

The boxer and the builder: How they met



John Regan met Chris Eubank in the late 1980s after Ronnie Davis, one of his employees, started training the young boxer. A couple of years later, Eubank became a household name after beating the Nigel Benn, the world middleweight champion, in one of the most famous bouts in British boxing history.

By that time, the two had become firm friends. Regan was at the ringside during Eubank's many wars, and at one point stayed with the Eubanks for nine months. He converted the property next to Eubank's home into a personal gym and designed a piece of apparatus – a kind of heavy bag with four targets to help boxers to work on combinations – that helped him in the run-up to his fight with Henry Wharton, considered by many pundits to be Eubank's most complete performance. Lennox Lewis later used the same device to prepare for his fights with the legendary Evander Holyfield.

Regan's relationship with Eubank has always been stormy – he claims to have been the only man to have ever had a fight with Eubank outside the ring – but they remain close, and he is godfather to one of Eubank's children.

Eubank is now thought to be in need of cash, and is hoping to make some by redeveloping his £2m home and gym into blocks of flats. Despite complaints from neighbours, it is understood that council officers have indicated their support for the plans and they should get approval in September.

use of public money on any plans of the pier, no matter how revised. "It was lovely to meet Chris Eubank," he says, "he was very charming and committed to making the pier come to life again. But we would not be able to recommend that it would get public money – although we're not closing the door on a privately funded scheme."

Clearly, the battle for public funds is a political one, and City Partnerships needs to build up a coalition of allies. Regan already has the support of the Noble Organisation, an entertainment group that operates Brighton's Palace Pier, and Save Our Seafront, a lobby group that opposed St Modwen's plans.

Noble had threatened to mount a legal challenge to the use of lottery funding to St Modwen on the grounds that it constituted state aid to a competitor. It complained to the European commission, and this resulted in plans for the West Pier being put on hold for a year.

Further legal challenges looked possible if St Modwen had secured EH approval.

Save Our Seafront was worried that the scale of the developer's proposals, which included massive retail and restaurant elements, would ruin the

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Andrew Johnson, English Heritage

Brighton coastline. Regan's group has more modest ambitions. The centrepiece and financial driver of the project would be an 80-bedroom hotel, but this would consist of slender eight- to 10-storey towers that would not intrude to heavily on sight lines. Hotel operator Malmaison, a subsidiary of the property group MWB that is funding the project, is believed to have signed heads of terms to run it. Regan says Eubank plans to take one of the hotel's suites – unsurprising given that the ex-pugilist once declared he wanted to live in the concert hall of the pier itself.

Noble is thought to regard Regan's scheme as a complement rather than as competitor to the Palace Pier – the remainder of the scheme would largely consist of tea rooms, two to four restaurants and a 365-day-a-year exhibition on the main pier decking called "The Brighton Story". Regan says Eubank met the organisation's boss, Andrew Noble, on a plane after a book signing, and this helped smooth relations between the two groups. It would also, of course, placate the heritage funds fear of spending public money on a court case.

The aim of Regan's project is to stitch the West Pier into the fabric of a regenerated town. A nearby paddling pool would be converted into conference facilities – fulfilling a long-term ambition of the council. A monorail would run past the pier and connect it with an area earmarked for a new town centre. Regan is also keen to get in contact with PY Gerbeau, the former Millennium Dome boss, whose current employer, X-Leisure Fund, has splashed out £65m on the commercial element of Brighton marina. "The West Pier could be part of a much bigger scheme, particularly with its link to the monorail," Regan says. "Hopefully, City Partnership can be the catalyst that stitches the elements together."

Nick Lomax, the managing director of Cassidy Edwards & Lomax, the architect behind Regan's designs, is more upbeat today than he was in the aftermath of EH's report. He says that by bringing the West Pier into the broader regeneration of Brighton it could still be salvaged, and he is in talks with interested parties about drawing up the masterplan himself. He adds: "To get the go-ahead for the West Pier on its own would be quite difficult, but as part of a wider strategy it has got a chance."

EH and the heritage fund will need some convincing if Regan is to fulfil his dream. And one thing is for certain: Eubank will need to be on top form and his best behaviour if Regan is get through doors that are now barely ajar. Six years since he last entered the ring, Regan better hope that Eubank is still a winner.

