

West Pier Trust Newsletter – October 99

1. Introduction

The Trust's task over the past eighteen months has been to get its three principal partners (Heritage Lottery, Brighton & Hove Council and a private sector partner) to agree to proceed with the project on the same conditions and at the same time. Nearly a year's efforts came to nought when our then private sector partner withdrew in January 1999. At the time of the previous newsletter we had secured the continuing commitment of the HLF Trustees and were in negotiations with the Council and Eugenius (the private sector partner). Those negotiations through the Summer have not been easy, but it now seems that we will soon reach the consensus we have been seeking for so long. We expect within a month to conclude the formal development agreements with Eugenius and the Council. The agreements with all three partners are conditional upon each of us agreeing later this year the detailed scheme for the restoration of the pier and the associated development, but the conditional agreements mean that we are all committed to the basics on which that detail will be built. The next step is a roundtable meeting of the Trust with the Heritage Lottery Fund, Eugenius, Brighton Borough Council and English Heritage on 29th September at which we hope that a firm timetable for the commencement of the full restoration next Spring will be agreed. We have been close to this point before and faced disappointment; so I am not yet running the flag up the pole, but we are washing the flag and polishing the pole.

2. Phase O

The Phase O works were completed at the end of July and just within the £560,000 budget. In summary, the two aims of the phase were accomplished i.e.

1. the structure of the pier has been strengthened as part of the permanent restoration and sufficiently to sustain the structure through the forthcoming winter.
2. The surveys, recovery of artefacts etc., of this phase are aiding considerably the planning of the full restoration.

We are grateful to the HLF for accepting the need for Phase O and for funding 75% of the cost. We also recognise our debt, literally, to Brighton & Hove Council for providing the £140,000 loan which enabled the phase to proceed. Eugenius have agreed to repay that loan once the full deal on the restoration has been agreed.

3. Brighton & Hove Council

Following meetings between our Chairman and myself with the Chief Executive of the Council and the Council's Lead Officer on the West Pier project, the Council has agreed to enter into a Development Agreement with the Trust which covers:

1. the Council land on the Lower Esplanade to be leased to the Trust for 125 years (from the west end of the petanque rink to the eastern end of the paddling pool).
2. The amount of net new commercially usable square footage allowable on that land (60,000 sq.ft)
3. The planning categories of that usage; which include all usages envisaged by Eugenius.
4. The Council's willingness to use its best endeavours to ensure that the commercial operators of the pier have acceptable usage of the Regency Square car park.

The formal lease of the land on the Lower Esplanade will not be settled until the full scheme for the restoration has been agreed.

4. Eugenius

Eugenius was reluctant to enter into the formal agreement with the Trust until the Trust had concluded its agreement with the Council, and the Lower Esplanade development was assured in terms of location and scale, if not design. Following news of the outcome of our discussions with Council officers, Eugenius instructed its solicitors to seek to resolve the BWPT/Eugenius Development Agreement and lease with our solicitor (Michael Bailey of Donne Mileham & Haddock) this month. Throughout the summer Eugenius has been revising its plans for the restoration of the pier and the associated development in the light of regular discussions with myself, deeper knowledge of the site (in particular of a Victorian sewer running east/west across the Lower Esplanade site) and commercial calculations deriving from its negotiations on pre-lettings. Eugenius presented its scheme with planned usages and business calculations to officers of the Trust and the Council on 6th September. The scheme is now being revised in the light of those discussions for presentation to the roundtable meeting. Eugenius is as anxious as the Trust for the full restoration to commence next Spring and for visible activity to take place through this winter. The Trust is continuing to pursue its Planning application for the restoration of the pier up to deck level (the old Phase I) in order to ensure that the restoration can commence even if planning and statutory consents are delayed regarding the structures on the deck (Phase II) and the new build on the Lower Esplanade (Phase III).

