Support for the Abbey Experience

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Two new extensions – one within a ruined chapel – will create space for visitors including families and schoolchildren to learn about the abbey's fascinating history. An archive of documents, dating back 700 years, will be conserved and some, including a 1613 King James Bible, will be restored.

Inappropriate architectural additions to the building will be removed, a medieval herb garden recreated and public access for organised groups will, for the first time, be permitted to the Abbey Meadows which is a county wildlife site.

The abbey, whose distinctive two towers are a prominent local landmark, is a Grade I listed building and part of the churchyard includes scheduled ancient monuments. There has been a church building on the site since the 7th or 8th century and the abbey itself, officially known as the Church of St Mary and St Thomas of Canterbury, has been in continuous use as the parish church of Wymondham for 900 years. The two church towers, one at each end of the building, bear witness to a strained relationship that once existed between Benedictine monks (who built the smaller east tower) and the parishioners (who raised the structure at the opposite end).

The Abbey Experience project – the total cost of which is £2.5 million – involves the building of an extension adjacent to the monks' east tower. The new single story building will provide a space dedicated to learning and interpretation. To the north of the tower, within the ruins of the former St Margaret's Chapel, further study space and a choir vestry will be created. The two new spaces will be linked by a path through the shell of the east tower and the circulation route throughout the whole of the abbey will be improved.

A full time learning and events officer will be employed for three years and will work closely with volunteers to arrange such things as open days and hard-hat tours while the restoration and building works are ongoing. A family discovery trail is just one of a number of projects being planned to provide visitors of all ages with lively means of finding out more about the abbey's history. Learning materials and events will also be aimed specifically at local schools and an introductory film about the building's history will be created by schoolchildren. The project will also permit an archaeological dig to take place on the site.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "The distinctive form of the abbey, visible from miles around, must spark many questions in people's minds. This project will provide answers and so much more for visitors young and old to experience and learn from."

The project is being managed by Wymondham Abbey Parochial Church Council. For the PCC, the Vicar of Wymondham Abbey, Canon Christopher Davies, said: "We're delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this further support. This thrilling news greatly encourages us and means we can achieve our vision that the abbey will be more welcoming and accessible to everyone and that its place in the life of the community is greatly strengthened."

George Freeman, MP for Mid Norfolk, said: "Wymondham Abbey is a historic and architectural jewel in the crown of Norfolk and Britain. I am delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund grant will help the ongoing restoration work of this important historic building, and ensure that this magnificent Abbey can be enjoyed by more people for many generations to come. I was delighted to support the grant bid and look forward to seeing the works over the coming years. I believe the abbey, set on the edge of the beautiful Tiffey Valley, can be a major attraction to visitors and could play a major part

in helping to revitalise the town centre and in help secure a sustainable future for Wymondham.

"I would also like to pay tribute to all the team who work to support the Abbey for all their hard work maintaining our Abbey as a spiritual, cultural and social hub, and living connection with our Christian heritage, for future generations."

Notes to editors

Wymondham Abbey (the church of St Mary and St Thomas of Canterbury) is the parish church of Wymondham, is managed by the parochial church council (a registered charity) and four volunteer church wardens. The PCC is chaired by the vicar, the Reverend Canon Christopher Davies. Further details about the abbey can be viewed on the Wymondham Abbey website.

Further information

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