Uncovering Hidden Treasures at the White House

01/04/2009

As part of a two day visit to Northern Ireland, her first since becoming Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund in October 2008, Dame Jenny received a tour of the site, which is the oldest building in the Greater Belfast Area.

The White House has a colourful history, having been gifted to Col Brunker by Queen Elizabeth I for his assistance with a skirmish with the Spanish. It was seized from one of the owners due to a lack of co-operation with Cromwell. It was also used as a meeting place for King William III, the Duke of Schomberg and the generals prior to their march south for the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. It is currently undergoing a programme of restorations which, with the support of an HLF grant of £425,000 will see it become a community heritage resource centre, a meeting and exhibition space and the site of a permanent Williamite/Jacobite exhibition.

The HLF award and additional funding from Biffaward, EHS, Ulster Garden Villages and the Architectural Heritage Fund is being used to repair the existing walls, conduct archaeological investigations and create new conference and exhibition facilities. Work at the site has been ongoing and emergency repairs to the stone work have been completed and a series of archaeological excavations are nearly complete.

Dame Jenny received a guided tour of the site and examined the archaeological artefacts that have been uncovered so far, including an embossed clay pipe dating back to the 1600s and numerous early coins and pottery that have yet to be dated. She also heard details of the recent exciting discovery of stone hearths and beam slots, believed to be from a building which pre-dates any structure known to have existed on the site, that possibly date from as early as 1524.

Speaking on her tour of local heritage projects, Dame Jenny said: “I’m delighted to be here at the White House to view firsthand the exciting progress made to date. Once fully restored, the history of the building, its archaeological heritage and the significance of the people that came here will be opened up and preserved for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

“I’m looking forward to visiting several more of the one thousand local projects that have benefited from HLF funding, which has helped to transform local landscapes, townscapes and communities”.

Chairman of the White House Preservation Trust, Mr Billy Webb, said: “Without funding from Heritage Lottery Fund, Ulster Garden Villages, Biffaward and Architectural Heritage Fund this building would have continued to decline. But with the assistance and funds from these organisations, the skill of our professional team, the patience and forbearance of our neighbours and the dedication of the volunteers whose work tirelessly for the Trust this seemingly impossible task is becoming a reality. The Trust is truly delighted to welcome Dame Jenny, to show her the artefacts found by the archaeologists and to thank her and her team at HLF for their invaluable help and funding. When finished in January next year this building will be a cross community centre with conference facilities, permanent exhibition, and genealogy service.”

Dame Jenny was presented with a book featuring The White House to mark her visit.