

Lottery funding for village heritage

31/03/2011

A community programme will run alongside the restoration work to record and document the fascinating and significant history of the village.

The funding will enable the Church Council to build on and improve awareness of the long history of Somerton and its church, attracting new visitors to both the village and the project website.

Conservation work will include repair of the chapel's 16th century plaster and décor. A 400 year old tower clock mechanism will be refurbished and revealed for display. Installation of lighting will enable the chapel's historic monuments and rare 14th-century stone reredos* to be properly shown and appreciated.

A community programme led by volunteers will create, collect and publicise material about the history of the village and the church. The village has an intriguing history including featuring in the Domesday book, persecution during reformation when villagers remained staunch Roman Catholics, the coming of the canal in the 18th century and the impact of the arrival of Americans to the nearby Upper Heyford base after World War II.

Volunteers will produce an exhibition to be displayed in the Chapel, along with a programme of themed talks and events for the community. A website will be created as a database providing access to the history of the village. The volunteers will receive oral history training to record the tales of residents' memories to be transcribed for the website.

Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund for the South East, Stuart McLeod, said: "Despite its small size this village and its church carry a wealth of history, and it is important to restore and improve aspects of this iconic Somerton landmark that need attention. Valuable history will be recorded, documented and shared with the community by the community, building on a well established sense of historical pride."

On behalf of the St James' Church Council Basil Eastwood, the Lay Chair added: "The church has played a central role in this village since the eleventh century. The Church Council wants this to continue and is delighted to sponsor this project on behalf of the whole village."

Work on St James Church is due to begin in the next few months and should mostly be finished by the end of the year. The community history activities will run at the same time and continue into the future.

Notes to editors

*A reredos is a screen or decoration behind the altar in a church, usually depicting religious iconography or images and also called an altarpiece. It can be made of stone, wood, metal, ivory, or a combination of materials. Images may be painted, carved, gilded, composed of mosaics, and/or embedded with niches for statues. Somerton's depicts Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper and is full of lively detail. After the Reformation the villagers hid it for two centuries to preserve it from destruction.

Further information

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