

# **WREXHAM COUNTY BOROUGH MUSEUM**

## **REFURBISHMENT SCHEME**

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**



DEPARTMENT OF LEISURE, LIBRARIES & CULTURE

**WREXHAM COUNTY BOROUGH MUSEUM**  
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## **WREXHAM COUNTY BOROUGH MUSEUM REFURBISHMENT SCHEME**

### **1.0 Wrexham County Borough Museum - Aims & Objectives**

1.1 Wrexham County Borough Council's vision and strategic aims for the County Borough are outlined in 'Wrexham Refreshed', the Community Strategy for 2004-20. The development of the County Borough Museum as a major museum facility for Northeast Wales significantly contributes to the Council's vision for the County Borough as a regional centre. The County Borough Museum contributes to the following priorities:

- A Place that Values Learning and where Children and Young People are Valued:
  - Improving educational standards and attainment.
  - Creating and supporting the provision of formal and informal learning opportunities that help local people participate in all aspects of economic and social life.
  - Increasing the availability of safe leisure and cultural activities and more opportunities for play and creativity.
- An Economically Prosperous Place:
  - Maximising the benefits of tourism by the sensitive and sustainable development of a quality tourism product and infrastructure within the County Borough.
  - Building and reinforcing the vitality and viability of Wrexham town centre's economy by enhancing its image and improving its built environment.
- A Place that Cares for the Environment:
  - Improving the quality of the local environment.
- A Safe, Healthy and Caring Place:
  - Making best use of resources to combat poverty and social exclusion.
  - Celebrating the County Borough's unique and diverse cultural heritage.

1.2 The County Borough Museum refurbishment project has the following objectives:

- To provide facilities to high quality standards that will enable the museum to work in partnership, and make locally available, collections from other institutions, in particular to encourage the National Museums and Galleries of Wales and the National Library of Wales to exhibit elements from those collections and to provide a public access point to the services of those institutions;
- To provide facilities that will enable a greater percentage of the County Borough Museum collections to be made publicly accessible;
- To restore a Listed building in a Conservation Area and to enhance the quality of the urban landscape as a landmark building on a main approach road into the town centre;
- To promote and make the reserve heritage collections and information materials publicly accessible as a learning and research resource through the Satellite and Palmer Centre facilities;
- To provide an appropriate facility for the presentation of the Welsh Football Collection as the national collection for Wales.



## **2.0 Wrexham Heritage Service**

- 2.1 Wrexham Heritage Service forms part of the Culture & Heritage Services section of the Department of Leisure, Libraries & Culture of Wrexham County Borough Council (a unitary authority formed in 1996).
- 2.2 This integrated Service was created to deliver locally based archives, museums, archaeology and local studies services for Wrexham County Borough, and amalgamates the museum facilities of the former Wrexham Maelor Museums Service together with Bersham Heritage Centre and Ironworks (part of the former Clwyd County Museums Service). All of these museums and their collections were newly established during the period from 1982 to 1993, in response to the lack of local museum provision at that time and the consequent drain of heritage material from out of the area.
- 2.3 As the largest town in North Wales (with a current population of 129,500), for many years Wrexham aspired to a museum facility which would reflect the importance of the area's heritage. A small museum had been established in the old Wrexham Library after World War I but this had ceased to exist by the 1950s. In 1988, as an interim measure, Wrexham Heritage Centre was opened in the town centre until such time as a suitable building could be made available. The Centre was closed following the acquisition of County Buildings and the opening of Wrexham County Borough Museum, where the Heritage Service is now based, in September 1996.
- 2.4 The Council also owns and manages a number of site museums based upon the industrial archaeology of the Clywedog Valley (including Bersham Heritage Centre & Ironworks, Minera Lead Mines and Kings Mill) and Scheduled Ancient Monuments such as Penrhos Engine House, Holt Castle and Bersham Colliery Winding House & Headgear.
- 2.5 In December 2000, the Council achieved Full Registered status under Phase II of the scheme for Wrexham County Borough Museum, Bersham Heritage Centre & Ironworks, and Minera Lead Mines.

### 3.0 County Buildings - Historical Background

- 3.1 Located in a Conservation Area at a key junction on the approach road into Wrexham town centre, County Buildings was originally built as a barracks for the Denbighshire Militia Regiment. Construction of the building, which was designed by Thomas Penson, County Surveyor of Denbighshire, was completed in 1857.



With the appearance of a fort, the building was constructed of Cefn Mawr sandstone in a Tudor Gothic style, originally with circular turrets at each corner (of which two have survived), an inner courtyard and a loggia (now glazed).

