

The Convener of The Highland Council Sandy Park marked the end of his local government career on a high note today by giving a major boost to a project close to his home and his heart.

On behalf of the Council, Councillor Park presented a cheque for £50,000 to the Highlanders Museum at Fort George, bringing the Highland Heritage Appeal to within £170,000 of its target of £2.9 million.

Councillor Park retires at midnight on Wednesday 2 May after 17 years as a councillor, the last five as Convener of the Council.

In presenting the cheque to Major General Seymour Monro, Chairman of the Heritage Appeal, he said: "It has been a real privilege to serve the Council over the past 17 years and I couldn't think of a better way to sign off my career than to support such a worthwhile and exciting project. "The Highlanders Museum not only celebrates and helps to maintain our cultural heritage but it also assists the economic vibrancy of the region in helping to generate and sustain tourism."

The Highland Heritage Appeal has been established as the fundraising and development arm of The Highlanders Museum. This registered Scottish charity is spearheading the fundraising and development which is hoped will transform the Highlanders into the best military museum in Scotland.

Major General Monro said: "Today we fire the starting gun for the construction phase of the project. We would like to thank The Highland Council particularly for the £50,000 cheque. Sandy Park and his fellow Councillors have been regular supporters of the project. Many other bodies including our partners in Historic Scotland and the Inverness Common Good Fund have helped enormously as have local businessmen notably David Sutherland and many regimental supporters. We are humbled by the many cheques that have come in from all over the Highlands, Islands and Moray. Although we have raised over £2.7 million towards the £2.9 million cost of the project which has enabled us to start, we still have a £170,000 to raise. So please keep giving. The upgraded museum which will become a tremendous military centre of the north of Scotland will reopen in March 2013."

Set in what was formerly the Lieutenant Governor's house, a prime position in the Fort, the Highlanders' Museum is an important part of the visitor experience and tells the story of the many Highlanders who served in one of the regiments that were raised from the region.

The Highlanders are the descendents of three famous Scottish regiments - the Seaforth Highlanders, The Queen's own Cameron Highlanders and the Queen's Own Highlanders (Seaforth and Camerons). They have all played crucial roles in many of the most significant events in the military history of the UK from the Napoleonic Wars to the present day in Afghanistan.

Founded over 60 years ago the museum houses more than 5,000 gallantry awards and campaign medals won by the fighting men of the regiment as well as silver and personal artefacts. It also contains a set of Colours carried at the Battle of Waterloo and King Edward VIII's regimental uniform. On the 'darker side', the Museum holds a box used by Adolf Hitler for his personal papers.

The collection housed at the museum is probably the largest regimental display outside London and as well as telling the stories of the many Highlanders who served in the regiment. The museum also houses the wonderful collection of the Lovat Scouts whose supporters have been great benefactors of this project.

Young people from across the Highlands and Islands enjoy the museum thanks to an education programme for primary and secondary pupils. Despite the success of this initiative, work has been constrained by the lack of any dedicated education space. The Redevelopment Project will significantly expand the education work which will be possible and create a space complete with state of the art facilities.

The last time any significant physical work was done to the Museum buildings was the early 1980s. It is not surprising therefore that the Museum is now in desperate need of upgrading to 21st century standards in order to attract more visitors and improve the conservation of the Collection.

To pay for the improvement works a fundraising appeal has been privately launched to members of the regiment, individuals, and to government agencies.

The proposed redevelopment will take 2 years and is set to transform the museum into a heritage centre where visitors will be inspired by the history of the army regiments and their links to the clans and local communities in the Highlands and Islands. It will trace the story of the Highland warrior over the past 3 centuries to the present day and will be an invaluable tool for the community, schools, universities and those who simply want to research their family history.

Strategically sited to protect the approaches to Inverness, Fort George is one of the finest examples of 18th century military engineering in the British Isles. Named after King George II (1727-60), construction began in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden and took over 20 years to complete. It holds two field battalions and staff officers (some 2,000 men) and an armament of over 80 guns.

Fort George is a 'registered historic monument' and for the last 250 years has been a military garrison and training depot for a Regular Infantry Battalion of the British Army. The site is cared for by Historic Scotland and plays host to more than 60,000 visitors.

It was designed as the main garrison fortress in the Scottish Highlands following the Jacobite Rising of 1745-6. The attempt by the Stewart Dynasty to regain the British throne from the Hanoverians prompted the government to introduce ruthless measures to prevent such a rebellion taking place again.

Designed by Lieutenant-General William Skinner who was also the first governor of Fort George, the garrison consists of a complex and fascinating interplay of ramparts, massive bastions, ditches and firing steps. The defences are heavily concentrated on the landward side of the promontory, from where an anticipated Jacobite assault would come. The remaining seaward sides are protected by long stretches of rampart and smaller bastions.

Access to the fortress from the landward side is across a wide area of loose shingle which is unsuitable for siting heavy guns, so that besieging artillery is kept out of range. Sloping grassy banks designed to absorb artillery shells all but hide the fort from view. The entrance is reached via a free standing defensive structure incorporating a guardhouse, then by a raised wooden walkway, complete with drawbridge bridging across a wide ditch set between heavily defended bastions. The ditch forms a wide killing ground openly exposed to gunfire from these walls.

Houses were built inside the fort for the governor, deputy-governor and fort-major as well as blocks for the staff officers and gunners, two enormous piles of barracks, ordnance and provision stores, powder magazines, workshops and a chapel. Everything is still there, largely as it was built.

After the Jacobite threat had evaporated later in the 18th century, the fort became a recruiting base and training camp for the rapidly expanding British Army. Many a Highland lad passed through its gates on his way to fight for the British Empire across the globe. Between 1881 and 1964 the fort served as the depot of the Seaforth Highlanders.