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History in the making



Lews Castle has begun a new chapter in its history that aims to safeguard its future.

Picture and front cover: John MacLean Photography

IT'S a story worthy of the history books. A decaying architectural treasure is rescued against the odds and transformed back to its original grandeur. A community is rewarded for its faith and vision with a new resource to safeguard its heritage.

The opening of the £19 million Lews Castle development last month represents a major milestone in the history of the Outer Hebrides.

The castle was gifted to the community in 1923 by Lord Leverhulme and its legacy has fulfilled its potential – offering a place for the community to gather and celebrate the culture and heritage of each island.

Ten years in the planning, this has been one of the most ambitious projects in the area in recent times.

Challenging repairs have brought the castle back to life. Ground floor rooms have been faithfully restored and original features reinstated – to the extent that microscope analysis from scrapings off walls helped to determine historic paint colours.

It's now a luxury destination with accommodation where visitors and locals can experience living history in this grand setting.

Meanwhile, Museum nan Eilean has a purpose-built modern extension on the site of the castle's former glasshouses, where the roots of the islands' culture and history can be nurtured for the future.

Spaces specifically designed for community engagement have been built in to its foundations. The on-site heritage service supports learning and activities to help people get

closer to the exhibits and find inspiration in their past.

And for the first time the islands also have their own dedicated, fully accessible archive service.

Project co-ordinator Iain Macleod, economic development officer at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, said: "The community has waited a long time for the castle to be brought back to life.

"Historically and architecturally, Lews is a building of national importance. There's a strong sense of attachment, as it has been owned by the community since the 1920s. It was also a place of learning which set many local people on their way.

"The Comhairle recognised this when it made regeneration a key task. My hope has always been that the project will justify the effort and costs to benefit the whole community.

"Signs are that local people already feel at home. More than 5000 people visited in our opening week and, although we're in the middle of the visitor season, many were local.

"Although our original motivation may have been about saving the castle, this project has been about creating something to deliver long-term economic and social benefits for the whole of the Outer Hebrides."

■ The £19 million project has been funded by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Historic Scotland, the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and investment from a private sector partner.

ONCE home to clan chiefs and philanthropic tycoons, a base for flying boats and later a technical college, Lews Castle boasts a colourful history which stretches back more than 300 years.

In or around 1680, the Mackenzies of Kintail built a summer residence on the prominent site overlooking Stornoway, established as Stjórnavágr (Anchor Bay) by the Vikings.

Seaforth Lodge was extended and extensively remodelled in the 1750s and remained in the clan until the last male descendant – Francis, Earl of Seaforth – died in 1815.

Thirty years later, in 1844, the island of Lewis was sold, along with Seaforth Lodge, to entrepreneur James Matheson for £190,000.

Born in Lairg in Sutherland, Matheson made his fortune in the Far East dealing in opium, tea and silk.

He commissioned renowned Scottish architect Charles Wilson to design a large and luxurious mansion on the site of the original Seaforth Lodge.



Painted in 1798 by James Barret, this is one of earliest known oil paintings of an Outer Hebrides landscape and shows the original Seaforth Lodge – the island residence of the Mackenzies. The lodge was demolished in 1846, to be replaced by Lews Castle, but two of its original walls can still be seen in the new glass-covered inner courtyard.

Picture: courtesy of Museum nan Eilean

With crenellated towers, gargoyles, the Gothic revival mullioned windows, grinning grotesques and dragon

The tycoon spent a further £49,000 transforming the rough grazing land on Gearraidh Chruaidh to surround his castle with private gardens and extensive woodlands.

A long, curving palm court and conservatories were added in or around 1870 to protect his collection of exotic and delicate plants from across the globe.

Matheson also invested heavily in a programme of improvements to the economic and infrastructure of Lewis – building roads, piers, gas and chemical works, and funding steamer services and education.

By 1850 he had spent some £329,000 on the island.

Sir James Matheson died in 1878 with no direct heirs.

Although his nephew Donald Matheson inherited the estate, it was passed to his grand-nephew Duncan Matheson who took up residence in the early 1900s.

In 1918 the island of Lewis was sold for £143,000 to Lord Leverhulme, co-founder of the soap and cleaning products company Lever Brothers which later became Unilever.

Lord Leverhulme founded



In 1902 King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra visited Lews Castle and planted a tree in the grounds.

Picture: courtesy of the Lewis Museum Trust

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the model industrial village of Port Sunlight on the Wirral and pursued his Hebridean plans as a separate private venture.

In little over three years, he had spent at least £2 million on a programme of industrial schemes, largely based on herring fishing, which he believed would transform the islands' economy and improve social conditions.

He drew up a radical plan for Stornoway which he envisaged as the Venice of the North, complete with a railway station, wide boulevards and a bridge across the harbour to Lews Castle.

Except for the boiler room added in about 1920, the castle itself remained unaltered externally from Matheson's time.

However Lord Leverhulme did set about modernising the

castle's interior by installing electric lighting, central heating, numerous bathrooms and intercom telecoms.

