

Case Study

Heritage at Droxford Church

Background

Droxford, a village in Hampshire, sits on the western slopes of the Meon Valley within the South Downs National Park.

In Droxford and the surrounding area there is enormous interest in local history which has been stimulated by the local “Saxons in the Meon Valley” programme and the significant war time anniversaries in 2014.

www.saxonsinthemeonvalley.org.uk

Famous visitors to Droxford include Izaak Walton, author of “The Compleat Angler” first published in 1653, who is known to have stayed in the Rectory and Manor House in Droxford when visiting his daughter who was married to the rector; and Winston Churchill who used the long closed Droxford station as his base during preparations for the Normandy landings in 1944.

This project was conceived as a subset of the “Droxford Church Community Hub and Heritage” Project whose aim was to restore Droxford Church, a Grade I listed Norman church from 1150.

Droxford Heritage working group formed in 2016 as an outcome of several community workshops. The workshops developed an Outline Interpretation Plan which envisaged that important features of the church would be exposed and conserved, and new displays, information sheets and website links would better inform the many visitors to the historic church.



The project

The working group successfully fundraised £250,000 for the first phase of the project which was to make structural repairs to the tower, east walls of the north and south chapels and the south slope of the nave roof.

Once this critical structural work was carried out, the team was able to focus on building the community annex for which a further £250,000 had to be raised and was anchored by a grant of £75,000 from Hampshire County Council's Community Business Funds. The annex would also house an essential toilet, kitchen, office and storage facilities which would support the community room and heritage centre in the church. These facilities would enable community events, including concerts, talks, plays, exhibitions, conferences and the interpretation of the rich heritage of the Church and the Meon Valley.

The South Downs National Park Authority 'Sustainable Communities Fund' was pleased to support the project with a £10,000 grant, matching equivalent funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund which was committed as part of the original restoration project.

A contracted heritage consultant carried out a community consultation and presented the resulting concepts to the community and the Parochial Church Council. The proposal was well received even though it included the removal of a number of pews. The proposal was approved by the Diocese but time taken to gain this approval meant that the delivery of the project was significantly delayed. Fortunately, all of the funders were able to be flexible and support the team through the consequent challenges.

“Wilfrid’s – our volunteer led café – embodies the community spirit which has underpinned the success of the project and has been shown by the support of fundraisers, donors, volunteers, cake-bakers, and the visitors and walkers who appreciate a good coffee surrounded by the unique heritage of Droxford Church.”

John Symes, Project Lead

The outcome

A Community Interest Company was setup to operate Wilfrid’s Café which proudly opened on the 6th January 2020 initially for 3 afternoons a week. The first 4 weeks of trading exceeded the business plan’s forecasts and expectations and nearly 40 volunteers were registered, before the Cafe had to close due to the Coronavirus emergency.

The café will re-open as soon as permitted and again provide a social centre for the local community in the Meon Valley. The café is particularly aimed at visitors to the Valley as well as the socially isolated in the rural community with an above-average elderly population.

The overall project has protected the heritage of the church which has been removed from the Historic England’s Heritage ‘At Risk’ Register. The Sustainable Communities Fund supported the interpretation which was installed in December 2019 and has already started to play an important role in sharing the rich local cultural heritage with a wider range of people in the village and beyond.



Lessons learned

A positive lesson from this project was the consistent focus on how it could benefit the local community – starting with the initial restoration grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, right through to the South Downs SCF grant in the final phase of the project – ensuring that the needs and well-being of the local community were met, in addition to the restoration church.

Planning for the future, including setting up a sustainable income stream for maintenance of the church, was incorporated into a strategic business plan which is so far proving to be successful.

The project was dependent on an experienced and stable team with relevant business and marketing skills who were willing to work *pro bono* over the lifetime of the project.

Projects of this type often rely on the commitment of hard working volunteers who are willing to sacrifice their personal time for the benefit of the community.

For more information regarding the Sustainable Communities Fund, please contact:

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