Was there an earlier church in East Portlemouth?

14/05/2012

The present church in East Portlemouth was built around 1200 and enlarged in the 15th century. However, indications that there might have been an earlier church on the site led to a ground penetrating radar study in December 2006, which showed what appears to be the buried chamber under what was the nave in the 12th century. The floor of the chamber is about 8 feet below the present floor with walls rising from it along both its sides and its centre.

To investigate the chamber, a trench is to be excavated around one of the sections of wall; it is hoped this trench may contain artefacts that could give the age of the chamber. The section of wall revealed in this way will be covered in walk-on glass so that it will be on permanent view. It is also planned to drill down to the chamber floor in several places and to recover core samples to obtain information about the structure of the floor. The work will be carried out in June under the supervision of South West Archaeology, a company based in South Moulton.

In addition to supporting the excavations, HLF's grant will enable Year 6 students from Stokenham primary school to become actively engaged in the project. The background and aims of the project will be explained to them in late May and they will visit the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter for an illustrated talk on archaeological processes and techniques.

In June, they will come to East Portlemouth Church to observe both the dig and the coring, as well as carrying out their own mini-dig in the school field under the supervision of an archaeologist. They and the East Prawle History Society will also have talks from a visiting historian on life in the South Hams in Anglo-Saxon and early Norman times.

In addition to the active involvement of Stokenham School the project is being supported by many other local groups including East Prawle History Society, East Portlemouth Parish Council and Village Hall Committee, the Friends of East Portlemouth Church and the Diocese of Exeter.

Commenting on the award, the Rector, Rev Pam Kemp, said: " I am very thrilled we have been given this award and delighted that the project will involve the local community, particularly Year 6 and others from Stokenham Primary School".

Explaining the importance of HLF's support, acting Head of South West for HLF, Richard Bellamy, said: "We are delighted to be able to support Portlemouth PCC with this intriguing project. A key aim of our funding is to enable people to learn about and enjoy their local heritage. We hope the project will also help to strengthen local pride, enhancing a sense of community and quality of life; the involvement of so many local people of all ages within the project will ensure that East Portlemouth's past can be better understood and valued in the future."

Further information

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