

West Pier Trust Newsletter - May 2003

NEWSLETTER TO MEMBERS OF THE TRUST

The most dramatic events since the January newsletter were the firing of the Pavilion in March and the very recent firing of the Concert Hall. I have my views on the cause of those fires but in the absence of proof it is not wise to point the finger, except to express the view that it was professional arson.

The fires have not affected our ability to carry out the stated aim of restoring the West Pier to its 1920's appearance with significant usage of original elements. In the main the fires have simplified the restoration works and probably reduced their cost. We have ample detailed records and stored artefacts to fulfil our aim.

What the fire has done is to add to the misguided view that our plans amount to a rebuild not a restoration. In England we have a dated and insular view of restoration. The residents of Berlin, Warsaw, Cologne etc are proud to take you round their medieval centres, which were no more than rubble in 1945. They have been restored. Even in England, when, for example, Uppark House was burnt to the ground, it was 'restored' not 'rebuilt'. Nelson's Victory contains 5% - 15% of the original, all of which is below the waterline. We can and will restore the West Pier.

The plans for the restoration are proceeding a pace. They are on target for final approval later this year so that the work contracts can be issued in early 2004. In the meantime work will be carried out this summer on the landward compound, on moving artefacts stored in the country back to the compound and on recovery of further artefacts from the pier.

It is not possible to be definite about the timetables since we are still facing obstructive legal challenges for the owners of the Palace Pier intent upon maintaining their pier monopoly in Brighton & Hove. There is a timelessness about legal proceedings which ignores totally the time-limited current state of the West Pier. I retain full confidence that those challenges will be overcome but it remains possible that they could cause further delay.

The Trust is continuing to develop the plans for the Heritage Centre. It will be located under the landward deck. In addition to being the locus for exhibitions for the history, architecture, usages etc of the West Pier it will also be the base from which the Trust will organise heritage tours of the pier, educational visits for the pier etc. The basic structure of the centre will be part of the restoration costs but the Trust will need to raise circa £1m for the fit-out and equipment costs of the centre. We will begin that fund-raising this summer, but any contributions now would be most welcome!

I repeat that we will restore the West Pier. When is not certain, as to 2005 or 2006, but it is certain that older generations will be able to walk again on the pier and younger generations will be able to experience the heritage their grandparents so enjoyed. The Trust, St Modwen plc, the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and Brighton & Hove City Council remain committed to that objective.

29th May 2003 Dr Geoff Lockwood Chief Executive

General Manager's Information

Commercially, the season has started well for the Trust. The Information Kiosk reopened at the end of February under the management of Issy Leister. She has refreshed the interior of the kiosk and introduced several new items of merchandise including West Pier T-shirts and tea towels, and new pictures and photographs of the pier. We're hoping to expand this range gradually but are pleased to report that business has been good so far, helped of course, by the fine weather we had through March and April.

We are putting together a video about the recent (post WW2) history of the pier to sell in the kiosk. If any of you have video or Super 8 material of the pier, especially from the 1950's or 60's, which you would be willing for us to use, please contact me. We are also interested in holiday snaps from the 1950's, 60's and 70's.

The market is running again every weekend under Norma Binnie's management. It's become an established part of Brighton's seafront now and makes the once quiet surrounds of the pier very lively at weekends.

The members' and general public's response to the fires, as with the partial collapses, has been extremely heartening. Since January we have been receiving several emails every day encouraging us not to give up. It really makes a difference, having confirmation like this of how strong the general feeling is in favour of the project. Likewise, the support we received around the date our planning application went to committee was cheering. The obstacles, both natural and man made, have done nothing but strengthen our resolve to achieve the restoration, but knowing how firmly public opinion is behind us adds to that resolve.

Many of you will have seen in the Argus that Paul and Heather McCartney dropped in at the kiosk recently. They assured us that they were completely behind the project and told us not to be bullied into submission by the various strands of opposition in the city. Endorsement from a living legend – it doesn't get much better than that!

Finally, I'd like to thank Mark James for his considerable help to the Trust. Mark keeps our website up to date and also provides all our technical support on a voluntary basis. This job increases in volume all the time and for an office where technical expertise is not top of the skills list, it's completely invaluable.

Rachel Clark
General Manager