Village bells will sound once more thanks to Heritage Lottery grant

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A new generation of ringers will also be created as the restoration work gives a fresh lease of life to a parish bell-ringing tradition that dates back more than 550 years.

The Church of St Mary the Virgin has a peal of eight bells – which is uncommon in the area – but centuries of wear and tear have rendered the existing bells virtually un-ringable. However, the HLF grant, together with other funding raised by the church, means that five of the bells can be re-cast and the three oldest bells replaced with new ones. At the same time repairs will be carried out to strengthen the tower of the Grade II* listed church and to the unusual X-shaped frame that supports the bells.

The parochial church council will also work with the village school and the local scout and guide groups to research information for a small exhibition and a new project website. The young people will learn about the history of the bells, the church and the village and will be encouraged to take up bell-ringing.

Villagers of all ages will also be able to get involved with, among other events, a visit to the Whitechapel Foundry in London where the new bells will be made and the others recast. As well as updating and expanding the heritage information available to local residents and school teachers, a church trail worksheet will provide visitors with the chance to learn more about the building and its architecture, the bells, stained glass windows and the war memorial.

The restored bells will also enhance the village's plans to commemorate the centenary of the First World War staring next year. The last restoration of the bells took place in 1908 and many of the ringers at that time went off to serve in the war. The story of the bell-ringers, one of whom was killed on active service, will become part of the commemoration.

Other results of the project include brochures, a video, and lectures on the history of the church. These will also be filmed and uploaded onto the internet.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "This project embraces the entire community whose history has been bound up with their local church for centuries. We are delighted to think that young people will be at the heart of this work in taking up so joyful and melodious a pastime."

For the Parochial Church Council of St. Mary the Virgin Geoff Blyth, Churchwarden and Fabric Officer, said: "We are delighted with the generous support which HLF has given to our project. The bells were last renovated over 100 years ago and we look forward to sharing this rare experience with the whole community."

Notes to editors

The tradition of bellringing began in the village of Saxlingham Nethergate in 1455 when one John Gyles left 13s 4d for the purchase of a great bell for the church.

The three oldest bells, which will be replaced with new ones, will nevertheless be conserved. One will be used in future as a clock bell to strike the hours while the others will remain in the clock chamber of the church tower.

Further information

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