French Hospital wins support to develop a Huguenot Heritage Centre

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The project aims to display the rich material heritage of the Huguenots, a group of some 100,000 French Protestants who fled from religious persecution predominantly from France during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Development funding of £90,900 has been awarded to help The French Hospital progress their plans to apply for a full grant at a later date. This will hopefully lead to the Huguenot Heritage Centre opening in 2015 above the Visitor Information Centre at 95 High Street, Rochester.

The new Huguenot Heritage Centre will engage the public with the history and heritage of the Huguenots, who were the most successfully integrated group of migrants ever to enter Britain. It will provide exciting opportunities for school children and students in higher education to discover the Huguenot trades including silver smithing and weaving, through demonstrations and practical hands-on workshops.

It will also offer the visitors an opportunity to research their Huguenot roots through access to unique documents. The contemporary and historic role of Britain as a haven for victims of intolerance and persecution will be investigated through a temporary exhibition and events programme.

Today, at least one in six of British people has been estimated to have Huguenot blood, and their legacy also can be found in fine crafts (e.g. silk weaving, silversmithing, furniture-making), banking, insurance and other mercantile trades. This grant will mean that there will now be access to the French Hospital's highly regarded collection of paintings, engravings, furniture, silverware, clocks, Huguenot memorabilia, held mainly at the French Hospital's headquarters, La Providence, Rochester.

The collection dates back to the late 17th century and holds such gems as a miniscule prayer book that could be concealed in a fist, quickly-extinguishable oil lamps which lit the way to clandestine prayer meetings in the remote countryside of France, and a Bible which has been baked in a loaf of bread, again an indication of clandestine worship.

In addition to the HLF application, the French Hospital has launched a major fundraising campaign to provide further funding for the creation and development of the Huguenot Heritage Centre and also to provide funds to add to the supply of almshouse accommodation at La Providence. Funds will be sought from a number of sources including those who are proud of their Huguenot descent.

The fundraising campaign is being organized by a campaign committee (on behalf of the Directors of the French Hospital) chaired by Gospatric Home, himself of Huguenot descent. It has spent the past six months preparing the foundations of the fundraising campaign.

A series of information meetings are now being launched, at which details of the project are being shared initially with people of Huguenot descent and others interested in Huguenot history in Rochester, London and at other venues hosted by key supporters. These meetings mark the beginning of the French Hospital talking to supporters and seeking their support.

Peter Duval from the French Hospital, said: “We’re delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this support. The Huguenot Heritage Centre will be of enormous benefit to everyone of Huguenot descent, but also for everyone to understand the importance migrants have always had to our society. This grants means we are one step closer to telling our story with clarity and vision for all to enjoy.’

Explaining the importance of the HLF support, Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: “The Huguenot Heritage Centre provides a great insight into the varied and vibrant heritage of the Hugenots and this project will open up its fascinating collections for more people to learn about and enjoy. HLF is delighted to be giving our initial support and look forward to seeing these exciting plans progress.”

Notes to editors

The French Hospital was founded in London in 1718 as a charity offering sanctuary to poor French Protestants, or ‘Huguenots’. It has had several subsequent locations and currently maintains 60 self-contained sheltered flats at Rochester in Kent. It owns a highly regarded collection of paintings, engravings, furniture, silverware, clocks, books, archival records, and other items illustrating the material culture and history of the Huguenots. The collection is held mainly at the French Hospital’s headquarters, 41 La Providence, Rochester. The French Hospital’s core activity is providing sheltered accommodation for older people of Huguenot descent, as described above. Paid staff are employed to ensure this activity’s successful operation and a board of trustees (known as “Directors”) oversees this and other charitable undertakings.

Further information

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