Sion Stables saved with help of lottery grant

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The grant will enable the historic fabric of the 19th century building to be repaired and reinstated for use as a heritage education centre, providing a much needed community and visitor facility complete with a small museum, tea rooms and meeting space.

Sion Mills is a designated Conservation Area, containing a host of historic and listed buildings ranging from the vast Herdman's Mill to the small streets of mill workers' cottages. The Grade B+ listed Sion House and Stable Block dates from 1884 and was designed in an Elizabethan revival style by William Unsworth, who also designed the first Shakespeare memorial theatre in Stratford-Upon-Avon. The Stable Block is of great importance to the architectural heritage of the area; it is currently on the Buildings at Risk NI Register (BHARNI) and was vested by the DoE in 2008 due to its state of neglect and disrepair.

The new project, which is led Hearth Revolving Fund and Sion Mills Building Preservation Trust, will involve a programme of major conservation-led repair works to save the Stable Block and maintain its character and integrity. Once restored, the building will house community-run tea rooms, meeting space and a small museum which will be used to raise awareness of the unique heritage of the village. Themes to be explored within the museum include the history of the village and its establishment by the Herdman family in 1835, whose utopian vision of fostering good community and working lives was at the cutting edge of nineteenth century social inclusion, and helped to create a self-sustaining community which flourished with the growth of the mill.

Announcing the award, Paul Mullan, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, said: "We are delighted to be involved in this exciting project which will breathe new life into the iconic Sion House Stable Block. The regeneration of this hugely significant building will bring a range of economic and social benefits to the area, and it will act as a stimulus and model for future conservation efforts within the village."

A series of educational events and activities will also be undertaken to encourage the local community to become involved in the project throughout the restoration process and beyond. Volunteers will be recruited and trained to record and catalogue the heritage of the village, including collecting oral histories, compiling a photographic record of the restoration works and creating a register of artefacts. Guided museum visits, village walking tours, open days and a summer activity programme are just some of the events planned to enable both local people and visitors to the area to learn more about the history of Sion Mills.

Welcoming the news, Karen Latimer, Chairman of Hearth Revolving Fund, said: "Hearth and Sion Mills Buildings Preservation Trust are very grateful to the HLF for this support. We hope that the restoration of this building, and its proposed new use as a heritage education centre, will do much to enhance Sion Mills and raise awareness of its unique significance."

Explaining the significance of the project, Lorraine Robinson, Heritage Projects Officer, Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, added: "The highly distinctive Sion Mills stable block was languishing on the Built Heritage at Risk Register for eight long years. The first ever listed building in Northern Ireland to be subject to a Compulsory Purchase Order, the stables demonstrate the effectiveness of enforcement action coupled with grant aid in rescuing a severely 'at risk' building.

"HLF has played a vital role in facilitating the much needed restoration works, displaying how, with will and vision, a ‘ruinous’ structure can be brought back from the brink and contribute positively to the life of the community. The completed project will showcase the ‘art of the possible’, offering hope and inspiration for other buildings at risk, and reinstates a landmark building for local residents and visitors to enjoy once more.”

Notes to editors

Hearth is Northern Ireland’s longest established building preservation trust. It has carried out nearly twenty projects across the province with buildings ranging from houses to a former town hall. Sion Mills Stables is the first building to have been compulsorily acquired by the DoE following the service of a Repairs Notice on a Listed Building. The DoE vested the building in 2008 and sold it on to Hearth for restoration.

The Ulster Architectural Heritage Society was established in 1967 and exists to promote the appreciation and awareness of good architecture of all periods and to encourage the conservation, restoration and re-use of Ulster’s built heritage to regenerate and sustain our communities. The Built Heritage at Risk Register (BHARNI) is managed by UAHS in partnership with Northern Ireland Environment Agency. BHARNI was first established in 1993 in order to identify and record historically important buildings which appear to be threatened and to act as a catalyst for their restoration and creative re-use.

Further information

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