Bell tolls for church’s place in history

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Now, Grade I listed St Peter’s, the town’s most historic landmark, is to offer more of its fascinating past to thousands of visitors, thanks to a £39,200 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The building, which is cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT), is like a time capsule of the town’s history, dating back to the 11th century. Its architecture demonstrates the influence of European migrants fleeing persecution, and it is said to have helped the earliest pilgrims on their journey to settle in America.

The curfew that peals out each and every night at 8pm is made possible by a rota of 31 bellringers who take turns in this duty, something that their ancestors have done for centuries. It is also said that the Pilgrim Fathers, en route to the New World, stopped at Sandwich and prayed at St Peter’s in order to resolve an argument before continuing on their journey.

The project, For Whom the Bell Tolls, will be run by the CCT in partnership with the Friends of St Peter (who are contributing £10,000 towards the cost). It will provide a wealth of new information that will be displayed to help visitors enjoy and understand this important local building. It will also provide improved access for disabled people.

A pageant depicting historical scenes and characters associated with the church will also take place in a special event next July. Involved in the procession will be a series of illustrated banners that will then be displayed permanently in the building.

CCT will involve a community artist to work with local people to provide new illustrations for the visitor information. The project will also result in family trail leaflets and an education pack. A new welcome desk will become the focal point for visitors.

St Peter’s was declared redundant in 1974 and was taken on by CCT who have spent £600,000 on repairing the building since then. It is used for a range of events and the occasional religious service. The original church on the site is thought to have been destroyed during a French raid on the town in 1216. The current building was constructed during the late 13th and early 14th centuries although the original tower collapsed in 1661, it is said, during an earthquake.

The present tower boasts a distinctive onion-shaped dome – a major landmark on the historic town’s skyline – which shows the influence of Hugenot refugees who settled in Sandwich and worshipped in the church after fleeing religious persecution in medieval France.

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: “St Peter’s provides a rich resource for anyone interested in the history of Sandwich, its role as one of the Cinque Ports, and as a haven for refugees fleeing persecution in medieval Europe. This project will re-invigorate these stories and present them for a wider audience.”

Rebecca Rees, Director South East of the Churches Conservation Trust, said: “The Friends of St Peter have done so much for this church and with this grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, for which we are so grateful, they will be able to realise fully the potential of the church as a visitor attraction and a community building.”

Notes to editors

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) is the national charity protecting historic churches at risk. The Trust is responsible for over 340 beautiful buildings which attract almost two million visitors a year.

Established under Ecclesiastical Law on 1 April 1969 the charity receives its churches in the form of ‘vestings’ from the Church Commissioners. All the CCT’s churches remain consecrated and can be used for occasional worship.

The CCT works with local people to bring historic churches back into the heart of the community and use as a social, tourism, educational or cultural resource. The CCT’s care of Grade I and II* buildings has given it an international reputation in heritage conservation and regeneration.
Chairman of the Trust is Loyd Grossman OBE FSA, who was appointed in 2007. Crispin Truman is Chief Executive.

Further information

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