

West Pier Trust Newsletter – October 98

Introduction

In March 1998 when, after 2½ years of negotiation, we achieved the agreements in principle with the Heritage Lottery Fund, our private sector partners (Brighton Pier Resort Ltd) and Brighton & Hove Council for the funding necessary to restore the West Pier, I warned the Board of the Trust that turning agreements in principle into binding contracts, leases and other firm legal documentation would not be a simple or a speedy exercise - and so it has turned out to be the case. However, after six months of further negotiation, the funding contract with the Heritage Lottery Fund has now been finalised and signed. As the contents of this newsletter illustrates, there remain significant hurdles to overcome, but we are still on track to achieve the restoration, albeit later than we both hoped and expected.

Membership

The membership of the Trust has now risen to 2000 from the approximate 250 level of 1996, and the situation ten years ago when all of the members could meet in someone's front room! That increase reflects the breadth of support the West Pier enjoys. However, the increased size of the membership, very welcome though it is, means that it is expensive to communicate with you. The Trust is in a situation in which it is dealing in millions of pounds for the restoration, but has very little cash to transact its own business. The circulation of a newsletter costs us approximately £1000 in labour and direct costs, so please accept that we cannot produce one as regularly as we would wish.

A.G.M.

It was clear from comments received after last July's AGM that the acoustics of the room prevented some members from following the business fully. We apologise for that fault, and will ensure that it does not recur at next years meeting.

New Building

The next major hurdle in the struggle to achieve the restoration of the West Pier is the approval of the design of the new building to be associated with that restoration. It is crucially important that all of our supporters recognise the necessity for such a building. Any analysis of why the West Pier went into decline confirms that the amount of commercially-exploitable space on its short deck (much shorter than the Palace Pier or the Blackpool Piers) was insufficient to sustain the costs of maintaining the structure. Management Consultants hired by Brighton Council and the Trust (KPMG and Deloitte-Touche) have underlined that analysis. There has to be something of the order of 60,000 sq.footage of commercial space off the pier to contribute to the costs of maintaining the structure of the pier, especially if the pier is to be restored authentically to its 1920's state, e.g. not crowding the deck with commercial ventures like our sister Palace Pier (which is to be applauded for its commercialism, but which is very different from our intentions for the West Pier). The creation of that commercial space off the Pier necessary for the long-term viability of the Restored West Pier is a considerable architectural challenge. It is a very sensitive site, and the Trust does not intend to agree to any design which interferes with the full authentic restoration of the Pier. Most developers and architects prefer for the new build to be on the landward end of the Pier deck, but that has been ruled out by the Trust in the discussions to date. Since April 1998, discussions have been held with a number of leading architects about their ideas for the design of the new building, which will be funded 100% by Brighton Pier Resort Ltd (but on land on the Lower Esplanade to be supplied partly by Brighton & Hove Council and partly by the Trust). Those discussions led to a preference for a named architect and there has been a dialogue through the summer between him and the main parties in which various designs have been considered. By September one outline design was selected for further development. It seems likely that the latter design will soon be put forward for public comment. It is dramatic and challenging; probably as controversial as was the West Pier in 1866. If that controversy emerges, it is crucial to concentrate upon the objectives of the Trust. In particular that

we intend to see the West Pier authentically restored to its 1920's appearance and style

we need the off-Pier new commercial space in order to secure that restoration and to generate income which will prevent the restored Pier going into another cycle of economic decline

the present negotiations and proposals are almost certainly the last opportunity to achieve our objectives

There are other hurdles ahead in the finalisation of our leasing arrangements with Brighton Pier Resorts and our development agreement with Brighton & Hove Council; rising costs and declining economic conditions are also a problem, but the key to reaching our aims lies mainly in the plans for the new build.

Christmas Gifts

1. The Trust will again be producing a specially commissioned Christmas Card, further details of which are attached.
2. Dr. Fred Gray's book 'Walking on Water', a history of the West Pier, makes an excellent Christmas gift. It is now available at a cost of £10; and Trust members purchasing a copy will be given a seasonal gift of six of the Christmas cards.

National Piers Society

The Trust is a member of this Society and is in discussion about a National Piers Museum being located on the restored West Pier. The Society has recently published a new edition of Tim Mickleburgh's 'Guide to British Piers' (£6.90 + 80p p&p) and 'Piers of the North' also by Tim Mickleburgh. These are essential reading for pier enthusiasts; extremely informative and up to date. Copies are available from the Piers Information Bureau, 3 Withburn Close, Wirrell, L49 6QH.

Conclusion

It is difficult to keep 2000 members informed about our activities and achievements, but we welcome members contacting us in person, by letter, fax, e-mail, etc., and will do our best to respond quickly and fully.

8th October 1998

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