He extended the ballroom into an adjacent drawing room and invitations for the regular dances held at the castle were eagerly sought.

In 1923, when it became clear that his ambitions for Lewis were not going to succeed, Lord Leverhulme gifted the parish of Stornoway to the local people.

The Stornoway Trust was formed to manage the new 64,000-acre community-owned estate which included Lews Castle and grounds.

During World War II, the castle was requisitioned by the Admiralty as a naval hospital and accommodation for the 700 Naval Air Squadron which

operated six Supermarine Walrus amphibious biplanes.

Used for reconnaissance and air-sea rescue, the flying boats took off from the slipway at Cuddy Point in the castle grounds and could also be catapult-launched from battleships.

In 1953 careers were being launched from the castle, when it became the first home for Lews Castle College.

It was one of a number of innovative residential vocational colleges established at around that time.

It provided courses in navigation, textiles, building and engineering to students from across the Highlands and Islands.

Structural problems meant students had to move out in 1988, and although repairs

enabled the continued use of parts of the building, it was finally vacated in 1997.

The castle stood silent and empty for 25 years.

In 2002 Lews Castle Working Group was set up to explore ways of restoring and safeguarding the castle's future.

A feasibility study completed in 2006 recommended a mixed use development which would combine a museum and hotel as the best prospect for a viable development.

After 10 years of sourcing the necessary funds and grants, repairs began on the castle exterior in February 2012.

The restoration of the castle's ground floor and the building of the new museum started in August 2013.

A new chapter in the castle's history had begun.



Lord Leverhulme preferred lots of fresh air while he was sleeping and the unusual roof structure found in his bedroom at Lews Castle showed it would have been open to the elements.

Picture: courtesy of David Narro Associates

WHILE investigating the structural integrity of the castle, engineers discovered an unusual feature.

Dominic Echlin of David Narro Associates said: "There was a strange room off the hall landing which we were told was Lord Leverhulme's bedroom. It was a poky-looking space – more like a maid's room than a grand master bedroom.

"As we started unpicking the finishes on the ceiling, we found it had been restructured and reslated, and the roof cover was actually different from anywhere else in the castle.

"It looked like the room had been partially open to the elements at one point.

"Lord Leverhulme was a health enthusiast and preferred to sleep in the open air.

"At his purpose-built home at Thornton Manor near Liverpool, where he lived from 1888 until 1919, you can still see his original bedroom roof – half is railway sleepers covered by a canopy and the rest is open to the air.

"He obviously installed a similar arrangement at Lews and slept exposed to the Hebridean weather.

"It's just one of those fascinating bits of history you discover on a project. As you peel back the layers, buildings begin to reveal their secrets."



A postcard dating from circa 1908 shows Lews Castle with its extensive glasshouses.

Picture: courtesy of Western Isles Libraries

Lord Leverhulme (fifth left) shown with guests at a hotel on Harris in the mid-1920s. By this point, he had already gifted the parish of Stornoway to the local community.

Picture: courtesy of Museum nan Eilean



Looking beyond its parapet, Lews Castle and the new museum and archive have created a destination experience and community resource for the whole of the Outer Hebrides.

Picture: John MacLean Photography



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Restoration and conservation

RESCUED from the brink, the historic A-listed Lews Castle stood empty for 25 years and was on the buildings at risk register.

"It was just caught at the right time," said Dominic Echlin, consulting structural engineer and director at David Narro Associates.

"When we first visited on a snowy day in December, there was water dripping through the ceiling and running down the walls in the ballroom and dining room.

"The effect of water ingress was a major issue. The building has lots of complicated roof structures. They all had to be investigated to establish failing roof materials, find hidden gutters and ensure water had not affected the structural integrity of the building and timbers.

"We were crawling into hidden roof spaces to determine repairs, checking every rafter and floor joist before construction teams arrived."

During initial investigation, the building started to reveal interesting details.

John Sanders, partner at Simpson & Brown architects, said: "The archaeologists found roof timbers with Cyrillic lettering.

"It was a puzzle as the timber had been cut and used all over the roof, so there

was a lot of head scratching before they worked out the symbols were Russian, then more head scratching as they pieced together the words to spell out the name of original timber yard, which they traced back to the Baltic States.

"The Hebrides did not have large trees for construction in the 1800s but, as it was part of an important sea trading route, it was able to source materials from across the world."

Although timbers were mostly sound, roof coverings had to be almost entirely renewed and water damage repaired.

Gary Holmes, regional director of Graham Construction, said: "Soaked masonry caused by leaking roofs was a major challenge.

"On the exterior we used lime mortars to control the moisture and evaporation profile in the granite and limestone schist rubble masonry."

A bay window at the front of the castle also suffered significant water damage. Extending over two storeys, the bay had been built with large cast iron beams within the stonework.

Mr Echlin said: "Water found its way in and as iron corrodes it expands dramatically. Although the window had been strapped up as a temporary repair, it had reached a point where the iron was wrecking the stonework.

