Historic Essex oyster vessels to sail again

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The oyster dredging smack - Priscilla, dating to 1893 and the Trinity House Launch 393, built in the 1950s – are both on the National Small Boat Register and have historic links with Brightlingsea and the Tendring coastline. They are both at risk of loss unless urgent repairs are carried out.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "These boats help us to understand the economic and social heritage of the Tendring peninsula coastline. Now, this HLF grant will bring this history up to date by providing opportunities for local people to get involved in conserving and protecting the boats, while learning many new skills in the process."

The project – called Land and Sea – the craft of building and using traditional boats – will, over three years, see 15 apprentices working towards qualifications in marine engineering while they restore the ships back to seaworthiness.

Priscilla, a 30-foot long Oyster dredging smack built in Brightlingsea and the oldest Stone Brothers Shipyard vessel in existence today, is a typical smack used by local fishermen. Operating throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, she signifies an important era in Brightlingsea's history - a time when the Stone boat building yard was a major employer right up until its closure in 1988. She was found and recovered in Bristol ten years ago in a very poor condition and requires complete restoration.

Trinity House Launch 393, built by Lambie Ltd of North Shields, North Tyneside, was a service vessel used by Trinity House in the Thames Estuary and North Sea used to maintain local navigational marks to ensure safety at sea. Typical of the type of boat used to maintain lights at sea and supply lightships and isolated lighthouses with food, fuel and crew, she was assigned to two large Trinity House vessels (THV Stella and THV Winston Churchill) where she was hung on davits to enable her to be used for shallow water work when needed.

Both ships were based in Harwich during their working lives. A series of boatyard open days are now planned to welcome over 3,000 visitors during the lifetime of the project where they will be able to talk to the apprentices, view the vessels and watch traditional skills being put into practice to restore them. Volunteers will also be working in partnership with Eastside Community Heritage to capture oral histories from local boat builders and sailors, their wives and families and the findings will be made available on a national database. These stories will be told as part of a multi-media exhibition exploring the seafaring way of life, touring a range of local and national gallery and museum locations. The trust will also work with Eastern Angles Theatre Company to develop a play using extracts drawn from oral histories, while a book is planned to accompany the exhibition.

Rupert Marks, Chairman of the Pioneer Sailing Trust said: "Maritime heritage is not just about the big famous vessels. It is also about simple, working craft the played a vital role in keeping the nation fed and the shipping safe at sea. We are excited about restoring two simple but significant vessels that help to tell this story. We are also pleased that we can use the restoration process as a means of inspiring the next generation of boat builders and restorers."

Notes to editors:

The HLF grant to the project Land and Sea – the craft of building and using traditional boats is for £790,500 (84% of project costs) and is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.

Eastside Community Heritage is a charity based in East London that documents the history of ordinary people from the area.

Further information

More information can be obtained from the Pioneer Sailing Trust website.

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