



**A COMMISSION TO DEVELOP THE OVER-ARCHING  
INTERPRETATION NARRATIVE AND DELIVERY MECHANISMS FOR REDHOUSE,  
FORMALLY THE OLD TOWN HALL, MERTHYR TYDFIL**

**To provide a thoroughly researched, accessible, engaging and resonant heritage story to set in context the role of the Old Town Hall in the wider Merthyr Tydfil story, its critical place within the Industrial Revolution and the town's subsequent social and political evolution within the national consciousness of Wales.**

**To create a vital interpretation experience to compliment the creative programme at REDHOUSE, an arts complex situated at the heart of Merthyr Tydfil in the former Town Hall, a magnificent French Renaissance-style civic centre built in 1896.**

**BACKGROUND**

The Old Town Hall is an iconic building in the centre of Merthyr Tydfil and has a remarkable history in the evolution of the town: it was the site of the nationally celebrated and politically explosive *Merthyr Uprising* of 1831 which cemented the legend of Dic Penderyn; Kier Hardie, the first independent labour MP, made his famous parliamentary acceptance speech from the town hall balcony; and many major figures from across the political and cultural spectrum have assembled in this civic building at key moments in the building's illustrious history.

As a landmark building, both within the town – and the wider national consciousness of Wales – the Old Town Hall has recently been subject to a major, publicly-funded, £8M restoration programme destined to transform the imposing building from an erstwhile civic building into a contemporary arts and creative enterprise centre.

This capital development programme, coupled with major strategic town centre regeneration and investment, represents a step change in fortunes for the local community; a community beleaguered by a combination of long term economic austerity and an historical 'burden of representation', borne out of a rich iron and steel heritage that defined the town for decades until its eventual and catastrophic post-industrial decline.

The Old Town Hall, in its new guise as REDHOUSE, will harness the radical industrial and political story of Merthyr as a fundamental driver for its wider public engagement programme. This programme will be articulated through a portfolio of permanent heritage displays and interactive features, coupled with a series of free-standing and interlinked arts activities including: theatrical performances, visual arts exhibitions, music events, and the spoken and written word. Across all platforms the emphasis will be on challenging, thoughtful and life-enhancing debate and spectacle. Above all, the telling of the Town Hall and wider Merthyr Tydfil historical experience must provide inspiration, opportunity and succour for the much-maligned people of the town today.

**TIME LINE**

The renovation and refurbishment of the Grade II\* listed building is set for completion in July 2013, and while a number of creative businesses and performing & media arts students from Merthyr Tydfil College (an anchor tenant of REDHOUSE) will take up residence in September 2013, the building will be officially opened to the public on **St. David's Day, 1st March 2014.**

REDHOUSE is seeking to engage outstanding interpretation/heritage destination consultants & designers to provide the conceptual framework and mechanisms that will articulate the critical texts and thematic threads behind the Old Town Hall story.

## THE OPERATING CONTEXT

REDHOUSE, via its interpretation and creative outputs, represents a radical new departure for the people in the immediate area; a community that has had little access locally to participate in a broad range of arts-related activity at first hand in the recent past. From the outset, the heritage interpretation and creative programme, across all media and platforms, will seek to provide models of engagement which are challenging but also sufficiently grounded in a visual and verbal language that is accessible and inspiring.

## THE PHYSICAL INTERPRETATION ENVIRONMENT

REDHOUSE occupies a relatively spacious footprint and the expansive circulation spaces – which equate to approximately 20% of the building – offer a unique environment in which to roll out interpretation, in addition to a pivotal space dedicated to heritage and interactive interpretation.

In this context, the realisation of the interpretation programme requires significant creative imagination to effectively weave its various strands into the fabric of the building: with the nucleus of the interpretation programme emanating from the intimate Kier Hardie Room and then extended across the prominent public circulation spaces.