- 3.2 When a new barracks was completed for the Royal Welch Fusiliers at Hightown, Wrexham, the Militia moved and the building was converted around 1879 to become a divisional police station and magistrate's court and re-named 'County Buildings'. Further alterations were made to the front elevation in 1897 when a second courtroom and new public entrances were added and a new wing was built on the eastern side.
- 3.3 In 1940, a two-storey flat-roofed building was constructed at the rear to accommodate the Wrexham ARP and after the war, part of this extension was taken over by the police CID department. This extension was demolished in 1997 to enable the construction of the 'Satellite' facility.
- 3.4 The last resident, the Bridewell Sergeant, moved out in 1960, the police vacated the building in 1976 and the Magistrates in 1977. After a short period of use as the Wrexham Citizen's Advice Bureau, the building was taken over by Aston College (later the North East Wales Institute) and used as an annexe to the Art College.
- 3.5 Ownership of the site transferred to Wrexham Maelor Borough Council in 1995 and subsequently to Wrexham County Borough Council, as the successor authority, in 1996.
- 3.6 The building is Grade II listed. Internally, several interesting features have survived, including the imposing stone staircase with lantern light, decorative screen and bench where witnesses waited to be called to the stand, two large Courtrooms and the prisoner's exercise yard.

## 4.0 Summary of Collections

- 4.1 Building upon collections established by the former museum authorities, in 1996, Wrexham County Borough Council adopted a policy to guide the development of its museum, archive and local studies collections for research, display and learning purposes. The



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breadth of these collections reflects the unique contribution that Wrexham County Borough has made to the heritage of Wales.

Archaeological collections include the skeletal remains of Bronze Age 'Brymbo Man' and excavated finds from the Roman settlement at Plas

- 4.3 Wrexham's role as an important centre for technological and industrial development in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is represented by significant collections on brewing, clocks, printing, the chemicals industry, brick, tiles and terracotta-making as well as iron and steel-making, lead and coal mining.
- 4.4 The wealth and character of the Wrexham area was built upon this economic activity and the Heritage Service holds extensive collections that illustrate the history and lives of the rural and urban communities that evolved. Material relating to the Royal Welch Fusiliers is also collected, to reflect the role that it played in the life of the community.
- 4.5 Wrexham is considered to be the spiritual home of Welsh Football because of the key role that the area played in the establishment of the early game in Wales. In December 2000, the Museum acquired - with funding support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Football Association of Wales - an extensive collection of artefacts that would form the basis for developing a National Football Collection for Wales. The National Museums & Galleries of Wales has endorsed the development of such a collection in Wrexham and the development of a gallery to exhibit the collection is an integral part of the County Borough Museum refurbishment programme.
- 4.6 The Archive Service, located in the Museum, was established in 1996. Since then, a collection of original archives (documents, photographs, maps etc.) and supporting information materials related to the County Borough has been brought together to provide a complementary research resource. This collection was further augmented when the local history reference collection transferred from Wrexham Library to

the Museum in spring 2002, bringing together for the first time public access to all the museum, archive and local history collections under one roof.

- 4.7 Funding from the Council of Museums in Wales and subsequently Cymal: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council Wales has enabled work to commence on transferring the collections from a manual to a computerised database. This is the first step in developing a comprehensive integrated multi-media catalogue that will improve public access to the collections, eventually becoming available on-line.

## 5.0 Wrexham County Borough Museum - Development to Date

- 5.1 As a first step, the former Wrexham Heritage Centre on King Street closed in August 1996 and museum provision was transferred to County Buildings.

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Since then, the museum has steadily increased the number of visitors from less than 5,000 to 15,500 in 2004/05.

- 5.3 A large gallery on the ground floor of the museum has been developed re-using cases and lighting equipment from the former Heritage Centre. This gallery was opened as an interim measure, to enable a limited range of material from the museum collections to be displayed until such time as the main museum refurbishment project could be implemented. As a result of this measure, the skeletal remains of a Bronze Age inhumation known as 'Brymbo Man' were returned to the County Borough Museum from the National Museum & Gallery of Wales Cardiff. Following a detailed examination of the remains, they are now on exhibition together with an interpretative display and a facial reconstruction that helps to bring 'Brymbo Man' to life.
- 5.4 Two other gallery spaces have been developed at the Museum for the presentation of temporary exhibition programmes. One of these is dedicated to the Welsh Football collection, the other includes exhibitions that have been initiated from the museum's own holdings, or are brought in from other organisations and help to attract a wider audience for the museum.
- 5.5 In 2002, the County Borough Museum was selected as one of three museums in Wales to work with the National Museums and Galleries of Wales under the Welsh Assembly Government's partnership programme '*Cyfoeth Cymru Gyfan – Sharing Treasures*'. Since then, in the region of £60,000 funding from the programme (administered through Cymal, the Museums, Archives and Libraries Council in Wales) has enabled one of the temporary exhibition galleries to be upgraded to a standard that enables the display of material from the national collections.
- 5.6 Funding from the former Council of Museums in Wales 'Innovation' scheme has enabled modest improvements to be made to the smaller of the former courtrooms on the first floor. The room is now used on an interim basis as an essential teaching space for school visits, evening

