

Abbey of St Edmund, Bury St Edmunds

*Past,
Present
and Future
Conference Summary*



Conference Summary

The stories of St Edmund and the Magna Carta are focused on the Abbey of St Edmund and have local, national and international significance for Bury St Edmunds.

Foreword

I'm pleased to introduce this summary of the *Past, Present and Future* conference which was held by the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership at St Edmundsbury Cathedral on Saturday 26 January 2019. About 175 people listened to presentations of the recent Heritage Assessment and Conservation Plan and took part in discussions during the rest of the day.



This "Conference Summary" outlines the proceedings and is illustrated by photographs taken by Sarah Whibley, one of

the students from the Masters Course in Culture, Heritage and Museums at the University of East Anglia who attended the conference. We are grateful to the University of East Anglia for helping to support the conference in various ways.

The *Past, Present and Future* conference marks an important step forward for the Heritage Partnership after several years preparatory work, mainly behind the scenes, to this point when we can now share the results of our work so far with our local community near and far. The conference has helped us all move forward to identify priorities for potential future projects.

The conference also marks the beginning of a programme of continuing local community consultation. Conference participants were invited to fill out contact forms and feedback forms to register their wish to support our work and to record their views on the priorities for potential future projects. The conference booklet and forms are available for others to get involved.

Revd Canon Matthew Vernon
Chairman, Abbey of St Edmund
Heritage Partnership



This Conference summary, the Conference booklet, the contact and feedback forms and other information about the Abbey of St Edmund can be accessed digitally free of charge via:
www.stedscathedral.org/AbbeyofStEdmund and
www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/AbbeyofStEdmund

Above Left: Richard Summers opens the conference

Front Cover Photo: Picture of Norman Tower
by Richard Banks Harraden, c1847 (St Edmundsbury Museum Service)

St Edmundsbury Cathedral
A beacon of faith, hope and love in Suffolk



West Suffolk
Council



Deepening public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the Medieval Abbey are encouraging people to experience the spiritual, historical and archaeological significance of the Abbey of St Edmund in the modern world.

Introductions and Presentations



The participants were welcomed to the conference by the Very Reverend Joe Hawes, Dean of St Edmundsbury Cathedral (pictured left). The morning session was chaired by Richard Summers, Coordinator of the Heritage Partnership, and the afternoon session was chaired by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon, Chair of the Heritage Partnership.

The first two sessions in the morning comprised presentations of the Heritage Assessment by Dr Richard Hoggett and the Conservation Plan by Rowenna Wood of Purcell, Heritage Architects. The PowerPoint presentations and the study reports of the studies are available at www.stedscathedral.org/AbbeyofStEdmund and www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/AbbeyofStEdmund

The Heritage Partnership is grateful to Historic England and the Borough Council for funding these two consultancy studies. It is also grateful to the former Heritage Lottery Fund for funding a more recent "Gearing Up for Action" project including workshops on governance, business planning and fund raising, a visit to Abingdon Abbey and procurement of IT equipment.

Question & Answer Discussions

The third session in the morning was a Question & Answer discussion when participants raised questions and made comments from the floor about the two consultancy studies. Notable points raised during this wide-ranging session included:

- There are many stories about the Abbey of St Edmund that can reach a wide range of interests. The mix of history and legend should be explained in clear and subtle ways to visitors and local people.
- Access to and within the Abbey area should be improved.
- St Edmund, the Abbey and the Magna Carta are important themes as well as the history of the Anglo-Saxon town before the Benedictine Monastery was founded in 1020 and the growth of the Georgian and modern Bury St Edmunds after the Dissolution in 1539.
- The Abbey of St Edmund should be conserved and interpreted as part of the network of heritage attractions in and around the town. There is widespread concern about the need to repair and protect the historic fabric and to explain its importance to people.

- The conference has marked the start of a programme of community engagement which could include an on-street visitor survey to find out what people like, dislike and want to see improved. It could be followed by a series of local community meetings.
- The discussion about the priorities amongst potential projects during the day should help to identify one or two "big projects" to catch people's interest and to help attract funding. The Heritage Partnership is learning from the experience of similar heritage attractions.

