

Historic Wigmore church looks forward to bright new future

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Famous Wigmore church to become exciting new community space Michael Fieldsend
A historic church at the heart of a small rural community in North Herefordshire looks set to take centre stage once again thanks to support from HLF.

Founded in the 11th century alongside Wigmore Castle, St James' Church was once a major seat of power – and the size and splendour of these historic buildings show just how important a place Wigmore was in medieval England.

For over 500 years, the site played host to some of the most famous names of the day. It was owned by the powerful Mortimer family (1075-1425), with its most notorious inhabitant probably Roger Mortimer, lover of Queen Isabella, the wife of Edward II. In the 1600s it passed into the hands of the Harley family and was partly demolished by parliamentarian Lady Brilliana Harley to prevent it being used by Royalists.

Today, these names – Wigmore, Mortimer and Harley – have their legacy laid out in bricks and mortar as London streets that everyone will recognise.

Returning to the cultural agenda

The project, run by local volunteers the Wigmore Centre Community Interest Company, has been awarded a grant of £170,000 to work up plans for a £1.3million scheme, which aims to place this special church in Wigmore back on the cultural agenda.

It will be transformed into an interpretative and heritage centre with state-of-the-art facilities and access for all. In addition to space for hire, the venue will live-stream theatre from around the UK and offer a range of exciting events, lectures and concerts.

Keen supporters of the scheme include John Challis, President of the Mortimer History Society and perhaps better known as *Only Fools and Horses'* Boycie, who said: "The proposed plans are very exciting and will make it an attractive place to congregate and share in activities, while maintaining the historical integrity of the building."

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Author and historian Alison Weir gave an insight into the special nature of the Wigmore: "I had the pleasure of giving a fundraising presentation in Wigmore Church on my biography *Isabella, She Wolf of France, Queen of England*. To speak in the space that she frequented and was built by her lover, Roger Mortimer, was emotional and very special, to say the least.

"This is a wonderful and atmospheric venue and I am delighted that it will remain open for everyone to visit."

Vanessa Harbar, Head of HLF West Midlands, said: "A coalition of believers and non-believers, historians and educationalists, as well as those who simply love old buildings for what they say to us and about us, have joined forces to keep this church at the heart of village and community life.

"Thanks to National Lottery players, St James' Church in Wigmore can now look to a brighter future as this exciting project gets off the ground."

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The Wigmore Centre Community Interest Company (CIC) has received a development grant of £170,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to help progress plans to ensure the survival of its 1,000-year-old church.

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