City of dreaming spires to benefit from £3.4million investment

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The University Church of St Mary the Virgin – featuring the tallest 'dreaming spire' in Oxford and nestling among some of the most iconic built heritage in the country – has been awarded a massive £3.4million* Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant for a full scale refurbishment and conservation project, it was announced today.

HLF's confirmed investment will see a five-year project help repair the church's façade, including the stonework, spire and tower, as well as vital repairs to the interior. The history of the church will be displayed and learning and volunteering programmes will be created with up to 200 local people being offered the chance to train as guides. The Old Library will also be restored, enhancing its facilities as a space for educational activities, and access greatly improved around this fascinating 1320 building.

Grade I listed and sitting within Oxford's Conservation Area, St Mary's attracts over 300,000 visitors to the city every year – nearly twice the number of the city's population. As the University Church, it was used for meetings of the University ruling body during the 13th century and housed its first ever library, the forerunner to the Bodleian. The church's most notable feature, its spire, is the tallest in the city and offers wonderful panoramic views.

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "This inspirational and important project showcases our heritage at its very best, by providing the local community and visitors with a special look into the past. Heritage Lottery Fund money continues to revitalise and transform historic sites like The University Church of St Mary the Virgin into sustainable places for the future, offering a wide range of training and volunteering opportunities and reinstating them as appealing tourist attractions."

The Vicar of St Mary's, the Revd Canon Brian Mountford, explained further the importance of this lottery money to the church: "I am delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has decided to make this significant award to the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. It comes after long and careful consultation with local people, national bodies, and professional advisers as to what is best for this iconic Oxford building. In the process we have been helped to think about widening our educational outreach as well as the conservation of the fabric.

Everyone at St Mary's is looking forward to being part of this challenging development and to the involvement of the local community in the process. As the work goes ahead both the church and the Vaults and Gardens Cafe will be faced with considerable temporary restrictions, but the end-product will be a transformation to see St Mary's through the next fifty years. I would also like to thank once again the Clore Duffield Foundation, the University of Oxford, several trusts and many individuals for donations already made."

Notes to editors

*The HLF grant to the project The University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford – Education, Heritage and Renewal for the 21st century is for £3,445,900 (68% of project costs) and is a confirmed award.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF

has supported more than 30,000 projects allocating £4.5billion across the UK, including £423million to projects in the South East alone.

Further information

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