Looking back, looking forward - marking 15 years of funding in the South East

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Key players in the heritage sector from across the region gathered in Oxford yesterday (Monday 7 December) to discuss and debate the importance of heritage to South East England.

They were joined at the conference by Margaret Hodge MP, Minister for Culture & Tourism. The event, which marks the 15th anniversary of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), was held at the Ashmolean Museum, recently re-opened to the public after a multi-million pound redevelopment aided by a £15million HLF grant.

After a keynote speech on the contribution of heritage to the social, environmental and economic wellbeing of the region, the Minister was followed by speakers from heritage organisations from all corners of the South East, keen to share experience and celebrate what has been achieved.

They included project leaders from some of the best known heritage sites in the region: Debbie Dance, Director of the Oxford Preservation Trust, and Bill Ferris, Chief Executive of award-winning Chatham Historic Dockyard.

RT Hon Margaret Hodge MP, said: "It's wonderful that for 15 years the Heritage Lottery Fund has been giving money to heritage causes. This money has funded renovations, re-developments and upgraded facilities and accessibility to hundreds of our most treasured heritage sites. It has helped redevelop townscapes, museums and archive facilities and funded projects in archaeology and biodiversity. It has also helped to create jobs in the heritage sector as well as providing training to craftspeople, ensuring that some of our most endangered skills – such as blacksmithing and lime plastering - will not die out.

In these difficult economic times, HLF's continued commitment to investment in the heritage sector is something to be celebrated. The money that the HLF invest in this diverse and exciting array of projects is money not only invested in the heritage sector, but in the people who love and work in heritage. And these are the people who will, ultimately, continue the upkeep of our historic buildings and places, as well as making them relevant, accessible and exciting for generations to come."

Debbie Dance, Project Manager for the innovative Oxford Castle Regeneration Project, explains how HLF funding has made a difference: "Oxford Castle has been all about making a place, inviting the public in and allowing them to connect with their history. Oxford is well known for its university but giving access to the town's heritage is very special. The Saxon Tower and Norman Mound at Oxford Castle Unlocked have quickly become must visits for Oxford visitors and the Learning Centre is a huge success with all ages. The project has allowed many exciting education projects to take place, alongside our regular work with schools. Oxford Castle was all about partnership between the private sector, the public sector and the third sector and it remains so today. We could not have begun to achieve all that we have without the help of the HLF, so on behalf of Oxford thank you and happy 15th anniversary."

Focussing on one of the most diverse and wide-reaching regions in the UK the conference also debated what the heritage sector has achieved, and what role heritage can play in a post recession economy.

From Medway in the East, to Southampton in the West and Milton Keynes in the North, the South East covers an area of 12,000 square miles, has 67 local authorities and a population of over 8 million. Across this vast area HLF has funded not only hundreds of heritage treasures such as historic buildings, much-loved parks, galleries and museums, but it has also supported thousands of local community groups in exploring their diverse heritage.

Oxford has been the focus for substantial HLF investment, from major capital projects such as the Ashmolean Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum and Oxford Castle to smaller grants for projects that have uncovered important hidden histories in the city that might otherwise be lost. Arts Asia, for example, ran a project called OXASIANS which unearthed the little-known lives of ten prominent Asian figures during the time they studied at Oxford University between the 1870s and the present day, whilst the Oxfordshire County Youth Service worked with young and older people to trace the African Caribbean heritage of migrants who settled on the Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys Estates in Oxford.

Across the UK, since 1994 over £23 billion - that's £25million each week - has been raised for the arts, sport, heritage, environment, education, health, charity and voluntary sectors.

£428million has been given to over 3,000 heritage projects across the South East, including over £32.2 million to projects in Oxford. Given that for every £1million invested by HLF over £655,000 is attracted into the region's economies from partner organisations, it could be said that everyone is a winner.

Jane Weeks, Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund Committee in the South East, said: "It is vital, as we reach our fifteenth year of funding heritage across the region, to consider the impact these projects have had and are having on the communities around them. As well as preserving our wonderful museums and ancient buildings, our funding is also about conserving the natural world, opening up and improving our beautiful parks and landscapes, and facilitating access and learning. It is about helping people to gain new skills, working with volunteers of all ages, and energising local communities to get involved in and make decisions about their heritage.

People from every walk of life are now involved with heritage that inspires them, making choices about what they want to keep and share from the past, for future generations. But there is more to do. Much of our heritage remains at risk and society has only just begun to understand the special contribution that heritage makes to places, communities and the economy."