

Inspired Futures for historic North East churches

26/01/2015



St Thomas's Haymarket, Newcastle

An initiative of Inspired North East – a support scheme set up by the Church of England Dioceses of Newcastle and Durham – Inspired Futures will demonstrate new models for working with historic places of worship and getting resources to where they are needed. Development funding of £40,500 has also been awarded to help Inspired North East progress their plans to apply for a full grant later this year.

Historic church buildings can be vulnerable in terms of physical condition, suitability for modern use and the skills and capacity of volunteers to manage changes. There can be significant opportunities for improvement and change which are currently not being realised due to lack of resources.

The project will therefore work with eighteen churches across the North East, all of which have elected to take part and are open to exploring new possibilities. A team approach will involve professionals and local volunteers to work with the targeted churches to share project planning 'know-how' and develop activities, skills and plans for the future. Enabling more diverse use of these church buildings alongside their traditional worship role will lead to more stable and sustainable futures, with more users contributing towards upkeep, maintenance and running costs.

Workshops and events will raise public awareness of the heritage interest and community potential of the churches. Audits of accessibility, conservation repair and improvement needs and volunteer involvement will be carried out. The potential for new community uses, improved heritage access and interpretation will be explored, and new heritage activities will be piloted.

The church buildings covered by this project (listed in notes below) have been a focal point for their local communities for generations – some for over 800 years. In addition to regular use for worship, weddings and other parish activities, they are typically used by many other community groups, such as youth groups, art clubs, music societies, health and fitness groups and so on.

Peter Robinson, Archdeacon of Lindisfarne and Chair of the project group, said: “We’re very grateful that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this support. These historic churches are of great significance within their local communities. We hope that the Inspired Futures project will pave the way towards improved facilities, inject new life and engage wider local use, and make these valued places sustainable for future generations.”

Ivor Crowther, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund North East, said: “Places of worship are among our most historic buildings, with so many stories of architectural, social and community heritage behind them. We’re pleased to offer our initial support to this project which will begin to put plans in place for the future of a number of places of worship in the North East.”

Notes to editors

About Inspired North East

Inspired North East was set up in 2010 involving Newcastle Diocese, Durham Diocese and part-funded at that time by English Heritage. It works with local congregations to help achieve a sustainable future for church buildings as living places of worship, used and enjoyed by local communities, welcoming to visitors, and unique heritage assets.

Over four years Inspired North East has supported around 200 churches across the North East with advice on grants for repairs, planning of new projects, enhancing the visitor welcome, etc. Some churches have received more in-depth help to plan re-ordering and community activity projects to help improve future prospects for church buildings.

About the churches involved in this project

St Thomas's Haymarket, Newcastle Listed Grade II*: Built in 1825-30 to the design of John Dobson, Newcastle’s famous architect of the time. It serves as Newcastle’s Civic Church, venue for concerts, care for vulnerable people and Fair Trade outlet. Located close to the Civic Centre, Universities of Newcastle and Northumbria and the city’s main retail artery, Northumberland Street, it is a heritage gem and a valuable community asset. However, repairs are needed to roof and drainage, and investment to develop new facilities and open the building up to a vibrant range of uses suited to its city centre location, role as a place of worship and accessible community heritage asset.

Our Lady, Delaval Listed Grade I: A church of national importance, dating from at least the early 12th century. Originally a private chapel to the neighbouring Seaton Delaval Hall, it draws people

from across the region and beyond to visit. It is currently on the English Heritage register of Places of Worship at Risk due to structural problems which are currently subject to investigation and phased remedial action. The 'Friends of Our Lady' provides a channel for community engagement, fundraising and volunteers who help look after the church. There is potential to build upon tourism interest and engage visitors as well as local people in the heritage of the building.

St Cuthbert's Haydon Bridge Listed Grade II*: An attractive and active parish church, but it is on English Heritage's Register of Places of Worship at Risk due to leaking roof and structural problems affecting the north gable wall of the church. It also needs investment to improve heating and lighting and to provide toilet and kitchen facilities. The acoustics at St Cuthbert's are very good for music and choral singing, and there is potential to increase visitor activity linked to local interest around Haydon including nearby Hadrian's Wall.

St Chad's Bensham, Gateshead Listed Grade II*: Dating from 1902, one of the largest and most ambitious churches by William Searle Hicks in the late Gothic style. Notable for the quality of its furnishings and fittings of that time, including much carved woodwork and delightful stained glass windows. Re-ordered about 25 years ago to create space for a community project but which has since outgrown the space, and the facilities are now underused and in need of refurbishment. Re-roofing is also needed. The church wants to develop a more flexible space whilst preserving the Arts and Crafts heritage. Bensham as a community is undergoing significant change as older substandard housing is redeveloped – the church wants to be ready to serve this new community.

St Cuthbert's Darlington Listed Grade I: One of the most iconic churches in the north of England, and the most complete example of its date and style in Durham Diocese. The church is currently subject of a major roof repair project. However, lack of facilities in the building limits efforts to develop and expand its use. Located at the foot of the market place the location of the church makes it the obvious choice for major civic services, memorials and celebrations. The congregation would like to be able to provide a venue for community, arts and civic events, and develop activities engaging people in the heritage of the building.

Other churches also involved:

- St Cuthbert's Elsdon, Grade I
- St Mary & St Michael's Doddington, Grade I
- St Michael's Alnham, Grade I
- Christ Church Shieldfield, Newcastle, Grade II*
- St Andrew's Auckland, Grade I
- St Cuthbert's Billingham, Grade I
- St Edmund Sedgefield, Grade I
- St Michaels Heighington, Grade I
- St Thomas Stockton, Grade I
- St Augustine's Alston, Grade II
- St John Darlington, Grade II
- St Oswalds Hartlepool, Grade II
- St Margaret's Scotswood

Further information

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