

# **Derelict Merthyr Tydfil YMCA building set for central role in regenerating the town**

18/02/2015



Adeilad rhestredig Gradd II YMCA ym Mhontmorlais, Merthyr Tudful Y Cymeithas Fictorianaidd

The money has been awarded to Carmarthenshire Heritage Regeneration Trust (CHRT) which aims to safeguard the building by converting it into eleven commercial units with the potential to create over 70 local jobs.

Built in 1911, the YMCA is a building of specific historical and cultural interest in Merthyr Tydfil. It was designed by the renowned Welsh architect Sir Percy Thomas as a centre of social advancement and personal

improvement for Merthyr's local young men. It provided a place where they could come for 'healthy amusement, recreation and health giving exercise'.

On the ground floor there were offices, two shops and a café, while the first had a lecture hall and billiard room. On the second was a lounge, reading room, games room and library and on the upper floor, other games rooms, gymnasium and rifle range. In later years the building was occupied by the Board of Trade and the Labour Exchange, and then became the district education offices. Edward VIII visited the building on his tour of South Wales in 1936.

It also served as a boxing gym operated by the British Boxing Champion Eddie Thomas and a dance hall in the 1950s. The building began to fall into decline in the second half of the 20th century and has been 'at risk' for over 30 years.

This support from HLF will enable this striking, four-storey terracotta building, which occupies a commanding and elevated position at the northern end of the town centre, to be at the forefront of the regeneration in Merthyr Tydfil.

Merthyr Tydfil YMCA is the first project in Wales to receive funding through HLF's innovative grant programme, Heritage Enterprise. It is designed to help when the cost of repairing an historic building is so high that restoration simply is not commercially viable. Grants of £100k to £5million bridge the financial gap, funding the vital repairs and conservation work needed to convert derelict, vacant buildings into new, usable commercial spaces that can have a positive impact on local economies.

Commenting on the award, Jennifer Stewart, Head of HLF Wales, said: "With the right investment, historic buildings not only provide inspirational spaces where enterprise can thrive, they can also have a positive impact on local economies. Heritage Enterprise is providing vital financial support where it is needed most, helping with the high costs of restoring vacant heritage buildings so they are fit-for-purpose and sustainable for the future.

"HLF has a strong track history in Merthyr Tydfil, having already invested over £6.5 million in hugely valuable projects such as Cefn Coed Viaduct, Canolfan Soar, Merthyr Old Town Hall, Cyfartha Park and the Townscape Heritage Initiative. These are also examples which have contributed to the economic regeneration of the town."

### **Economic and social hub**

Carmarthenshire Heritage Regeneration Trust (CHRT) is a Wales-wide trust which has previously worked with HLF on restoring Llanelly House in Carmarthenshire, which is now open to the public as a visitor centre.

Welcoming the grant, Claire Deacon from CHRT, said: "Our proposals to regenerate the building will, as well as preserving its striking four-storey terracotta exterior, provide 877sqm of new office and work space for the modern creative industries and the traditional professions. This will breathe new life into the building. It will be an inspirational hub for economic and social activity in the heart of Merthyr Tydfil."

Commenting on the award, Deputy Minister for Culture Sport and Tourism Ken Skates AM, said: "The YMCA has become an undeniable symbol of Merthyr striving for regeneration. Its loss would create a void in the town's distinctive heritage and signal a continuation of decline. The Welsh Government recognises the cultural and sporting significance of the building and we are delighted a plan has been funded to bring it back into use."

Welcoming the award, Christopher Costelloe from the Victorian Society, said: "This is great news for Merthyr Tydfil YMCA. This impressive historic listed building has survived two applications for demolition by previous owners. The Society is relieved that its potential to spur the regeneration of the local community

has been recognised before its condition worsened any further. Hopefully the building will soon be playing a vital role in Merthyr life once again.”

### **Notes to editors**

Heritage Enterprise applications are assessed in two rounds. A first-round pass is given when HLF has endorsed outline proposals and earmarked funding. A first-round pass may also include an immediate award to fund the development of the project. Detailed proposals are then considered by HLF at second-round and as long as plans have progressed satisfactorily and according to the original proposal, an award for the project is confirmed.

Carmarthenshire Heritage Regeneration Trust has been awarded a first-round pass for Merthyr Tydfil YMA including £373,000 of development funding. This development grant will enable the trust to develop plans and come back to apply for the remaining £2.6m grant.

Plans for the project include:

- Conservation-based repairs to the YMCA, fit-out and conversion to 11 commercial units including a quality café. Total unit floor space 810 sqm with additional shared 114sqm floor space for reception and storage.
- Creation of a car park behind the building accommodating approximately 12 cars.
- Develop three community based projects.
- Training opportunities for community volunteers; a part time trainee Project Officer to develop project management skills and opportunities for construction apprentices and trainees.
- Appointment of a Project Director and Community Engagement Officer.

### **Further information**

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