

**EUROPEAN FUNDING ENQUIRY CONDUCTED BY THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY FOR WALES FEBRUARY 2010**

EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY SWANSEA ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

THE MARINA TOWER OBSERVATORY, THE PROMENADE, SWANSEA

SUMMARY

- The Marina Tower Observatory was built with the assistance of a 50% European Regional development grant in the 1990s
- Swansea Astronomical Society (SAS) operated the Tower from 1993 to 2009 with the aid of a peppercorn rent and subsidies towards utilities under a lease agreement with the Council of the City and County of Swansea
- New lease proposed by the City and County of Swansea was for the rent to increase incrementally to £2,000 per annum over 10 years and no subsidies; this was declined by the Society which is a registered charity, as the new charges over the 10 year period would have been in the region of £40,000 over the 10 year period – that is at today's prices
- SAS ceased its activities and events for the public and schools in October 2009
- City and County of Swansea states its intention to “dispose of the property on the open market” – see copy of enclosed letter of 16 December 2009

ISSUE

Is it within the conditions of European funding for such subsidised public properties to be disposed of on the open market?

DETAILED EVIDENCE

INTRODUCTION

The Tower is formally known as the “Tower of the Ecliptic” and this appears on a plaque imposed on the landward side of the building.

*“Towers in history have been associated with defence, religion, or as places of learning. The Tower of the Winds at Athens was erected for measuring time. More recently, the Einstein Tower at Potsdam was a laboratory and observatory. It is the latter function which justifies the “Tower of the Ecliptic”. As a symbol of ascent and vigilance, the tower refers in form to the architecture of the coastline and to the many lighthouses which populate the edge of the island, structures whose sole purpose is an expression of good intentions. Amid the boundless space of sea and beach, the tower provides a focal point in the great sweep of Swansea Bay, from where it becomes a conscious statement of the City's edge. The upper levels function as a viewing gallery, conservatory and exhibition room. Intermediate levels contain workshops and beach rescue station. At Promenade level there is an ice cream parlour, directly accessible from the beach. Swansea Astronomical Society will equip the Observatory with a 360mm reflecting telescope and a Coelostat/Solar Telescope. **The City Council gratefully recognises the 50% grant made available for the tower by the European Regional Development Fund**”.*

Quote from “Swansea Maritime Quarter in progress” Director of Development
Swansea City Council 1988 ISBN 0 946001 15 4
(please note - **bold** used to highlight the funding)

In the event the workshops, beach rescue station and ice cream parlour did not materialise.

“The Tower of the Ecliptic

*This is the name given to the Public Observatory built by the City Council, **with the aid of a 50% grant, made available by the European regional Development Fund.***

The Tower acts as both a focal point for the grand sweep of the Swansea Bay and is a visible statement of the City’s edge. Both landmark and functional structure, it rests on an octagonal plinth lapped (and occasionally lashed) by the sea. The upper levels act as a viewing gallery and observatory, the latter equipped with a 500mm reflecting telescope, the largest in Wales”.

(please note - **bold** used to highlight the funding)

Quote from “Swansea maritime redevelopment : Planning strategy” (1975 uploaded 2 October 2006) see www.swanseamarina.org.uk /home page/click on search and insert “observatory” then click on “development projects” and scroll down to “The Tower of the Ecliptic”

Please note - It is understood that this reference has now been removed frm the website

As can be seen from these quotes the Tower was half funded by European money.

OPERATION 1993 to 2009

Swansea Astronomical Society has been formally involved with the Tower since 1993 but was in fact involved for several years before during protracted discussions with the then Swansea City Council relating to the lease for the building.

Below is an extract from the Society’s response in “City and County of Swansea Corporate Grants Funding Concessionary Lettings Application Form” submitted to the Council in February 2009 when negotiating a new lease for the Tower. This extract summarises the Society’s involvement.

- The Tower was completed by Swansea City Council in 1993 and officially opened by the then Lord Mayor on 24 September 1993
- The initial design for the Tower did not include a telescope as the original intention of the City Council was to have a “Terrestrial Observing Tower” (i.e. coin-in-slot telescopes); however SAS offered to provide a substantial astronomical telescope which was constructed by a member in 1992 and is the largest telescope in Wales – a feature of which Swansea can be justly proud; the Tower is unique in being the only one in to be built in Wales (and possibly the whole UK) as a public Observatory
- The Tower houses the largest indoor model of the Solar System in the UK which was originally made by the Art Dept of Penyrheol Comprehensive school and which was recently refurbished by SAS
- The Tower is a notable architectural feature as a unique purpose built building unsuitable for any other purpose
- The Tower’s location on Swansea’s promenade is a major prestigious asset for the City from the point of view of providing a tourist attraction for visitors and an education venue; as such it has become part of the City’s culture and heritage in keeping with the aim of Swansea becoming a distinctive European city by 2020

