Royal Garrison Church Woolwich gets new lease of life

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The money will see up to twenty students work alongside newly appointed mural conservators under the Heritage of London Trust Operations (HOLT Op) scheme to preserve the remains of the Royal Garrison Church, currently on the English Heritage At Risk Register. The scheme, expected to take just over two years to complete, will also make the site fully accessible to the public for the first time.

Key to the conservation works will be a new tensile roof structure to be erected above the building to conserve its precious mosaic interior from the elements. Interpretation will also be created at the site for visitors, and a programme of associated educational activities and open days for the local community and school groups is to be developed.

St George's Garrison Church - built between 1863-67 to serve the Woolwich Garrison community - was designed in the Lombardi style of stock brick construction with red and blue vitrified detailing, and was decorated internally with mosaics, inlaid marble, and monuments to battles and servicemen fallen in armed conflict. It became the Royal Garrison Church in 1928 after a visit by King George V, however was reduced to a roofless shell after being hit by a V2 Flying bomb in 1944. Subsequently partly demolished to leave only the lower sections of the perimeter walls, the remains of the church now enclose a walled garden that has the feeling of a 'secret' garden.

Today, the church remains consecrated and is used for open air services by Service personnel in the Royal Artillery Barracks, and significant decorative interior remains. Notably, this includes the Victoria Cross memorial with a mosaic depicting St George and the Dragon, flanked by marble tablets inscribed with the names of all deceased gunners who won the Victoria Cross from the Crimean War to mid World War II. Ownership, as part of this project, is due to be transferred from the Ministry of Defence to HOLT Op at the start of November.

Culture Minister Ed Vaizey, also a Trustee of the Heritage of London Trust, expressed his support for the scheme: "For well over 60 years St. George's Chapel has stood a poignant and silent victim of World War II. I am delighted that Heritage of London Trust Operations has devised a scheme to conserve the magnificent mosaics and create a garden which can be used by the local community and the Friends of St. George's Woolwich. The HLF grant will ensure the success of the project, and the chapel will be ready in time for the Olympic Games. Congratulations!"

Wesley Kerr, Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund for London, said: "The magnificent St George's Garrison Church, with its richly evocative mosaics, has survived Second World Ward bombing and decades of exposure to the weather, but remains a poignant and fantastically inspiring space, which until now few have been able to visit . The Royal Artillery is inseparable from the history of Woolwich and now everybody will be able to visit this incredible space , imaginatively presented by HOLT . The Heritage Lottery Fund is delighted to support this great project in time for it to be part of London's historic Olympic offer."

Finally, Laura Norris, Project Organiser at HOLTOPS, said: "HOLT Op is delighted to be entrusted with the restoration of this historic ruined church and important memorial. We are looking forward to setting up the Friends and getting local people involved with the restoration, and opening up the church to visitors. I hope that the restoration of the mosaics will inspire young artists to learn this ancient craft."

The story of St George’s Garrison Church and its conservation journey will be told on BBC Inside Out during the week of 7 November.

Notes to editors

* The HLF grant to the project St George’s Garrison Church, Woolwich is for £396,100 (56% of project costs) and is a second-round pass, which means it is a confirmed award.

Further information

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