

News Release

Strictly under embargo until 7 January 2020.

Chief Executive of Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust to retire

After 19 years of exceptional service to Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, the Chief Executive, Bill Ferris OBE DL, will retire from this role later this year.

Trained as an accountant, Bill gained a 1st Class Honours Degree in Managerial and Administrative Studies. His involvement in the operational management and leadership of the heritage sector commenced in 1988 when he became the first Commercial Manager of the Yorkshire Mining Museum (now the National Museum of Coalmining for England). He went on to run a series of commercial projects for Heritage Projects Ltd and became Operations Director responsible for seven national projects with combined visitor projections in excess of 1m per annum.

His experience of maximising commercial return while delivering high operational standards from educational and landmark projects, especially those located in historic buildings, became a particular strength and led to him being appointed Chief Executive of Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust in December 2000.

When Bill arrived, the Trust was facing significant financial challenges and its reputation was at an all-time low. He replaced the original “living museum” concept of the Dockyard with a more “serious” museum/heritage approach and spearheaded the “preservation through re-use” strategy - a strategy that would ultimately lead to the long-term financial sustainability of the Trust on a revenue basis.

Over the past two decades Bill has led capital development projects totalling £47m and has secured more than £40m investment from external sources to support major projects. This has included the multi-award winning and runner up for the RIBA Stirling Prize for Architecture, “Command of the Oceans” project; No.1 Smithery – an “at risk” 19th Century Scheduled Ancient Monument now converted into a state of the art building and exhibition hall and most recently the Fitted Rigging House project, the last “challenging” building, which was officially opened in October 2018. With £8.2m investment, the completion of the Fitted Rigging House project has played a significant role in unlocking the long-term financial sustainability of the wider Historic Dockyard site.

These substantial preservation projects have transformed the once dilapidated, post-industrial, former Naval Base into a flourishing mixed-use heritage estate, at the heart of Medway’s regeneration.

Through a careful balance of commercial tenancy, tourism and residential, today the dockyard is home to a thriving community of 115 houses; over 110 businesses and organisations, including the University of Kent (and its 800 students); 190,000 visitors annually and it supports over 500 jobs; these combined activities generate in excess of £29m to the local economy each year.

Under Bill’s leadership, the Trust has won countless awards including RIBA South East Regional Award (2017); RIBA South East Conversation Award (2017); RIBA South East Building of the Year Award (2017); RIBA National Award (2017); Kent Excellence in Business Awards - Best Large Visitor Attraction (2017); Historic England Heritage Angel Award for Large Conservation Project (2018); two Visit England Gold Awards; Beautiful South Best Large Visitor Attraction (2011), Best Education Project – National Lottery Awards (2010) and shortlisted for the prestigious Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2017.

In recognition of his services to heritage Bill was appointed Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2011 and made a Deputy Lieutenant of Kent in January 2016.

Bill also currently holds the positions of Deputy Chair of the London & South Committee, National Lottery Heritage Fund; Chairman of the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) Biffa Award History Makers Programme and Chairman of Go to Places. He is also on the Boards of Visit Kent and London Transport Museum; a Champion for Medway City of Culture; and a Kent and Medway Ambassador. All positions that he plans to retain after retirement from the Trust.

Commenting on his decision to retire, Bill said: "I consider my time with Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust to have been a privilege. I want to pay particular tribute to the three chairmen that I have served and to the trustees who have been a constant inspiration from day one. It is a fact that it's the people involved with this great place, along with the spirit of partnership and mutual support that has led to the success we see today.

Over the last 19 years, the Historic Dockyard site has changed beyond recognition and one of my proudest achievements has been developing our business strategy of 'Preservation through Re-use.' This has been delivered by the wonderfully dedicated team of staff and volunteers that I have had the honour of leading. The result is that we are now a leader in the field of heritage-led regeneration and education within a superbly restored heritage environment back in its rightful place at the heart of Medway."

Bill added: "After nearly 2 decades commanding the bridge of the world's most complete dockyard from the Age of Sail, I leave the organisation with an extraordinary sense of accomplishment and a confidence that the Trust is in a strong position to flourish under new leadership. I take incredible memories and unforgettable experiences with me as I hand over the reins to the next generation and allow them the opportunity to lead the Trust into its next chapter."

Sir Trevor Soar KCB OBE DL, Chairman, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust said:
“After nearly twenty years at the helm, Bill has steered the Trust through a period of great change. The charity has benefitted significantly from the continuity and stability Bill has provided over so many years. We have faced enormous challenges and Bill has never been afraid to make key decisions.

Bill’s drive for excellence and entrepreneurial thinking, underpinned by carefully considered charitable choices, has been central to our development. He has played an instrumental role in making the Trust the financially sustainable charity that it is today.”

Sir Trevor added: “As Chairman, I am personally grateful for the outstanding leadership, endless contribution and selfless commitment which Bill has given during his tenure. He leaves the Trust in an exceptionally strong position and has laid the groundwork for what will come. I know how much he will be missed. He has been a strong leader, mentor and advisor as well as a supporter to many across the heritage sector. I would like to express the thanks of the entire Board of Trustees and wish him well in the future.”

The announcement of Bill’s retirement coincides with the launch of Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust’s new Corporate Plan.

The 34 year journey since the closure of the dockyard has taken Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust to a point of financial sustainability on a revenue basis. Due to completion of the Fitted Rigging House Project, the Trust’s current Corporate Plan (2016 – 2021) is ahead of schedule. A new 5-year Corporate Plan will be launched by Sir Trevor in February 2020. With a focus on evolution, not revolution – balancing the core charitable objectives of preservation and education, the new plan will chart the work of the Trust through to 2025.

The recruitment process for a new Chief Executive is underway and a formal announcement will be made later in the year. In the meantime, the Board of

Trustees, led by Sir Trevor, remain committed to delivering the Trust's charitable objectives and closely managing the transition period for new leadership.

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Please contact Lynnette Crisp, Head of Marketing and Communications, for further information on 01634 823800 or email lcrisp@chdt.org.uk

NOTES TO EDITORS

The Historic Dockyard Chatham is the only place in the world that lets you explore a complete dockyard from the age of sail. It's a unique destination that celebrates Great Britain's magnificent maritime past and unmatched contribution to the Royal Navy's shipbuilding excellence that led to worldwide command of the oceans.

Chatham offers unrivalled access to the ships that shaped the world, from a Victorian anti-slavery sailing ship, to a Second World War Destroyer or a Cold War submarine and the stories of the people who made them. From Chatham's historic buildings, including The Commissioner's House and officers' quarters to the remarkable Victorian ropery, where the rigging for HMS Victory was made, to its collection of maritime archaeology, the Dockyard forms an indispensable part of Britain's naval history and its national heritage.

As a fully accredited museum, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust collects, preserves, researches and exhibits objects and materials connected with the history of the dockyard and its people. It studies the development of Royal Navy warship design, construction and the use of the River Medway by the Royal Navy.

Visitors to and users of The Historic Dockyard Chatham are fundamental to its purpose and the economic reuse of the site and its buildings. Its staff and volunteers play a vital role in providing a high level of service and customer care.

The Trust is also involved in the on-going regeneration of Medway and The Thames Gateway.