Hitting the highest heights

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Soaring 124ft above the city streets, Devonport Column has always been a highly prominent feature on Plymouth's skyline yet, until now, to all but the more senior residents in the city, the landmark has been a mystery. However on Saturday 11 May 2013, thanks to a regeneration project led by RIO (the Real Ideas Organisation) the Grade I listed Column became a pillar of the city's community once more.

Saturday 11 May saw a day of art, interactivity, historical musings and celebration as the public were invited to take the 137 steps to the top and experience the highest, and quite possibly the most impressive, 360 degree view of Plymouth. Restoration of the column is the second phase in RIO's wider programme of regeneration in Devonport, supported by a £685,000 Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant and 19 other key partners including Plymouth City Council and Plymouth College of Art. RIO has helped to attract millions of pounds worth of development money into the area and formed a key part of the ongoing surrounding improvements which have included the rebuilding of Ker Street, the rejuvenation of Devonport Park and the pavilion and new housing inside the former dockyard wall.

Local firm, Le Page Architects, created the design for the construction work which has included the installation of handrails and lighting to make the column easier to climb and Plymouth-based building company, Ryearch Limited, has completed the necessary physical adjustments.

RIO has also commissioned celebrated Plymouth artist Brian Pollard to create a new canvas of the two 'partner' buildings and to work with children at nearby Marlborough Primary School to paint their own reflections of these iconic landmarks. This work will be viewed for the first time at a special reception and a new 'Column Ale', also commissioned by RIO and created by local brewery Summerskills, will also be launched on the day to toast the opening.

RIO has worked in collaboration with Plymouth City Council Arts and Heritage and the Plymouth and West Devon Records Office to create a fascinating set of interpretation and historical tools which will ensure that visitors understand the depth of the significance of the column and its surrounding area. The column will also form a key part in the upcoming History Festival which is being run by Plymouth City Council.

Already established as a key business and cultural venue in the city, Devonport Guildhall has served and supported Plymouth, its community and its businesses, bringing over 30,000 new visitors to Devonport. Ed Whitelaw, Lead Developer at RIO said, "Having restored the Guildhall, the column was the next priority. The refurbishment of Devonport Column will add to the city's visitor proposition and thanks to the team at the Plymouth City Council Arts and Heritage department we have unearthed a plethora of compelling stories which will now come alive in the interactive games and experiences."

Ed continues, "This project has come from the community and our new wi-fi, 3D technologies and experiential learning tools will help more people learn about and participate in their own heritage whilst also helping local residents find out what's going on in the area. The view from the top is amazing and we are overjoyed to be able to invite the local community, the greater city at large and all of Plymouth's visitors to experience this undeniable 'high point' once again."

Nerys Watts, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South West, said: "Built to commemorate the establishment of Devonport, this important historic monument towers over the city and holds a special place in the heart of the community. This

fantastic project, which has resulted in the column being fully restored, now means the site is open once again, allowing visitors from near and far to climb the column and use innovative new technology to enjoy the fantastic views across the city."

Completed in 1827 by architect John Foulston, adjacent to his Regency masterpiece, the Devonport Guildhall, the column was erected to celebrate the founding of Devonport as an independent town in 1824. Foulston's Devonport Guildhall and Column, Oddfellows Hall and the Zion Chapel (now lost) are an eclectic set of buildings and today are the finest examples of Plymouth's regency architecture. For many generations of Plymothians, the column was a popular attraction, offering unrivalled views across the city and the Sound. Grade I listed, the Doric column has an internal staircase and a public viewing platform. Unlike much of pre-war Plymouth, Devonport Column escaped damage during the war. Its fortunes still didn't fare well. In the 1950s general access was limited and in the 1990s it was completely closed to the public and mothballed.

Notes to editors

Devonport Guildhall is a listed building in the heart of Devonport, renovated by the Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) and funded through the Community Assets Fund delivered by the Big Fund, with support from Plymouth City Council and Devonport Regeneration Community Partnership. RIO has transformed the Devonport Guildhall into a social enterprise hub and cultural centre for the Devonport, Plymouth and the South West. The Guildhall is available for hire for events, exhibitions and meetings and has an ongoing programme of activities.

Real Ideas Organisation (RIO), a social enterprise itself, works with communities and young people to make real change happen through social enterprise. It offers services and products to schools, local authorities, government departments and national partners which create real and lasting improvement.

The Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) secured a Heritage Lottery Fund Grant of £685,000 to restore the iconic Devonport Column. Part of an £800,000 funding package, the grant has enabled RIO to fully renovate and develop the column to become a heritage and tourist destination, giving the public access to the top of the viewing platform for the first time in 50 years.

124 feet above street level, the viewing platform commands some of the best views across Plymouth. Future plans also include establishing a nature reserve, creating a rose garden and building a public plaza, framed with a two year strategy of marketing, training, learning and participation.

RIO has been working in partnership with Plymouth City Council to develop the scheme and the redevelopment will partner an additional 19 partner organisations from across the city, including the University of Plymouth, Plymouth College of Art, the museum as well local schools.

Plymouth City Council still owns the column but once the building work is completed, will lease the column on a 25-year lease to the Real Ideas Organisation. A similar scenario enabled RIO, a social enterprise, to lease Devonport Guildhall from the council and to access grants to carry out a significant restoration programme worth £1.75million