

The damaged Torbryan rood screen

In a double blessing for the Devon church, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has also awarded a £47,000 grant for a two-year project to tell the history of the building and the surrounding village and countryside, adding imaginative new on-site interpretation and events.

A fundraising campaign was launched in May 2015 to pay for vital restoration work after the two priceless 15th century oak panels - bearing paintings of St Victor of Marseilles and St Margaret of Antioch – were recovered by the police with significant damage. Following their theft in August 2013, the panels had remained missing until they were recovered by the Metropolitan Police Art & Antiques Unit after being spotted by a private collector in an online sale.

Crispin Truman, Chief Executive of The Churches Conservation Trust said: “This is truly fantastic news. The theft of the Torbryan rood screen panels in August 2013 was a real blow to The Churches Conservation Trust, but thanks to the generosity of the public, where once we were faced with a tragedy, now we are celebrating victory.

“Not only will the panels now be returned to their rightful place at Holy Trinity Torbryan, but also a community project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund will encourage local residents and schoolchildren to learn their fascinating story. I’m truly grateful to all those who offered their help in restoring this priceless masterpiece, and encouraging the world to enjoy their beauty.”

Nerys Watts, Head of HLF South West, said: “The Torbryan rood panels are finally back where they belong. Once treated so badly by a few it is the passion and generosity of the many which has ensured a bright future for this beautiful piece of our heritage. Thanks to money raised by National Lottery players we’re delighted to help tell the fascinating story behind the panels which hit the headlines and uncover the wider history of Torbryan.”

Though the two stolen panels are currently being safely stored off site, once the restoration work has taken place, they will be returned to the church, and the public will not only be able to observe the newly-restored rood screen, but also to join in a project – supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund – which will allow visitors to learn the hidden histories of Torbryan. The tumultuous history of the rood screen will also be explored, alongside the role of local nobleman Sir William Petre during the Reformation and the story of local caves which were the unlikely source of prehistoric finds by Victorian archaeologist James Lyon Widger. A programme of events will also be developed to encourage local people, schools and organisations and tourists to visit the church throughout the year.

Throughout the project local residents are being invited to volunteer, taking part in conservation, welcoming visitors to the church, organising events and undertaking further research into the history of Holy Trinity and Torbryan.

Notes to editors

The Torbryan rood screen panels

The rood screen and its panels are one of only a handful of such artworks in England which survived the Reformation. The theft prompted a national media campaign to try to trace the whereabouts of the missing panels, receiving the backing of high profile figures such as Loyd Grossman, Dan Cruickshank and the late Candida Lycett Green. The collector who alerted the police recognised the panels from media coverage of the theft.

West Mercia Police are leading the investigation into the theft as part of Operation Icarus, which has also recovered a treasure trove of other church artefacts, including stonework, friezes, statues, paintings, brasses, misericords, stained glass and bibles. The police are appealing for help in identifying the artefacts, which include the misericords from St Cuthbert's Church at Holme Lacy in Herefordshire, also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. In response to the original theft, The Churches Conservation Trust conducted a thorough audit of security at Holy Trinity, Torbryan and a new alarm system is now in place at the church to protect its contents in future. A new project has also been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund to explain the artworks and the history of this unique Grade I listed church to visitors.

About Holy Trinity Torbryan

A Grade I listed medieval church, built in an isolated and wooded Devon valley in the Gothic Perpendicular style, Holy Trinity Torbryan was built over twenty years between 1450 and 1470. The superb, soaring tower rises in three stages, and has an octagonal stair turret which forms a dramatic architectural feature.

Though the 15th century rood screen – with painted panels showing 40 saints - is one of the highlights of the church, it has many, including medieval stained glass, an impressive vaulted ceiling in the south porch and original Beer stone font and oak pews. Since 1987, the church has been in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust.

About The Churches Conservation Trust

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national charity saving historic churches at risk, charged with protecting 347 beautiful church buildings which attract almost 2million visitors a year. The trust's collection includes irreplaceable examples of architecture, archaeology and art from 1,000 years of English history.

The trust is the operator of the third largest heritage estate in charitable ownership in the UK and has an international award-winning reputation in heritage conservation and regeneration. All churches in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust are listed, mostly Grade I and II*, and some are Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Without the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, the buildings they look after might have disappeared entirely. Instead they are enjoyed as social, tourism, educational or cultural resources, kept open, in use, and living once again in the heart of communities. All the Trust's churches remain consecrated and are used for occasional worship.

Further information

For further details and images, please contact Tom Jones, Senior PR Officer at The Churches Conservation Trust, at tjones@thecct.org.uk or 07831 873 515.