North Shields Fishermen’s Heritage Project Raises £75,000 to build lasting memorial to North Shields’ lost fishermen

There are over 30 fishing ports in the UK, and of those North Shields is widely recognised as the biggest prawn landing port in England. Many of these ports have memorials to remember those fishermen who have died at sea, yet North Shields - a town built on the fishing industry - doesn’t have one. Yet.

Henry Howard is a local retired fisherman who was born in Dublin and fished out of Eire for 25 years, principally in the seas off Iceland and the Russian Coast - notoriously dangerous waters. Henry moved to the North East in the 1960s, and for a number of years worked on trawlers sailing out of North Shields. It was he who, in 2015 after a conversation with his granddaughter, first raised the idea of erecting a local memorial to lost fishermen.

With the help of VODA to draw up a formal constitution, the North Shields Fishermen’s Heritage Project (NSFHP) was born in August 2015. NSFHP is made up of ex-fishermen, current fishermen and other volunteers from the local community, some of whom have never even been near a fishing boat, but who are all committed to help fundraise and spread the word about the project.

The group began by putting together an artist’s brief and asked four sculptors to provide designs, which were then put to a public vote. A fundraising launch event was held at The Old Low Light Heritage Centre and after three months of voting, the winning design - Fiddler’s Green - by County Durham Sculptor Ray Lonsdale received a staggering 47% of the public vote.

The group were delighted that they had a clear winner, voted for by local people. The serious business of raising the £75,000 then began to make Henry’s idea a reality.

According to the song of the same name, Fiddler’s Green is the mythical place fishermen go to when they die - a legendary supposed afterlife, where there is perpetual mirth, a fiddle that never stops playing, and dancers who never tire. In 19th-century maritime folklore it was a kind of heaven for sailors who have served at least 50 years at sea.

Henry Howard said: “Fish and chips are a national institution; queues at the chip shops are a common sight along the Fish Quay. But the ‘true price of fish and chips’ lies out beyond the piers, where fishermen have left the port of Shields never to return.”

A Monumental Effort

Pictured far left: From left to right, Keith Spedding, Henry Howard and Alison Spedding with the winning sculpture design.

Pictured left: Sculptor Ray Lonsdale working on the memorial.
“The memorial will be a fitting tribute to those men who died at sea just doing their job,” Henry continues.

Keith Spedding, fundraiser for NSFHP, said: “We are grateful to guidance from VODA on how to complete grant applications and are delighted that the local community were so keen to get on board with our fundraising too. We often refer to The Memorial as a piece of ‘destination art’ and our belief is that once it’s in place people from outside the area will travel to see it, just as they do with similar designs such as Seaham Tommy or the Angel of the North. We are confident that such a landmark piece of public art will provide a significant contribution to the regeneration of the fish quay area as well as being a fitting tribute to the many men who lost their lives at sea.”

A mere ten months on from the start of their fundraising, NSFHP have raised the full £75,000 needed for the memorial to fishermen lost at sea from the port of North Shields. It was a remarkable effort by the local community, businesses, fishermen, Charitable Trusts, North Tyneside Council and everyone connected to the project.

Made in weathering steel, best known under the trademark COR-TEN, developed to eliminate the need for painting as it forms a stable rust-like appearance when exposed to the weather, the final design will be in place for around 150 years.

Thanks to the generosity of Places for People and Urban Splash, the companies who are working to regenerate the Smith’s Dock shipyard site, the groundworks are well underway. Work began at the Fiddler’s Green site early in August and is being carried out by Robertson Construction, the company behind the restoration of the Spanish City Dome in Whitley Bay, and will be completed in plenty of time for the sculpture’s arrival.

Ray Lonsdale recently put the finishing touches to the 10ft 6” creation, which is inspired by an image of a fisherman taken in the late 1950s by local photographer Harry Hann.

It will be unveiled on Sunday 24 September between 11am-1pm at a ceremony on the foreshore at Clifford’s Fort, North Shields, on the green space that looks out beyond the North and South Piers. The group hope that local residents and supporters will be out in force to witness the event.

Elected Mayor of North Tyneside Norma Redfearn said: “As a council we completely support this project. This is a fitting tribute to those fishermen who lost their lives at sea off North Shields and to those who continue to head out to sea every day. I am sure that it will attract more people to the area and I look forward to seeing what promises to be an impressive sculpture when it is unveiled on 24 September.”

For further details on what the launch event will entail and how you could be part of Fiddler’s Green Day visit www.nsfhp.org.uk/event/fiddlers-green-day.

With thanks to Alison Spedding for words and images.

Pictured above: Ray Lonsdale’s winning design.

Pictured below, from left to right, are Rose Miller from Places for People and Urban Splash, Terry McDermott and Henry Howard from NSFHP, Elected Mayor Norma Redfearn, Leanne Nicholson from Cygnet Events and Chris Price from Robertson Construction.

**Fiddler’s Green Day Event**  
**Sunday 24 September**

11am to 12 noon – Live music from local musicians  
12 noon – Fishermen’s Parade  
12:15pm – Speeches  
12:30pm – Memorial unveiled  
12:40pm – Blessing of the Memorial  
12:45pm – Rendition of “Fiddler’s Green”  
12:55pm – Toast and thanks  
1pm – Photographs, then back to a marquee at the Old Low Light Heritage Centre