"We had to dismantle the whole window, while holding up the front wall to prevent a complete collapse, then remove the rotting ironwork and rebuild the stonework.

"It was one of the most nerve-wracking and complex issues we encountered in terms of propping and repairs."

Sustainability was embedded throughout the project. Mr Holmes explained: "Where possible, existing materials were salvaged and used to avoid replacement.

"Local subcontractors were employed, including artisans and crafts people from within the Outer Hebrides. The consideration given to future-proofing the building means it will be easy to maintain."

As well as building repairs, the team was determined to restore the interior to its former splendour and conserved many original features.

Lead architect John Munro of Malcolm Fraser Architects said: "The original fabric has been retained wherever possible. Conservation was mainly of repair with restoration appropriate where good evidence was available.

"Materials were repaired like-for-like and traditional paint techniques were used to restore the remarkable Victorian and early 20th decorative schemes."

John Sanders of Simpson & Brown said: "The castle had seen many changes



Before: water was dripping through the ceiling and running down the walls of the ballroom, before repairs began.

Picture: courtesy of David Narro Associates



After: using traditional paint techniques, the remarkable Victorian and early 20th decorative schemes have been restored in the ballroom.

Picture: courtesy of Iain MacLeod

over the centuries. It was used as a hospital and a college, so many special finishes had been lost.

"We employ archaeologists and historians specialising in building conservation to search archives to find out what a building was originally like.

"Our archaeological specialists were able to establish where the 17th century Seaforth Lodge stood and how much was left.

"Two of its original walls were fully revealed when contractors demolished the concrete sheds in the courtyard that had been put up during the war.



Before: the structure of the dining room roof was one of the most challenging areas to repair.

Picture: courtesy of David Narro Associates



After: Think of the stories this dining room has still to tell, now that it has been brought back to its original condition.

Picture: John MacLean Photography

"These 300-year-old walls now form one of the features of the glass-roofed courtyard.

"It seems fitting for a museum to have part of its own history on display."

In-depth investigations also led to restoring the original vision of Lews Castle – as first designed in 1845.

Mr Sanders said: "Drawings by the original architect Charles Wilson have survived, which show his impression of the interiors.

"It includes plaster vaulting and gold stars painted on a blue background in the hall which we have reinstated."

Hand-painted ferns on the wall in the Morning Room have been restored by specialist conservators. A craftsman is carving new wooden lions for the bottom of the main staircase. And ornate and decorative plaster work has been carefully restored.

Gary Holmes of Graham Construction said: "About 25 per cent of the plaster in the main ground floor rooms has been lost or radically altered and some plaster ornament has been salvaged and reinstated.

"Traditional materials and techniques were used throughout. The plaster in all ground floor rooms, except the ballroom, is traditional lime plaster on riven timber lath.

"The ballroom was created by Leverhulme in the 1920s and uses fibrous plaster on metal lath, so this construction technique was repeated."

Every little detail has been carefully considered and painstakingly reconstructed.

Mr Sanders said: "You can think of Lews Castle as a large, complicated clock with lots of pieces working together to show the passage of time.

"In effect, it is the biggest artefact in the new museum. We have to consider how best to conserve, interpret and present it, so people can understand the building and appreciate the stories which go with it.

"Architecturally, there are lots of examples of Gothic revival mansions intact in Scotland. What makes Lews stand out is the personality of its former owners and the community's personal connection and affection for it.

"You can still see student graffiti on the basement walls from the castle's college days.

"Putting back the historic interior of the period is not just supported in terms of conservation theory.

"If you remove or ignore significant features, as some building renovations tend to, you lose the stories and that personal connection – and this building has so many stories to tell."



Using drawings by the original architect who first designed the castle in the 1840s for Sir James Matheson, conservation architects were able to reinstate features such as the plaster vaulting and gold stars on a blue background on the hall ceiling.

Picture: John MacLean Photography

Iain MacLeod, special projects officer at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, said: "There are many stories from the restoration, hidden work people won't see or will take for granted – such as the lead and slate work on the roofs or the services installation. Running pipes and wires through the castle has not been easy.

"But I've been so impressed by the imagination and order that the architects and other professionals have brought to the project, the way the contractors embraced the challenges, and I've enjoyed watching the specialist tradesmen at work – especially the stonemasons, plasterers, joiners and painters.

"There's been a great spirit of teamwork around the project and despite the sheer hard graft, everyone involved seems to have ended up loving this old building!"



Linking the castle with the new museum, the glazed covered courtyard blends the old with the new.

Picture: courtesy of Iain MacLeod



Before: corroding iron struts within the bay window were destroying the stonework.

Picture: courtesy of David Narro Associates



After: stonework was rebuilt in the large bay window which had to be completely taken apart to remove the rotting iron.

