

# Heritage Lottery Fund to help with restoration of the Chainbridge

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The development grant will enable the councils to carry out detailed development work in order to submit a full proposal for the second round of the HLF application process later this year.

The first-round pass does not guarantee that the councils will receive a grant for the restoration project but it does mean that the project meets the Heritage Lottery Fund's published criteria for funding and has the potential to deliver high quality benefits and value for Lottery money.

The Chainbridge, which has been closed since the 1980s and is in a poor state of repair, spans the River Dee. Constructed in 1817 by local entrepreneur Exuperius Pickering, it opened up a cheap transport route and made him the predominant coal merchant in the area. It is a historically important engineering structure with the wrought iron centenary chains thought to be the oldest working part of any bridge in the UK.

The proposed £325,500 project aims to restore the bridge, reopen it for public access and regrade the path from the south side of the bridge to the tunnel to Berwyn Halt train station in order to enable disabled access for the first time. The work will be complemented by a programme of community activities including research, oral history interviews, producing new interpretation including web and audio visual materials, holding events to celebrate the reopening of the bridge and creating education packs and volunteer opportunities.

As part of the development work the councils will be working with local schools, local history groups, Llangollen Museum and volunteers so that the whole community can learn about the history of the Chainbridge and have their say on its future.

The re-opening of the bridge would create a major tourist attraction located within the World Heritage Site and the newly designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Plans include linking a canal boat ride with a steam train ride back to Llangollen to improve the experience of 980,000 visitors a year to the area.

Jennifer Stewart, Head of HLF in Wales, said: "We were impressed with the councils' proposals to restore this significant landmark which is of historical engineering importance. The project will provide great opportunities for local people to get involved and play their part in saving a piece of their local heritage for future generations.

"The Chainbridge also has the potential to play a key part in attracting visitors to this area, and thereby provide a boost to the local economy by supporting local businesses. As such we have awarded a development grant for the councils to work up their plans and they now have up to two years to submit their application to compete for the full award."

Cllr Jon Haddy, Llangollen's Town Mayor, commented "It will be a great asset to the area to have the ChainBridge open once again and used regularly by walkers, canoeists, railway enthusiasts and we eagerly look forward to that day."

David Walton, Chair of Llantysilio Community Council, added: 'Llantysilio Community Council are delighted that Llangollen Town Council joined forces to restore the Chainbridge. We believe the Chainbridge

will become a major asset and attraction to the World Heritage Site and produce benefits to the canal, railway, hotel and general tourism.

## **History of the Chainbridge**

Although many sources state that the Chain Bridge was built by Exuperius Pickering in 1814, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHM) gives the date as 1817. Exuperius Pickering, a local entrepreneur dealing in coal, limestone, slate and iron bar is reputed to have been involved in the building of the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and as a result to have known Thomas Telford well enough to call on him for help with the design and building of the Chain Bridge.

However, there is some doubt about this. According to the RCAHM, Pickering had been petitioning the Llangollen Canal Company, to improve the feeder section of the canal and allow him exclusive access to the wharves and bridges.

The construction of the Chain Bridge allowed him to monopolize the local coal trade as the bridge gave him access to the new London to Holyhead road (now the A5) built by Telford. It also meant that he avoided the tolls he had to pay to cross the main bridge across the river in Llangollen.

Pickering's bridge was constructed with wooden decking, supported by wrought iron chains from below with a surface covering of earth and stone. The bridge was supported from the river bed by six oak pillars. Detailed survey drawings were carried out by the French engineer Joseph-Michel Dutens and published in *Memoires sur les Travaux Publics d'Angleterre* 1819 with a report that concluded that "One cannot assign a limit to the genius... there exist in London examples of chain bridges but the conception of the Dee is preferable."

By 1870 the bridge was in a bad condition and considered to be beyond repair and was removed and subsequently was replaced in 1876 by Sir Henry Robertson, a part owner of Brymbo Ironworks. His design is known to have closely followed that of the first structure with the supporting pillars being of iron rather than oak.

In February 1928, flooding washed away most of the bridge, although the supporting chains held fast. Henry Robertson's son, another Henry Robertson, decided to rebuild it on the lines of the Menai Suspension Bridge and is reported to have reused the chains from the first structure.

Six of these chains were suspended to support the deck from above while a further two again lay underneath the deck. The new design was a great improvement, being stronger and able to withstand flooding. It cost £303/11/00. The official opening in 1929 was marked with celebrations and its strength confirmed by having 45 of his employees stand on the bridge.

The bridge was finally closed in the mid 1980s and is inaccessible at the present time due to its dangerous state. Research carried out by the RCAHM has been able to show the design and scale of the chains used in the third structure are so similar that it is highly likely that the chains from the original structure were stored and reused 111 years later.

## **Notes to editors**

A first-round pass means the proposed project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

## **Further information**

For further information please contact Ian Parry on 01978 861 345.