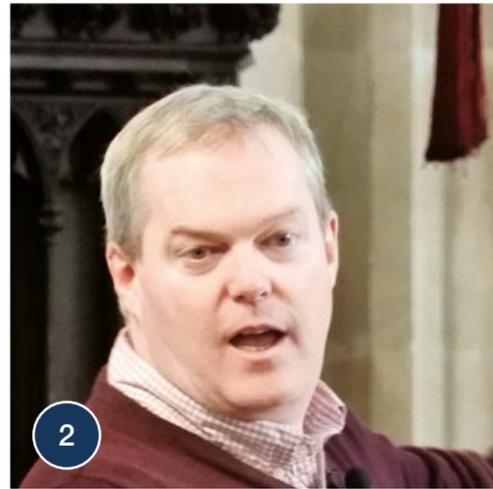
The lunch break gave everyone a chance to talk about the discussions during the morning and think ahead about identifying potential project priorities during the afternoon. The afternoon sessions encouraged further discussion in an open forum to help identify project priorities within four themes: archaeology, management, learning and interpretation.



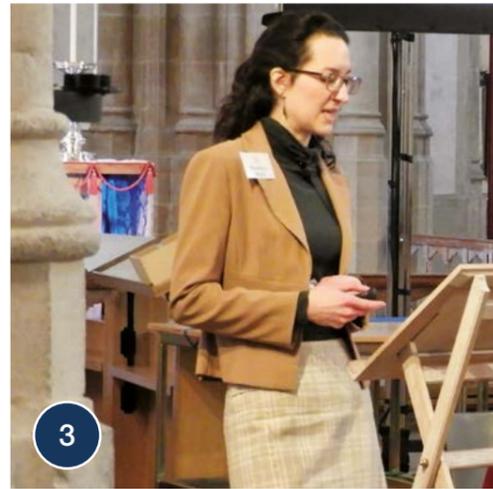
Conference in pictures



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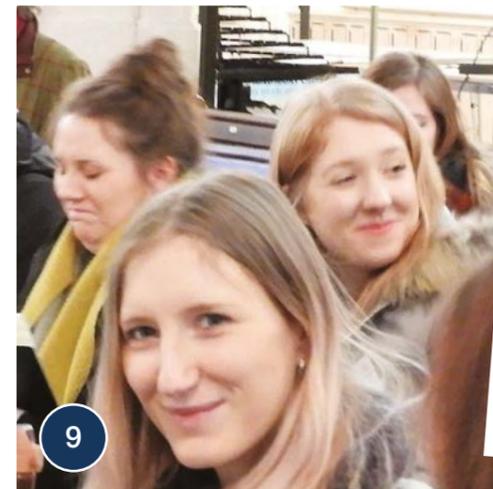
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1. A rapt audience
2. Richard Hoggett inspires the audience
3. Rowenna Wood showing the significance of the Abbey of St Edmund
4. Keen listeners
5. Earnest debate
6. Richard Hoggett and Rowenna Wood - an expert exchange
7. Questions...
8. ...more questions!
9. The young ones
10. Answers - Canon Matthew Vernon and Adrian Tindall
11. More answers
12. Panel partners - Jane Sheat, Damien Parker and Canon Matthew Vernon
13. Richard Summers closes the conference

Themed Discussions: Archaeology



The first themed discussion about archaeology was introduced by **Adrian Tindall**, a retired archaeologist and a member of the Heritage Partnership Core Group. He focussed on the priorities

to publish reports of previous excavations, take advantage of development led excavations and promote more document based research.

Key discussion points included:

- Priority to examine the Anglo-Saxon origins of the Abbey of St Edmund area, to understand why the body of St Edmund was brought here and to investigate the lower layers of archaeology underneath the medieval abbey.
- Priority to repair the historic fabric of the standing ruins, to undertake non-invasive geophysical surveys of all the open areas of the whole Abbey of St Edmund and to identify exciting future projects that could catch the public imagination.