At the same time, the over-arching interpretation narrative/s will play off against two specific REDHOUSE heritage projects, *Heroes & Villains* and *Reflections*. As such, the environments available to roll out the interpretation programme are effectively made up of:

- **The Kier Hardie Room**

This particular space in the building – with its rich historical associations – will become the hub of heritage interpretation and information, albeit largely screen-based. It is anticipated that a number of interactive computer terminals will be complimented by wall-based graphics and other information display formats, where appropriate. This dedicated space will be a catalyst for contextualising the importance of the Old Town Hall, what it symbolised for Merthyr Tydfil, the famous and infamous people associated with it, its painful demise and its phoenix-like rebirth in its guise as REDHOUSE.

The public will access this room as 'a heritage experience of self exploration', supported by extended textual information and access to further research facilities. It is anticipated that a central feature in this room will be the original Magistrates Chair – which graced the Old Town Hall Magistrates Court – and which will be audio-linked to relay the *Reflections* stories.

Furthermore, visitors will be encouraged to participate in a number of inter-linked heritage workshops, of various durations, tailor-made to focus on a variety of themes that underpin the socio-political and cultural axis on which the Old Town Hall evolved. The appointed Consultants will be responsible for developing the educational resource packs for a range of users, including curriculum-linked handbooks for school groups and other published material for community organisations and special interest groups – and members of the general public. An indicative programme of workshop themes is set out in the brief after this section.

- **REDHOUSE Circulation Spaces**

The circulation spaces – which equate to circa 150 linear metres of varied hanging space – offer the potential to present a range of wall-based or mural-format works, display cabinets and interactive/audio-visual formats. These two spaces, which circle the glazed internal courtyard, on the two main floors of the building, are equipped with circa 20 power and data outlets to facilitate the AV presentation, in either screen-based or projection formats.

- **First Floor Landing Display Vitrines**

A number of large-scale vitrines, equipped with power and data, will be situated on the landing adjacent to the Kier Hardie Room, and while a number of these will be used periodically to present temporary displays of curated objects, time-based imagery and artefacts, there is scope for the permanent interpretation programme to utilise these exhibiting/presentation spaces to add critical mass to the heritage interpretation offer.

- **Ground Floor Display Wall Reveals**

Similarly, 4 large glazed display reveals that are inset into the walls in the entrance hall outside the REDHOUSE art gallery provide a unique presentation environment for shallow objects, two-dimensional artefacts and various information panels.

- ***Heroes & Villains* in REDHOUSE Café & Circulation Spaces**

*Heroes & Villains* is a major heritage initiative, unique to REDHOUSE. Over 50 portraits of the great and good – and perhaps not so good – who have contributed over centuries to Merthyr

Tydfil's illustrious, but troubled, history loom large in the Café/Bar in the form of ceramic roundels. This study in portraiture is an open-ended voyage of discovery into the personalities who have shaped Merthyr's past and those who will influence its future, with new names being added to the pantheon and rolled out as portraits in the circulation spaces, as and when appropriate. The appointed Consultants will have to consider carefully how this family of portraits will dovetail with the permanent displays, physically and conceptually.

- **Reflections in the Kier Hardy Room & Circulation Spaces**

*Reflections* is an audio and digital stories archive that features some of the voices of individuals who share their vivid past and present experiences of the building; whether as elected representatives, council workers, journalists, community activists or other interested members of the public who have fond and evocative memories of a building that played such a seminal role in the lives of the town's citizens.



## INDICATIVE WORKSHOP/RESOURCE PACK THEMES

- **Decision Making: Urban Planning & Development**  
It took 40 years of meetings and discussions to realise Merthyr Town Hall. This workshop could explore the political and pragmatic decision-making processes that underpinned the development of the Town Hall; looking at the planning activities, using historical documentation such as newspaper articles, key people, funding, timelines and old town maps; contextual references that explore and review the momentous decision to build the Town Hall, and what the building meant and symbolised for Merthyr Tydfil.
- **Structural Development of Local Government**  
From small rural town to urban Incorporation: from Board of Health to Urban District Council to County Borough Council: how did this burgeoning status evolve against the backdrop of the political development of regional towns in the wider Wales? And what were the political forces at work that helped to secure Merthyr Tydfil's status as a municipal location in Wales?
- **The Great Coal Strike – No Celebratory Official Opening**  
The symbolic significance of refraining from having an official opening in 1898 was in direct contrast to the laying of the foundation stones ceremony some years previously. The great

coal strike had a profound impact on the mood of the people and forced the council mandarins to cancel an official opening of the Town Hall; this extraordinary state of affairs, at a very turbulent time in Merthyr's history, offers a rich fabric in which to weave a vivid narrative and explore, via workshops, the political and social imperatives that underpinned this watershed moment.

