

Report to Trowbridge Area Board on proposed relocation of Museum to Courtfield House

Trowbridge Museum & Art Gallery attracts 21,000 visitors per annum, including 16,000 adults and 5,000 children, including 2,000 school children who undertake much-respected educational visits to meet Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The town's heritage is also valued by non educational visitors. Comments taken from the Museum's visitor book show the appreciation: '*Simply fascinating displays - just what a local museum should be*'.

Background

For over 12 months, discussions have been ongoing between Trowbridge Town Council, Trowbridge Museum & Art Gallery and Mrs Mary Pearce, owner of Courtfield House. The intention is to transfer the building's ownership to the Friends of Trowbridge Museum who will then lease the site to Trowbridge Town Council enabling the Museum to relocate.

In June 2013 Courtfield House was placed on the 2014 Heritage at Risk Register. This is significant because it recognises the uniqueness of the building as a regionally important building of enormous heritage value. It also means that once an application to Heritage Lottery Fund is made, the level of grant support may well need to exceed the regional level of £2million. It is accepted, in principle, that the restoration of this building for a beneficial, community purpose will require a substantial injection of public and private funds.

The proposed Museum development

The new Museum development will enhance the town's Museum enabling it to deliver a bigger, bolder offering. However, it also has an international, national, regional and local significance which needs to be understood and exploited to the full. The new Museum will enable:

- **an internationally significant object to be displayed:**

One of only five left in the world, this machine is the best preserved spinning jenny in Britain and is itself a symbol of the nation's 19th century pre-eminence. The spinning jenny, a multi-spool spinning frame invented in 1764 by James Hargreaves, reduced the amount of work needed to produce yarn, enabling a worker to manage eight or more spools at any one time, will help explore the impact of mechanisation on the development of factory production which is a historical story still relevant to today's textile industry worldwide.

- **nationally significant heritage asset to be saved:**

Trowbridge's new museum is going to be located in and around Courtfield House which contains the Clothier's House, a Grade II* Listed Building. Only 5.5% of all Listed Buildings are Grade II* and a building must be of *more than* special interest, usually nationally significant, to achieve this level of listing.

- **nationally significant hidden histories to be revealed:**

Built in the 1750's by adding to an earlier farmhouse, the Clothier's House reveals the hidden story of cloth merchants - clothiers - who operated as the middle men between weavers and manufacturers whose place in the history of English trade is little known. The site also allows the Museum to reveal further little known history through Dyehouses attached to the Clothier's House in which domestic cloth production as a craft skill took place. A cottage industry undermined by the arrival of mechanisation prompted the move into factory production. The 19th century Wool Store, added in 1861, symbolises the arrival of industrial production methods, destroying home based craft skills, and was used to store bales of cloth and raw materials for industrial production.

- **a regionally significant museum dedicated to the history of west of England cloth to be created:**

Trowbridge Museum is the only museum in the West Country with comprehensive displays telling the story of the once dominant, but now vanished West Country woollen cloth industry. With improved displays, interactives using new technologies, demonstrations and 'hands-on' experiences, visitors will find new ways to be inspired by the town's significant contribution to the history of trade in England.

- **a regionally significant art gallery to be developed:**

A county-wide study commissioned by Swindon and Wiltshire Arts Alliance (S&WAA) in 2008 highlighted the gaps in cultural capital when it noted the absence of arts and creative centres in Trowbridge. By creating a new art gallery, capable of displaying works from both national and regional collections, Trowbridge's residents will have opportunities to engage with art in a new venue once the building opens.

- **'local history; big world themes' to be told in new ways:**

Trowbridge's role in the Magna Carta and its place at the very heart of democracy will be explored through displays on liberty, freedom and justice signalling the big world stories that originate here on the very local stage.

- **'local history; national stories' will also be explored:**

The radicalism of the Trowbridge Chartists' and the town's role as a seat of radical politics is little known, whilst Isaac Pitman's shorthand still survives with text speak its modern equivalents, Trowbridge's role in shaping the world around us will be explored.

