

PARASOL FOUNDATION'S INVESTMENT RESTORES THE MOUNT

Known for its philanthropic work around the globe, the Parasol Foundation has always held Gibraltar close to its heart. In the latest of a string of projects on the Rock, it has recently restored the event hall at The Mount back to its former glory. By Simon Warburton



Now in its 21st year, the Parasol Foundation recently completed one of its most ambitious local projects to date – bringing the event hall at The Mount next to Loreto Convent back to life.

The Foundation – whose principal benefactress is Ruth Parasol, who listed PartyGaming in Gibraltar and has spent over 20 years on the Rock – has sunk a considerable amount of resource – £750,000 and counting – into bringing the Hall back to its former glory with the development the latest in a string of philanthropic ventures around the world.

Established in Gibraltar in 2004, the Parasol Foundation has awarded more than £40m in health, heritage and education grants in Gibraltar, UK, Israel, India, US, Spain and elsewhere.

The Event Hall building – a former ballroom and now formally known as Parasol Event Hall – forms part of the vast Mount complex whose principal house was purchased by the Royal Navy in 1799 to house the Admiral, its most senior officer in Gibraltar – but which had fallen into disrepair for the last 20 or so years.

Also restored – by the Government – is the Porter's Lodge at the north entrance to The Mount, which can now be potentially used as a registry office.

After lying practically derelict for so many years, the Parasol Event Hall is now a gleaming testament to what can be done if the right attitude and capital investment is harnessed to maximum effect. And the effect is striking. Cream walls on the outside are framed by restored original timber shutters, while the interior now features the old trusses which have been exposed. In a nod to the past, windows can be opened the way they would have been back in the day – using hand cranks attached to levers and letting light flood into the airy space.

Naval past

As well as the restored building itself, along with a new commercial kitchen and toilet facilities (incorporated within the main house), a considerable amount of new weatherproof decking has also been installed. That will allow functions such



as weddings to take place outside under several canopies designed in the form of sails to reflect The Mount's naval past. Even those humble toilets after installation unveiled old stonework in the shape of an arch which has been retained and woven into a large window. There used to be fashion for covering up elements such as trusses and old brickwork, but modern tastes yearn for authenticity and Parosol Event Hall puts it front and centre.

The immediate environs of Parosol Event Hall have also been extensively landscaped capitalising on the area's natural beauty, which continued to be cultivated during the Great Siege and which includes old magnolia, cypress and palm trees, as well as conifers overlooking the Bay of Gibraltar.

During its fallow years, The Mount's copious gardens were reclaimed by nature, whose relentless march across the old pathways and lawns is manifest, but the area around Parosol Event Hall shows what could be achieved at the rest of the site.

The Parosol Foundation has now handed Parosol Event Hall keys to No 6, but there is still vast potential for the enormous site - at 33,000 square metres it around the same size as the Alameda Gardens - to undergo yet more restoration - particularly the 18th century Admiral's Residence which will require colossal effort to restore its previous magnificence.



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Despite the building's somewhat dilapidated condition now, it doesn't take much imagination to stand in front of the imposing entrance and imagine a scene oozing with colonial nostalgia. Elegant verandas framed with wrought iron dot the exterior and there are several stables nearby. Echoing the naval theme, the windows even come in the shape of portholes, while anchor symbols adorn the entrance gate to the site.

Labour of love

But despite The Mount's importance in Gibraltar's history, it remains relatively unknown to the younger generation; a situation The Parasol Foundation is determined to rectify with its restoration. Two of the Foundation's key advisors, who took on the project as a labour of love; Nyreen Llamas and Stefanie Brancato, explained to Gibraltar Business some of their thinking behind the mammoth undertaking. They highlighted that there has to be a streamlined vision for the entire site of which the Parasol Event Hall is only the start.

The Government will need to consider the wider use and the potential synergies for example, the Porter's Lodge accommodating the registry and the Parasol Event Hall hosting the celebratory events afterwards. Like every site, especially one as significant in size as this, it will need to be maintained and cared for. The Parasol Foundation as the provider of the initial capital investment by way of donation to the Hall, is supportive of any initiative which will ensure the area is used in a commercially sensitive way, balancing the use and enjoyment of the site by the community as well as ensuring there are appropriate resources to maintain the upkeep of the site for as long as possible – not an easy objective in an area with such historical significance.

