

Expanding Denbighshire's Heritage Attraction at Ruthin Gaol



The Context

Ruthin Gaol represents a unique and intriguing heritage asset of national importance and is owned by Denbighshire County Council. Denbighshire County Council purchased the site in 1926.

The 1868 Pentonville prison block currently houses a heritage attraction (30%) and the County Archive (70%).

The Archive Service currently attracts approximately 800 visits per year while the Heritage Attraction attracts approximately 11,000, opening to the public April-September with pre-arranged group bookings only October-March.

The Gaol visitor attraction is rated Number 1 of Things to Do in Ruthin on TripAdvisor. Approx. 80% of visitors state they are visiting Ruthin specifically to see The Gaol museum. Feedback is generally very positive but many visitors comment that they would like to see the following:

- More of the building
- A play area
- More interactive experiences
- More to do outside
- A cafe
- Would like spend longer at the Gaol (current average visit time of just 2 hours)

A recent Cadwyn Clwyd funded Feasibility Study report reflected much of the customer feedback but also advised that the sense of arrival and signage be improved. It would benefit from the introduction of high tech interpretation/experiences (i.e. VR and AR), a much bigger retail offer, better site and regional marketing (also cited in the 2015 DC Research Economic Study).

The Heritage Team have researched the Gaol's history linked to WW2, it's use as a munition factory, the transportation of prisoners to America and Australia, the overcrowding of prisons and use of 'hulks' (docked ships) to house them, crime and poverty, Victorian punishment, capital punishment, prison and religion, children in prison, the industrial revolution and many more aspects of social history that are only partly (if at all) told within the current small Ruthin Gaol museum. With additional space, much more of this research can be put into practice with physical interpretation and new experiences.

The Opportunity

Denbighshire County Council, along with Flintshire County Council, are developing ambitious plans for a joint North East Wales Archive Service. The new joint service came into being during April of this year, initially located over 2 sites – Hawarden and Ruthin.

A National Lottery Heritage Fund bid is well underway that if successful, will help fund a new purpose-built and environmentally friendly archive centre in Mold, next to Theatr Clwyd. The bid is progressing well so far, with anecdotal feedback from the NLHF indicating that the bid is regarded as being within the top 3 in the UK. There is still a long way to go, but should the funding application be successful, the Archive Service will vacate Ruthin Gaol by 2025 and move to Mold.

The space vacated by the Archive Service presents a tremendous opportunity to create an expanded heritage destination at Ruthin Gaol, which would not only serve to safeguard the building for the long-term but to also increase visitor numbers, thereby growing the local economy.

The Gaol campus has the potential to be developed into a year-round all-weather attraction with a range of indoor and outdoor spaces and buildings which could be converted into offices, café, shop, education space and welcome space as well as investment in audio visual interpretation.

The Proposal – Expansion of Denbighshire’s Heritage Attraction at Ruthin Gaol

In consultation with staff and users, several ideas have been developed for creating an extended heritage attraction at Ruthin Gaol.

It’s expected that the following proposals would increase visitor numbers, from 11,000 to approx. 20,000 per year within 3 years. This compares to 800 visits that the archive service attracts.

The options laid out below will all deliver the following benefits:

- Generate increased income at the Gaol
- Increase footfall, spend and overnight stays in Ruthin
- Improve the local economy
- Expand the visitor season
- Create a permanent Ruthin town exhibition
- Provide space, events and activities for local residents
- Utilise empty space at Ruthin Gaol and secure its future
- Enable all museum artefacts to be available in one single location and free up much needed warehouse space for other services
- Attract new user groups, larger group bookings, coach trips and more schools
- Expand opportunities for volunteers
- Enhance the visitor experience through product development
- Increase accessibility for all
- Extend formal and lifelong learning provision and offer new wellbeing related activities for physical and mental health
- Enhance and Develop the Museum Collections

Changes to be made for 2025:

The following changes will be implemented and paid for from DCC service underspends.

As well as being affordable, it's believed the following changes will expand the heritage attraction and provide a truly memorable visitor attraction that will have a significant impact on visitor numbers and the local economy.

Capital costs have been provided by Denbighshire's Design Team. Equipment costs have been provided by Denbighshire's Heritage Service.

A large multi-function room

The creation of a dedicated multi-function room that can be used for schools, exhibitions and gatherings of large groups. Can also be used for events, room hire, parties, workshops, cinema nights, plays etc.

Immersive Cell Experiences

Use the vacated cells to expand the existing interpretation to include:

- 'children in prison' cell
- More cells telling the stories of interesting prisoners (the 'human story')
- Augmented reality and virtual reality cell(s)

The removal of the glass security screen.

The screen separating the Museum from the Archives will be removed, instantly expanding the visitor attraction, allowing visitors to experience more of the interpreted cells.

An outdoor 'Escaped prisoner' trail.

A detective trail to find the notorious escaped prisoner 'Coch Bach Y Bala' with lots of clues along the way. Takes visitors all around the outside of the Gaol.

Denbighshire's Heritage Collections

Bringing the collections from the DCC Corporate Store into Ruthin Gaol and storing them on the vacated racked cells and allowing room for displaying.

A dedicated area for Archives/Family History activity.

This area will be staffed by an Archivist, initially 1 day a week, and reviewed on a regular basis in order to ensure that resources meet demand

Play Area

Encourage movement, exploration, 'families playing together', wellbeing and education through play.

The cost of the capital works and equipment total £65k.