McArthur centenary celebrations win Heritage Lottery Fund support

01/11/2011

The project will be delivered by Ballymoney Museum and include an exhibition on McArthur, in addition to a new community drama and a selection of resources for local schools.

Kennedy K. McArthur was born in Dervock in 1881. As a young man, he emigrated to South Africa where he became a successful athlete. In 1912 he competed with the South African national team at the Stockholm Olympic Games and won the most prestigious event, the marathon. He returned to his place of birth a hero before going back to South Africa and a beautiful bronze plaque in Ballymoney Town Hall commemorates his achievements.

When McArthur died in 1960, his collection of medals and trophies, his Olympic team blazer and the number from his Olympic running shirt were donated to the museum in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Thanks to the generosity of Potchefstroom Museum, these precious artefacts will now be released on loan and transported to Northern Ireland. The exciting museum exhibition will attract thousands of enthusiasts to Ballymoney Museum to see these enigmatic sporting artefacts which will be on public display in Europe for the first time in 100 years.

Ballymoney Museum will also be working with a playwright to write a new play on McArthur's life story. People from the local community will be invited to take part and the play will be performed in Dervock and Ballymoney to coincide with the centenary in July 2012.

Two of the most memorable features of the drama project will be re-enactments of the events which occurred on McArthur's return from Stockholm. When he arrived in Ballymoney by train, he was pulled from the station up High Street on a carriage - the carriage was drawn, not by horses, but by the people of the Borough! He then travelled to Dervock where he was greeted by the villagers leading him in a torchlight procession. Both these remarkable occasions will be repeated, using actors and members of the public, creating a spectacle that will attract huge crowds to the Borough.

Over the coming months, Ballymoney Museum will be a developing stronger relationship with Potchefstroom and this will help to form the links between local pupils and children in South Africa. Other links will be established with sports enthusiasts interested in McArthur's life and there are plans to bring Riel Hauman, a journalist who wrote a biography of the famous athlete, to deliver a lecture on his life story while he is visiting Ballymoney next summer.

Councillor Ian Stevenson, Mayor of Ballymoney, thanked the HLF saying: "This is a tremendous boost for our 2012 programme and, on behalf of Ballymoney Borough Council, I am extremely grateful to HLF. This funding will give the people of our Borough an opportunity to celebrate this important centenary and focus the attention of the world on a true Olympic hero who was born in our community. I would also like to thank Dervock and District Community Association and Potchefstroom Museum for their support in putting together this exciting project."

Mervyn Storey MLA also welcomed the HLF grant: "As both an MLA and Councillor I have supported Ballymoney Museum and the community representatives in North Antrim who are working hard on this ambitious project to ensure that K.K. McArthur's centenary is properly commemorated. This grant aid will go a long way to giving McArthur the

recognition he deserves for his Olympic achievements and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the HLF. I encourage everyone to come along to Ballymoney and Dervock next year to join in the celebrations. McArthur is one of our greatest sporting heroes and he has been overlooked for too long."

Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, added: "It could not be more fitting to celebrate the achievements of one of our most interesting and colourful Olympians during 2012. The ambitious plans to mark the centenary of McArthur's gold medal win will enable the whole community to become involved in the celebrations, helping to raise awareness of our sporting heritage in the year of the Olympic Games, and we are delighted to be involved."

For further details, please contact Keith Beattie, Museum Manager, Ballymoney Museum, 028 2766 0230 or museum@ballymoney.gov.uk.