Picture: John MacLean Photography

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Museum and archive extension



Specialist conservators restored the hand-painted ferns on the walls of the Morning Room.
Picture: John MacLean Photography



The clock in the hall.
Picture: John MacLean Photography



The complicated, leaking roof structure of the castle was one of the biggest challenges of the project.
Picture: courtesy of Iain MacLeod



To restore the 1840s architect Charles Wilson's original idea, wooden lions are being carved for the bottom of the staircase.
Picture: John MacLean Photography



Putting the castle's own history on display, the 300-year-old walls of the original Seaforth Lodge were uncovered and form one of the features of the glass-roofed courtyard.
Picture: courtesy of Iain MacLeod

The comprehensive repair programme was handled by a multi-disciplined team working in close collaboration:

- Lead architect Malcolm Fraser Architects
- Conservation architect Simpson & Brown Architects
- Landscape architect Derek Carter
- Consulting structural and civil engineers David Narro Associates
- Quantity surveyors David Adamson & Partners
- Services engineers Harley Haddow
- Main contractor (phases two and three) Graham Construction
- Phase one contractor Neil Mackay & Co
- Project manager WSP/Parsons Brinckerhoff

DESIGNED by Malcolm Fraser Architects, the museum and archive extension successfully integrates old and new.

Lead architect John Munro said: "Conservation philosophy should start with the idea of an appropriate sustainable use that fits the building, making best use of its strengths and which gives it the best chance of being loved and beneficially used."

"The use for the castle - grand reception rooms for great social events with high-quality bedroom accommodation above - essentially mimics the use of the original castle as a grand entertainment centre."

"The museum and archive is complementary to this, allowing crossover in footfall and supporting the re-use of the whole site."

"Although the museum and archive is a new build, it learns from the past - sitting where the demolished glasshouse sat and making reference to its structure."

"The museum galleries all lead off from one continuous corridor that runs the length of the

castle, mirroring the promenade arrangement of the castle's main reception rooms."

John Sanders at Simpson & Brown said: "Collaborating with other architects on this project and appreciating how they linked the new with the historic was so interesting."

"When the design was being drawn up, I watched the architect at the site working out exactly how to include the best view of the castle from the new build and make the most of the narrow space. Basically the view was built in."

John Munro agreed: "The view and the relationship to the landscape is critical," he said. "The grand lodges were sited to command the view of the sea."

"The museum bucks the trend for black box display by allowing objects such as the chessmen to be seen, or stories such as the tragic sinking of the HMV Iolaine to be told, in relation to the views out to the horizon and the coast they navigated."

Structural engineer Dominic Echlin said: "Although the

extension is a simple design, structurally it's a very clever building."

"The museum needs to maintain a stable temperature and humidity to protect exhibits. You can invest in lots of mechanical and electrical equipment, but these can be expensive to run."

"Or you can build environmental control into the design, for example through the mass of the walls."

"The archive has a large thermal mass and the structure is relatively heavy so it stays the same temperature, no matter what the weather outside."

"The main gallery is also one solid block of masonry, covered by lime-based plaster instead of the usual gypsum plasterboard. Lime absorbs and lets out moisture, so the plaster helps to stabilise humidity naturally."

"It's interesting to see these traditional materials and historic technical solutions, such as the lime plaster, being rediscovered and incorporated in modern buildings to make them more efficient and sustainable."



By using the principles of thermal mass and through the choice of traditional materials, the design of the new extension helps to control the temperature and humidity naturally.
Pictures: John MacLean Photography



The design of the new extension references the crystalline structure and repeated vertical panels of Matheson's former glasshouses - and the view of the castle was built in from the beginning.



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Museum nan Eilean

THE purpose-built Museum nan Eilean at Lews Castle is more than a place where people can connect with the past. The elegant extension has created a new community and heritage hub for the whole of the Outer Hebrides.

The museum galleries focus on the interwoven relationships between the land, the sea and the people – exploring these islands on the edge of the Atlantic.

The experience is enhanced by flexible spaces designed for events, meetings, workshops or for relaxing, with an integrated courtyard café and shop.

Collections officer Ashley Ferrier said: “We’re so fortunate to have this facility at Lews Castle. The grounds are well used – whether it’s people going for a run, walking the dog or meeting up with friends.

“We hope more locals will drop in on their way past. Entry is free. People can dip into our exhibits, even if it’s just for 20 minutes, and find something inspiring and special.”

The galleries

Dùthchas (A sense of place; heritage; inheritance)

In this square room, with large screens on three walls, visitors are given an immersive flying tour of all the islands, from Lewis and Harris in the north, through the Uists, Benbecula and Barra, to Mingulay and Berneray in the south.

“The 10-minute timelapse film was shot over one year, so it captures all weather and seasons and shows how different each island is in character,” Ashley explained.

“With only the sounds of the wind, the sea and the occasional bird, it gives a wonderful visual impression of the Hebrides. It’s the ideal introduction for people on a short visit and encourages those staying longer to explore the other islands.”



Eileanaich (Islanders)

Interspersed among maps which place the islands in their global context, seven interactive screens enable visitors to meet the people of the Hebrides.

“There are interviews with people of all ages, from every island, and everyone was asked the same questions, so there’s a good mix of opinions on what it means to live on the isles, the Gaelic language, and religion,” Ashley said.