- **Design – Architectural Trail**

The architect for the Old Town Hall, A.E. Johnson was a prolific creator of civic spaces in Wales. This workshop could address the design process; looking at the architect's original drawings and illustrations (200 of which were recently discovered in Dowlais Library and some of which will be displayed as artefacts in REDHOUSE). What were his inspirations and over-riding vision, and what was happening architecturally in the rest of the world? What, and where, are other examples of his design work? Such as the Merthyr Tydfil Infirmary, Dowlais Church, Dowlais Library and the first Masonic Temple in Merthyr Tydfil. How does the Old Town Hall relate to and compare aesthetically with the new buildings in Merthyr Tydfil? Not least the new Civic Centre, which superseded and eclipsed the function of the Old Town Hall.

- **Decorative Features - Symbolism**

Many opportunities exist to develop hands-on heritage workshops on the distinct decorative features present in the Old Town Hall, their significance and the Art Nouveau influence that was brought to bear. Including **the Doulton tiles** – containing the rich symbols of angels; fleur de lys, oak leaves, etc.; **the entrance hall mosaic** – the iconic red dragon with the inscription, '*Y Ddriag Goch A Ddyry Cychwyn*', loosely translated as '*The Red Dragon Inspires Action!*'; **the leaded lights in the windows** – fleur de lys, oak leaves, vessels, vines, ropes; **the carved/ embossed inscriptions on the stairs & ceilings** – scrolls, circles within octagrams and the predominant knights templar references. How many decorative features can visitors/ children find? What are their Masonic or civic relevance? Opportunities present themselves to record these features visually and explore how they have been fashioned and the craftsmanship that was used to install them.

- **Welsh Language & Old Town Hall Mosaic**

It is significant, and hugely symbolic, that the inscription on the iconic mosaic gracing the floor of the entrance hall is rendered exclusively in the medium of Welsh: '*Y Ddriag Goch A Ddyry Cychwyn*'. This is indicative of the influence of the Welsh language in Merthyr at the time of the building's opening, which raises many cultural and political questions about the demise of Welsh language use amongst the town's citizens during the 20th Century. Workshops could effectively trace the fortunes of the language, examine the reasons for its decline and chart its revival in contemporary Merthyr.

- **Masonic Connections & the Politics of Patronage**

It is no coincidence that E. A. Johnson was also the architect for the first Masonic Temple in Merthyr Tydfil, built in 1881. He became a mason in November 1881, aged 26, and not unsurprisingly, embedded many Masonic symbols in the architectural design and decorative features of the building. There is a strong history in the development of Merthyr Tydfil of Masonic influence on the town, which provides rich material for investigating the political circumstances and fraternity of this largely clandestine institution.

- **Heritage Building Skills**

The nature of the fabric of the Old Town Hall offers great potential for a series of practical workshops reviving heritage building skills: looking at the key skills used to fabricate the building, for instance, the processes used to produce the terracotta and bricks, the hair plaster mouldings, lincrusta ceilings, the carvings, stained glass and leaded lights, the prints and the tiles; exploring how they were originally made and how they have been restored and the underlying processes and techniques. A number of courses are possible, ranging from daylong taster workshops to more long-term structured delivery of accredited heritage skill programmes.

- **Migration**

Workshops exploring how the community of Merthyr Tydfil has been built essentially upon people migrating to the town, from the earliest roots: Romans, Normans, and more recently Irish, English, Spanish and Italian fortune-seekers. This heritage theme could explore the impact that this eclectic migration had on the cultural character of the town and how the expanding population was a significant factor in the Town's development.