- Admission to the Tower is free reflecting the Welsh Assembly Government's policy of free access to Museums and places of educational interest
- SAS holds public open evenings in the winter months as part of its lease agreement to allow the public to view the night sky through the telescope; average attendance is 100 per session
- SAS voluntarily opens the Tower on 2 afternoons/week during the summer for tourists and other visitors to view the facilities and use a dedicated specialist Solar telescope to view the sun; visitors include many from overseas; average attendance is 70 per session
- SAS voluntarily runs a weekly schools programme during term time for Primary schools with a scripted production directly linked to Key Stage 2 curriculum where a minimum of 4 members are required to facilitate this. Between 2003 and 2008 160 such visits took place enabling over 1000 pupils and their teachers per academic year to have direct experience of science away from the classroom thus enhancing the curriculum and providing a centre of excellence for teaching and learning. No fee is charged for this but schools are invited to make a donation. Bookings for academic year 2009-10 have already been received

To date the above activities have been financed and enabled by SAS paying:

- A peppercorn rent as initially agreed with the Council with SAS providing the telescope now worth £36,000 in addition to providing 2 digital projectors and 4 computers required to operate the telescope and education programme

By SAS receiving:

- A grant from the Council to pay for/towards the electricity & water rates – currently £840pa – *costs for 2009 estimated to be at least £1,500*
- Voluntary donations from schools – *it is unlikely in the current economic climate that schools would be able to pay a going rate for their programme and it is understood that schools no longer receive income for trips and consequently pupils pay for these*
- Donations from visitors at open events
- Donations from organisations having SAS presentations

SAS's costs to maintain the Tower and its activities include:

- Upkeep of the telescope whose mirror currently requires re-aluminising at a cost of at least £750
- 4 x computers, 2 of which need to be replaced urgently
- 2 x powerpoint projectors which require regular updates
- Exhibition & display materials
- Interior maintenance - it is worth noting that in summer of 2008 members spent many hours and £800 upgrading the lecture facility
- Buildings insurance
- Public liability insurance
- Extensive library with many historical documents – *SAS is working with the Museum Service on the best way to archive & preserve these*
- Maintenance of a website with information for members, the public & schools; hits currently total over 250 per month

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately the Society has not been able to agree a new lease for the Tower. The Council wishes to charge an annual rental increased incrementally each year for the next 10 years and is not able to contribute towards the running costs for water and electricity. As a registered charity the Society cannot afford to pay these charges to maintain what is purely a **public** facility. The Society is in the process of removing all the fittings and fixtures from the building as per the lease conditions. It will vacate the Tower at the end of February 2010 whereby the **public** viewing and schools programme have ceased.

The Society however continues to exist as it has always run its own lecture programme at the University of Swansea and has a “members’ only” observatory on Gower.

COPY



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

Mrs Ann Spinks

Please ask for:
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E-Mail:
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HSR/PS

16th December 2009

Dear Mrs Spinks

Re:- Swansea Observatory

I refer to your letter dated 9th December 2009, and I agree that I said that I would get back to you in respect of the telescope at the Observatory.

We intend to dispose of the property on the open market with the telescope as part of the package. Should the Council not receive any interest from prospective purchasers involving the future use of the telescope I will then contact yourselves in order that you can approach others within your field to seek its relocation.

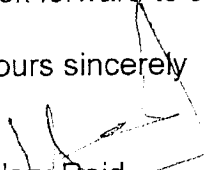
In order to achieve this in a satisfactory and effective way I will endeavour to carry out the marketing exercise whilst your organisation is in occupation and therefore you will very quickly hear from my colleague Mr Paul Jenkins who will be dealing directly with the disposal and will need to arrange to visit the building through yourselves in order to draw up sales details.

I know that at our meeting your organisation offered to co-operate in any way that would achieve the safeguarding of the telescope, both in terms of its current situation and its future use, and I remain grateful to you for that offer.

I note that you are happy to proceed with the works outlined in my earlier letter and I thank you for that.

I would suggest that we meet early in January to discuss any issues which may arise and I look forward to seeing you then.

Yours sincerely


Hilary Reid
For and on behalf of
Head of Corporate Property & Asset Management

CORPORATE PROPERTY/EIDDO CORFFORAETHOL

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