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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Beverley's 'town church' achieves milestone in restoration works on 500th anniversary of dramatic event

Today, April 29th, St Mary's Church Beverley – home to some of the finest medieval architecture of any parish church in the country – announces that the first phase in its major restoration programme has reached the halfway point on schedule, despite the coronacrisis and the three storms which have passed through since the scaffolding was put up in February!

The conservation project is the first in a proposed series of rebuilding works which will ultimately see the crumbling stonework of the entire 900-year-old church restored over the next ten years.

The current works commenced last year thanks to a grant of £421,400 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and are being carried out by master stonemason Matthias Garn, who has hired new colleagues and apprentices to help with the job. Mr Garn and his team are working on the stonework of the north nave clerestory of St Mary's – some 15 metres up from ground level – and their task includes the restoration of pinnacles and window tracery.

“We are delighted with the significant progress which Matthias and his team of skilled craftsmen have made,” said Roland Deller, Director of Development at St Mary's. “It is fortunate that the stones needed for the project were obtained from the quarry before the lockdown,” he added.



The announcement that the critical project is at its midpoint is made exactly 500 years since one of the most fateful events in the history of the church. Says Mr Deller:

“On this day in 1520, the tower fell killing 55 people – a horrendous event, leaving the church in ruins and in need of huge restoration. The speed with which the church was rebuilt following that disaster – the rebuild was completed within 11 years – was remarkable. It’s testament to the importance of the church and the affection with which it was held by the people of the town.”

One of the treasures of St Mary’s which the current restoration project aims to save and make better known is its collection of roof bosses. High up on the ceilings of the beautiful Yorkshire church are over 600 wooden carvings – a vast number for a parish church. Many of these colourful and curious artworks date from the Tudor restoration of the church in the 1520s, making the bosses of particular historical interest.

Within years of St Mary’s rebuild in the 1520s, the religious and political situation in England changed dramatically. Desperate for a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, King Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the authority of the Pope in Rome. England transitioned into a Protestant nation and erased the old Catholic traditions. This ultimately led to the dissolution of the monasteries, and the removal of bright colour or ornate decorations from churches.

“The rebuilding work at St Mary’s was completed at a really fascinating moment,” explains Dr Jennie England, St Mary’s Heritage Learning Officer.

“Had the rebuilding at St Mary’s happened even a few decades later, we would not have our colourful and decorative ceiling. But arriving when they did, the roof bosses vividly capture a moment before everything changed. This is a period in history studied by many school children, and we are excited to introduce pupils to the story of St Mary’s and how the bosses can shed light on the years leading up to the English Reformation,” added Dr England.

In the first of a series of video podcasts about the project released today on the heritage pages of the church’s website, www.stmarysbeverley.org, Dr England tells the story of the sixteenth-century collapse and rebuild of

the church. The website also contains photos of the bosses and activities for home-schooling and the holidays.

“We cannot wait to welcome people back into St Mary’s after the current restrictions have eased and when it’s safe to do so,” she continues. “Until then we hope that people stay healthy and enjoy engaging with this exceptional heritage via the website. The array of characters and creatures featured in the bosses is amazing. It includes unicorns, angels, wrestlers, jesters, musicians, saints, brewers, mermaids, kings and a bagpipe-playing pig, among many others!”

Resources on the website include ‘Boss of the Week’, a blog by Dr England interpreting some of the enigmatic carvings, and ‘Design Your Own Boss’ which invites people to get creative and design their own decorative bosses. People can also take a virtual tour of the church.

The church emphasises that the restoration works are being carried out in full compliance with government instructions to the construction industry regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

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