Torbay Lass gets the green light

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Fears that 1923-built Torbay Lass might never head out to sea again have been allayed thanks to the efforts of a Torbay-based campaign group and crucial funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The group, headed by the Trinity Sailing Foundation, is seeking a £900,000 grant to restore and preserve the vessel.

The first stage of the application to HLF has now been approved, providing funds with which to carry out temporary repairs to the ailing vessel and draft the detailed application for the major grant. That means Torbay Lass will be able to return to Brixham harbour under her own power, and there await the final decision about her future.

Brixham shipwright John Cuthbertson and local trawler skipper Toni Knights, who have both skippered Trinity's other traditional sailing trawlers boats, will head the crew on the voyage back from the River Thames, where Torbay Lass is currently lying.

As a precaution, Torbay Lass will be shadowed by an escort vessel as she needs to undergo a complete restoration.

Struan Coupar, Chairman of the Trinity Sailing Foundation, said he is delighted that boat will be heading back to Torbay. "Everyone at Trinity is obviously thrilled, as we hope everyone else in the local community will be. The fact that she is the last Brixham trawler, that needs restoration, especially with the name Torbay Lass, makes it all the more exciting. It has been a real group effort from an ever-growing and supportive steering group, composed of a number of organisations and individuals from across Torbay."

Her current owners do not have the funds to maintain or restore her, and the owners of Tilbury Docks, where she has been kept, wanted her out earlier this year.

Torbay Lass was given a stay of execution until the Lottery bid result was revealed after Totnes MP Sarah Wollaston and Torbay Mayor Gordon Oliver intervened with letters of support.

The second, more detailed, application needs to be submitted in February to fund the main restoration work. A final decision on her fate will be announced next June.

Torbay's mayor has now joined the steering group and will sit on the committee tasked with raising £371,000 in match funding that will be required to supplement the HLF main grant, if that is approved. The total cost of the project to save the vessel is estimated at £1.27 million.

The Trinity Sailing Foundation already owns and runs three of the surviving Brixham trawlers – Leader, Provident and Golden Vanity. It is a registered charity dedicated to the preservation of historic local vessels and providing sail training for young people and sailing opportunities for members of the general public with an interest in traditional craft.

Among those also supporting the project are Brixham Town Council, the Chamber of Commerce, Torbay Development Agency, South Devon College, Tor Bay Harbour, as well as prominent local people including former pilot Captain Bob Curtis, shipwright Bob Cann and enthusiast Bill Wakeham.

The campaign is now seeking practical and financial support from the Torbay community. Mr Coupar said: “Now the real hard work starts as we need to start raising the additional money that will be required, and for that we need businesses, other organisations, and individual members of the community to get behind us and help. We hope to see a big turnout to welcome Torbay Lass when she comes back.”

Torbay Lass is one of 200 vessels that form the nation’s National Historic Fleet, vessels that include HMS Victory, Cutty Sark and SS Great Britain. Six of the vessels in the fleet are former Brixham sailing trawlers, a testimony to their reputation as an iconic class of working vessel in the days of sail.

Five of the six have already been brought back to Torbay and restored. The aim is to complete the locally-built heritage fleet based in Brixham by restoring Torbay Lass in the harbour area, with the work open to the public. The work will take two years to complete.

Sailing trawlers were first developed by the fishermen of Tor Bay and became the model for deep sea trawling in Europe during the 19th century. At one time more than 3,000 were in commission, based in ports like Hull, Grimsby and Lowestoft as well as Brixham and Plymouth. They vastly increased the catches made by previous methods, and linked up with the developing railway network to bring fresh fish to all parts of the country.

Nerys Watts, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South West England, said: “This is an historic vessel that is much loved by the local community. We look forward to receiving in due course the detailed plans for her restoration and hope to see the Heritage Fleet in Brixham working in partnership for the benefit of them all.”

Notes to editors

Trinity Sailing Foundation is a registered charity (No: 1137405) dedicated to supporting the personal development of disadvantaged young people through offshore sail training and to conserve the nationally important historic sailing vessels in its care. Based in Brixham, its fleet of historic sailing vessels also provide opportunities for traditional sailing holidays around the UK and Europe.

Further information

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