- **Crime, Retribution & the Legal Process**

The role of the Old Town Hall as a centre of justice is not insignificant, and a workshop that reflects on the notoriety of the building's holding cells via court records could provide a

powerful framework for exploring the nature, mechanisms and delivery of justice. This theme could look at the criminal demographic within the town, not least during its Wild West 'coal rush' phase, the punitive sentencing that took place and its severity in relation to today's sentencing. It could explore criminals of note that may have, however briefly passed through the courts, for example John Lewis, the last man to be hung in Britain who was given a posthumous pardon?

○ **Time Capsules**

A time capsule was reportedly placed in the building prior to completion, containing a range of Merthyr Tydfil memorabilia from the late Nineteenth Century. While this time capsule has not been located during the restoration phase, its subject and contents offers a topical line of enquiry about the nature of secreting objects and artefacts for posterity. A workshop could explore the time capsule phenomenon and the communal desire to encapsulate and record history; personal time capsules can be fashioned and potentially buried, to be uncovered in the future; analysing what we consider this activity to secrete real objects potent, and why we feel this has importance for future generations.

It is anticipated that this indicative programme will be delivered as a themed outreach option for formal and non-formal education contexts and provide professional training events for teachers, lecturers and youth leaders who may then disseminate and extend the heritage narratives of the Old Town Hall within a wider educational and life-long learning environment.

### **DISPLAY & INTERACTIVE MEDIA**

Given the limited amount of physical space available to delivery interpretation, the appointed Consultants will be expected to use a broad range of imaginative graphics, time-based media, published material and objects to articulate – and percolate – the multiple histories and stories in and around the Old Town Hall.

There will be ample opportunity to showcase examples of *agit prop* and mainstream media depictions and narratives which characterise some of the key historical and cultural moments of the town; drawing on the wealth of material from popular culture that helped to define common perceptions about the growth, eventual demise of the town and its over-arching identity.

As the building is substantially wired with power and data points throughout, the use of social media and other contemporary modes of communication can be meaningfully adopted, where appropriate, to further exploit the interactive potential of the interpretation offer.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS & OPPORTUNITIES**

REDHOUSE is not subject to government indemnity in relation to exhibited material, and therefore the Consultants will have to give careful consideration to the nature and provenance of any exhibits and their respective values, when formulating an artefact-based interpretation strategy.

Nonetheless, within reason, original artefacts can be displayed in the relatively secure display environments, such as the freestanding display vitrines & glazed recesses in wall reveals.

As the wider circulation spaces function as more fluid hanging environments with no formal invigilation, care will have to be taken in selecting exhibits (which of course will also take the form of reproductions) for presentation in these less controlled spaces.

The Consultants may also identify other spaces/places within REDHOUSE, which could meaningfully be used to extend the reach of the exhibition, permeating the building and creating multiple dialogues across spaces.

### **REDHOUSE & ACCESSIBILITY**

In line with the Disability Discrimination Act to reflect best practice and ensure that visitors of all abilities are able to enjoy their experience of the Old Town Hall story, the following elements will need to be sensitively taken in to consideration:

- The use of pictures instead of text where this is possible, assisting people with learning difficulties or lacking basic skills.
- The use of audio facilities, 'Braille' or talking labels, helping people with severely impaired sight and much younger people.

- Recognising the importance of seating, and considering possibilities to enable people to undertake a 'virtual tour' of the site to assist those with mobility difficulties.
- On interpretative panels, ensuring that introductory text is at least 48pt and body text no smaller than 18pt.
- Ensuring that there is good colour and brightness contrast between text and its background. Avoiding too much red & green and green & blue may help people who are colour blind, as will the use of shapes & numbers to back up the use of colour coded keys.
- Positioning graphic interpretive panels at a height and angle that enables people in wheelchairs to see them easily.
- Avoiding reflective surfaces and ensuring internal displays are adequately lit.
- The provision of induction loops at staffed information points, assisting those who are hard of hearing.

