HLF gives home of iconic First World War poet a major boost

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Plans to conserve and develop Yr Ysgwrn, the home of the iconic First World War Welsh language poet known as Hedd Wyn, into a museum and interpretation centre have been given a major boost today.

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has given Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) the green light to progress plans for the Grade II* listed farmhouse, farmland and the collections relating to Hedd Wyn with the award of first-round pass and a £149,700 development grant.

Yr Ysgwrn has international significance as the home of Ellis Humphrey Evans, better known by his bardic name of Hedd Wyn, a renowned Welsh poet who was killed in action during the First World War. He was posthumously awarded the 1917 National Eisteddfod Chair for his poem *Yr Arwr* (*The Hero*). The chair was draped in black cloth at the moving awards ceremony and has been known ever since as Y Gadair Ddu (the Black Chair). The Black Chair came to represent the loss of a whole generation of young Welsh men whose lives were cut short by the First World War.

The site has become a place of pilgrimage for visitors from Wales and around the world who want to see the Black Chair, pay respects to both Hedd Wyn and others of the lost generation while experiencing the dramatic landscape which inspired so many of his poems. It has been identified by Welsh Government as a focal point for Wales' First World War centenary commemorations.

Dr Manon Williams, Chair of the Committee for Heritage Lottery Fund Wales, said: "Yr Ysgwrn represents so many key themes of our heritage from literature to traditional farming, and we support SNPA's plans to open up the site for a wider audience to explore its compelling story. Hedd Wyn is one of Wales' heroes and it is fitting that this project should be developed as part of the First World War commemorations.

"We were impressed with the plans for this rare insight into early 20th century rural Wales with extensive learning opportunities for people to get involved in their heritage while conserving it for the future. We have awarded a first round pass in recognition of the project's potential and the benefits it could bring to the local area and Wales as a whole."

Gerald Williams, aged 83, looked after the farm and house until March 2012. SNPA acquired the house for the general public earlier this year with financial support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Welsh Government.

Gerald Williams said: "I promised my grandmother that I would keep the door open at Yr Ysgwrn as a way of paying respect to the bravery and success of my uncle. Knowing that the Park Authority has been successful in this application to develop their ideas for Yr Ysgwrn is great news. It will ensure that the place will be safeguarded for the future, and that information about the life and work of Hedd Wyn will be available to visitors for many years to come."

In response to the news, SNPA Chief Executive, Aneurin Phillips said: "The Park Authority is delighted to hear this announcement today. Money from the Heritage Lottery Fund will enable us to proceed with our plans to put into practice the Authority's statutory purposes, namely to protect the cultural heritage of Snowdonia and promote opportunities to understand and enjoy its special qualities. If we fulfil our plans, we will have a unique opportunity to be able to promote

some of Snowdonia's literary and cultural features in an exciting and appealing way. We now look forward to the exciting challenge that lies ahead."

The proposed project will ensure the unity of Yr Ysgwrn, the farmhouse little changed since the poet's death in 1917, is preserved together with the farmlands, the collections and the stories of Hedd Wyn. Increasing physical and digital access to the site needs to be balanced with sensitive management of the farmhouse and its 168 acres of traditional farmland, where Hedd Wyn worked as a shepherd with his father from the age of 14. Visitors will be able to learn about this iconic literary figure, Welsh culture, rural farming life in the early 20th century and First World War connections, all on one site.

SNPA propose repairing and adapting the barn and pig sty near the farmhouse to provide an exhibition room, education room and small visitor facility. A range of activities has been put forward including themed exhibitions, oral history projects, poetry and rural skills workshops and a pan-European schools twinning project.

An online resource will play a vital role in providing access to a wider audience, with an online diary of activity, image gallery and uploaded talks and lectures meaning that web users can explore and learn about the project without having to visit the remote rural site.

An audience development manager will be employed to oversee a significant programme of volunteer opportunities including guiding visitors around the site, conservation, care of collections, customer service, health and safety and first aid. They will also work with a range of heritage partners to increase knowledge and understanding of the Hedd Wyn story amongst non-Welsh speakers, including the Mosaic project, a Campaign for National Parks' initiative which builds links with black and ethnic communities.

There is strong support for the project from local people, schools and the Friends of Yr Ysgwrn group who are eager to help make the project a success. SNPA also has the backing of key heritage bodies including Cadw, CyMAL and National Museum Wales who will help contribute expertise to the project.

A key element of the conservation work is to capture and safeguard the knowledge of Hedd Wyn's nephew Gerald Williams, both about Hedd Wyn's family life and how the farm was worked so it can be maintained, using traditional methods.

Notes for editors

About Hedd Wyn

- Born Ellis Humphrey Evans, he is better known as his Welsh bard name, Hedd Wyn, which means Blessed Peace.
- Hedd Wyn was a farmer's son and self taught poet, he had left school at the age of 14 to shepherd on his family's farm. He joined up to the 15th Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers to save his brother from becoming a soldier so young.
- He was killed in the Battle of Pilkem Ridge (on the Western Front, in modern day Belgium) on 31 July 1917.
- The working farmhouse contains the six bardic chairs Hedd Wyn won including Y Gadair Ddu, the black chair, described as the most famous piece of Welsh furniture.
- Unlike other war poets Hedd Wyn wrote about the war's effect on his land, his friends and people rather than directly about the war. His experiences of the horror and grief of the war, initially through the death of friends, inspired him to complete his poem *Yr Arwr* (*The Hero*).

- The Black Chair was carved by a Belgium craftsman, himself a war refugee and to this day Hedd Wyn's memory is commemorated in Belgium.
- His life story was the subject of an Oscar nominated Welsh language film in 1992 and more recently a children's book The Black Chair published in 2009. His story and poetry is taught in every school in Wales both in terms of Welsh literature and remembrance.

The HLF first-round pass means that SNPA is able to move to the second round of the HLF application process. It has up to two years to submit more detailed plans and apply for the remainder of the £2.7m HLF support that it is seeking for the project.

Further information

For further information please contact Kate Sullivan or Helen Newton on 029 2076 4100.