5. New Build

All parties, and all our members, know that the extra commercial square footage in the new build on the Lower Esplanade is essential for the long-term financial viability of the restored pier. It is especially necessary because of our decision not to allow significant new structures on the deck of the pier; all of the schemes put forward in the 1980's provided for such new structures whereas we are insisting upon authentic restoration of the pier as it was in the 1920's. The Trust has brokered the deal on the scale of the new build. It is important to stress to the public that the calculation of the extra commercial space needed was made by the Trust, based upon knowledge of the history of the pier and upon reports from independent consultants. What remains for discussion, and is crucial to our timetable, is the design of the new build. The scale and location are agreed. The form is set by the Planning constraints, i.e. two structures separate from the pier to its east and west, both of single storey above ground but with some height points above the level of the promenade (like Alfrescos), linked to the promenade and allowing pedestrian flow along the Lower Esplanade. The remaining question is about style and design. Since 1997, over a dozen nationally and internationally recognised architectural practices have studied the site. Most of them could not produce 'exciting or distinctive architecture' without breaching the planning constraints. The present situation is that some partners would prefer to proceed with a project architect refining a design in co-operation with an executive or monitoring architect appointed by the HLF and English Heritage. Others have expressed a preference for a further architectural competition. This is one of the key issues for resolution at the forthcoming roundtable meeting.

6. The Pier

The restoration of the pier will be to its 1920's external appearance, though the deck will be higher above the sea, the deck might be widened slightly at its narrow point between the Concert Hall and the Pavilion, and the kiosk at the front centre of the landward end might be a little larger than the original (it will probably house the office of the Trust). Restoration to its 1920's state is not a simple matter. The Trust's Technical Officer and Consultant Engineer are trying to identify the detail of the structure at that time, since significant changes were made in the 1930's and the works carried out at the landward end in the 1980's were neither authentic nor high quality. The planned usages of the restored pier remain as reported publicly i.e. entertainment, food and drink, conferences, gambling, leisure/health and traditional seaside retailing. There will be significant cultural as well as commercial activity, and the plans still include a museum experience of the history of piers.

7. Conclusion

Rachel has been rationalising our archives, and showing me the more interesting bits. Our predecessors went through so many false dawns that I will simply conclude by hoping for the best and being prepared to avert the worst.

30th September 99 Dr. Geoff Lockwood Chief Executive

The General Manager adds

Over the summer the Information Centre went from strength to strength, raising crucial funds for the Trust during a difficult time. Tours ran every day and there were several film shoots bringing in valuable extra income.

As ever, thanks are due to Lorraine Lewis who manages the Centre and Maureen Rawlinson who runs the tours and is chief guide, for all their hard work and enthusiasm. They work very long hours and have contributed enormously to the Trust's improved public profile. Thanks are also due to the other guides, particularly Charlie Dixon who has been conducting tours since May 1997. Since November 1996, when we tentatively began the tours, over 15,000 people have been shown the pier. Since May 1998 Anna Kempton has been working one day a week as a volunteer for the Trust. She helps maintain Trust's membership which has now grown to almost 2,750. Two years ago there were about 300 members, so it is easy to imagine how crucial her role is. Over the summer she has also been conducting tours of the pier. Her enthusiasm for the project and upbeat presence in the office greatly is appreciated by all of us, while the work she does on the membership is invaluable.

Apart from fund raising, the Centre has raised the profile of the Trust, especially at weekends when the office is closed. The Information Centre will be open through the winter from 10am to 4pm and from 1st November the daily tour of the pier will be at 2pm. For bookings please call Lorraine on 01273 207610.

This year's Christmas card is a colour photograph of the pier under snow taken in the late 1970's which we have reproduced in black and white on the enclosed order form. We also have some of last year's cards (Michel Chauny's cheery picture of the Concert Hall) and the Information Centre will be stocking at least one other design featuring the pier.

We still have copies of Fred Gray's excellent history of the pier 'Walking on Water, the West Pier Story'. For those of you who have not yet seen the book, it traces the history of the pier until its closure in 1975 and contains many beautiful photographs. Details of a special Christmas package containing the book and some cards can be found on the order form. Also with the Christmas market in mind, a local film company specialising in marine work is producing a video featuring the flourishing sea life under the West Pier. Please call the Information Centre for further details.

Rachel Clark

The Brighton West Pier Trust

Kings Road

Brighton

BN1 2FL

Tel: (01273) 321499 | Fax: (01273) 726070