“The interviews are complemented by displays from each of the islands. We’ve always worked closely with the Comainn

Eachdraidh – local historical societies run by volunteers.

“Seven societies have been very generous in lending items from their individual collections, and our display cases give them a chance to show what they think is unique to their location or what best represents their collection or community. In return we’re keen to promote the individual museums, so visitors are encouraged to get out and about and discover the treasure trove of information, stories and objects they hold.”

Blas nan Eilean (A taste of the islands)

The museum’s largest gallery is split into four themes: Land, Sea, Community Life and Working Life.

The timeline starts with the formation of the isles and the rocks of the Hebrides – some, at more than three billion years old, are among the oldest rocks in the world.

The display also features sapphires found locally, on loan from the National Museum of Scotland.

It continues with the first settlers of pre-history right up to the arrival of wind turbines and their influence on land use. Ashley said: “We are delighted to have a number of items on loan from the National Museum of Scotland in every display, including a castle coin hoard and a Viking hacksilver hoard.

“We have six Lewis Chessmen on loan from the British Museum. Carved from walrus ivory and whales’ teeth, the intricate pieces date from the 12th century

and were uncovered on a beach on Uig in 1831.”

Visitors are led on their exciting journey of discovery through the gallery by interactive panels, games and activities. Hand-held boards give a more in-depth account of some of the objects, revealing personal stories that bring the displays to life.

“In the Sea display, which explores the rich fishing traditions of the isles, the board tells a story supplied by Bernera Historical Society,” Ashley said.

“In 1860, a man from Great Bernera

designed and built a special lobster pond so he could keep the lobsters he caught alive and fresh, until he could get the highest prices from the mainland.

“Shipping lobsters from the isles to London in those days was quite an operation. The island is justly proud of the innovation, and various engineers have been impressed by its ingenious design. Visitors to Great Bernera can actually visit the site to see the remains of the ponds.

“We have modern stories, too. In the Working Life display, visitors hear about

Abhainn Dearg – the first legal working distillery on the isles in 200 years.

“It was established on an old fish hatchery site near Uig in 2008 by Mark ‘Marko’ Tayburn. He’s a typical example of the entrepreneurial Hebridean spirit. Throughout time, islanders have to find ways to diversify, adapt and change so they can build a life here.”

Air an Stairsich (On the threshold)

As well as exploring the past, the museum takes a look into the future in this gallery, where displays are loosely based

The modern museum offers a community and heritage hub for the whole of the Outer Hebrides.

Pictures: John MacLean Photography



Inspired by the new museum and galleries, staff will be on hand to help everyone make the most of their visit. Inset left: One of the six Lewis Chessmen from among the 93 pieces dug from Uig beach in 1831 are on loan from the British Museum.

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Making its public debut, a vintage 1923 Morgan three-wheeler car is one of the milestone exhibits in the Blas nan Eilean gallery.
 "This was the first ever car on Berneray and was used by a local merchant until the 1950s," Ashley Ferrier revealed.
 "It was found in the 1980s in a barn in a terrible state and has been lovingly restored. If you consider the state of roads at that time, it couldn't have been very comfortable to drive. It's also really small – sitting in it your knees would be up near your ears!"



Interactive displays encourage visitors to discover the Gaelic language at their own pace and delve deeper into the stories of the islands.

Museum nan Eilean is the first museum in the UK to use Gaelic as its primary language. Ashley Ferrier said: "Most interpretation panels were created in Gaelic first. English interpretations are not a

direct translation but convey a sense of the spirit of the meaning instead.

"It doesn't matter whether they speak Gaelic or not – visitors discover the language at their own pace. You might hear

one word of Gaelic in a film, or be taught a Gaelic phrase while using one of our interactive displays. We hope to help people learn a little Gaelic during their visit, even if it's only a couple of words."

on the themes of sport, music and recycling. "Recycling is nothing new to the Hebrides," Ashley said. "Islanders have been doing it for centuries. They had no option but to reuse or recycle materials as resources were scarce and expensive."

In the music section, a fine lambswool wedding dress donated by gold medal Mod singer Alyth McCormack takes pride of place and shows how island traditions are woven into modern life.

There's a dressing up area with costumes, including a herring girl, fisherman and oil rigger, so visitors can walk a step in the shoes of an islander, past or present. Cases will display items made in workshops at the museum, led by the heritage officer.

Alternatively, items can be contributed by local groups or schools with things inspired by the museum's collection, island life or perhaps the local shinty team.

Ashley said: "It's another flexible space designed to be used by the community, and we'll be holding small ceilidhs – the sitting and listening to stories kind, rather than the dancing kind – as well as other informal music events here, surrounded by the islands' musical heritage."

■ Museum nan Eilean is open daily (except Sundays) from 10am to 5pm. Admission is free. Tel: 01851 822746 www.lews-castle.co.uk



Many important artefacts in the displays are loan from the National Museum of Scotland and local historical societies.



More than 5,000 visitors attended the opening at the beginning of July.

