

## The Abbey of St Edmund: A Millennium of English History in West Suffolk

We need to assure a sustainable future for the Abbey of St Edmund, once one of the greatest medieval abbeys in England and now a ruin. The Abbey site is fractured, divided up into sections and managed by different statutory organisations. The Abbey ruins are in the publicly accessible Abbey Gardens but hidden from the historic town centre and the Cathedral. Our project will re-unify the site, making the Abbey a place-maker in West Suffolk, strengthening the identity of Bury St Edmunds as a historic town and cultural destination, and providing a wide range of audiences greater enjoyment and understanding of the Abbey heritage. 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 a thousand years of English history, and we will bring these to life across the whole Abbey area (ruins, gardens, cathedral site) through imaginative interpretation and a wide range of activities. Key storylines include: 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; the role of the Abbey in the formation of the Magna Carta; the impact of the Dissolution; the establishment of St James's Church which became St Edmundsbury Cathedral; the role of the Abbey for the people of Bury St Edmunds today.

This is an integrated and unifying project. It will:

- Conserve and protect the highly significant Abbey ruins, to limit further deterioration caused by their vulnerable exposure to the elements. By implementing key works now, the site can be managed more sustainably moving forwards, limiting the impact to both historic fabric and visitor access.
- Create a heritage welcome centre within a 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 centre will provide a welcome for visitors to the site (orientation, visitor information, toilets shop), and interpretation spaces. A ground floor extension to a Georgian coach house will create 110sqm of interpretation space. The first floor will be a flexible space for workshops and community groups. A west cloister on its other side will replace a derelict yard, be a space for exhibitions and art displays, and link the Heritage Welcome Centre to the network of footpaths around the Abbey ruins.
- Improve and expand the footpath network into a circular 1.4km walk which
  - takes in all the greatest elements of the Abbey;
  - starts and finishes at the heritage welcome centre but can be joined at any point if entering from one of the other entrances to Abbey Gardens;
  - makes the Abbey site universally accessible;
  - strengthens connectivity between the Abbey ruins, Cathedral and Town;
  - helps raise the profile of the Rivers Lark and Linnet, ecologically significant chalk streams.
- Establish the Abbey as a place-maker by
  - linking with other heritage sites in the town such as the 12<sup>th</sup>C building Moyse's Hall Museum, the 13<sup>th</sup>C Guildhall and the Regency playhouse Theatre Royal;



- being the start or end point in journeys (cultural visitors, pilgrims, walkers) to other heritage sites in West Suffolk, especially West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village which is in the Brecks landscape and linked to the Abbey by the River Lark.
- Expand the Cathedral's existing learning space to become a learning hub about heritage for use by school groups.

This creates enormous scope for engagement with a wide range of people through:

- Layered and inspiring interpretation, utilising digital technology and traditional media in the heritage welcome centre and along the footpaths to help unify the Abbey site. Visitors will be supported in exploring the site regardless of where they enter or of their existing knowledge or interest.
- Exciting and enriching learning and engagement. 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 and understanding 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 project partners to ensure the sustainable future of the abbey ruins; partners' respective organisations strengthened; increased biodiversity in the Abbey area.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral, West Suffolk Council and English Heritage (the project partners) have come together as members of The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership (comprising 29 organisations and individuals who care about the Abbey) to develop and deliver this project.