Themed Discussions: Management



The second themed discussion about area management was introduced by **Damien Parker**, Borough Council Operations Manager for Leisure and Culture and Vice Chair of the Heritage

Partnership. He focussed on the priorities to relocate the tennis courts, to improve access and interpretation and to repair the historic fabric.

Key discussion points included:

- Priority to reconcile the various different functions of the complex Abbey of St Edmund area in linked Master Plan and Interpretation Strategy consultancy studies to build on the recent Heritage Assessment and Conservation Plan.

- Priority to undertake a pilot on-street visitor survey of visitors and local people about their likes, dislikes and suggested improvements. There was general discussion and some support from the floor in support of the provision of an Abbey visitor centre.

Themed Discussions: Learning



The third themed discussion about learning was introduced by **Jane Sheat**, Director of Education, Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich. She focussed on the key objective: "Don't forget our history". She said that learning should include schools, school holidays and lifelong learning and that heritage assets are a learning resource.

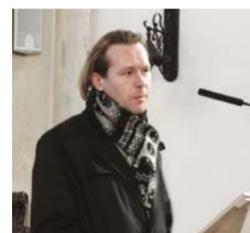
Key discussion points included:

- Priority to recognise that young people are focussed on IT and multi-media. Learning and heritage interpretation at the Abbey of St Edmund must include a variety of digital media as well as more conventional print and information panel materials.
- Priority to include the international as well as the national and local context of the Abbey. Educational programmes should fit into the National Curriculum and on-site facilities for school visits including work rooms, catering, cloakrooms and toilets should be provided.

Themed Discussions: Interpretation



The fourth themed discussion about interpretation was introduced by **Dan Clarke** (above) and **Alex McWhirter** (below) from the Borough Council Heritage Service. They focussed on the key point: "Interpretation should be based on listening to people's ideas".



They said that Moyse's Hall Museum provides for schools as well as walk-in visitors.

Key discussion points included:

- Priority to provide for school visits to the Abbey of St Edmund and other heritage assets in and around Bury St Edmunds. Priority to explain the local, national and the international significance of the Abbey as a major pilgrimage centre and the origin of Magna Carta.

- Priority to develop a smart phone "heritage app" for the Abbey area and the rest of the town. There are opportunities to connect with genealogical researchers and to re-use some of the worked stone from the Abbey that is currently stored at West Stow.

Conference Conclusions

Matthew Vernon, Chair of the Heritage Partnership, drew the conference to a close. He thanked the organising team, the speakers and theme leaders, the University of East Anglia, the Cathedral venue support team, Richard Summers, the Coordinator of the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership, and all the participants in the Conference.

Finally, Matthew reminded everyone to fill in their contact forms and feedback forms and to make donations. About 70 sets of forms were left after the conference and others have been returned by post. The forms distributed to local public venues will be analysed later. The Heritage Partnership is grateful that just over £250 was donated at and after the conference.

Conference Feedback

A preliminary analysis of the 79 "Project Priorities" feedback forms left behind at and after the conference has identified initial first preferences. Some respondents didn't indicate second and subsequent preferences, other responses may still arrive by post and further responses are expected from post-conference feedback forms left at key venues around the town.

The top priority projects in rank order from this preliminary analysis are:

- Commission archaeological research and non-invasive surveys (38)
- Start clearing the backlog of fabric repairs (30)
- Produce a range of information for visitors (30)
- Develop a Master Plan and Action Plan (30) (link with Interpretation Strategy)
- Improve access and circulation within and around the Abbey precinct (29)
- Reconcile the different roles of the area as a public park and a heritage attraction (28)
- Work with local organisations to feature the Abbey within the town's tourism offer (28)
- Local community engagement (25)
- Consider an Abbey Information Centre (25)
- Clear the old tennis courts (23)
- Develop a framework for future research (22)
- Incorporate outlying areas (21)

What Next ?

- The Heritage Partnership will address itself immediately to these conference feedback preferences together with comments from its various partners.
- The ideas expressed at the conference and elsewhere will feed into discussions with the new National Lottery Heritage Fund (formerly the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)) and other potential funders in order to identify priorities and a timeline for action.
- The existing volunteer base will be widened and organised to pool local energy and expertise to help drive the project through further stages of development.