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Museum galleries

The Long Gallery is the ideal place to pause and reflect while enjoying the views over Stornoway Harbour.

Picture: John MacLean Photography



The Long Gallery

Along the length of the museum, a wall of panoramic windows provides magnificent views over Stornoway Harbour.

"I like to sit here during my break on the Harris Tweed cushions and watch the ferry and cruise ships coming and going," said collections officer Ashley Ferrier.

"Visiting any museum or art gallery can be overwhelming as there's so much to take in. It's good to have this lovely space where people can find a quiet seat, appreciate the views and gather their thoughts - while the castle's gargoyles look down on you through the glass roof."

Special exhibition gallery

A regular programme of temporary exhibitions will be shown in a dedicated gallery.

"We didn't have temporary exhibition space before, so this will make a massive difference to the museum service," said Ashley.

"It's a bright, flexible, high-spec space that enables us to try different things and

display exhibits in a modern, exciting way.

"The enhanced security and environmental controls throughout enable us to meet the strict criteria set by national institutions, so we can host more touring exhibitions and artefacts from national collections.

"Next year we will be one of only four museums hosting the touring Fossil Hunters exhibition from the National Museum of Scotland.

"We're also hosting a joint exhibition with the Purvai Project, based at An Lanntair, on Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the first Surveyor General of India.

"Our exhibition will include items on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the British Library and the British Museum."

She added: "This space is designed to be used by the community and we're looking forward to working with local groups.

"At the beginning of this year we hosted an exhibition by local artists which proved very popular and attracted 2500 visitors."



Local materials have been used throughout - including Harris Tweed cushions in the Long Gallery.

Picture: John MacLean Photography



Watch this space! The bright special exhibition gallery will host a full programme of temporary and touring exhibitions brought by local community groups and artists and the National Museum of Scotland. Picture: Iain MacLeod



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Archive centre

ACCCESSING the rich history of the Outer Hebrides has become a lot easier with the opening of the new archive centre at Lews Castle. Tasglann nan Eilean Siar (Hebridean Archives) is the first official archive centre for the islands and is fully accessible to the public.

Archives are the original records that document the history, people and unique culture of the islands.

They can consist of photographs, volumes, personal papers, business records, genealogies, oral histories and digital media.

Many of these collections were created in the Gaelic language – particularly oral histories, folklore, poetry and song.

Museum collections officer Ashley Ferrier said: "Until five years ago we did not have an archivist on the islands. Through the redevelopment project, the Comhairle was awarded European funding for the post.

"Now we have our own dedicated archive research room and visitors can book time with the archivist or access the records they need.

"It makes such a difference to have all the archives now held on site in one purpose-built store.

"Previously researchers could only read our archive records in the library and we had to transport sometimes rare and fragile documents across town from our former archive store."

The varied collections provide a unique insight into the history of the islands and contribute to a better understanding of their fascinating history. The collections are housed in a controlled

environment and will be carefully preserved for future generations. They include education records, such as logbooks, admission records and school board papers, as well as local government records, poor law applications, estate rent ledgers and valuation rolls.

"There are also documents from private individuals, including research papers, manuscripts and photographs, and information relating to local businesses such as The Lewis Coffee House.

"The records are a brilliant resource for anyone looking for information on the history of the Outer Hebrides," explained archivist Seonaid McDonald.

"The archives are available to everyone and we're already getting queries from all kinds of people, including researchers, students and genealogy enthusiasts.

"We're hoping that as people become more aware of the archive facility, we'll be offered more material and the archive will continue to develop."

The archive service will also act as a gateway to the wider collections held by the network of community organisations across the islands.

Local historical societies hold a wealth of information and knowledge, much of it rooted in the oral history and traditions of the islands.

Seonaid and her colleagues in the heritage team work with groups across the islands to help protect and preserve the rich collections.

"If someone contacts us looking for information on a particular subject, although we may not always hold the material, we're almost certain to know where they can find it," said Seonaid.

Heritage

BRINGING history to life is all part of a day's work for heritage officer Angus Murray. As part of a team he leads a full programme of workshops and events that enable people to get even closer to the exhibits and see history in a whole new way.

"My role is very much based in partnership working with community groups, local history groups, groups for the elderly, schools and nurseries," said Angus.

"We run a number of projects designed to encourage the community to use the museum on a regular basis – it's not just for visitors.

"Our workshops help people of all ages engage with some of the collections and items on display.

"In a weekly workshop run in partnership with the Nicolson Institute, we're teaching young people museum skills and actually a lot of the current display content was initially tested on them.

"They've had a chance to work on museum tasks such as object cleaning – it's been really interesting.

"Other workshops focus on community events. For example, I'm currently working on a special programme for October when the national Mòd is in town."

The purpose-built community and education room has everything a group might need, from the latest technology to help with research to craft areas and sinks for "messy play".

Angus said: "We also use the castle grounds as much as possible and I lead outdoor education groups. The grounds are currently part of a Parks for People restoration and regeneration project led by Stornoway Trust.

