

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2017

Work starts to save the Iron Bridge

- Major Conservation Supported by €1m German Donation -**
- English Heritage Launches First Ever Crowd-Funding Campaign
to support Project Iron Bridge -**
- www.crowdfunder.co.uk/project-iron-bridge/ -**

Work starts this week on vital repairs to the world's first iron bridge, English Heritage announced today (Monday 13 November) as the charity revealed a €1m donation towards the £3.6m conservation project and launched a crowd-funding campaign to help save one of the wonders of the modern world.

Erected in 1779 over the River Severn in Shropshire, the Iron Bridge was the first single span arch bridge in the world to be made of cast iron and was a turning point in British engineering – it is the great-great grandfather of today's railways and skyscrapers.

However English Heritage's extensive surveys and investigations have shown that the Iron Bridge is under threat from cracking due to stresses in the ironwork dating from the original construction, ground movement over the centuries, and an earthquake in the 19th century which pushed the sides of the gorge closer together, putting even more pressure on Abraham Darby's 378 ton masterpiece.

With an enormous scaffold in place around the bridge, English Heritage will now start to clean and conserve, repair and – where necessary – reinforce the different elements of the bridge: the iron radials and braces holding the bridge together, the deck plates and wedges, as well as the main iron arch itself. The bridge will also be repainted to protect it for the future.

At £3.6m, Project Iron Bridge is English Heritage's single largest conservation project since it became a charity in 2015. The site is free to visit and today English Heritage is launching its first ever crowd-funding campaign and asking the public to help save the Iron Bridge. A €1m donation from the German Hermann Reemtsma Foundation means that £25,000 is all that is required to ensure that this industrial icon will continue to inspire generations to come.

Kate Mavor, English Heritage's Chief Executive, said: "The Iron Bridge is one of the most important – if not the most important – bridges ever built. It sits in the cradle of the Industrial Revolution and is open to everyone to visit, for free, every day of the year. But after two centuries, its cast iron is cracking and if it is to survive, the bridge needs our support. Today we are asking the public to help save the Iron Bridge so that it can continue to inspire generations to come."

Jochen Muennich of the Hermann Reemtsma Foundation said: "We immediately recognised the value of English Heritage's project to conserve the Iron Bridge, an outstanding example of the late eighteenth century engineering skills pioneered in Great Britain and subsequently adopted and developed throughout Europe. Not only do we admire the Iron Bridge as an important technical landmark, but we also see it as a potent reminder of our continent's common cultural roots and values."

"This is the foundation's first funding venture in the UK, a signal of our strong attachment to Great Britain in general, and to the mission of English Heritage in particular. In the current climate it seems more important than ever to raise awareness of the links in our industrial heritage and our broader cultural bonds."

To donate to Project Iron Bridge, visit www.crowdfunder.co.uk/project-iron-bridge/.

In return, donors to English Heritage's first ever crowd-funding campaign can receive special 'conservation-in-action' tours of the Iron Bridge or get their hands on a limited edition print of the Iron Bridge by renowned designer Paul Catherall.

Keep up to date with #ProjectIronBridge on Facebook and Twitter.

Notes to Editors:

For further media information, contact the English Heritage Press Office on 020 7973 3390 or at press@english-heritage.org.uk

English Heritage

cares for over 400 historic monuments, buildings and sites – from world famous prehistoric sites to grand medieval castles, from Roman forts on the edges of empire to Cold War bunkers. Through these, we bring the story of England to life for over 10 million visitors each year.

www.english-heritage.org.uk

Registered charity no. 1140351

Hermann Reemtsma Foundation

is a private and not-for-profit foundation promoting cultural and social projects in Germany and Poland. It is also a funding partner for the preservation of heritage. The Hermann Reemtsma Foundation especially likes to support projects in the start-up phase.

<http://www.hermann-reemtsma-stiftung.de/>

The Iron Bridge

The world's first iron bridge was erected over the River Severn in Shropshire in 1779. This pioneering single-span cast-iron structure was a turning point in British design and engineering; after it was built, cast iron came to be widely used in bridges, aqueducts and buildings.

Although this symbol of the Industrial Revolution sits in what is today a rural area, in the late 18th century this part of Shropshire was an industrial powerhouse because of its rich coal deposits near the surface.

In 1709, Abraham Darby I, a former brass founder from Bristol, had begun to smelt local iron ore with coke made from Coalbrookdale coal. The expansion of industrial activity here in the upper Severn gorge, however, was handicapped without a bridge, the nearest being at Buildwas 3km (2 miles) away. Intense barge traffic along the river also required a single-span bridge, as the steep sides of the gorge ruled out rising approaches to a stone central arch.

It was the Shrewsbury architect Thomas Pritchard who first suggested in 1773 to the ironmaster John Wilkinson that an iron bridge be built over the Severn. The chosen crossing point, where a ferry had crossed from Benthall to Madeley Wood, had the advantage of high approaches on both sides and relative stability.

Pritchard drew up the designs, but he died in 1777, a month after work had begun on a single-span bridge of 30 metre (100 foot) with five main semicircular ribs. Abraham Darby III, grandson of the first foundry owner, agreed to continue the project, and all the necessary iron was cast at his Coalbrookdale furnace.

Construction was completed in 1779, using in all 378 tons of iron, and the world's first iron bridge was formally opened on New Year's Day 1781, having cost over £6,000.

The bridge had a far-reaching impact on the local society and economy. It was always intended as a monument to the achievements of Shropshire ironmasters as well as a river crossing – it was an advertisement that gave their ironworks a competitive edge over their rivals.

The bridge remained in full use for over 150 years, by ever-increasing traffic. It was finally closed to vehicles in 1934, when it was designated an Ancient Monument. The whole area of Iron Bridge Gorge was designated a World Heritage Site in 1986.

Today, the Iron Bridge is in the care of English Heritage and – like the majority of our sites – is free to visit.