

The Bury Society

The Newsletter of the Bury St Edmunds Society

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Bringing Home Bury's Treasures

As many of you will already be aware, it has long been the ambition of many local groups and societies to see the historic Guildhall in the heart of Bury St Edmunds made more accessible to the public. The building holds an iconic position in the history of the town, is of national importance and deserves to be better recognised.

The potential role of the Guildhall has been further highlighted since the closure of the Manor House Museum, and it has long been felt that the Guildhall would be both an appropriate and fitting setting for the display of elements from the former museum collections. With this in mind it is with great pleasure that we are now in position to update you upon the recent progress in what has come to be known as 'The Guildhall Project'.

The project is a joint venture between the Bury St Edmunds Heritage Trust, whose remit lies with the protection and promotion of the historic environment of the town, and the Guildhall Feoffees, who have owned the building itself for centuries. Working in close conjunction, and with the support of, organisations such as St Edmundsbury Borough Council and English Heritage, the project aims to open the Guildhall as a Heritage and Exhibition Centre.

It is anticipated that the new Heritage Centre will include three exhibition spaces, that will house both semi-permanent and temporary exhibitions, a heritage education centre, café, archive and retail outlet. The centre will have a strong community focus, highlighting the history of the building within the town's development, and will strive to work alongside existing museum resources, such as Moyses Hall, to give a fuller and more rounded view of the town's past.

In January 2010 the Bury St Edmunds Heritage Trust, generously supported by local organisations (such as the Bury Society) appointed experienced Heritage Projects Manager, Matthew Champion, to oversee the first stage development of the Guildhall Project. This development has really focussed upon the creation of a long term and sustainable project outline – a framework which will be developed over the coming months, in conjunction with a number of stakeholder groups, to ensure that the project is both practical and achievable.

In addition, the last six months has seen the project make significant steps forward in terms of funding, including the submission of a 1st stage application form to the Heritage Lottery Fund. However, the project

has also had a much more practical side to it.

Working closely with local archaeologists and conservation officers the project has begun to more fully investigate the physical structure of the Guildhall as a building – and the results have been both surprising and extremely significant. The actual fabric of the Guildhall, hidden behind its 19th century façade, was originally thought to belong to the first half of the 13th century. However, closer examination of the rear walls has now led to suggestions that the building may well have been constructed in the middle of the previous century. Indeed, the Guildhall is probably the oldest complete civic building to survive anywhere in England. In addition, as recent initial surveys have confirmed, the Guildhall is also the largest surviving medieval Guildhall in the country.

The project will take an estimated four years to complete and will require considerable local support and fundraising. However, the result will give Bury St Edmunds a significant new exhibition venue and, for the first time in a generation, the chance for the Guildhall to once again become the focus for community and civic activities.

Matthew Champion