Methodist ‘cathedral’ makeover

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Stoke-on-Trent’s former Methodist chapel, known locally as the ‘Cathedral of the Potteries’, is to begin the second phase of its restoration, thanks to a grant of almost £375,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

Bethesda Methodist Chapel is thought to be the largest Nonconformist place of worship outside London and was said to seat up to 2,000 people during its mid 19th century heyday. The interior was designed in 1819, with mid-Victorian alterations. There is an unusual, huge, tiered oval gallery, pews, stained-glass windows, memorial tablets and an octagonal mahogany pulpit with a double flight of stairs.

Thanks to the work of the Historic Chapels Trust, which took over ownership in 2002, and a concerted campaign by local people, the chapel is well on its way to becoming once more the hub of the local community. But whereas previously this was thanks to its religious role, now it looks set to fulfil a number of other functions associated with the adjacent Stoke Potteries Museum and Art Gallery which is acting as a partner in the restoration.

Commenting for the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF West Midlands, Anne Jenkins, said: “We are delighted to support this project which will take forward the restoration of one of England’s grandest town chapels. A key feature is the dedication and involvement of the local community that underlines the importance that the building continues to have in the lives of the people of Stoke.”

Closed down in 1985, it became seriously dilapidated. The Grade II listed building was added to English Heritage’s ‘at risk’ register and featured in the BBC’s Restoration series when its condition came to public attention. It won the programme’s West Midlands category and went on to come fourth overall in the national competition.

The latest HLF grant will enable a range of repair and restoration works to take place. These will include the restoration of four stained -glass windows and the re-instatement of a fifth window depicting William Holman Hunt’s painting ‘The Light of the World’, which was discovered in the Potteries Museum. Other work will include repairs to the organ, pews, pulpit and floors and ceilings.

A learning programme will also be launched to reinforce earlier work by the Bethesda Friends organisation to recruit volunteers and supporters and raise awareness of the project. Bethesda Friends have many good ideas in the pipeline, including more choral concerts. A four-month exhibition detailing the restoration project and history of the chapel will be held early next year in the Potteries Museum; a chapel guidebook will be produced, and a training programme established for local volunteers to act as guides.

The building in its present form dates mainly from the early 19th century with a facade from 1859. Its construction was supported by financial donations from a number of leading industrialists in the Potteries including John and George Ridgway, Joseph Clementson, and Job Meigh. Throughout this period it was Stoke’s principal place of worship and counted many local prominent citizens, including the pottery owners, among its congregation. It became the centre of community life and marked a high point in the rise of Nonconformity and Methodism in England.

Now its place at the heart of the community is set to continue with modern-day usage, including concerts, recitals,

exhibitions, civic events, talks, film shows and occasional services of worship.

For the Historic Chapels Trust, Director Dr Jenny Freeman, said: “We are delighted with this grant from HLF, adding to English Heritage’s £200,000 offer. We need balancing funds of £70,000 and are making applications to find this amount.”

Notes to editors

The Historic Chapels Trust was formed in 1993 to take into ownership redundant chapels and other places of worship in England which are of outstanding architectural and historic interest and have fallen out of use for regular worship. Bethesda Friends were formed by HCT in 2004.

The complete restoration of Bethesda Methodist Chapel is planned in three phases. The first phase, started in 2006, made the building wind and weathertight. An audience development programme was commissioned to run alongside the ongoing building work. HLF supported this phase with a grant of £265,500.

Further information

HLF Press Office: Vicky Wilford or Phil Cooper on 020 7591 6046 / 07973 401 937.

To find out more about the Bethesda Methodist Chapel.