
Report To: Policy and Resources Committee

Date: 21 September 2010

**Report By: Corporate Director
Education and Communities**

Report No: EC/10/09/ /EH/NM

Contact Officer: Events Development Officer

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Subject: Comet Bi-Centenary Event in 2012

1.0 PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- 1) inform the Committee that the Bi-Centenary of the Paddle Steamer (PS) Comet will be in 2012.
- 2) inform the Committee of the progress of the multi-agency group established to celebrate the bi-centenary of the launch of Henry Bell's Comet in 2012.
- 3) determine whether the Council would like to mark the bi-centenary.

2.0 SUMMARY

2.1 The Paddle Steamer (PS) Comet ship is of great historical importance as it was the first commercially successful packet steamship in Europe.

2.2 The PS Comet replica was built in 1962 to mark the 150th anniversary of the launch, and it is currently being refurbished in Fergusons. The PS Comet is due to return to the Civic Square in Port Glasgow in late autumn 2010. A detailed history is appended to the report.

2.3 A multi-agency bicentennial group, originally brought together by the Helensburgh Heritage Trust was set up to examine options for marking the bi-centenary.

2.4 The committee has met on a number of occasions since February 2010 and representatives include the Provost of Inverclyde, and the Events Development Officer. A comprehensive list is included in the background.

2.5 The Port Glasgow Comet Festival Group has celebrated the heritage of Port Glasgow since 1987, with an annual festival – the Port Glasgow Comet Festival. Since 2007 the Councils Events Team has been involved in the running of the festival, with finance controlled by the Council. In 2012, it will also be the 25th anniversary of the first Port Glasgow Comet Festival.

2.6 If the Council were to approve an event to celebrate the bi-centenary of the Comet ship, further investigations would be required to determine the financial input required. Event Scotland could provide some money, but they require match funding.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 That the Committee notes the history of previous Comet ship celebrations – see Appendixes 1- 3.

3.2 That the progress made by the Comet Bicentennial Group be noted.

3.3 That it is remitted to the Corporate Director Education and Communities to update the Committee on the progress of the Comet Bicentennial Group on a quarterly basis.

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- 3.4 That the Committee considers whether an event should be held to mark the occasion, and if so, whether this should be a joint event between Port Glasgow and Helensburgh or separate events, and if funding should be made available.

4.0 BACKGROUND

4.1 PS Comet and Replica History:

Comet History:

The PS Comet was commissioned by Henry Bell and built by John Wood & Co, Port Glasgow in 1812. The PS Comet was the first commercially successful packet steamship in Europe and marked the birth of the Clyde Steamers.

The PS Comet's maiden voyage was from Port Glasgow to Glasgow in August of that year. Following this successful trial, Henry Bell inaugurated a regular service between Glasgow, Greenock and Helensburgh.

Please see Appendix 1 for a full PS Comet history, and Appendixes 2 and 3 for further details on the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the launch of the Comet was celebrated.

Current Comet Replica Restoration

The current Comet replica is undergoing restoration work in Fergusons' shipyard. It is being worked on by 12 trainees using a combination of traditional and modern techniques. The work was started in February 2010 and the Comet is due to be back in Port Glasgow Civic Square by November 2010. The ship will be housed underneath a canopy to protect the ship from the elements.

4.2 The Comet Bi-Centenary Committee:

In January 2010, the chairman of the Helensburgh Heritage Trust wrote to over 60 Clyde organisations, inviting them to attend a meeting at the Glasgow Museum of Transport. In the event, some 30 representatives from different organisations attended.

The aims of this meeting were to determine whether an organising committee for the bicentenary of the Comet should be set up, and if so, to appoint members to this committee.

A decision was made to form a committee and it held its first meeting in Greenock in February 2010, with the Provosts from both Argyll and Bute Council and Inverclyde Council attending. Other members of the group included:

- Helensburgh Heritage Trust,
- Helensburgh Model Boat Club,
- Institute of Engineers and Shipbuilders,
- Glasgow Museums (Culture and Sport / Glasgow Life).
- Caledonian MacBrayne.

