

Exciting community future for historic Wigmore church

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Famous Wigmore church to become exciting new community space Michael Fieldsend

Wigmore is a small village at the heart of a beautiful farming landscape in North Herefordshire. St James' Church and Wigmore Castle are of great significance in English history.

Founded in the 11th century, the size and splendour of the church and castle show just how important a place Wigmore was in medieval England. A major centre of power for over 500 years, Wigmore played host to several kings and queens. Stronghold of the Mortimers and then owned by the Harleys, the castle and church

have a fascinating and tumultuous past.

The famous London streets - Wigmore, Mortimer, Harley - were all named after the village and the great local families associated with it.

Like many rural churches, Wigmore's congregation has waned over the years and the church has sadly become unsustainable. The CIC is formed of a group of villagers who got together in May 2015 to find ways of ensuring a prosperous future for this splendid building.

The aim is to bring the building up to date with state-of-the-art technical facilities as well as installing essential services such as toilets, heating, a cafe and making it accessible to all. The building will become an important Interpretive and Heritage Centre for the area providing information and respite for visitors as well as an educational resource and event space for the wider community.

The project aims to ensure the future of Wigmore church by running ticketed events such as concerts, lectures and live-streaming theatre productions as well as a hire space for recording purposes and a meeting place for the many local history societies.

Planning will begin immediately and the CIC will work with English Heritage, local architects, archaeological and ecological specialists and other organisations to apply for a full delivery grant from HLF in around a year's time. Once the full grant – estimated to be around £1.3million - is obtained, it is envisaged that the actual building work will take about nine months and the church would be ready for a grand opening at Christmas 2018.

The project will breathe new life into this historic church and ensure that it will continue to be open to the public and available for religious services for many years to come.

The village already has a core of volunteers who are the stalwarts of a thriving community shop that is now in its eighth year supporting local people and producers alike. The centre will provide a further opportunity for people to become involved in a community project, become trained in different skills and learn about the very special heritage of the area.

Vanessa Harbar, Head of HLF West Midlands, said: "A coalition of believers and non-believers, historians and educationalists, as well as those who simply love old buildings for what they say to us and about us, have joined forces to keep this church at the heart of village and community life. Thanks to National Lottery Players, St James' Church in Wigmore can now look to a brighter future as this exciting project to transform it gets off the ground."

Local resident, John Challis, President of The Mortimer History Society and perhaps better known as *Only Fools and Horses'* Boycie, is a great supporter of the project. He said: "In order for the church to survive it is vital to attract people not just to worship but also to learn about and understand the rich history of The Wigmore Basin. The proposed plans are very exciting and will make it an attractive place to congregate and share in activities, while maintaining the historical integrity of the building."

Edward Harley, Deputy Lieutenant of Herefordshire, whose family are linked with Wigmore's castle and heritage, said: "I am delighted that Wigmore, a village which even has a street in London named after it, has been successful in its HLF application. This community, where there is so much local enterprise and enthusiasm, is a most worthy recipient of HLF funds. I couldn't be more pleased for Wigmore, and the beneficial effect will be substantial and long lasting."

Alison Weir, author and historian, said: "I had the pleasure of giving a fundraising presentation in Wigmore Church on my biography *Isabella, She Wolf of France, Queen of England*. To speak in the space that she frequented and was built by her lover, Roger Mortimer, was emotional and very special, to say the least.

"This is a wonderful and atmospheric venue and I am delighted that it will remain open for everyone to visit."

For more information

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