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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Urgent restoration works begin at St Mary's with National Lottery support

Work is underway at St Mary's Church, Beverley, to save its remarkable collection of medieval and Tudor roof bosses thanks to a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant of £421,400 awarded earlier this year. Made possible by money raised by National Lottery players, the project focuses on the 600 bosses on St Mary's ceilings, which are at risk due to the church's crumbling stonework.

A roof boss is a decoration carved in wood or stone at the point where the ribs or beams of a roof meet.

The project was the brainchild of St Mary's vicar, Rev'd Becky Lumley. Speaking about it she said:

"These carvings are a vibrant visual record of the lives, hopes and dreams of our medieval and Tudor ancestors. The intricate, colourful and beautiful designs represent a way of story-telling without words. We are excited to be preserving and celebrating this extraordinary heritage for the people of Beverley, the region and the country."



Founded in 1120 St Mary's is Beverley's oldest building. Grade I listed and designated a 'Major Parish Church', St Mary's attracts approximately 20,000 visitors per year from around the world. But its stonework is badly eroded and in urgent need of restoration. The project will conserve a vulnerable area of the church in which a number of the bosses are housed. The conservation work will be carried out by master stonemason, Matthias Garn of York - whose firm has taken on additional staff and apprentices for this job - and is expected to be completed in September 2020. The new stones will be carved in Mr Garn's workshop during the winter months and installed during the spring and summer.

"Caring for the fabric of this important historic building is a big responsibility and so we are relieved and delighted to see Matthias and his team of skilled craftsmen beginning the restoration work - which will secure the heritage for generations to come" said Rev'd Lumley. "We're hugely grateful to The National Lottery Heritage Fund for its support" she added.

Many of the bosses were carved during the Tudor rebuilding of the church in the 1520s, following the collapse of the tower. The carvings include a mermaid, wrestlers, a unicorn, saints, kings, angels and a variety of animals. But some of the ceilings of St Mary's are over 15 metres high, which makes it difficult for people to see these artworks in detail. And so the project seeks to make the bosses accessible in creative and practical ways.

"We consulted with hundreds of people throughout the area when developing this project and we were amazed by the reactions to close-up photos of the bosses. They seem to capture the imaginations of people of all ages. During the consultation, lots of children designed their own bosses and also came up with some rather original ideas about how we might help people see the bosses more clearly. Their suggestions included installing a trampoline in church!" said Rev'd Lumley.

Binoculars and a telescope are currently in the church to help visitors see the bosses. High-quality photographs will be taken over the months ahead and a range of printed and digital resources will then be introduced including a new website, a guidebook and an interactive digital display.

Responsible for the roll out of these resources is St Mary's new Heritage Learning Officer, Dr Jennie England. She is tasked with delivering a wide range of activities to help people engage with the bosses and to enhance the visitor experience. Dr England joined the staff team at St Mary's in September and speaks of her enthusiasm about the project:

"I am thoroughly enjoying working on this exciting project. It has been a pleasure getting to know the wonderful team of volunteers who keep the church open daily and welcome thousands of people to it each year. I have also relished meeting the many community groups who use the church and its hall every week and month. I have been struck by how cherished St Mary's is by local people."

It is expected that the project will attract more visitors to the church and to Beverley, which will in turn create more volunteering opportunities at St Mary's. Anyone interested in joining its volunteer team is invited to contact the church to find out more.

A medieval historian who recently completed her PhD at the University of York, Dr England has already designed and trialled a tour of the bosses for school children and launched "Boss of the Week" - a weekly blog on St Mary's social media. Two of the bosses featured so far include Reynard the Fox (a sly fox preaching to a gaggle of geese) and a headless man (a figure from folklore known in the middle ages as a 'blemmye').

"There is so much for us to learn about, and from, these carvings. Paint samples will be taken to help date them and university researchers will be contributing to our endeavours to understand and interpret them. We look forward to sharing the discoveries and stories from the project as they emerge over the years ahead."