The Mount is one of many former areas in Gibraltar ceded by the UK Ministry of Defence to the Government on the Rock and remains one of its most important historical sites after coming into the hands of HM Government of Gibraltar in 2003.

Community engagement

There are always competing demands on the public purse, but the Government's investment into the restoration of the Porter's Lodge with the ancillary Parasol Event Hall restoration, may now trigger further interest in the rest of the site.

Other key players in the Parasol Event Hall's rebirth have been Government Projects Director, Carl Viagas, Gibraltar Joinery and Building Services Limited (GJBS), project managers, Carduus Limited and architects, Arc Designs.

The Parasol Foundation has completed its work – give or take a few normal snagging issues – on the Event Hall and is keen to see the Gibraltar Government, as landlords, take the wider site forward, given the restoration has been just one of many campaigns the Foundation undertakes. Women's projects are significant especially in the fields of science, technology, education and maths, with for example, the Foundation donating \$3.5m to the Women's Breast Cancer Research Center at Tel Aviv Sourasky



Medical Center and more than £1m in grants to the University of Gibraltar since its establishment for curriculum development of academic programmes, development of The Parasol Foundation Library and annual sponsorship of students in financial need.

The Parasol Foundation's representatives explained that in Gibraltar the focus has also been on heritage and community projects.

They showcased one of their earlier projects with the restoration of the Med Steps which was a very large project at the time. This was of particular interest from the Foundation's principal benefactress who enjoys trekking up the Rock and noted



there were areas that were dangerous to navigate for the community. She spearheaded support to the Government in refurbishing the steps so they could become accessible to everyone including those with young families. In the same spirit, she also undertook restoration of the Charles V Wall to ensure that these important parts of Gibraltar's heritage can be used and enjoyed safely.

Weddings

So now the ribbon has been cut on the Parasol Event Hall, what could it be used for? The Rock is extremely popular for weddings; at peak matrimonial season, there can be an extraordinary 12 couples tying the knot in just one day, so the Parasol Event Hall can now be another addition to existing venues such as Alameda Gardens, Rock Hotel, Sunborn and City Hall, with revenue from weddings ploughed back into maintaining and developing The Mount site.

The way the site is laid out at the back could equally lend itself to opportunities such as trails, zip lines or tree hopping, while if considerable resource was ploughed into the Admiral's Residence, that could become a boutique hotel with a restaurant for wedding guests.

Whether or not that investment requires the private sector to step in remains to be seen, but the possibilities are there for entrepreneurs to raise the phoenix from the ashes, much as the Parasol Event Hall has now come to life once more.

"Philanthropy comes with all of us"

For Ruth Parasol, Gibraltar was significant in her success in business and her home, but it was also relevant to her father and mentor, Richard Parasol whose early backstory and connection with Gibraltar (having seen Gibraltar from a boat docked in the Bay post-WWII), is astonishing. He overcame almost insurmountable odds to become a highly successful businessman in the US, allowing him to pursue his passions of boating and aviation.

Hailing from Czystochowa in Poland, Richard was forced with his Jewish family at the age of six in 1941 into the horrors of the city's ghetto. Into that space the Germans crammed 48,000 people at its peak, leading to outbreaks of disease while thousands were herded onto trains and into the death camps.

At eight years old Richard Parasol became a 'hidden child' – cared for by what must have been a truly heroic Polish Catholic couple who could only imagine the consequences if they were caught. Richard managed to stay hidden by the couple until the war's end in 1945, but with his original family gone, he managed the extraordinary feat of trekking alone through Poland, Europe and eventually to Israel, where he started a new chapter in the Ein Harod kibbutz.

Property developer

With the help of a distant relative in America, Richard subsequently travelled to California to study mechanical engineering, eventually using his savings to begin buying and selling flats in San Francisco. By 1976, Richard Parasol had become established as a real estate developer of apartments and office buildings with a career which was to span five decades before this truly remarkable man died last year at the age of 88.

Due to her father's death last year, Ruth Parasol did not hold a party on the 20th anniversary of the Foundation, choosing instead to have an event to mark its 21st on the Mount and as a memorial to Richard Parasol.