

# BRIGHTON WEST PIER TRUST

## Newsletter to Members

### 1. Introduction

It is genuinely difficult to write a newsletter in early September when we are expecting good news about the future of the West Pier in October; and fearing a media leak at any time about our plans. It is unfortunate that the timing of the required processes leading up to our Annual General Meeting force us to issue a newsletter at this time. We delayed the AGM to the latest permissible date.

The current situation is that, twenty months after the Heritage Lottery Fund killed our hopes for the full restoration of the West Pier, we are on the verge of agreeing a plan with a prestigious private sector partner for a scheme that will preserve what is possible of the old West Pier but will create on our site a feature matching for the 21<sup>st</sup> century the innovation and excitement of the West Pier in 1866. Moreover, the plan leaves open the long term option to restore/reconstruct much of the old West Pier.

Our prospective private sector partner asked for confidentiality whilst completing its assessment; both the Trust and Council officers agreed to that request.

### 2. Background

- a. When Sir Lindsay and I were persuaded to take over leadership of the Trust in 1995 we inherited a situation in which the authentic restoration of the West Pier to its 1920's appearance was
  - a) the aim of the Trust. The Trust's stewardship obligations towards the site are wider, but from John Lloyd to Bryan Spielman the focus was on that 1920's restoration.
  - b) The aim of English Heritage.
  - c) The aim of Brighton Council; whose officers promised us lower esplanade land either side of the pier to meet the commercial requirements of the restoration.

Further, the Trust had been encouraged by HLF officers to believe that the aim would be delivered by 100% funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

- 2.2 The history of the following ten years makes depressing reading, but the outcome was that the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and Brighton & Hove City Council had by 2004 withdrawn from that original shared aim. The Trust fought for the restoration through 2004 but it now has to accept that the fulfilment of the previously shared aim is, at best, deferred to the longer term. Thanks to the vacillations of public bodies, the opposition of the owners of the Palace Pier and the dramatic damage caused by professional arsonists. There is no hope of restoration or reconstruction in the next phase of action on the site.

- 2.3 The Trust possesses a site and a heritage central to the seafront of Brighton & Hove and high in the global recognition of Victorian heritage. How should the Trust use its site to both uphold the heritage of the pier and the regeneration of the city seafront?

In 2005 the Trust has settled on a solution which combines blending preservation of the heritage of the past with creation of heritage for the future. The formal objects of the Trust allow for a new feature provided that the Trust does its best to retain as much of the heritage as is practical and financially feasible. The Trust owns the freehold of the pier and the land either side of it (including that under the sea).

- 2.4 The Trust, thus, entered into discussions with the Council and English Heritage (and, eventually, the Heritage Lottery Fund) in a positive mode. The notion of combining world class 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture with heritage retention is exciting. The outcome will reflect the interests of the various parties; but going into the discussions the Trust wished, and was obliged, to maximise the heritage elements. It would ideally like to see the new pier incorporating

- a replica/reconstructed Concert Hall (not necessarily in its historical situation) since it was the single most important pier building in England
- retention of the east and west entrance buildings
- re-use of the 1866 kiosks (which are in storage)
- samples of the original railings/serpent lamps
- a Heritage Centre on the history of the West Pier.

The Trust felt that any acceptable private sector partner would also wish to see heritage retention for straight-forward commercial interest.

2.5 The officers of the Trust, BHCC and EH have been discussing the new situation since January. There is a 'buzz' about the idea of a New West Pier; building upon the heritage since 1866 but setting it in a 21<sup>st</sup> century structure which future generations will revere as much as the Victorian standards of Eugenius Birch. It will be another long haul. We face again all of the problems of investment finance, planning permission, objections from self-interested groups etc. Fortunately, by June we had generated private sector interest; with three possibilities in play. We hope to report positively on one of the options in the autumn.

### **3 The Trust**

3.1 Once the HLF delivered its withdrawal blow in January 2004, the Trust reviewed its management and costs in the knowledge that it would need to remain a going concern for the lengthy period necessary to enter into a new agreement for the future of the pier. Major economies have been made in the running of the Trust; in particular, we now rely on voluntary labour other than the General Manager (and Rachel is now employed for only three days a week). We can just balance the books, but we are reliant upon your subscriptions. Please continue in membership, and encourage your friends to join. It is essential that the Trust remains in being to ensure that its stewardship role is a strong voice in the future of that site. Our history derives from the supporters who fought to save the West Pier in the 1970's and we will continue the essence of that struggle in the changed circumstances of 2005.

3.2 In March 2005, Sir Lindsay Bryson died. Our Chairman had successfully fought off a fatal disease for five years. His courage, resilience and sheer cheerfulness were remarkable. Lindsay had many other interests and public responsibilities, but from 1995 the West Pier was closest to his heart. The deepest regret in my professional life is that weak bureaucrats, professional arsonists and the strength of nature prevented us from securing the future of the West Pier in his lifetime. He was a wise, flexible and experienced Chairman. The Trust owes him, as it does John Lloyd and Bryan Spielman, and must deliver for him. Fortunately, Glynn Jones agreed to move from the joint Deputy Chairmanship to be Chairman

### **4 Conclusion**

4.1 The sand has shifted. We cannot hold onto our wish to restore the old West Pier. We can try to ensure that what replaces it contains as much of the old lady as possible and is of a quality that matches the standard set by Eugenius Birch. Stay with us.

4.2 Our reduced administration means that I cannot tell you when we will produce another newsletter. We will do so if anything crucial or dramatic happens. In the meantime, we will rely on you seeing reports in the media and we will keep our website ([www.westpier.co.uk](http://www.westpier.co.uk)) as up to date as possible.

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Deputy Chairman and Chief Executive

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