



# A LASTING LEGACY

**Mike O'Connor CBE, Director of the Millennium Commission, has been responsible for the investment of over £2 billion of Lottery money across the UK to mark the millennium. In 2001, his work is far from over.**

## A diverse portfolio

The role of Director at the Millennium Commission is certainly a unique job. It is a very exciting place to work. Investing large sums of money in diverse projects to mark the millennium is not an opportunity that comes along very often. I don't think we will see investment like this for a long time to come, but I hope we won't have to wait another thousand years. The Commission has used the investment of Lottery money to create a lasting legacy across the UK for the millennium.

The Millennium Commission was set up in 1995, with its stated role being 'to help communities mark the close of the second millennium and celebrate the start of the third'. It has done this in four ways. Firstly, it has invested nearly £1.3 billion in almost 200 capital projects and over 3,000 smaller projects around the UK. These range from large regeneration projects of international significance, to the refurbishment of hundreds of local village halls and the planting of two million trees in new woodlands.

Secondly, the Commission invested in the Millennium Dome which, despite all the negative media coverage, was a hit with the 6.5 million people who visited it, with enviable visitor satisfaction levels of 88 per cent (MORI, September 2000). I think that for all the problems people associate with the Dome project, getting to 31 December 1999 and seeing it open on time, against all expectations, was a huge achievement.

Thirdly, the Commission is funding individuals to carry out their own community projects through the Millennium Awards Scheme. We have made grants of around £2,000 to 15,000 people so far, and ultimately aim to fund around 32,000 Award winners. These Award winners are transforming their local communities through thousands of locally-based projects. Each is unique, and the list of Award projects is endless. Some examples include converting derelict land into a community garden, setting up a support group for homeless people,

connecting local interest groups via a website, and setting up a youth group on an inner city estate. Through their projects, the Award winners are learning new skills and gaining confidence for themselves. This is real people power for the millennium, supported by relatively small sums of money.

Finally, the Commission funded festivals across the UK during the year 2000. These succeeded in tapping the creativity and imagination of local communities, who put forward their own ideas on how they wanted to celebrate the millennium. The result was a colourful mix of festivals around the UK throughout 2000. They united people in celebrations ranging from multicultural events, parades, pageants and exhibitions to music concerts, heritage plays, workshops and sporting activities – to name just a few. In total, over 20 million people around the UK participated in Millennium Festival events and activities during 2000.

This is an extremely diverse portfolio and a difficult one to communicate succinctly. We have been working to bring together the patchwork quilt of our projects and tell people what we've done with their Lottery money. The range of projects and people we've supported and the variety of schemes are enormous. There isn't one thing which pulls it all together, so it's a challenging task. The Commission has recently produced an interactive CD-ROM, which has been distributed to schools and libraries throughout the UK, highlighting our work by region. This will act as a leave-behind summary of all our work.

## Capital projects

The Commission has supported almost 200 projects on around 3,000 sites UK-wide. It did not initiate any of these itself. Instead it was a bottom-up process. The Commission invited applications and a huge number came forward. We've only been able to fund one-tenth of the applications, so these projects are the cream of the crop.





*London's Tate Modern, one of the two Millennium Projects to receive a grant of £50 million*  
 Photograph courtesy of Marcus Leith



*The Millennium Commission has funded the creation and renewal of 500 village halls*



*The Woods on Your Doorstep initiative was awarded a grant of over £6 million*

Selecting which projects to fund was not an easy task. There were so many good ideas. The Commission wanted to see a spread of projects throughout the country, to reflect the fact that people all over the UK play the National Lottery. We now have projects across the UK from Glasgow to Cornwall, Belfast to Leeds, Cardiff to Norwich, so I think we have been successful.

## **Breaking new ground**

The Millennium Commission has taken some calculated risks. It would have been easy to invest in the traditional tourist honeypots, but the aim was to get a UK-wide spread of projects and schemes. The Commission invested in some deprived areas because we believe this attracts new investment and raises the level of the local economy.

We have invested in new kinds of projects that focus on education, and created a new generation of science and environment centres around the UK. The Commission hasn't gone for the obviously commercial ventures. The result is a range of innovative projects and schemes that are leading the way for others. If we are to look to the future, we

can't rely on projects which have been historically successful. We have to try to break new ground, and to do this you have to take risks.

The Lottery has funded the biggest programme of non-governmental, social investment the UK has seen since Victorian times. Around 25 per cent of Millennium Commission projects are visitor attractions, and they are certainly launching into a competitive market. However, many have exceeded their predicted visitor numbers already, such as Tate Modern in London, The Eden Project in Cornwall, The Lowry in Salford and Our Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh. Others are now working hard to build their reputations.

## **Widespread benefits**

The first projects opened in 1999, others opened in 2000 and more will be opening this year and next, so there is still plenty of work to do. As these projects open across the UK, the legacy of the millennium investment is just becoming clear. Opinion polls have shown that nearly three-quarters of people in the UK believe these projects and initiatives will benefit the area in which they live.



*The National Botanic Gardens of Wales, which received over £21.5 million of Millennium Commission funding*

Many projects are major additions to the architectural profile of an area, such as: the National Space Centre in Leicester, the Glasgow Science Centre, The Eden Project in Cornwall, Odyssey in Belfast and the International Centre for Life in Newcastle.

Millennium Projects have generated local pride and stimulated economic regeneration. At a national level, they have created a new layer of social and economic assets. They both reflect the UK's history and look to the future.

From the perspective of the UK as a tourist destination, these projects are certainly good news. Many tourists see the UK as a heritage destination. They come to see the old castles, the palaces, the historic buildings. I hope that now they will also come to see these forward-looking millennial projects of great architectural quality, which reflect the culture and innovation of the UK.

As well as attracting tourists and generating income, these projects have other spin-offs. Projects and schemes fall under five broad themes – regeneration, environment, education, science and technology, and communities. Investing in these areas has had a significant impact, which will

generate waves of change for years to come.

Besides the large-scale projects, there are thousands of smaller projects around the UK making a big difference to local communities. There are 500 village and community halls helping to put new life back into communities where people can meet, put on a play, or hold a fête. The Commission has also invested in church bells and floodlights, 250 village greens, 8,000 new miles of cycleways, and planted over one million trees in new woodlands. These are things which make a real difference to people where they live. They will never grab the headlines, but I think they are very important to the health and future of our communities.

## Looking to the future

The role of the Commission is changing as its projects and schemes open and set out on their own. The Commission started in 1995 and expects to close in 2005. It is a relatively short life cycle, but one that has seen enormous changes. As an organisation, the Commission has gone from a period of inviting and assessing applications to making grants and ensuring that projects are built successfully.

The work of the Millennium Commission will leave a lasting legacy around the UK, long after the Commission itself has gone. I hope the Commission will be remembered as a body which tapped the enthusiasm and talents of our generation and enabled hundreds of really good ideas to be put into practice. I hope we have said something positive about our generation and our vision of the future.

The Lottery as a whole has certainly been a creative investment for the UK, and the Millennium Commission has been forward-thinking in its choices. I know that basic health and education is society's first priority, but it is important to have more than just the basics. This investment in new bridges, science projects, creative arts, education, environmental sustainability and a range of community facilities would simply not have existed without this pool of funds to support them. I think the Lottery funding has been the spice in the mix. Taken with the creativity of people in the UK, it has produced some remarkable initiatives.