4.2 Bi-centenary Committee plans for 2012:

The Bi-Centenary Comet Committee group have discussed various event ideas and are currently investigating 2 of them:

1. The replica Comet ship sails (under its own power) from Port Glasgow to Helensburgh (just as in 1962). The two councils would then organise their own events to mark this occasion.
2. The replica Comet ship is put onto a barge and sailed across the Clyde, with events in Port Glasgow and Helensburgh.

However after further investigation by Inverclyde Council, the Comet replica ship will not be able to sail under its own power from Port Glasgow to Helensburgh. This is due to the prohibitive costs combined with the fact that the ship is actually built around the engines and so to take the engines out may cause irrevocable damage to the restoration work.

It was then discussed if the ship was put onto a barge, whether it could make the same journey. After further examination by Inverclyde Council it was agreed that this was not possible due to the costs and risks associated with this venture.

As the costs and risks associated with the ship sailing/being put on a barge are prohibitive, the group is now looking at the potential for:

- boat races across the Clyde (yacht, kayak, sailing) between the various clubs.
- In Helensburgh there is/was a Comet Regatta (Helensburgh) and enquire if they would like to be part of the event.
- involving school children in a competition, or possibly each region making a commemorative gift to be exchanged at some point.
- PS Waverley provide sailing trips between Port Glasgow and Helensburgh.
- The original engine is in the Science Museum in Kensington, London. If the engine could be loaned to the McLean Museum / Maritime Museum in Glasgow.

Discussions are still underway within the Bi-centenary committee group as to whether the event should be:

- a joint event between Port Glasgow and Helensburgh,
- separate events, with both towns making their own plans.

4.3 The Port Glasgow Comet Festival Group:

The Port Glasgow Comet Festival Group was formed in 1986, and held the first Comet Festival event in 1987. The aims and objectives of the group are:

1. to build a pride and a sense of identity with the town of Port Glasgow.
2. to put on events and activities which will seek to restore a former pride in the town of Port Glasgow and to make the area a more desirable place to live, for the betterment of the local community as a whole.

Prior to 2004, the festival was organised solely by the Comet Festival Group with some Council involvement (book keeping etc).

Between 2005 and 2007, Inverclyde Council's Community Work worked with the group to stage the event. In 2008 and 2009, the event was staged by Inverclyde Council's Events Team, as the Comet festival Group was no longer operational.

In 2010, after several public meetings another Comet Festival Group was formed and the Events Team is now working in conjunction with the Comet Festival Group to stage the event.

In 2012 it will be the 25th anniversary of the first Port Glasgow Comet Festival.

5.0 Funding Opportunities

5.1 The Bi-Centenary Committee Group:

Within the Bi-Centenary Committee group there are a number of stakeholders:

- Inverclyde Council
- Argyll and Bute Council
- Glasgow Museums (Glasgow Culture and Sport)

There is also the potential opportunity for sponsorship and/or funding from the following:

- Event Scotland
- Caledonian MacBrayne
- Riverside Inverclyde

It is important to note that Event Scotland will only supply match funding for an event. The application deadline for an event taking place in 2012 is Friday 3rd June 2011.

5.2 The Port Glasgow Comet Festival Group:

Since 2005, the Council has provided some money to stage the event. In more recent years, the event has been solely funded by the Council.

