



HENLEY BLEED TWINNING ASSOCIATION

Report to Henley Town Council 5 April 2016

The formal twinning of the two towns was confirmed by the signing of the Town Twinning Charter at a ceremony held in Henley Town Hall on the 22nd of April 2013 and confirmed by a reciprocal ceremony at Bled Castle in September the same year.

The twinning followed visits by various dignitaries to Henley including the then British Ambassador to Slovenia, Andrew Page, the Mayor of Bled, Janez Fyfjar, his director of tourism, Eva Strauss-Podlogar and the Slovenian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Iztok Jarc. The venture was also supported and encouraged by our local MP John Howell.

The twinning concept had arisen from the support given by Bled to a team of 20 local fundraisers who had visited in 2010 to climb Mount Triglav, Slovenia's iconic peak, to raise funds for Cancer Research UK. Hosted by the Bled Mayor at a reception the day afterwards in Bled Castle the subject of a town twinning came up. Discussions followed over a 3 year period before the Charter was eventually signed.

It was always recognised that the first connection would be the strong link that both towns have with rowing. Bled has been the host venue for a succession of rowing world championships and world cup events. Since the twinning a team of local rowers have participated, by invitation, in the Slovenian National rowing championships in Bled in September 2013 and a team of young rowers from the Bled Rowing Club participated in the Henley Town and Visitors Regatta in August 2014. Discussions are now going forward with representatives of Upper Thames Rowing Club to take crews over to Slovenia in 2016.

It was also recognised that both towns have world renowned business schools. The Principals of each school have recently agreed to make a joint presentation in Henley and discussions are in hand to secure the date and venue for this event later this year. It is hoped that this will encourage a dialogue between representatives of the business communities in both locations, particularly around tourism and travel. We have recently made contact with Henley College in the hope that we might encourage the students there to interact with their counterparts in Bled, where there is a very well developed travel and tourism programme.

We have now secured a date for the first visit of the Henley Symphony Orchestra to perform in the Festival Hall in Bled, a 512 seater auditorium on the shores of the lake. A planning visit will take place this May with a concert in the spring of 2017 at which it is hoped that over 50 Henley musicians of all ages will perform. This event has the support of the UK Ambassador in Slovenia, Sophie Honey and her UK counterpart, Tudaj Rupal. We are hopeful that it will develop further and that soon we will see regular representation of Slovenian artists on the fringe of Henley Festival as well as Henley musicians at the annual "Okarina" music festival in Bled.

There are also plans with regard to creating sporting links in Football and Tennis. The Association were heavily involved in seeking to introduce a one mile open water swimming competition to Lake Bled to be run by the organisers of the successful Henley Swim. These discussions are ongoing.

The town has a very strong sporting heritage with numerous Olympic medallists in rowing and highly successful triathlon and running events as well as top level (World Cup) Biathlon and running events.

We see many opportunities for the cross fertilisation of ideas in commerce, sport and the arts. We have had some continuing exchanges between young students from Peppard school via skype with their counterparts in Slovenia and we have every hope that this will eventually develop into regular exchange visits.

In short we see everything to commend this town twinning which we believe has a great deal to offer to the citizens of Henley. We hope that we can rely on the support of the Town Council in our endeavours to bring these opportunities to the Town. The obvious and outward confirmation of this link by the erection of the road signs requested would be appreciated.

Steve Bennett (Chairman).