Ringwood celebrates

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It has served as a community meeting place for more than 280 years but few people are aware of its significance. Now, all of that will change thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant that will restore Ringwood's unique Meeting House and create a local history centre.

A grant of £513,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) will permit urgent repairs to the building and bring a wealth of historical artefacts and documents onto public display. All archive material will also be digitised and made available online.

Built in 1727 as a Nonconformist chapel, the Meeting House is thought to be the most complete example of such an 18th-century building remaining in the country. It has stayed virtually intact with original features, including the box pews, still in situ. The Grade II listed building is in the heart of the town where it has been managed and cared for by the Ringwood Meeting House Association (RMHA) for the past 25 years.

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: " This modest building has served the local community for nearly three centuries and the grant will not only enable it to fulfil this social role into the future, but will help residents and visitors alike to discover so much more about their town."

The Association is made up entirely of volunteers and works closely with conservation and heritage staff from New Forest District Council and Hampshire County Council. An expert-designed local history centre with be established within the Meeting House with the aim of encouraging local residents and schools to find out more about the heritage of the area and its people. There will be information about the building itself, Nonconformism, and the town.

Volunteers will be trained up to run the history centre and develop skills in research, IT, how to conserve a historic collection, managing a heritage site, and delivering a learning programme. An additional ten volunteers will be recruited to assist the existing pool of around 20.

Building repairs will concentrate on the south and part of the west walls of the structure and on guttering and downpipes. Poor heating and lighting will be replaced and access for disabled people greatly improved. It is anticipated that the annual number of visitors, some 12,500, will be swelled to 16,000 following the project. The restoration of the Meeting House's 19th-century organ will also make organ concerts possible.

There are plans to install a reproduction of a Parliament Clock – these large clocks named after a late 18th century Act of Parliament that placed a tax on the ownership of personal watches – were set up in public places so that people could avoid being taxed.

John Waddington, RMHA Chairman, said: "This is great news, the Meeting House is the most historic building in Ringwood and it will now be lovingly restored. The history centre will help people of all ages to learn more about the rich history of Ringwood and its environs and the building will continue as a venue for cultural activities."

Notes to editors

The HLF grant to the project The Ringwood Meeting House Conservation and Heritage Project is for £513,000 (73% of

project costs) and is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.

Further information

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