

Scenic Railway could be fixed to ride once again

By JENNA PUDELEK

AN iconic and historically important rollercoaster that was badly damaged in an arson attack at a Kent amusement park can be restored to its former glory, say campaigners.

Twenty-five per cent of the Grade-II listed Scenic Railway, which was the oldest rollercoaster in the UK, was destroyed in the blaze at Margate's Dreamland on Monday evening.

But the Save Dreamland Campaign, Thanet District Council and English Heritage are confident the 88-year-old ride can be restored and rebuilt.

Nick Laister, leader of the campaign, said: "Several people who know the Scenic Railway well, and have maintained the ride over the years, have told me that repairing the structure will not be a major task.

"With all this local knowledge, the expertise of rollercoaster specialists, and the hundreds of photographs of the ride, I am now convinced that a rebuild is possible and achievable."

Vulnerable

Kent Police confirmed on Tuesday the blaze had been started deliberately after specialist officers and fire investigation teams sent samples from the site for analysis.

But as Kent on Sunday went to press, police were yet to make any arrests.

Dreamland is owned by Margate Town Centre Regeneration Company. Mr Laister said he spoke to its chairman, Toby Hunter, this week.

"Mr Hunter confirmed that engineering firm Jacobs will be on-site from Monday assessing the damage and advising on the works required to rebuild the ride," he said.

"The ride has suffered from serious fires before and has been rebuilt. It can be rebuilt and little of its historic interest will have been lost.

"For the time being the most important thing is to stop this from becoming another Brighton West Pier, with a series of further arson attacks. Security at the site must be stepped up immediately to protect this now extremely vulnerable listed building."

Cllr Sandy Ezekiel, the leader of Thanet council also called for security at the site to be stepped up.

Arson cause of blaze that gutted famed rollercoaster

"Our conservation and planning officers have a wealth of technical expertise that can be called upon by the owner [*sic*] if they require it and we would be happy to offer them help and advice.

"In the first instance, we are calling on the owners of the site to take urgent action to ensure that security at the site is stepped up, in view of what's happened," he said.

The council and campaigners met with representatives from English Heritage on Wednesday to visit the site.

Dave Collard, a campaigner who began working at Dreamland in 1991 and went on to become brakeman and engineer on the Scenic, said the biggest loss to the blaze was the workshop containing the ride's four original trains.

Speaking after walking around the wreckage of the rollercoaster, he said: "Normally it's exciting and knowing what had happened I didn't know if I wanted to see it. It took a while to sink in seeing it in that state."

But Mr Collard is confident the Scenic can be rebuilt, he said: "The trains are the major loss, but it does not mean the end. We have been fighting for Dreamland for five years and we are not going to stop."

English Heritage said the wooden structure was a unique survivor of the inter-war period of seaside developments when Margate was a leading resort and tourist destination.

After a team visited the site, a spokesman said it was agreed that it was a feasible to repair the rollercoaster.

He said: "English Heritage will support the site owner, the council and the people of Margate in their efforts to resurrect this unique part of their heritage and to restore it to its position at the heart of the town."

Help funding the rebuilding work had not been ruled out, he said.