Christmas comes early for Eastgate House

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The imposing Tudor town house – on historic Rochester High Street – is a draw for hundreds of thousands of visitors who flock to the area each year to see Rochester's rich heritage, old world charm and links to the famous author.

Eastgate House – a Grade I listed building - was built in the latter part of the 16th century for Sir Peter Buck, the Clerk of the Cheque at Chatham Dockyard. It was lived in by five generations of the Buck family.

During the 18th and 19th centuries it had many uses, perhaps most notably as a girls' school. It featured as Westgate in Dickens' The Pickwick Papers and as the Nun's House in his work The Mystery of Edwin Drood. Now, as the bicentenary year of the great writer's birth comes to an end, the property has received £1.28million of HLF investment to transform it. Medway Council is contributing a further £700,000 towards the project, which will cost a total of £2.1million to complete. The work will start next year and be completed in 2015.

Cllr Howard Doe, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, said: "Eastgate House is a stunning Tudor property, a wonderfully imposing and awe-inspiring building that is a jewel in the crown in regards to Rochester's historic High Street. We are blessed with an abundance of heritage in this part of Medway and this Heritage Lottery Fund grant will mean we can transform Eastgate House – which featured in two of Dickens' novels – so that the public can fully appreciate its wonder. It is fitting that this money has been awarded as it is the icing on the cake of a wonderful year of celebration – one in which Dickens' bicentenary played a large part locally, and was marked nationally and even internationally."

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East, added: "Today's Heritage Lottery Fund grant will not only conserve the important heritage fabric of the building itself, but also help transform Eastgate House into multi-functional community space with vastly improved visitor facilities and access, turning this 400 year-old historic house into a 21st-century tourist attraction. It's great to know that our grant comes in the year of Dickens' bicentenary and that this project will explore that fascinating part of the house's heritage for everyone to learn about and enjoy."

Mark Reckless, MP for Rochester and Strood, also welcomed the news. He said: "The Heritage Lottery Fund is to be congratulated for granting Eastgate House vital funds. Eastgate House has stood proud in Rochester since the late 1590s. With the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Eastgate House will be reinvigorated as a tourist as well as community centre piece in the heart of Rochester for future centuries following this decision 200 years after Dickens' birth."

Eastgate House is set in its own gardens and the site also encompasses an annexe building and cottage designed by Sir Guy Dawber in the 1920s. In 1897, the house was bought by the Corporation of Rochester and turned into the city museum. In the 1970s it became the Charles Dickens' Centre until 2004.

The house is currently occasionally used for art and local history exhibitions as well as educational visits, heritage open days and as a wedding venue.

The Heritage Lottery Fund Grant will be used to transform the property and the way it can be used. The money will help support, in partnership with Medway Council and other funding partners, the repair and conservation of the building's

fabric, from the roof, to the windows and floors.

New heating and lighting will be installed, removing unsightly pipework and wiring and providing services more sensitive to the 16th-century interior.

Access for visitors will be greatly improved with a new lift at the back of the building, which has received planning permission, and is being sensitively designed by architects, Thomas Ford & Partners, in consultation with English Heritage and local residents.

A staircase, removed by the museum at the turn of the century will be re-instated to allow easy access from the first to the second floor. The project will help tell the story of Eastgate House, for the first time, focusing on the house and the people who have made it their home, for over 400 years.

A ground floor display will showcase the house and its development, while new galleries on the second floor will host changing exhibitions developed with the Medway community and in partnership with other museums.

Hand-held touch screen devices will also be bought so that once the project is finished visitors will use them to reveal even more about the secrets of this magical building. In addition, an extensive activity programme has been designed to give the people of Medway access to Eastgate and its history throughout the construction work and beyond.

This project will create new jobs, new ways for people to get involved as volunteers and other supporters, and will secure the future of this much loved local landmark.

The announcement is welcome news to Medway Council who have named 2012 a ‘Year of Celebration’ due to the Dickens’ bicentenary, the Olympics, and the fact that the Royal Engineers have been based in the area for 200 years.