

The Abbey of St Edmund: a millennium of English history in West Suffolk

*A Major Project led by St Edmundsbury Cathedral, West Suffolk Council and English Heritage
as lead members of the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership
with support (applied for) from the National Lottery Heritage Fund*

We need to assure a sustainable future for the Abbey of St Edmund. By making the Abbey site a place-maker in the wider landscape of West Suffolk, we will strengthen the identity of Bury St Edmunds as a historic town and cultural destination, providing a wide range of audiences greater enjoyment and understanding of their heritage. We will be innovative, imaginative and welcoming, so that every visitor – whether familiar or not with the Abbey’s heritage - gets something special out of their visit and wants to return again and again. This driving idea sets the calibre and integrity of the entire project. Its principal elements are the conservation of the Abbey ruins and the provision of universal access – physical, intellectual and emotional.

The many stories of the Abbey are a prism into over a thousand years of English history and we will bring these to life within the historic setting: King Edmund - slain by the Danes in 869 and the first patron saint of England; the foundation of the Abbey by King Cnut in 1020; the Abbey as a focus for international pilgrimage for over five centuries; the role of the Abbey in the growth of the town and the fractious relationship between them; the role of the Abbey in the formation of the Magna Carta; the impact of the Dissolution; the establishment of the parish churches of St Mary’s and St James’s Church – the latter becoming St Edmundsbury Cathedral.

This is an integrated project, where each element draws strength from and reinforces the others. Its key components are:

- Establish the Abbey as a place-maker by linking with other heritage sites in the town such as the 12thC building Moyse’s Hall Museum, the 13thC Guildhall and the Regency playhouse Theatre Royal. They are each a 5-6 minute walk from the Abbey. The Abbey is also the start or end point in journeys (cultural visitors, pilgrims, walkers) through the landscape to other heritage sites in West Suffolk, including West Stow Village (dating from the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period, as the Abbey dates from near its end) which is nestled in the unique Brecks landscape and linked to the Abbey by the meandering River Lark.
- Conserve the highly vulnerable Abbey ruins which are exposed to the elements and need urgent work to prevent their rapid deterioration.
- Improve and expand the footpath network by providing a circular route starting from and finishing by the visitor centre; taking in all the greatest elements of the Abbey and giving spectacular vistas at every turn; providing intuitive access across the Abbey area; strengthening connectivity between the Abbey ruins, Cathedral and Town; and helping raise the profile of the Rivers Lark and Linnet, ecologically significant chalk streams, as valuable resources. At the time of the foundation of the Abbey, the Lark and Linnet would have been teeming with life and through this project we will undertake certain projects to enhance the current condition of the water courses and the rivers biodiversity. The walk will also pass through ‘the Crankles’ - a former monastic fishery site now woodland meadow - and ‘No Man’s Meadows’ as well as the Great Cemetery, which again will spawn projects designed to improve biodiversity and raise environmental awareness.
- Create a visitor centre within the line of listed properties facing the town’s main public space, stitched into the historic context of the Cathedral precinct and positioned between the Abbey Gate and Norman Tower. The visitor centre will re-use listed buildings including a Georgian coach house (the only one left in this historic town) in dire state of disrepair. There will

also be new build comprising a ground floor extension to the coach house and a west cloister in the Cathedral precinct.

- The visitor centre will comprise a sequence of interiors to form the welcome (orientation, visitor information, toilets), retail and interpretation spaces.
- The west cloister will be built over a derelict yard. It will be the connection between the orientation area, the interpretation space and the footpath network. It will be the principal space for visiting exhibitions, community displays and art installations.
- Upgrade the Cathedral's existing learning space into a multi-purpose discovery centre for use by local community groups, school workshops and of the delivery of the activity plan.

This enables:

- Inspiring interpretation. Digital technology and traditional media will be utilised in the visitor centre and at key locations along the footpaths to help unify the Abbey site. Visitors will be supported in exploring the site regardless of where they enter the site or their existing knowledge or interest. The interpretation will provide a layered and enriching experience.
- Exciting learning and engagement opportunities. An activity plan will reach a wide range of audiences, supporting their understanding and enjoyment of the Abbey site and its rich history.

The project's legacy will be a transformation in the accessibility of the Abbey ruins; the establishment of a place-maker which brings into sharper focus the richly textured heritage of town and county; conservation of the Abbey ruins bringing the site into good and sustainable condition; closer working relationship between the partners; strengthened organisational resilience for St Edmundsbury Cathedral; increased biodiversity in the Abbey area.