talks and out-of-school activities. However the current configuration of the building prohibits access to this space by people in wheelchairs.

- 5.7 The presence of a range of advisory services (i.e. the Council's museums, archives, local studies and archaeology services) is the first stage in the development of County Buildings as a 'one-stop shop' for Wrexham's heritage.
- 5.6 The local history reference collection formerly housed at Wrexham Library was transferred to the Museum in spring 2002. A small public search room facility - The A.N. Palmer Centre - has been opened to provide public access to the archive and local history collections and the museum reference library and attracted more than 3,500 personal research visits in its first year of operation.
- 5.7 To date, whilst the ground floor of the building has been brought into public use on an interim basis the first floor of the building remains undeveloped and has very limited use. However, there is significant potential for the development of exhibition galleries and other public facilities on this level, as illustrated by the exhibition about Welsh footballer John Charles, the 'Gentle Giant'.



## **6.0 Phase I – ‘Satellite’ Project**

6.1 A grant of £299,375 from the Heritage Lottery Fund enabled the Council to complete the first phase in the development of the museum refurbishment. This phase comprised the construction of a purpose-built wing (to replace an unsuitable building constructed during World War II) to provide: -

- storage for the museum’s important local social and industrial history collections;
- conservation and exhibition preparation facilities;
- a public study room which will provide on-line access to the reserve collections that are not on public display.

This new ‘Satellite’ wing was opened on 15 May 1998. The new wing is entered via a glazed link to the original County Buildings, thereby enabling disabled access to the study room and reserve collections. The total cost of the new wing was £398,500, the balance funding of £99,125 being met by Wrexham County Borough Council. Advice and support for this phase of the project was also given by officers of the former Council of Museums in Wales and the former Museums and Galleries Commission.

6.2 In undertaking the ‘Satellite’ project as the first phase of the museum refurbishment scheme, the Council took the unusual step of ensuring that the provision of a ‘state of the art’ collections management facility underpins the subsequent development of the public exhibition and ancillary services of County Buildings. Similarly, the incorporation of a collection study room and the proposed development of multimedia collection catalogues will enable easier public access to the museum reserve collections.

6.3 In conjunction with the construction of the new wing, a comprehensive scheme of stone cleaning and refurbishment of the exterior fabric of County Buildings was undertaken between September and December 1996. The ‘JOS’ cleaning process was used to provide a chemical-free and soft abrasion method, as recommended for the sympathetic restoration of historic buildings. The finished work revealed the face of the building in a new light and received favourable public comment. The Welsh Development Agency provided a grant of £39,000 towards the total cost of £48,000, with the balance of funding being met by Wrexham County Borough Council.

## 7.0 Phase II – Landscape Scheme

- 7.1 Phase II of the museum development comprised a landscape improvement scheme for the forecourt and peripheral areas of County Buildings and provided limited disabled parking for museum visitors on



St Mark's Road. As an important feature in the urban landscape of central Wrexham, a sensitive approach to design of the landscaping within the designated conservation area was required. The landscaping scheme was undertaken with financial support from the Welsh Development

Agency, which gave a grant of £67,000 towards the total project cost of £75,000.

- 7.2 To complete the museum forecourt scheme, new decorative gates and benches – designed to reflect the heritage of the area and produced by students from NEWI – were incorporated in the landscaping, in line with the Council's policy to foster public works of art. An Arts Council of Wales Lottery grant was secured in support of this work, the total cost being £8,500.

## 8.0 Phase III – Roof Renewal

- 8.1 In January 2002, funding was secured from the Welsh Development Agency, to enable the roof of County Buildings to be renewed. This work was undertaken in order to provide a sound shell to house the public spaces of the museum. The WDA grant provided £70,350 towards the total project cost of £87,937.
- 8.2 During the course of the roof renovation, dry rot was discovered in the smaller of the former courtrooms. This problem was rectified at an additional cost of some £13,000.