

St Mary's Church, Witney

The project aims to undertake urgent repairs to the Victorian roofs of the chancel and organ chamber, as well as repairing guttering and drainage, and restoring external masonry including one of the north windows.

Work on the chancel roof will complete a 15-year long weatherproofing programme that St Mary’s congregation committed to in 2000. Once the building is rainproof, St Mary’s can begin the task of transforming its interior spaces: revealing the beauty of its medieval sculptures and unlocking the stories that underpin Witney’s identity.

St Mary’s is the oldest building in Witney and its Grade I listing highlights its significance to our national heritage. The western half of the building – its main seating area – is nearly one thousand years old. Much of the rest of the building, especially its magnificent bell tower and 156ft spire, was added in the 13th century when St Mary’s was re-dedicated. Its impressive size reflects the wealth and importance of Witney’s wool trade and weaving industry in the Middle Ages.

As a place of worship and a focus for civic ceremonies, St Mary’s offers one of the largest public spaces in West Oxfordshire. In addition, the building provides a focal point for the local community, hosting a wide range of community activities. These include the very popular Beer Festival and the Food & Drink Festival, events that each year attract thousands of people into this ancient building.

[quote=David Cameron, MP for Witney]"This well-loved church is a real focal point in the town and it’s so important we preserve and share its long and fascinating history"[/quote]

David Cameron, MP for Witney, said: “As a big supporter and Patron of St Mary’s Church, I was delighted to hear they will receive Heritage Lottery Funding to restore the chancel roof.”

“This well-loved church is a real focal point in the town and it’s so important we preserve and share its long and fascinating history. Benefitting from such funds is a big step in enabling the church to achieve this.”

Explaining the importance of the HLF support, Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: “Places of worship in the wards, villages and towns across the South East region provide a very powerful visual connection with our past. Not only will our awards secure the immediate future of these particular buildings, it will also empower congregations to adapt them, where necessary, so they can be enjoyed more widely throughout the community and in turn enable them be more sustainable for the future.”

The Right Reverend Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester, said: “This is very good news for Witney as St Mary’s has long played a key role in the life of the town. It will be wonderful to complete the long task of repairing the roofs. The church can then turn its attention to the plans to ‘re-medievalise’ the internal spaces of the building. By this I mean the way St Mary’s will return much of its internal space to their pre-Victorian use as community spaces – giving back to the town community a social space to be enjoyed by all.”

Reverend Toby Wright, Rector of Witney Parish said: “This work is an essential part of our Inspiring Change programme through which we aim to create a 21st-century community space. The Heritage Lottery Fund’s wonderful grant will move St Mary’s fundraising campaign significantly forward in our exciting plans, but this still leaves £60,000 to be raised for this phase. We have already raised £10,000, so I hope and trust that local people and grant-making trusts will get behind the campaign to raise the remaining funds.

"We are encouraging local people to get behind Raise the Roof. By sponsoring a slate for £10 they can help us repair the 4,000 roof slates.

Once the building is rain proof, Inspiring Change can then begin the larger task of restoring the church’s dark, water-stained interior fabric. New lighting will reveal the great beauty of the medieval stone and timber carving inside. At the same time we will modernise the social and catering facilities to bring them in line with the many community activities that we already host. A special part of this work will be to release the Stories of Witney for our local people and schools, unlocking the many stories preserved in the church.”

Further information

St Mary’s Church, Witney – Robin Brunner-Ellis, Development Consultant – 07557 522 267.