### **SCOPE OF CONCEPT PLANNING & DESIGN DEVELOPMENT COMPONENTS**

The successful Consultants will be expected to deliver a complete programme of outputs across the subject areas outlined below – under the 5 interlinked headings; where Consultants are unable to deliver skills or expertise in specific areas, they will be expected to indicate explicitly which sub-contractors they wish to commission to support their bid, and provide a detailed narrative outlining their appropriateness for this particular project and the provenance of those satellite companies or individuals. They will also be expected to actively engage local historians and other expertise, where appropriate, in developing and authenticating the interpretation offer.

It is also a condition of this contract that a full bilingual (Welsh) translation is provided for all of the public-facing interpretation outputs, and Consultants will need to demonstrate that they can provide this service, understand the impact that dual texts have on the design requirement and the logistical complexities that arise with this hybrid approach.

#### **Narrative Research & Development**

- Content mapping & conceptual framework
- Interpretive theme strategy
- Identifying & researching key stories, themes and sub-themes
- Scripting/copywriting & proofing
- Research & writing of educational resource packs/handbook material
- Image, artefact and memorabilia research & selection
- Cataloguing & captioning

#### **Public Interactivity**

- Planning space & content
- Spatial design & visitor flow

#### **Design**

- Graphic scheme: design of space & interpretation
- Graphic design & artwork
- Web & interactive design
- Management of graphic production
- Management of graphic installation on site

#### **Production**

- Object/artefact acquisition & placement
- Audio-visual installation, including animations & interpretive time-based presentations
- Touch-screen programming of audio-visual content
- Display arrangement & captioning
- Mounting & display case procurement & placement
- Ambient lighting production

#### **Pre & Post Production**

- Liaising with architects, builders & sub-contractors
- Allocating & prioritising budgets to various and most appropriate delivery mechanisms
- Reporting to stakeholders & presenting to project steering group

## APPLICATION PROCESS

In the first instance, applicants are invited to submit a detailed account of their experience to date in research, managing and delivering complex projects of this nature.

Based on the information provided in this brief, and drawing on themes from the Conservation Management Plan for the Old Town Hall (attached) – coupled with their own independent research of this project – interested applicants are required to set out their thinking, specifically taking account of the sentiment embodied in the brief and the approach that they might speculatively use to address this unique context.

It goes without saying that extensive knowledge and familiarity with the cultural politics and linguistic tradition of Wales, and an awareness of the seminal role that steel and coal production played in the development of the industrial heritage of the country, will be a distinct advantage in informing this commission, but that does not preclude submissions from interested parties who can demonstrate a track record in delivering interpretation narratives with gritty social agendas and a willingness to invest considerable time researching the overriding historical and political imperatives.

Above all, applicants must possess an astute ability to communicate complex, and sometimes contentious ideas, in an authoritative but accessible way to reach a range of audiences.



Applicants should submit a covering letter with company profile or curriculum vitae and a **maximum** of 4 pages of A4 (no less than 10/11pt) setting out the conceptual thinking and methodology they would bring to bear in tackling a complex exhibition of this nature and its associated outputs.

Short-listed applicants will then be invited to visit the Old Town Hall site during the latter part of the restoration phase to familiarise themselves with the extent and nature of the project and the physical nuances of the building. They will then be invited to submit a more detailed proposal setting out the strategies that they would chose to adopt to deliver the interpretation portfolio, substantiated with a full breakdown of fees and costs to implement delivery.

The REDHOUSE team will look favourably on submissions that can bring 'added value' to the process by way of suggested legacies that may sustain and enhance the development of the creative and interpretation programme of REDHOUSE in the longer term.

**SUBMISSION DATE**

Expressions of Interest must be received by 17.00 on **Friday 24th May 2013** and marked for the attention of:

Christopher Coppock  
Project Development Manager  
REDHOUSE (Old Town Hall · Hen Neuadd y Dref)  
c/o Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association  
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For further information the Project Development Manager can be contacted on (01685) 352 816.

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**REDHOUSE (Old Town Hall · Hen Neuadd y Dref) IS A MERTHYR TYDFIL HOUSING ASSOCIATION COMMUNITY REGENERATION INITIATIVE.**