

Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	A particular example of repair/conservation carried out effectively an organisation
Name of project/group:	Dudley Zoo Tecton project
Location:	West Midlands
Duration (if applicable):	

Short description of project:

Dudley Zoo, West Midlands, was founded in 1937. The architects chosen to design the Dudley Zoo in the 1930s were renowned Modernists, led by Russian-born Berthold Lubetkin, who called themselves 'The Tecton Group'. They were so-named because of their revolutionary new design of building, incorporating reinforced concrete, called Tecton.

The aim of the design of the buildings at Dudley Zoo was to protect the welfare of the animals while meeting visitors' demands for a clear view from a safe position.

Dudley Zoological Gardens (DZG) is now home to some of the rarest animals in the world and the site attracts more than 200,000 visitors a year. Lying within a conservation area incorporating the 11th century Dudley Castle, the Zoo has the world's largest collection of iconic internationally significant Tecton buildings. It is the only collection of interrelated Tecton designs in Britain and one of few remaining throughout Europe.

The project was awarded £875,800 under HLF's Heritage Grants programme in June 2012. It incorporates the repair, renovation and interpretation of four of the site's 12 'Tecton' structures, many of which are listed in their own right (seven are listed at Grade II and five at Grade II*). The Tecton Group, led by Russian-born architect Berthold Lubetkin, designed the 12 solid cement buildings which follow the natural curves of their surroundings. They are intended to harmonise with the area's hills and wooded areas. The structures include six animal enclosures, the Zoo entrance, two cafes, a restaurant and two kiosks, all located in the grounds of the Grade I listed Dudley Castle.

What would have happened without this project/group?

Without this project, the buildings would have continued to deteriorate and some may have become beyond repair. Their appearance would have detracted from the appeal of the zoo site, and there would have been a missed opportunity to learn about and develop techniques for the restoration of 20th century concrete structures.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

The works have brought parts of the site's historic fabric into better condition and have ensured they are maintained for future generations, with four Tecton structures and the chairlift being repaired and renovated. The project has allowed more people to learn about Tecton heritage through the interpretation provided as part of the project. It has also contributed to an improved sense of identity and community for local people through a very visible urban renaissance project in the heart of a town suffering from economic decline. The project has helped to increase visitor numbers to the site and in turn boost the local visitor economy by increased visitor spend through day and overnight visits. The project has also helped consolidate the Zoo's future as it is considered to be a crucial feature in the commercial development of leisure and tourism in the Black Country.

Foreman Carlo di Ponio has developed techniques and expertise in concrete repair and trained two apprentices. Once the project finishes in 2016, the zoo will have skilled people available to continue the programme of concrete repair and maintenance. Before the end of the project, the zoo will host a conference about the heritage and the repairs.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

The project has initiated a programme of repair and maintenance of listed historic structures. The repair of the chairlift has been a major attraction for visitors. The work at the site has contributed to wider plans to promote the heritage, leisure and tourism attractions of Dudley. The people of Dudley and the staff of the zoo have learned about the value of the built heritage of the site.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges? Would anything be done differently?

Initially the capital works were to be contracted out. It was decided to bring them in-house and employ the foreman and apprentices directly. This has allowed the zoo greater control and flexibility over the costs and timing of the work and to retain staff who will continue working on repairs and maintenance.

What is the future for the case study?

The project is still under way. There is a substantial activities programme which includes a conference on the Tecton buildings and work with local groups and schools. Information about the restoration is available on the Dudley Zoo website (<http://www.dudleyzoo.org.uk/around-dzg/tectons>) and in a book published by the zoo.

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