Portable life-size replicas of some of the bosses will also be made which people will be able to touch and feel. These models will be taken out into the community including schools and nursing homes and will help people appreciate the scale of the originals and the artistry of those who made them.

The project will also encompass a number of craft-based activities for people to take part in. Next year an adult learning group is running a drawing class which takes inspiration from the bosses.

“It has already sparked some very impressive artwork by a group of students from East Riding College who made carving designs following a visit to St Mary’s” said Rev’d Lumley.

In addition to the many weddings, baptisms and services held at St Mary’s, the church is also a popular venue for a wide range of events including concerts and festivals. It plays host to album launches by local bands, an annual visit from the Culture Train, the Remembrance Flower Festival, the Beverley Chamber Music Festival, the Beverley Early Music Festival and the Beverley Real Ale Festival. Approximately 15,000 people attend events in St Mary’s each year.

One of the bosses even featured at the recent beer festival. Dr England describes how this 500-year old heritage took centre stage at the event in October:

“One of the carvings is of an ‘Ale Wife’, the medieval term used for women who brewed ale for sale. And so one of the ales at the festival was named ‘Ale Wife’ and the festival beer mats bore an image of the boss. It was a joy to see the heritage at the centre of those festivities.”

Leading the project is St Mary’s Director of Development, Roland Deller. Speaking about the impact which it will make, he said:

“The grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund gives a tremendous boost to our efforts to restore St Mary’s. Preserving this important heritage will make Beverley and the region an even better place to live, work and visit.”

“The loss of such a beautiful building and a focal point for the community would be an unimaginable, devastating blow to the town. And so it is a great relief that vital works to repair St Mary’s crumbling stonework have now begun.”

St Mary’s is open daily and entry is free of charge.

“We encourage everyone to visit St Mary’s to enjoy and experience this colourful and fascinating heritage which belongs to all of us. A warm welcome awaits you” says Rev’ d Lumley.

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Contact

For further information please contact:

Roland Deller
Director of Development
St Mary’s Church Beverley
T. 07941 952 059
E. roland.deller@stmarysbeverley.org

Notes to Editors

Beverley boasts another beautiful church building – the Minster, which is the largest parish church in the country and considered to be one of the finest gothic buildings in Northern Europe. The Minster has also recently been awarded a grant by the National Lottery Heritage Fund for its ‘sanctuary’ project which will see the leadwork in a section of its roof restored.

Mr Deller says:

“It is rare for a town the size of Beverley to be home to two such large and exquisite parish churches, and much of the character of the place stems from their coexistence. These historic buildings are central to the town’s appeal as a tourist destination in the region and so the local authority, the East Riding of Yorkshire Council, has been a valuable strategic partner to us on the projects.”

“We are thrilled that projects to conserve and interpret the heritage at both churches are taking place simultaneously and we look forward to working with our colleagues at the Minster and the East Riding of Yorkshire Council to develop future projects that benefit the people of the region.”

He adds:

“One of the most iconic bosses in St Mary’s portrays St John of Beverley – the founder of the Minster and to whom the Catholic church in North Bar Without is dedicated – alongside King Athelstan. Looking up at the image of these two ‘founding fathers’ of the town on St Mary’s ceiling reminds us that we are all in it together as we seek to safeguard and interpret the heritage of this special town and make it more widely known.”

The collection of roof bosses is only one of the attractions of St Mary’s. Other notable features of the church include the stone carving of a pilgrim hare said to be the inspiration for the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, the beautifully carved Minstrels’ Pillar, the fifteenth century chancel ceiling decorated with painted images of 40 English kings, and the hidden Priest’s Rooms – in which artefacts have been stored for hundreds of years, including some old bosses.

The Priest’s Rooms are open to the public on a number of occasions each year including during the popular Heritage Open Days in September.

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we Inspire, lead and resource the UK’s heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future. www.heritagefund.org.uk.

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