Bid to reveal importance of New Forest in World War II

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Now the New Forest National Park is hoping a widespread archaeological project to discover and record the crucial role the area played in World War II will capture people's imaginations and is asking heritage organisations to get in touch.

The National Park has heard its initial bid for £473,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has been successful. The first-round pass* means that it can now progress to the second stage of the HLF application process and has up to two years to submit more detailed plans to secure the grant.

With 80% of first-round projects being successful, it hopes that now with the community's help the World War II scheme will get the go-ahead.

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund for South East England, said: "This is an exciting application which may uncover previously undisturbed archaeological remains across large tracts of the New Forest and offer as many as 75 new volunteers the chance to get involved first-hand in preserving the legacy of World War II history on their doorstep. We look forward to receiving the National Park's application for a full grant in the future."

The National Park intends to use the money to:

- Bring together existing information about World War II activities in the New Forest, working with the forest community.
- Conduct surveys of World War II sites involving trained volunteers. Collect memories of military personnel, residents, evacuees and prisoners of war including recordings, photographs and artefacts.
- Increase understanding and awareness of the forest's role in the war with events, activities, archaeological digs, resources and educational materials.

National Park Archaeologist Frank Green said involvement from New Forest communities will be essential in making the project a success. However he stressed that at this stage he is only appealing for heritage groups to come forward to back their funding bid.

Frank said: "Some of the World War II features are well-documented like the 12 airfields that were created in the Forest and the building of the Mulberry Harbours at Lepe for D-Day. Others we come across by chance – a survey of the Cadland Estate back in 2008 revealed 34 World War II features we didn't know about such as the remains of encampments, infantry trenches and air raid shelters. That's only a small area of the New Forest so it shows that the records that we currently have represent a very small part of the overall picture of the National Park's wartime past.

"These features are critical in telling the story of the war, which in itself was instrumental in shaping our life today. If we do not begin to record these features now and piece together the stories that they tell, then they will soon be lost to future generations."

World War II sites which we already know about include:

• Over 200 bomb craters recorded at Cooper's Hill and Ashley Hole, near Godshill in the north of the New Forest, some of which were believed to be connected to the trials of the bouncing bomb of 'Dam-busters' fame.

• Vast systems of earthworks criss-crossing the open heath at Milkham Bottom, near Linwood, which were designed to hamper any invasion by preventing gliders from landing.

• Dummy buildings and earthworks that formed a 'starfish' bombing decoy complex on Beaulieu Heath, created to spare other locations from the attention of the Luftwaffe.

• The site of a former advanced landing ground near Pylewell Park, a specialised type of World War II military airfield prepared for the Allied invasion of Europe.

• Extensive military camps at Exbury, Marchwood and Lepe.

Sites are already being lost due to accidental damage, whether through encroaching tree roots, timber extraction vehicles, new utility installations or machinery involved in land management. First-hand accounts of the human impact of the war are also dwindling as those who lived through it reach their 80s and 90s. The National Park Authority is therefore keen to capture the information now.

Frank added: "We are really hopeful we can get through to the final round and we need to show the Heritage Lottery Fund that we have the backing of heritage and community groups. When the project is up-and-running, we'll be asking people to help with everything from youngsters recording memories of the older generations, volunteers getting involved in archaeological digs and community groups telling us their ideas for events, exhibits and displays they would like to see in their village."

"However, unless we have the Heritage Lottery Fund support we have no way of collecting and storing any artefacts or memories so please don't send them to us yet!"

Applications for the next funding round will be soon be sent to HLF and the National Park should hear whether its bid has been successful in the summer. If the project gets the go-ahead, it is hoped that all those involved will take part in a celebration event in the summer of 2013 to mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

Heritage groups interested in getting involved should contact Rachael Bowen on 01590 646675, email Rachael.bowen@newforestnpa.gov.uk

Notes to editors

The New Forest National Park Authority took up its full powers in April 2006. Its purposes are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park and to promote opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities. It also has a duty to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities within the Park. www.newforestnpa.gov.uk.

*A first-round pass means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-

round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award. On occasion an applicant with a first-round pass will also be awarded development funding towards the development of their scheme.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported 30,000 projects, allocating £4.5billion across the UK.