Archaeologists search for Jane Austen's birthplace secrets

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Steventon Rectory in Hampshire was demolished early in the 19th century, soon after Jane and her family moved to Bath. Followers of the novelist have long regretted that the home where she started to pen the drafts that became *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* no longer exists.

Now, thanks to a £10,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) the foundations of the former rectory can being uncovered and a plan of the building created.

Hampshire-based Archaeo Briton has been planning the investigations for over a year and thought funding would not be possible until The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Community Foundation came to the rescue. Several months ago the Hampshire-based Foundation was able to help Archaeo Briton and the voluntary community project to apply for grant aid.

The dig is now getting underway. It is hoped the first stage of the project will be completed by the 236th anniversary of Jane's birth on 16 December.

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: "This project gives volunteers a hands-on opportunity to add to our knowledge about the physical connection between Steventon and Jane Austen and the results will be welcomed by the author's world-wide following."

Local MP Sir George Young has revealed a family connection with the Austens. He said: "I am a direct descendant of Jane Austen's brother, Edward. His daughter Fanny was grandfather's grandmother. It is one of those coincidences that I am now the MP for the area where the Austens spent much of their life, and I look forward to finding out more about the Rectory."

For Archaeo Briton, Debbie Charlton commented: "We will initially investigate results of geophysical surveys undertaken during 2007 and 2009, but our main focus for the project is putting together the puzzle of what Jane's first home was like".

Although the original shape of the building was recorded on a local map in the early 1800s this was not to scale. Also, the few drawings of the building made by different artists appear contradictory.

The authoress lived at Steventon from 1775 to 1801 when her father retired and moved the family to Bath. Jane led a full social life at Steventon which provided her with much material for her novels.

Having completed the archaeological excavations, the project volunteers will collate the finds for display at the Willis Museum at Basingstoke. Aerial photographs of the site will also be taken.

Toni Shaw, Chief Executive of the Hampshire Community Foundation said: "This is a very exciting project. We are thrilled that we have been able to support the work of Debbie and the voluntary team by securing a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The outcome of the project will give an excellent new heritage attraction for Basingstoke".

Archaeo Briton has been working closely with Maureen Stiller Honorary Secretary of the Jane Austen Society to plan the project, who said: “This is a significant project for all devotees of Jane Austen. We hope that it will provide us with a picture of Jane’s first home that was never previously possible.”

Notes to editors

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Community Foundation is part of a national network of 58 Foundations which support the smaller charitable organisations in their local communities. The network manages funds of over £225million and awards around £74million in grants per annum to more than 23,400 organisations across the UK. Local groups can visit the website to see if they might qualify for a grant .

Individuals and companies interested in finding out more about becoming a fund holder and supporting local need through local giving should contact Toni Shaw, Chief Executive on 01256 776 127.

Further information

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