- **diverse audiences to be educated, inspired and engaged:**

With grounds and gardens extending to approx. 2 acres which contain both a rare apple orchard and an Italian sunken garden, this offers the Museum the chance to develop Tudor and Victorian period gardens giving it new ways of engaging with different, diverse audiences. With outdoor space, the chance to develop and deliver a programme of outdoor events such as the popular Fleece to Fabric Day and the Apple Day with new partners allowing for collaborations is clearly something to be explored.

Strategic importance

Strategically, the heritage of the town has always been recognised as important. The development of the Museum and Art Gallery in 1989 was led by the Council, and Trowbridge became the first, third tier local authority in England to run a professional museum aimed largely at the town and its residents.

With the proposed redevelopment, the focus is being extended outside the town to the wider sub-regional role that the Museum can play, especially in relation to tourism. With a wealth of Georgian buildings, described by Nicholas Pevsner "to be so stately as to recall Genoa" and Fore Street being described as "a stretch of palaces", the Museum expects to be able to capitalise on this heritage by targeting sub-regional visitors, especially those visiting nearby Bath and Bristol. Architecture will be explored through interactives designed to allow access to them in situ and in period.

The role of culture in regeneration has also been recognised. The *Scoping and Vision study for Transforming Trowbridge* highlights the need to:

- create a day and evening economy
- celebrate assets including Trowbridge park and the historic town centre through the reuse of vacant historic buildings
- promote the town centre through public space improvements and events to improve perception
- create a family friendly town with Trowbridge Park at its heart, with shops and services facing onto the park
- improve public spaces capable of holding street performance, cultural and arts events regularly.

The Museum will play a role in meeting all of the above either directly or through strategic partnerships with organisations such as Trowbridge Arts and the bi-annual Textile and Weaving Festival.

The Cultural Quarter

The Wiltshire Core Strategy document identifies: *'Trowbridge ...does however suffer from a lack of infrastructure, particularly leisure, entertainment and cultural facilities...The regeneration of the central area of Trowbridge is a priority for the council, the Town Council and local businesses.*

It also identifies that: *'Trowbridge has a strong industrial heritage and features a number of key landmark buildings, including the Town Hall, mill buildings and a hierarchy of buildings associated with the cloth industry. Future development should have regard to this important heritage and ensure proposals enhance, rather than negatively impact on the existing townscape.'*

The Museum is relocating into an area being described as 'the Cultural Quarter'. Led by Trowbridge Town Council, and centring on the developments that have taken place already: Phase One, the new Civic Centre, and Phase Two, the new leisure complex hinged around the cinema development, this Quarter is slowly developing into a thriving area that will offer much to the residents of Trowbridge.

The Quarter has the potential to substantially expand the town's offer. With Phase Three, the transfer of The People's Park imminent, and Phase Four, the relocation of the Museum, underway, this leaves the final piece - the future of Trowbridge Town Hall - to be concluded.

Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund has recognised this Quarter as an area with great potential, and one which could attract substantial public funding into Trowbridge. However, given the pressure on these funds, the organisations involved in this area have recognised the need for a Cultural Strategy to ensure the planned development and delivery of a range of cultural and heritage offers. A working group has been established to deliver this, supported by Trowbridge Town Council, and feeding into the development of a county wide arts and cultural strategy co-ordinated by Wiltshire Council.

Costs

Indicative capital costs are in the region of £2.6million. Surveys, reports and accurate costings will be sought once funding, hopefully from the Architectural Heritage Fund has been secured.

Income

It is intended that funding will be secured from English Heritage for remedial works and repairs supported by Heritage Lottery Fund for the main capital works with additional support from Arts Council England for the gallery element. The remainder will be sought from trusts and foundations, companies and business and the community.

Sustainability

A sustainability plan is currently being developed and it is anticipated that income will be generated from a diverse range of sources including a café and retail facility, an enhanced programme of events, the hiring out of the house and grounds, especially for weddings and special events is being investigated. Textile artists' studios for small scale craft production may also provide an income stream and could lead to partnerships with educational providers both locally and nationally.

Timeline

It is anticipated that the Round One application will be submitted in November 2013 with a decision to proceed being secured in early 2014. Building works are estimated to take nine months to complete with the new Museum development opening in early 2015.

Recommendation

This paper is seeking support from the Area Board for the development of this strategy and a commitment to consider the recommendations once this exercise has been completed. Additionally this report is seeking support for the proposed Museum relocation.

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