"We're working closely with them to promote the outstanding designed landscape surrounding the castle."

In keeping with the first Gaelic-led museum in the UK, classes and workshops are bilingual. "It feels



Workshops help people to engage with the collections and displays in the museum.

Pictures: John MacLean Photography



The purpose-built community and education room will bring history to life.

totally natural to use the language in our workshops when we're working with people who use Gaelic in their daily lives," said Angus.

"We're also able to reflect the Gaelic language in activities and tours throughout the museum, adapting it to suit the abilities of the group, whether they are learners or native speakers."

Although based at the museum in Lews, the heritage officers also run an outreach programme on other islands, working with groups and schools.

■ Visit www.lews-castle.co.uk or follow on Facebook for the latest events and workshops.

Events at the museum in August

August 5: Oraid nu Chriadh/Hebridean Pottery through the ages, 10.30-11am.
An informal discussion with Sue from Hebridean Pottery to learn more about the work that went into these historic objects and try your hand at elements of the craft involved. Book at the museum reception or call 01851 822746. Free event.

August 11: Bookbug at the museum from 11am.
Aimed at pre-school and parents, this 30-minute session is a fun way to spend time with your child singing songs, chanting rhymes and enjoying books and stories together. Free event.

August 19: Greim Beag Gàidhlig, 2-3.30pm.
A chance for learners and those who want to practice their language skills to meet An Tac an Teine/At the Fireside. Free event.

August 20 Swords and Shields, 2-4pm.
Make your own Hebridean sword and shield.

Do your own version of one of the Chessmen's shields or one of the ancient swords on display. Aimed at under 14s with under-8s welcome, accompanied by an adult. Cost £2. Please book in advance at the museum reception or call 01851 822746.

August 26: Exploring basket weaving with natural materials, 10am to noon.
A look at baskets that are on display and a chance to try your hand at some of the techniques involved. Make something to take home too with Dawn Susan of Hebridean Baskets. Aimed at adults, but open to all. Cost £2. Book at the museum reception or call 01851 822746.

August 26: Young Curators, 2-3.30pm.
Fortnightly meet-up for young people (ages 14 to 24) who want to get involved in museums. Boost your skills with opportunities to contribute to what is displayed at the museum. Free event.



The archive holds all sorts of useful information.

A searchable online database has been set up which contains details of archive collections held, not just in the Outer Hebrides by historical societies, organisations and businesses, but also of important archive collections relating to the islands held elsewhere in the UK. Find it here: ica-atom.tasglann.org.uk
■ Tasglann nan Eilean Siar Tel: 01851 822750; email: archives@cne-siar.gov.uk



HARRIS TWEED ISLE OF HARRIS

No visit to the Western Isles would be complete without a visit to Harris Tweed Isle of Harris, one of the largest stockists of the famous tweed fabric.



The family-run business is owned by Catherine Campbell, a name synonymous with the weaving tradition. She inherited her family's passion for the handwoven fabric made on the island from pure virgin wool and opened the Harris Tweed Isle of Harris shop in Tarbert in 2007.

Today, it is one of the largest stockists of Harris Tweed in the Western Isles, a fabric which is famous worldwide and a favourite choice of top designers. There is also an exhibition centre just six miles from the shop which shows a history of the tweed, from the traditional methods used to make it to the high-end fashion pieces which adorn the catwalks.

The shop itself is an Aladdin's Cave of Harris Tweed and Hebridean wool items from tea cosies to beautifully tailored Harris Tweed jackets, iPad

covers and hand-knitted wool socks. Next door, you'll find a warehouse stocking the largest choice of Harris Tweed available, with a rainbow of colours and designs to choose from. Weaving demonstrations are also available in the tweed store (bookings recommended).

Should you need help, the business' creative and knowledgeable team are there to help you visualise ideas and find that special Harris Tweed to match your needs.

Offering a typical warm Hebridean welcome they are always on hand to help, advise and answer your questions.

Harris Tweed Isle of Harris
Caberfeidh, Tarbert, Isle of Harris HS3 3DJ
Tel: 01859 502040/502505
Email: info@harristweedisleofharris.co.uk
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View old collections from local weavers and Mavion Campbell's Artefacts. A view into the traditional fabric being used in high fashion in a superb exhibition showcasing designer products.

Harris Tweed and Knitwear
Old School, Drinishader, Isle of Harris HS3 3DX
Tel: 01859 502040/502505
info@harristweedandknitwear.co.uk
www.harristweedandknitwear.co.uk

Natural Retreats



Imagine a wedding reception held in the magnificent splendour of the restored ballroom.



The ground floor rooms of the castle will offer a wonderful venue for corporate functions, events and weddings. Pictures: John MacLean Photography

THE hospitality and accommodation facilities at Lews Castle are being run by luxury travel company Natural Retreats, renowned for offering high-quality tourism experiences in some of the most dramatic natural locations in the world.

The spectacular ground floor at Lews Castle is now open to the public and, in addition to the café and shop for visitors in the glass-roofed courtyard, it will serve as a luxury wedding and conference venue.

