

CASE STUDY

REDEVELOPMENT: A NEW MUSEUM FOR GAIRLOCH

In 2019 Gairloch Museum moved to a new building – a repurposed nuclear bunker. Through the journey of their redevelopment this museum has successfully won the support of their community, raised the profile of the area nationally and attracted enthusiastic new visitor audiences.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

RECOGNITION AND AWARDS:

- Accredited
- Art Fund Museum of the Year 2020 Winner

PROJECT FUNDERS:

- Museums Galleries Scotland
- National Lottery Heritage Fund (Scotland)
- Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- Highland Council
- Scottish Government.

PROJECT DELIVERY:

- The transformation work on the bunker commenced in February 2018
- July 2019 the museum opened to the public

THE PROJECT:

The museum's previous home was an increasingly decrepit farm steading. The lease was running out and the rain was running down the walls. With core funding slashed and limited opportunities for revenue generation in the confined premises, the museum needed a new home and a new business model in order to survive.

The new Gairloch Museum consists of five galleries over two floors, telling the story of Gairloch and the surrounding area from its earliest geology to the modern day. As well as doubling its display gallery space, the building incorporates a library, archive and artifact store, all fitted with modern storage furniture so that the collections are as accessible as possible.

Commercial space within the building includes a large retail space, designed to be in keeping with the presentation of the galleries and displays and offering quality products from across the Highlands & Islands. A café space on the first floor has one of the best views in the area, over Loch Gairloch to the Isle of Skye. West Highland College (UHI) occupies offices and study space at the rear of the building and makes use of an expansive Activity Room, which can also be booked for community use.

“Museums Galleries Scotland was the first funder to recognise the extraordinary capacity of Gairloch Museum’s volunteers and see the vision of the new project.”

Dr Karen Buchanan, Curator at Gairloch Museum



Credit: Mark Appleton

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

- The innovative transformation of the former cold war bunker from village eyesore to 5* attraction was the result of tireless effort, enterprise and determination by the Museum Board, volunteers and the wider community.
- More than twenty public and private funders provided grants towards the £2.4M cost of the conversion and an amazing £200,000 was raised by the local communities of Gairloch and surrounding area.
- Gairloch Museum's collections have been safeguarded for the future. An ambitious decant took place during the Spring of 2019, to move the collections from the old building to the new. This was done almost entirely with volunteer effort.
- Probably the most challenging aspect of the decant was the dismantling and reassembly of the massive Fresnel lens from Rubh Re lighthouse, which forms the centrepiece of the ground floor displays.

THE IMPACT IT HAS MADE:

- After being officially opened by the Princess Royal in July 2019, the museum more than doubled its visitor numbers over the next 6 months. Plans for a phenomenal 2020 were unfortunately scuppered by Covid-19 just as the visitor season was about to get underway.
- The visual impact of the transformation of the building has been astounding. As one local donor wrote: "This project has transformed the ugliest and most neglected building in Gairloch into its greatest attraction."

- The new museum has successfully won the support of our community, raised the profile of the area nationally and attracted enthusiastic new visitor audiences.
- Whereas the museum previous only had one full time employee, it now provides employment for a further four part time staff, and that is without taking the café staff into consideration.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- The main stumbling block to an earlier opening date was the difficulty in getting a mains electricity supply organised. This was ironic, considering that SSE had been among the first major funders.
- The lack of a project manager responsible for the installation of the displays created a lot of pressure on the Museum's curator, who was at the same time coordinating the decant and proofing interpretation panels and labels.
- There is very little that cannot be achieved by a determined group of hard working volunteers!

GUIDANCE:

- The first application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for the new Gairloch Museum was unsuccessful. Although this was disappointing, the persistence of the museum board in maintaining a dialogue with NLHF and acting on feedback paid off when the second application was successful.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

If you would like more information about this project please contact Dr Karen Buchanan, Curator, Gairloch Museum, email: curator@gairlochmuseum.org

Funding enquiries: <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/funding/>

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