Lottery grant to reveal hidden heritage in Combe Martin Parish Church

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This award will allow the church to conduct urgent repairs to the Roodscreen timberwork and clean and conserve its remarkable medieval paintings, many of which are hidden under centuries of grease and grime.

The award has been match-funded by £18,500 from Devon Historic Churches Trust, Garfield Weston Foundation, Headley Trust (Sainsbury Family), Margaret Clennell Gift Fund and the Idlewild Trust.

The repair work will start in late February and the cleaning of the twenty three paintings of Saints and Apostles will begin in the summer of 2010 and continue until 2012.

Commenting on the award, the Rector, the Revd. Keith Wyer, said: "It will reveal Combe Martin's treasure of 500 years ago! This Heritage Lottery Fund grant has come just in time and we are very grateful. Without it, this work would have been impossible for us. Maintaining such a large and ancient building creates huge demands on the voluntary giving, year in and year out, of our Church members.

"The Rector Keith Wyer receiving back the £1. Talent he gave Elizabeth Webb, in 2006, now turned into a £45,100, HLF Your Heritage Award."

Elizabeth Webb, Roodscreen Project Manager, praised the enthusiastic and most generous in-kind support promised by the regular congregation of 60 members for the next two years. She said: "This voluntary contribution was an essential element in our achieving this award. We are really looking forward to holding open-weekends, guided tours, art workshops and talks, to increase learning and understanding of this wonderful heritage. We hope the Roodscreen will bring the whole Mediæval history of the Church and the village alive and give a great deal of enjoyment to everyone."

She went on to explain that the building of a Church in Combe Martin was closely associated with the rising population and prosperity of the village from the 12th century; following the development of iron and silver-lead mining and through increased use of silver coinage for the woollen trade across Europe. It is said that silver from the Royal Mines in Combe Martin helped to fund the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, five years before the Roodscreen was built.

Hugh Harrison, timber consultant of West Anstey, who will carry out the repairs, said: "These West Country Roodscreens, unique to each church, are extremely precious, and internationally significant. Over the years the Roodscreen foundation at Combe Martin has become totally inadequate for so large a structure."

Last Easter, a pilot analysis of the paintwork by Eddie Sinclair, conservator of Crediton, produced some exciting discoveries. Several panels, thought to be blank, actually contain figures of female saints. She believes local pigments were used and are in danger of fusing with 500 years of dirt and varnish. Eddie said: "Without action very soon these major works of art would become impossible to clean and be lost to Combe Martin."

Explaining the importance of the award, HLF's Head of Region for the South West, Nerys Watts, said: "This project will not only conserve a significant and historic structure within Combe Martin Parish Church, but will also provide

opportunities for the local community and visitors alike to learn about many aspects of the heritage of the area, from medieval music to geology, embroidery to the natural history of the churchyard. We are delighted to be able to support this important work."

Notes to editors

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) enables communities to celebrate, look after and learn more about our diverse heritage. From our great museums and historic buildings to local parks and beauty spots or recording and celebrating traditions, customs and history, HLF grants open up our nation’s heritage for everyone to enjoy. Since 1994 it has supported more than 26,000 projects, allocating over £4 billion across the UK.

Further information

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