How our grant ‘turbocharged’ the Mary Rose



The Mary Rose was built in 1510-11 at the start of Henry VIII’s reign and was one of his favourite ships until it sank in 1545. Credit: Hufton and Crow.

A heritage project focused on organisational sustainability strengthened the museum’s future, created new opportunities and deepened relationships with its community and peers.

Based in Portsmouth’s Historic Dockyard, the Mary Rose Museum is home to a unique 16th-century warship and the largest collection of Tudor objects in the world. However, after using up its financial reserves during the Coronavirus pandemic, the museum was in crisis.

In 2023, our £241,835 grant supported The Mary Rose Trust – which runs the museum – with its organisational sustainability. Led by Chief Executive Dominic Jones, the Trust changed the way it operates and connects with the heritage sector.

Dominic says: “The Heritage Fund grant gave us the tools and opportunities we needed to succeed and helped us unlock over £1million of additional benefits.”



Dominic Jones and his team used our grant to make The Mary Rose Trust fit for the future. Credit: Harvey Mills.

Organisational sustainability is one of the four investment principles we ask all applications to consider. By supporting skills and capacity development, our funding can ensure a sound long-term future for heritage organisations and even encourage new investment that benefits communities and economies.

Creating a resilient future

To ensure the museum's survival, The Mary Rose Trust structured its application and project around five strands focused on financial sustainability. Dominic shares the activities delivered and the savings made along the way.

1. Future planning

"We commissioned a feasibility study to explore how the museum could generate more income, which resulted in us working with our landlord to double the capacity of the café and shop.

"Many museums receive cultural exemption from VAT, but previously we couldn't afford advice about this. The Heritage Fund grant allowed us to speak to a consultant and now we'll be able to save £175,000 a year from April 2026 when our Capital Goods Program ends."

2. Environmental sustainability

"Energy was our second biggest cost, so we dedicated time each week to explore ways to save money. By making adjustments and using energy differently during hot and cold periods, we've saved around 20%.

“The feasibility study also explored the use of heat pumps and solar panels. We used those findings to apply to the Garfield Western Foundation and received a grant of £500,000.”

3. Strategic thinking

“We have very experienced people working here, but previously they were in silos. Through coaching and management training, we now have a real tight executive team working towards a common goal – financial sustainability.

“We brought in an HR expert to help us change our mindset from a museum that’s running a project into a museum that’s running a successful visitor attraction. We reviewed our structure and now only have four business units, four budgets and four people in the executive team, saving £250,000 a year.”

4. Critical infrastructure and improvement

“Our old website provided limited functionality and cost us money to make updates. We’ve now brought the website in-house where our team can update it and keep it secure.

“We also introduced a new finance and HR system to improve efficiency and provide better support to our staff.”

5. Learning and community engagement

“We created the community programme ‘Anchored in the community’ to bring the Mary Rose to new audiences. Working across six partnerships and a variety of festivals and shows, we ran activities such as breakdancing and creating Braille art with artists with vision impairments. The results came together in a community showcase.

“It had a huge local impact and we’re now using this as a case study to show future funders the difference we can make.”

Connecting with the sector

Reflecting on the overall impact of our funding, Dominic says: "The Heritage Fund grant allowed us to think the unthinkable. It allowed us to feel like we could deliver our future and gave us confidence to talk to others in the sector and advise them on resilience.

“Two years on, we now have a clear vision and strategy for financial sustainability."

This year, the Mary Rose Museum hosted the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) conference and delivered a workshop sharing lessons from its resilience project. "I'd never been prouder of the Mary Rose than at that conference,” says Dominic.



The AIM conference brings together independent museums from across the UK.

The Trust has now built informal partnerships with a network of museums, exchanging ideas and best practice on everything from collaborating with volunteers to creating interactive exhibitions.

"This is the best thing I've done as the CEO of the Mary Rose Museum, because it's given us a real clear future," Dominic says. "With this resilience grant, we were able to do five years' work in one year. We're now a business that has a clear vision.

"The Heritage Fund supercharged our ability to make our organisation resilient."

Running a resilience project?

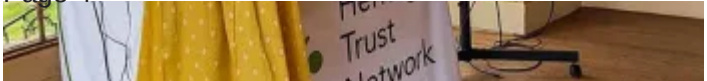
If you have a project idea, Dominic shares his advice:

- Be brave. "Spend time before going to application to think about what your future looks like and explore what would make the biggest impact for your organisation."
- Think the unthinkable. "We thought solar panels were too expensive, but our feasibility study allowed us to explore options we thought weren't possible."
- Use the grant to tease out your strategy. "This grant unlocked our future. Explore what your strategy is and what you need to get your long-term vision."

If you're thinking of applying for funding, read our organisational sustainability and resilience good practice guidance.



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Gopika Jayasree, who took part in Digital Heroes, talking at an event called Heritage Unleashed – Wider Engagement Through Digital.



a more resilient heritage sector

The Big City Butterfly project worked with partners to improve the quality and connectivity of London's green spaces, boosting habitats and connecting the community with nature. Photo: Chris O'Donovan.



innovate

Creating a new museum for the Mary Rose warship