Netley Military Hospital secures Heritage Lottery



Netley Military Hospital's historic chapel

‘Royal Victoria: Uncovering the stories of Netley Military Hospital’ aims to conserve the Grade II* listed chapel, which is all that remains of the former military hospital on the site. The project will also greatly improve the landscape around the chapel, and provide interpretation and understanding for visitors, connecting them with the history of the site. It will give visitors a unique opportunity to walk in the footsteps of the patients, doctors and nurses of the once vast and imposing Royal Victoria Military Hospital.

Hampshire County Council’s Executive Member for Culture, Recreation, and Countryside, Councillor Andrew Gibson, said: "It is fantastic news that that this vital funding from the HLF has now been confirmed, allowing this very special project to go ahead. When complete, the project will enable public access to the chapel all year round, six days a week – even including the tower and gallery, where visitors have not been allowed for more than 20 years due to safety concerns.

"The project will not only enable the council to preserve this beautiful piece of our history, but will also mean we can open it up to many more visitors, provide educational activities, offer opportunities for volunteers to get involved, and make a visit to Royal Victoria Country Park an even more special day out for everyone."

The work will be among the first transformational projects to be delivered as part of the council's ambitious plans to attract more visitors, all year round, to its country parks.

Between them, the county council's country parks attract 1.2million visitors a year due to their distinctive character, wildlife value and wide range of activities on offer. Despite the popularity of the parks, it is clear they are now showing their age and the facilities offered to the public are not keeping up with today's growing needs.

Stuart McLeod, Head of HLF South East, said: "Set in beautiful Royal Victoria Country Park the historic chapel is all that remains of the British Army's first purpose built military hospital and we're delighted to help secure the future of this much-loved landmark. Not only will this project carry out vital conservation work but will also enable even more people to gain an invaluable insight into the lives of the doctors and nurses who carried out pioneering work and the soldiers of all nationalities who were treated side by side at the hospital."

The confidence HLF has shown in the council's plans to improve Royal Victoria Country Park is very pleasing and provides much needed investment, helping establish improved facilities and more activities for people to enjoy. The project will also improve the experience for visitors during wet weather, making the park an all-year-round visitor destination.

The 1980 extension will be removed and the original façade of the chapel conserved. A new pavilion will be built to the side of the chapel with a kiosk, toilets and offices, providing facilities for the chapel to host music and cultural events in the evenings. Around the park will be points of information explaining the size of the hospital and its historical significance.

Alongside an exciting events programme of living history, music and children's theatre there will be guided walks and tower tours. Visitors will be able to view four new and exciting exhibitions on four different levels and handle objects from the historic collection. A new education programme for schools and colleges is also to be created.

With Friends of the Park already providing a valuable voluntary resource to help get the most from the park and chapel, more voluntary roles will be created, including tour guides, social demonstrators, events co-ordinators and researchers, enabling the local community to become more involved with the historic building and help share its history with visitors. There is also space for the local community to create exhibitions.

The hospital was a personal project of Queen Victoria. On 19 May 1856, the Queen laid the hospital's foundation stone, concealing plans of the hospital, a silver Crimea medal and the first Victoria Cross. The hospital was opened in 1863, was three storeys high and had corridors over a quarter of a mile long. This huge building could care for over 1,000 soldiers returning from wars across the globe.

Following the Second World War, the grand main building fell into disuse and decline. Eventually, a big fire in 1963 damaged the main building beyond repair and in 1966 those parts of the building still standing were demolished leaving just the chapel. The Grade II* listed chapel is one of the tallest buildings on Southampton Water and offers spectacular views across the park and Southampton Water.