National Botanic Garden wins Heritage Lottery



Slate beds at National Botanic of Garden Wales Dr Bruce Campbell

What will be the biggest project in the garden's history aims to uncover the origins of Middleton Hall – the 568-acre estate that the garden now occupies – and to tell the story of more than 250 years of East India Company influence that shaped the landscape of this part of Wales.

It was announced today (1 September 2014) that the garden has received initial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) with a pledge of more than £300,000 to develop its plans for the Regency Restoration project.

The scheme includes major archaeological work which will reveal the secrets of the estate from the time of Shakespeare and before, and see the restoration of the later Regency landscape that was one of the finest water parks in Britain. When completed, the garden will once more feature the necklace of seven lakes, cascades, falls and weirs created more than 200 years ago and again boast the Regency planting scheme that formed the heart of its parkland.

Director of the National Botanic Garden, Dr Rosie Plummer, said: "This is fantastic news and we are very grateful to the HLF for signalling this start to a brand new and exciting era for the garden. It is, of course, a major project and we need to acknowledge some of our other key funders, chief among whom are heritage philanthropist Richard Broyd OBE, who suggested and supported the project from the outset; the Garfield Weston Foundation, Welsh Government, the Mercers' Company and The Pilgrim Trust.

“It is an ambitious project and the most significant undertaking since the garden opened in 2000. It is one which will not only provide enduring value to this part of Wales but is also very much about honouring the original vision of William Wilkins and all the Garden’s founders.”

Dr Manon Antoniazzi, Chair of HLF Committee for Wales, said: “This is an extremely promising project and we are thrilled to be able to provide initial support to develop the plans for the restoration of this Welsh landmark. The garden provides such a rich reflection of Wales’ natural heritage and it is vital that this continues to be protected and developed so that future generations can also enjoy and appreciate these wonderful, Carmarthenshire landscapes. Not only did the National Botanic Garden make a convincing case for restoring the Regency landscape, there are ambitious plans for people to get involved in the project and new ways of helping people to learn about the heritage and significance of the site, including the little known links the East India Company had to the area. I’m looking forward to hearing how those plans develop.”

Speaking on behalf of Welsh Government, Tourism Minister Edwina Hart welcomed the news and said: “This fascinating story of Middleton will resonate around the world – and it all emanates from Wales, played out by the people of Wales and Welsh-speaking people. This project is a coup for our National Botanic Garden and we await with great anticipation the opportunity to watch it progress.”

Chief Executive of Carmarthenshire County Council, Mark James, also heralded the announcement as great news for the garden, the county and the region. He said: “Tourism is the beating heart of Carmarthenshire and is worth more than £330m a year to the county. This will be an important addition to the great and growing heritage offer we have for visitors to Carmarthenshire and the region.”

The garden’s Head of Development, Rob Thomas, who is responsible for successfully piloting the funding bid, said: “The Middletons who settled in Carmarthenshire in the last quarter of the 16th century were a family that comprised the prime movers in the creation of that early instrument of empire, the East India Company. They were not merely the petitioners for the original charter: they were the investors, directors, stakeholders and principal merchant adventurers in all of the company’s first voyages of discovery and enterprise that came to be known as the Spice Wars.

“And it is the fortunes won by John, David and Sir Henry Middleton, during their brief and brutal lives and by their bequests, that created the Middleton Hall estate which flourished for more than 150 years: and theirs were fortunes gained through the vastly profitable business of plants for health, at a time when pepper and cloves were prized commodities and nutmeg and mace worth more than their weight in gold.

“With the decline in the Middleton fortunes, the estate was acquired in the 1780s by Sir William Paxton, a Scot returning from his East India Company service as one of the wealthiest men in Britain. He set to work, creating the blueprint for the landscape here today, employing the finest minds of the day to design the mansion, gardens and necklace of lakes that surrounded his hilltop home. He would have been acutely aware of the Middleton history that he was buying into. This truly was the heyday of the estate and the Garden today can not only claim that it has been a site of formal growing for more than 400 years, but can also point to the fact that it had its very genesis in plants for health and the profits to be made from them and was sustained by the development and growth of the British Empire.

“It is an incredible story of pirates, plague and plants for health, and plots a period of 250 years of international trade from the times of barter and exchange to the establishment of international lines of credit and investment banking; the forging of the blueprint for our current capitalist system; and, in the hands of Sir William Paxton, the formation of modern investment banking.”

Notes to editors

A first-round pass means the project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project 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.

About the Heritage Lottery Fund

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) aims to make a lasting difference for heritage, people and communities across the UK and help build a resilient heritage economy. 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 almost 35,000 projects with more than £5.3bn across the UK.

About the National Botanic Garden of Wales

Opened in May 2000 as one of three iconic Millennium projects in Wales, the garden occupies 568 acres of historic parkland (Middleton Hall) including a National Nature Reserve and organic farm, as well as being a showcase for some of the world's most endangered plants.

It was the first national botanic garden of the new millennium and, in 14 years, has welcomed more than 2.2m visitors. It embodies the old and new with 18th-century features set alongside the futuristic, single-span Great Glasshouse designed by Lord Norman Foster. This is now an international landmark for Wales.

The garden's work is determined by its 10-year strategic plan, its vision, 'Conservation, Education, Inspiration' and its mission to dedicate itself to the research and conservation of biodiversity, to sustainability, lifelong learning and the enjoyment of the visitor.

Further information

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Dr Manon Antoniazzi, Chair of HLF Committee for Wales, is available for interview until 10am on Monday 1 September – contact Naomi Williams at Positif on tel: 029 2044 2020, or email: naomi@positifgroup.co.uk for details.