The stunning castle and surrounding scenery makes Lews Castle an exceptional destination for any occasion, including corporate functions, events and weddings. The principal downstairs rooms, rich in

culture and grandeur and filled with natural light, will serve as fantastic hospitality and event spaces, with ground floor rooms to suit different party sizes.

Available for functions such as weddings, private parties and conferences, the experienced head chef, Stornoway-born David Graham and his team, can offer everything from a cold or hot buffet to a full wedding breakfast and the finest of dining experiences.

The menu is locally sourced wherever possible, taking full advantage of the wonderful fresh produce that's abundant in the islands.

Natural Retreats has also opened its popular Storehouse café brand in the

glass-roofed courtyard, conveniently located between the museum and the main rooms of the castle. The Storehouse is already known and loved at the company's other Scottish locations at CairnGorm Mountain and John O'Groats.

It offers a wide array of delicious favourites including breakfast, fresh baking, sandwiches, panini, soup and baked potatoes.

An inspired children's menu reflects the café's castle location, with menu choices that are sure to get little ones excited about their food.

For those looking for a bit of retail therapy, or to pick up a souvenir of their visit, the on-site Outfitters shop is well stocked

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A new series charting the redevelopment of the Lews Castle building and the construction of the new Museum.



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Fittings have been chosen to suit the historic setting.



The Storehouse café in the glass-roofed courtyard will offer a wide choice of favourites, including breakfast, fresh baking, lunch and an exciting children's menu. Below left: Some of the scrumptious offerings.

with gifts, souvenirs, local crafts and clothing. Matthew Spence, founder of Natural Retreats, said: "We are so excited to have opened the doors at our latest retreat on the Isle of Lewis.

"Lews Castle is a stunning addition to the Natural Retreats portfolio and we are privileged to be part of the next chapter in the history of such an iconic building.

"When we opened our first site in the Yorkshire Dales back in 2006, our ambition was to allow people to experience luxurious accommodation in breathtaking locations – and Lews Castle will deliver every bit of that amazing experience.

"Whether you're a visitor looking for a delicious lunch, lovingly made with local produce, or an eager explorer searching for a stunning base to experience the island, Lews Castle offers something for everyone.

"We are proud to attract even more people to this spectacular corner of the British Isles and showcase all that the Outer Hebrides can offer visitors."

Opening times

The Storehouse and Outfitters:

9.30am – 6pm daily

Natural Retreats

T: 01625 416 430

E: infonaturalretreats.com

www.naturalretreats.com



The Outfitters shop is receiving new stock daily and will offer gifts, souvenirs, local crafts and clothing.

Luxury finish to match setting

SCHEDULED to open towards the end of this year, the accommodation at Lews Castle will be finished to a luxurious standard to match its spectacular setting.

Guests can choose from spacious ensuite rooms or deluxe suites – most with dramatic sea views of the Minch, and on a clear day the Scottish mainland.

With 23 rooms and suites of varying sizes, the clever design means sections and rooms can be locked off to create privacy for almost any configuration of guests.

This allows the accommodation to suit everyone, from families, couples and groups of friends to corporate teams or wedding parties.

Background to Natural Retreats

NATURAL Retreats was founded in 2006 by Matthew Spence, who wanted people to create memories in nature like the ones he had as a child visiting Yellowstone National Park.

Matthew developed the first location with some luxury lodges on his family farm in the Yorkshire Dales.

Ten years on, Natural Retreats is a unique travel and leisure company spanning over 30 destinations in the United States and Europe.

Matthew and his team are passionate about giving people the chance to discover some of the world's most beautiful natural settings in homes and resorts.

As with every destination, sustainability is a core feature of Natural Retreats' Lews Castle operation.

It uses local employment and supply chains and, most importantly, sustainable tourism to make significant economic contributions to the community.

Natural Retreats will create at least 25 new jobs at the venue, many of which have already been taken up by islanders.

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Skye Property Centre
www.skyepropertycentre.co.uk



This exciting new museum and archive in the leafy grounds of Lews Castle opened to the public on 14 July 2016. The museum explains life in the Outer Hebrides from prehistory to the present with a range of Gaelic-led exhibitions including significant archaeological finds from National Museum Scotland. Six of the Lewis Chessmen return to the island of their discovery from the British Museum to take their place as the centrepiece exhibits in a new building inspired by the Castle's former glasshouses.

A dramatic video projection takes visitors on a journey across the islands in a series of clips filmed day and night throughout the year from the north of Lewis all the way to Barra. Inside Lews Castle the ground floor has been magnificently restored to its former gothic revival glory

including ornate plaster ceilings and a fabulous 19th century mural in the Morning Room. To complete the experience, visitors can enjoy the Natural Retreats Storehouse Café and Outfitters Shop in the dramatic glass-roofed courtyard.

The Project has been funded by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Historic Environment Scotland, The Scottish Government, the European Regional Development Fund and Bord na Gaidhlig.

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