

OPEN LETTER

TO EVERYONE INTERESTED IN THE HERITAGE OF THE NORTH TYNE AND REDE VALLEYS FROM THE TRUSTEES OF THE HERITAGE CENTRE AT BELLINGHAM

The Trustees of the Heritage Centre at Bellingham are pleased to announce that the issues surrounding our new lease have now been satisfactorily resolved. This enables us to hold our delayed Annual General Meeting. The AGM will take place on **Wednesday 24 February, at the Methodist United Reformed Church (MURC) hall in Bellingham, starting at 7.30 pm.**

This is a crucial meeting, so we hope that everyone interested in the Heritage Centre's future will be able to attend. The AGM's main purpose is to elect a new Executive Committee able to take on the running of the Heritage Centre for the 2016 season and beyond.

From tiny beginnings at Shellcroft (now "New Horizons") in Bellingham, to the lease of purpose-adapted premises in Station Yard, the Heritage Centre has expanded considerably its collections and visitor offer over the past ten years. It showcases fascinating local heritage artefacts; stages interesting and varied temporary exhibitions; licenses a popular tea-carriage and benefits from a helpful on-site Tourist Information Centre. The Heritage Centre is now a respected member of the Museums' Association, and has been recognised by the Arts Council of England as an accredited museum, performing to the same quality standards as other regional and national museums. It receives excellent reviews from VAQAS, TripAdvisor and other associations. On its twentieth anniversary in 2014, it won the award for "The Best Volunteer-Run Museum in the North-East for 2014", an accolade which would have made its founder, a remarkable lady called Dorothy Bell, very proud.

During their term of office, the current Trustees have worked hard to maintain standards and current functions, while continuing to renew, modernise and upgrade the Heritage Centre's collections, care regime and operability. Sadly, the volunteer workforce which is its main asset and keeps it running so well, has dwindled alarmingly over time. Successive appeals for more volunteers through personal approaches, newspaper articles, website and Facebook invitations, have resulted in a very small number of new Museum Guides and just one new Trustee.

In 2014, three Trustees on the Committee resigned: the Chair and Treasurer at the AGM, and the Secretary in June of that year. Since no-one came forward to take their place, they generously volunteered to continue in service and have done so up to now. In 2015, a further Trustee stepped down, but luckily the new Treasurer then volunteered to become a Trustee. The current Trustees have always hoped that new volunteers would come forward. But the grim reality is that this simply has not happened, despite village rumours that many people are waiting in the wings. The situation at present is that at the forthcoming AGM, five of the current Committee's Trustees have firmly indicated that they do not wish to stand again.

Because of the rapid growth in the Centre's administration over the past five years, the Arts Council has advised us that our Committee should ideally number between ten and twelve officers, so that the various responsibilities of what has become a successful, thriving business can be shared equitably. But currently just seven Trustees manage between them the roles of Chair, Minuting Secretary, Membership Secretary, Curatorial/Accessions Officer, Temporary Exhibitions Officer, Advertising and Publicity Officer, Newsletter Editor, Legal Officer, Events Manager, Website/Facebook Manager, General Administrative Officer and Maintenance/Caretaking Officer. This situation cannot go on indefinitely and the Heritage Centre is urgently in need of the required number of skilled and willing people, capable of taking on management responsibilities. None of these responsibilities is onerous in its own right and, if shared, would equate to just a few days per month per Trustee. Neither is a specialist knowledge of history or heritage necessary for most of the administrative tasks specified above.

OPEN LETTER CONTINUED

Over the past two years, the current Trustees have explored a number of ways to keep the Heritage Centre viable and ensure its long-term, sustainable future. These have included getting specialist input from Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service and a further 'resilience' application to the Heritage Lottery Fund – all to no avail. Subsequently, the Charity Commissioners advised investigating the possibility of joining forces with another museum or museum group, to pool important resources because many other volunteer museums face the same problems as we do. Following a meeting with our members in the winter of 2014 in which this matter was discussed, the Trustees have followed this advice. During 2014 and 2015, favourable discussions with the Woodhorn Trust resulted in an offer to go into partnership with them while still maintaining our volunteer status, and have given real hope for the future. This would appear to be a good way forward, giving the Centre the vital back-of-house support urgently needed, while still maintaining a volunteer group of Museum Guides and a working Committee for day-to-day decisions.

However, it would be entirely inappropriate for such an important merger decision to be taken by the current Committee, which is standing down at the February AGM. That decision obviously rests with the entire membership of the Heritage Centre, which by default includes all members of the North Tyne and Redesdale communities interested in our heritage. The future of the Heritage Centre should therefore be discussed and decided at an extraordinary general meeting to be convened by those Trustees on the newly elected Committee.

In conclusion, the current Trustees ask that the people of North Tynedale and Redesdale consider the serious implications for the Heritage Centre if sufficient skilled new Trustees do not come forward to manage it. If the Centre is forced to close, its collections will have to be disposed of in accordance with strict procedures laid down by the Arts Council. Its assets will have to be disposed of in accordance with the Charity Commission's guidelines. The two railway carriages which belong to the Centre's collection of artefacts will have to be disposed of in accordance with the Heritage Lottery's legal requirements.

This will inevitably result in the loss of a key tourist attraction in an area which has a limited visitor offer; the loss of a popular tea-carriage and catering outlet with a unique selling point; the loss of a popular village amenity for locals; the severance of a key relationship with the Bellingham TIC, and of course, the loss of important revenue for the North Tyne & Redesdale Partnership and for the area as a whole.

Therefore, the current Trustees feel that now is the opportune time to address this open letter to the people of the North Tyne and Rede Valleys. We strongly emphasise the importance of the forthcoming AGM for everyone interested in preserving our unique heritage and preventing the loss of a valuable local and tourist amenity. Skilled people are urgently needed to form a new Committee of Trustees and we urge you to come forward.

We cannot afford to be complacent, because if this amenity is forced to close down, then it is lost forever to the region.

THE FUTURE OF THE HERITAGE CENTRE RESTS WITH YOU!

Sunday, February 7, 2016