

Case Study

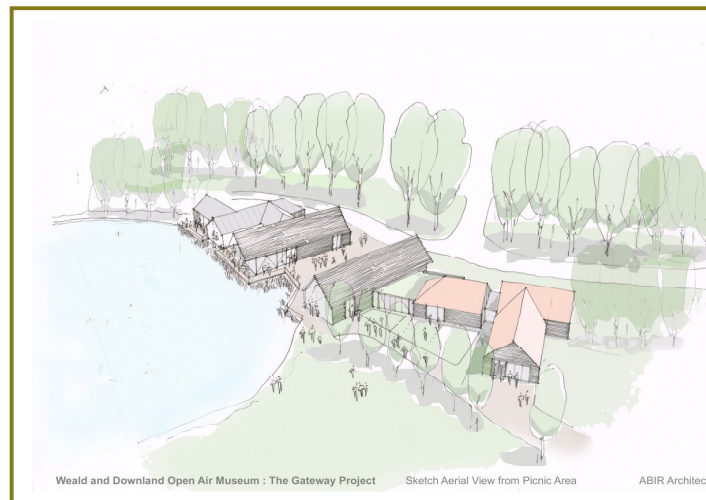
Gateway Project, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum

Background

The Museum, for over 40 years has rescued and restored over 50 historic buildings from all over the south east of England. It is a nationally designated Museum and is also noted for its rural crafts and landscape work. The buildings were rescued from development and represent vernacular architecture from the 13th to 19th centuries. Since 1970 the focus has been on re-erecting the exhibits. We know from research and surveys that the Museum needs to improve interpretation and the visitor experience. The updated vision is that the Museum should become: “A centre of excellence for the enjoyment, learning and understanding of the built environment, landscape, rural life and communities of South East England and the South Downs.”

The Museum needs to generate a level of income sufficient to ensure the maintenance of its exhibits and thereby protect this unique national collection for future generations.

The Gateway Project comprises all the elements needed to achieve those goals.



The project

The project was first conceived some ten years ago and the best solution investigated, involving stakeholders and the public. The Gateway project will provide new learning, participation, and activities, as well as being a gateway to the South Downs National Park. New buildings (see above) around the Museum’s millpond will have new visitor facilities (ticketing, retail and catering facilities), new information galleries and updated interpretation throughout the site, along with a suite of new engagement opportunities. This will enable visitors to explore, enjoy, understand and become involved with the Museum. Improved access will be achieved, including more cycle parking and other sustainable transport improvements plus an increase in car parking spaces thereby reducing the reliance on overflow parking. The project will increase visitor numbers and income supporting the maintenance of the collections. This stage of the Gateway project has developed the proposals to achieve a building scheme ready for a planning application, an interpretation strategy and a detailed cost plan. This work has been funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Stage One grant plus a grant from the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) of £8k. This has been the basis for a Stage Two HLF grant bid and a fund-raising campaign that has attracted over £1 million. The project has been managed by Museum staff, consultants and Trustees.

“It will provide a wonderful opportunity for visitors to learn about the landscape, buildings and rural heritage of the South Downs.”

Richard Pailthorpe, Museum Director

The outcome

The Stage One award from the HLF and the funding provided by the SDNPA gave the Museum a development budget of almost £0.25m, which enabled them to invest in an expert team of project managers, architects and designers to bring forward the detailed plans. This has resulted in a successful £4million Stage Two award from the HLF.

The project has engaged with the Local Planning Authority role of the SDNPA through the South Downs Design Review Panel and the pre-application process. A planning application will be submitted in January 2015.

The project has been managed within the Museum’s own governance structures and in accordance with HLF requirements. The conditions on the grant from SDNPA were outcome rather than process focused, so SDNPA officers were only partially involved in the project development process and would have contributed more if required by the Museum. However, it is acknowledged that there was one detailed meeting with the interpretation strategy consultant and some high level (CEO) briefing meetings in advance of building design. Whilst this situation is partly in the nature of partnership projects there could have been more added value beyond the purely financial contribution.



Sole Street House is used as café seating with picnic tables in fine weather.

The future

Once the planning permission has been secured the procurement process will commence to secure the construction team. The aim is to start the ground works mid to late summer 2015.

The museum will also apply to the NPA for a grant.

The building project will continue through to next year and the Museum team will strive to have the new facilities completed in readiness for the start of the 2017 season.

NPA staff will support the Museum’s team in developing the interpretation, in particular the use of the shared identity. This will especially focus on the national park element of the displays but the content of the gallery will be developed by Museum staff, so it is consistent with other elements of the displays.

This project is vital to the long-term financial sustainability of the Museum and will secure this extremely important heritage, educational and leisure resource for generations to come.