Unique prison tower to be saved

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Rye Museum Association, which owns the Rye Castle site, had been advised by experts that remedial work was urgently needed for the Grade I listed Women's Tower to survive. Now the association, together with the Rye Partnership, will be able to save the structure from further ruin and create a new exhibition dedicated to the lives of women of Rye and to explain the tower's history.

In addition to saving the 19th century structure, the project entitled Women and Children of Rye, will research the lives of local women during four historical periods. It will explore Victorian times and the role of women prisoners held in the tower to discover their identities and their crimes; it will look at the role played by women during the town's notorious involvement in smuggling; how women and children fended for themselves while their menfolk were away at sea for protracted periods; and what local life was like during wartime.

The resulting stories will form the basis of a programme of rolling exhibitions on the ground floor of the tower which will also include a reproduction of a prison cell. Additionally there will be access to the higher level which will form a conservation and archiving space. The funding will also enable a virtual tour to be created to enable disabled visitors to see around the restored building.

Local people have rallied to support the Rye Museum Association by giving up their time to raise awareness of the tower's plight. The Activ8 Art Group joined the campaign to save the tower by creating a colourful exhibition at the Tilling Green community centre, dedicated to the tower and the women who would have been imprisoned in it, and students from Rye College performed plays and wrote stories of the tower to sell. Volunteers from the local community will now be recruited to help in the research work needed by the project.

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: "This project will enhance a visit to the historic town of Rye by uncovering a specific aspect of local heritage that has been virtually overlooked until now."

For Rye Museum Association, Jeremy Huddle, Chairman of the Project Management Group, said: “We are grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, all of the community groups that have got behind our campaign and to the WARR Partnership and Rother District Council for their support. The Women's Tower project is a local project with a national significance.”

Councillor Keith Glazier, Chairman of the Rye Partnership, said: "This is a real partnership project and the Rye Partnership is pleased to be able to work closely with the Rye Museum Association to make it happen. Saving the Women's Tower for future generations is fantastic, but enabling the local community to learn about the history of their town and about the lives of their ancestors is a wonderful opportunity. I hope many people will get involved."

Amber Rudd, MP for Hastings and Rye, said: "I am delighted that such an important site in Rye is to be saved and restored, thanks to the hard work of the volunteers and the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. I am really looking forward to seeing the women's prison restored to its former glory in all its gory details!"

The Women's Tower at Rye Castle dates from 1837, the same year that Queen Victoria came to the throne. It was purpose-built as a women's prison in order to separate female prisoners from the men and it often housed children

along with their mothers. It stands as an important reminder of the position and treatment of women both in Rye and in the wider society of Victorian Britain.

This unique structure is a Grade I listed building that stands in the south west corner of the old courtyard on the Rye Castle site. It has been used as a museum store since the mid-1950s. Roof repairs were carried out after the Second World War to deal with bomb damage but these finally broke down a few years ago allowing rainwater to enter and cause damage to archives and artefacts stored there.

Notes to editors

- Rye Castle is a Grade I listed building, including the Ypres Tower, a Scheduled Monument, and the Women's Tower which is a Grade I curtilage listed building. The Women's Tower remained in use as a prison until the 1890s although the courtyard which had served as an exercise yard became an ornamental garden in 1862.
- The project Women and Children of Rye was initially given an HLF development grant of £8,600 to help put together a detailed application which has now achieved a second round full grant of £287,100.
- £30,000 grant funding was also achieved from the WARR Partnership and another £30,000 was achieved from the Rother District Council Community Grants Scheme.

Further information

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