20,000 rare Servite manuscripts and books receive backing

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The Servite Priory library at Benburb, Co. Tyrone, is made up of a number of valuable collections with some material dating back to the mid 16th century. The Servite and Marian collections provide the core of the collection but these are supported by excellent Irish literature and general religious collections. The library also contains extensive archival material relating to the Servites over the past 150 years, including personal records of 300 friars.

Some of the books have been in a Servite Library for over 400 years and have had an amazing journey to reach Benburb. Initially they would have been in Florence, Vicenza or Innsbruck. At the time of the Servite Friars coming to London in 1864 several volumes were brought there for safe-keeping during the time of Italian reunification.

In the late 1940s, when the Benburb Priory was founded, an excellent student library was established with some valuable endowments from the founding American friars. In the year 2000 with the amalgamation of the Irish and English friars, many of the books were brought to Benburb, from the English Servite Priories and the library there was expanded to its present size.

The planned project will see the restoration and preservation of the collection which is currently at risk of further deterioration as it is spread over five disjointed sites within the Priory. The project will also see the collection relocated to the Victorian stables building which will be refurbished to meet conservation requirements of the library material and create a space for people to meet, view and access the collection.

The collection, its journey, and associated stories will be utilised to develop educational resources and activities to engage a wider range of people with this fascinating collection.

Paul Mullan, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland, welcomed the initial award: “We consider the care of this collection a high priority and we are delighted to be able to give the project the necessary support to further develop their plans to secure funding. This is an incredibly valuable collection, and the outlined plan will provide the proper care and public access to an absorbing historical collection.”

Fr. Chris O’Brien OSM of the Order of Mary Servite Trust comments: “The Servite Trust welcomes the award from the Heritage Lottery Fund and sees this as a major step forward in the restoration of the stable block at the Priory and preservation of the Servite Heritage of historical books and archives”.

Professor Gerry McKenna, Chair of the Servite Library Project Board, said: “This is excellent news for the Servite Priory and for Benburb and the surrounding area. It will allow a heritage treasure to be preserved, developed and made accessible to a wide variety of interest groups from throughout Northern Ireland and beyond. The associated restoration of the Stables area will also provide a focal point for the many and varied groups associated with the Priory to meet, browse and commune in a conducive setting”.

Note to editors

* A first-round pass means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has the 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.

Since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £148.5million to over 1,000 projects across Northern Ireland.

Further information

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