- In 2008, £13,000 was allocated from the Common Good Fund to stage the event in Brown Street Car Park.
- In 2009, £16,000 was allocated from the Common Good Fund to stage the event in Coronation Park.
- In 2010, a total £13,000 was allocated from the Common Good Fund and Grants to Voluntary Organisations to stage the event in Brown Street Car Park.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Finance: (To be completed after further discussion with Finance)

6.2 Financial Implications – One off Costs

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	Budget Year	Proposed Spend this Report	Virement From	Other Comments
n/a	n/a	2012/13	10,000	n/a	n/a

Financial Implications – Annually Recurring Costs/ (Savings)

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With Effect from	Annual Net Impact	Virement From (If Applicable)	Other Comments
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	

7.0 Human Resources: None

7.1 Legal: None

8.0 Equalities: None

9.0 CONSULTATION

None

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

PS Comet History

The Comet was a unique and truly revolutionary ship. The Comet, built in 1812 for Clyde service, operated the first commercially successful steamboat service in Europe and marked the birth of the Clyde Steamers. Having seen the Charlotte Dundas in the USA, local entrepreneur Henry Bell decided that steamships should be suitable for Clyde passenger services. As a result, he commissioned John Wood & Co, Port Glasgow, to construct a paddle steamer. The 28 ton vessel was 45 ft long and 10 ft wide. It had two paddle wheels on each side and was driven by steam engines rated at three horsepower. Later, the twin side paddle wheels were replaced with a single paddle wheel on each side. The two engines were made by John Robertson of Glasgow and the boiler by David Napier, Camlachie, Glasgow. The ship also had a single tall funnel. It was decided to call the ship "Comet", in recognition of the Great Comet of 1811. In 1812, the Comet was launched and made her delivery voyage from Port Glasgow to Glasgow. She then made the sailing from Glasgow to Greenock. This was the first commercially successful steamboat service in Europe and was the start of Clyde Steamer services.

The success of the Comet's pioneering steamship service from Glasgow to Greenock soon inspired other services on the Firth of Clyde and to Largs, Rothesay, Campbeltown and Inveraray within four years. Soon the Comet was outshone by the newer paddle steamers. In 1816 she was briefly transferred to operate services on the Firth of Forth but these were unsuccessful and she was soon returned to the Clyde. Henry Bell then lengthened and re-engined the Comet and launched a service from September 1819 from Glasgow to Oban and Fort William via the Crinan Canal. This pioneered the "Royal Route" later dominated by David MacBrayne Ltd. But sadly, on the 13th December 1920, the Comet was shipwrecked in strong currents at Craignish Point near Oban and was lost forever. One of her steam engines found further use in a Greenock brewery and then in 1862 was purchased by Henry Napier, the famous engineer, who in turn presented it to the Science Museum where today it is preserved at the Science Museum in London as a lasting legacy to the historic and pioneering PS Comet.

Thus, today, her original steam engine is currently on display in the Science Museum in London in their "Making the Modern World" gallery. Additionally within the "Marine Engine gallery" in the Shipping Collection on the second floor are displayed two large gear wheels for driving pair of paddle shafts from the original engine of the P.S. Comet and also there is a painting of the ship by Alexander Nasmyth dating from 1816 which shows a view of the paddle steamer Comet, the first steam powered ship in 1812 using a Symington engine, plying on the Firth of Forth in 1816 after withdrawal from her original service on the Clyde.

Comet Centenary Celebrations 1912

To the sound of a bugle, the Comet Festival set off from Scarlow Street on 31st August 1912. By this time, the house that John Wood had lived in had become 29 Scarlow Street, and was decorated with flags and banners for the occasion.

The streets were crowded with people, and there were just as many taking part in the procession, as each trade turned out a display and men to join in the march.

Almost every trade had a band, but at the head of the crowd was the Clyde Royal Garrison Artillery Band under the Bandmaster Harkness. Behind them were the mounted police, who were closely followed by the carriages.

The head carriage contained Mrs James Reid (who was the niece of John Wood), Provost Fyfe, Bailie McFarlane and Bailie Leith.

There were a further 7 carriages, then the men who belong to each trade involved in the town, followed behind. Each trade had its own display and they were described as very well made with plenty of imagination. There was also representation from the fire brigade and the ambulance men.

The Gourock Rope Works also turned out a display which was made up of "coils of rope and canvas arranged in what can only be described as considerable tastefulness".

