Watts Gallery's campaigns to save Limnerslease receives Heritage Lottery Fund boost

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Thanks to initial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to support Saving the Watts Studios, the first phase of the Limnerslease Project can begin.

This first-round pass means that the Watts Gallery Trust can progress to the second stage of the HLF application process, where they will be seeking £2.3m million of HLF support towards the £5 million project. HLF has also awarded £184,100 of development funding to help the trust progress its plans.

Since 1938, Limnerslease – the only remaining artist's house and studio designed by Ernest George, celebrated Arts and Crafts architect and tutor to Lutyens - has been in private ownership. The property was divided and modernisation resulted in many of the original features being lost.

For the first time, both parts of Limnerslease are now being offered for sale, presenting the Watts Gallery Trust with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to restore the extraordinary achievement and legacy of G.F and his wife, the artist Mary Watts.

The £5m project - which includes an endowment – will enable Watts Gallery Trust to restore Watts's studio, recognise the contribution of Mary Seton Watts through a permanent exhibition of her collection, her construction of the Grade 1 listed Watts Chapel, and her community involvement with 70 local people who built the chapel. The studio wing of Limnerslease will also house a conservation studio for an annual fellow from City & Guilds of London Art School and the Mary Watts Craft and Community Studio to meet the needs of the growing Art for All Learning programme. There will also be an exhibitions gallery featuring exhibitions and archives on artists' houses and studios.

Saving the Watts studios will establish Compton as a unique Artists' Village, providing a remarkable window on the Arts & Crafts movements and exploring Victorian art, social history, craft and design.

The project will create a centre of excellence for developing skills in conservation, art, craft, design, and will provide a retreat for contemporary artists to draw inspiration from the artists' studios and the collection. The project will offer six apprenticeships in heritage collections, learning, estate management and visitor services.

Perdita Hunt, Director of Watts Gallery, says: "This is tremendous news for future generations that we can leave in tact a unique legacy of two remarkable visionaries, G F Watts and Mary Seton Watts. The gallery, the pottery, the chapel and now their studios will remain in safe keeping and open to the public in perpetuity. Thank you to all those who have had the faith to lend and pledge to our campaign. Thanks to the HLF we can now complete the Watts story in Compton, bringing a copper bottom to all that has been achieved at Watts Gallery.

"Saving the Watts Studios and the return of Limnerslease will enable the Watts Gallery Trust to offer an international hub for exploring the Arts & Crafts movement through the eyes of G F Watts and Mary Watts, reaching new audiences and bringing even more visitors to Compton.

“Over the next year we will be consulting and talking to the local community and our supporters about how they can get involved in helping save this important building for the nation. Receiving this first-round pass award means that we can start to put some of our plans in action and get wider input into shaping the overall project when work on site will hopefully begin in January 2015.

“We are enormously grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, whose generosity was pivotal to the successful restoration of Watts Gallery. We are delighted that they have recognised what an important and vital historic building Limnerslease is.”

Stuart McLeod, Head of HLF South East, said: “Limnerslease is the final piece in the Watts Gallery jigsaw. We recognised that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the Great Studio to be acquired and we applaud the Watts Trust for being so tenacious in pursuing this first step to securing full funding. The Heritage Lottery Fund’s initial support indicates our belief that the building should be preserved for the future and we also welcome plans to create the Mary Watts Craft and Conservation studios where people will have the opportunity learn practical heritage skills.”

Grade II listed Limnerslease was built between 1890 and 1891. In the Arts & Crafts style, the building was lovingly decorated by its artist owners who received visits from many illustrious guests, including William Gladstone, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Baden-Powell.

Former Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Tate Director Nicholas Serota and artists Antony Gormley, William Pye and Alexander Creswell have all pledged their support for the campaign. To find out more visit the Watts Gallery website

Notes to editors

A first-round pass means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

Further information

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