as a devleopment area for HLF, has received fewer grants than some other areas in the North West. We are working hard to encourage community groups and organisations, like Art Gene, to boost HLF funding in these places.”

MP John Woodcock, said: “This is an exciting project which promises to pull into sharper focus a little-known part of Barrow’s contribution to the First World War as the commemorations of that conflict begin to gather pace.

“It also holds the potential to create a thought-provoking historical feature in an area of natural beauty that will be of interest to locals and visitors alike.”

Notes to editors

Art Gene is an artist-led research and contemporary visual art production company that has been engaging people in the regeneration of their social, natural and built environment for the past 11 years. Art Gene's most recent project is "Seldom Seen", an exploration of the cultural heritage of the Islands of Barrow that resulted in Art Gene creating a "People's Museum" in the Ship Inn pub on Piel Island that enhances the visitor experience to the Islands of Barrow.

Further information

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