The original route took them first along Scarlow Street, then out to Shore Street, Brown Street and Bellhaven Street, Ardgowan Street, East Hamilton Street, Chalmers Street, Helen Street and from there back to Princes' Street. Up Princes' Street and Down John Wood Street along Bay Street and Port Glasgow road to Montgomery Street before returning to Fore Street where the "dismiss" was sounded on the Bugle.

Invitations were sent out to business men and dignitaries of the time, inviting them to take part in the celebrations. The men all boarded boats and were then given a tour of the yards on the river from Glasgow to Greenock and on the other side of the river in Dumbarton as well.

The weekend celebrations finished on the Sunday when a service was held in Newark Parish church.

It was at this service that it came to light that John Wood had at one time been engaged to be married. His intended Elizabeth Kyall of Douglas, Isle of Man, had come to complete arrangements in Port Glasgow when she was taken ill and died. John wood arranged for her to stay close by, having her buried in the Parish graveyard. He never wed.

After the service, the congregation proceeded outside, where a laurel wreath bound with purple silk was placed on the graves of her grand uncle John and Elizabeth's by Miss Reid of Glenhuntly

PS Comet 150th Celebrations

In 1962, The Provost of Port Glasgow came up with the idea of building a model of the Comet to celebrate the forthcoming 150th anniversary of her inaugural sailing. Despite the fact that she was built in Port Glasgow, then a separate burgh, he felt the links with James Watt and Greenock were worth celebrating. There was much discussion as to the scale the model should be built to, and where it would be displayed, until Lord Lithgow suggested building a full sized replica. He canvassed support from other ship related businesses and offered the services of his own shipyard.

The hull was built by George Thomson and Son of Buckie, renowned for their building of heavy wooden boats for fishing and leisure use. On completion, the hull was transported by road to Lithgow Ltd of Port Glasgow to be fitted out.

While drawings of the hull still existed, no drawings remained of the engine. Fortunately, a similar engine contemporary to the period of the original was on display in a local museum, allowing representative drawings to be prepared, and a reproduction engine built. The occasion was further remembered with the issue of a special commemorative envelope designed by John Brown, an art teacher at Greenock Academy.

On August 25, 1962, The Greenock Telegraph looked forward to the forthcoming Comet Week which would commence with a service at Port Glasgow's Newark Parish Church on August 26. The celebrations were to include a memorial service at the grave of John Wood (builder of the 1812 Comet), a civic dinner, and a parade of floats accompanied by men from both the Royal Navy and the United States Navy prior to the sailing. Free music and dancing took place nightly at Coronation Park, and a final church service was held at the conclusion of the celebrations.

On Saturday, September 1, the replica Comet was launched from the same berth that the original boat was built on by Mrs Walter Lucas, and afloat in the fitting out basin to be finished off.

On Sunday, September 2, eleven invited dignitaries plus Lord Lithgow, all attired in period costume, and with two engineers as crew, assembled at the yard and boarded the Comet. The parade of floats arrived, and she cast off at 3.30 pm. Once out of the yard she was met by a large flotilla of canoes, sailing dinghies, yachts, and motor boats to escort her on her journey to Helensburgh. The boiler, fired by lignum vitae logs, worked well and the engine achieved the design speed of 5 knots.

On arrival at Helensburgh, the dignitaries disembarked and were taken by a horse drawn carriage to a ceremony held at Henry Bell's memorial, and then on to a marquee for refreshments.

After the commemorative trip, a collection was taken and more than 1,000 members of the public paid to go aboard the vessel. The intention had then been to use the money to set up a Comet Museum in Port Glasgow to house the boat, however, this did not materialise, despite the availability of a redundant building at the shipyard which had been earmarked for this purpose, and there appears to be no record of what happened to the collection.

The replica Comet was taken out of the water and installed over a pond near the town centre in Port Glasgow. The pond was in the middle of a car park, and eventually drained. Since then, the boat has been refurbished and returned to an upgraded display area, fenced and floodlit on a raised plinth next to the pond, also upgraded in 2006.