Grant success for the oldest Methodist building in



Staff and volunteers from the New Room celebrate the grant success

The historic 276 year-old Grade I listed building, in The Horsefair, is known as 'the cradle of Methodism'. In 1739, preacher and priest John Wesley bought a plot of land to build a meeting room for those who were responding to his message of faith and social justice.

The New Room, as Wesley called it, was the starting point for the growth of the Methodist Church, which currently has 75million members around the world.

Now, the grant from the HLF, alongside a grant of £1.4million from the Bristol Methodist District, will enable the existing facilities to be updated. The trustees are planning to create a new three-storey building in the Horsefair Courtyard.

The ground floor of the new building will feature a shop and a café for visitors. On levels two and three there will be a large multi-media lecture and education room for up to 60 people, an extensive resource library on Methodist history, an archives room and offices.

A lift will connect the floors and the existing museum will be completely revamped to reflect John Wesley’s work in Bristol, in 18th-century Britain, and around the world. The interior of the chapel, an architectural gem, will not be changed.

Rev Ward Jones, Chair of the New Room Trustees and the Bristol Methodist District, said: “We are delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded us this significant grant. The New Room has been situated in the heart of Bristol for over 275 years and we now have the chance to look to the future in a very exciting way.

“We will be able to upgrade our current facilities so that we can properly welcome and inform visitors from the local area, from schools and colleges, and from all over the world.

David Worthington, Manager of the New Room, said: “Bristol was the most significant city in John Wesley’s ministry and it was at the New Room that he established the template for the Methodist movement that has now become an international Christian denomination.

“We already work in close partnership with Destination Bristol and the new building will provide an even more attractive visitor experience in the heart of the Bristol Shopping Quarter.”

Mandy Briggs, Education and Outreach Officer, said: “Wesley’s original focus was on education and we want to develop our work in this area, as well as being a place of history and faith that the people of Bristol and beyond can explore, enjoy and treasure.

“We will be able to offer tours, workshops and talks to schools and colleges as well as events for all ages in our new education room.”

The HLF grant will enable the existing museum to be enlarged. It is currently housed in the 18th-century rooms used by John and Charles Wesley and many of the early Methodist preachers.

Gary Best, historian and volunteer Warden at the New Room, has been in charge of developing the scheme, known as the Horsefair Project. He will be supervising the creation of the new museum.

He said: “The new museum has many interesting stories to tell, regardless of whether a visitor is religious or not. It will show not just how important Bristol was to the early Methodist movement and how that movement spread, but also how John Wesley tackled many issues that are still applicable today, such as consumerism, the gap between rich and poor, slavery and the role of women.

“Methodism’s emphasis on empowering individuals and demanding social justice was a key influence on the demand for liberty in America and the creation of trade unions and the Labour Party in Britain. Its influence was also important on a number of social reform movements.

“In addition, John and his brother Charles, the world’s greatest hymnwriter, created the hymn singing tradition that was to sweep across the world. We will also be making improvements to Charles Wesley’s House in Charles Street (which is also run by the New Room) to better tell that particular story.”

The new building has been designed by Purcell and it will be linked to the existing New Room building by a glass roof. It has been designed so that it does not adversely affect either the New Room or the streetscape, by following the pattern of the buildings that used to exist in the New Room courtyard until they were demolished in the 1940s. Planning permission and listed building consent have both been obtained for the project.

It is envisaged that, subject to meeting planning conditions, building work will begin in autumn 2015.

Ben Freeston, Project Architect for the scheme, said: “Purcell is delighted that this exciting project is now being supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and work is now underway to develop the design in preparation for its construction.
“This project represents a new chapter in the evolution of the site and the new building will provide outstanding facilities to allow visitors to explore and learn about the significance of the New Room. We are proud to be involved in such an important project.”

Nerys Watts, Head of HLF South West, said: “Thousands of shoppers pass the entrance to the New Room every day without realising that it is one of the most important buildings in the history of Methodism.

“This grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund will transform the museum’s offering to visitors, ensuring that its internationally important collections and archives are better maintained and displayed. Along with the extensive planned education programme, this project will help to protect Wesley’s legacy and open up the history of his New Place to a whole new audience.”

Notes to editors

Background information - The New Room

The New Room was originally built in 1739 and extended in 1748 by John Wesley at the outset of his work in creating a religious revival in Britain and America. Above the chapel are the Preachers' Rooms where John Wesley and other preachers could stay when in Bristol or en route to preaching engagements in the South West, Wales, and Ireland. For many years Charles Wesley, John’s younger brother and the world’s most influential hymnwriter, was based in Bristol. The New Room was also the starting point for many figures associated with the establishment of the Methodist movement in America.

The New Room, which is located in the heart of Bristol city centre, is open from 10am-4pm six days a week throughout the year. The Trustees also open Charles Wesley’s House to organised groups. The New Room currently receives around 25,000 visitors per annum. It is envisaged that this number is likely to double once the new facilities are in place.

It is:

- the oldest Methodist building in the world
- one of the first places to offer free medical care in Britain
- the place where John Wesley stayed more than anywhere else
- the place where the Methodist system of educating and helping people in ‘classes’ originated
- the first chapel to be licensed for Methodist preaching
- the place from which Wesley spoke against the slave trade
- the location of many of the eighteenth century annual Conferences that determined the development of Methodism
- the place with most links to the development of Methodism in America
- the location of two Grade II listed statues, one of John Wesley and one of Charles Wesley
- the place which virtually all the key figures in early Methodism visited and where a significant number were for a time based

Further information

Contact the New Room office on 0117 926 4740 (9am-4pm) or info@newroombristol.org.uk. Out of hours mobile contact – Mandy Briggs 07765 535 581.