
EXETER HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

Chair's Report, 2020

Introduction

This has been an exceptional year. The starting-point for this report must be a profound vote of thanks to all of those staff and volunteers who have shown such dedication to the care of the Priory and to the development of EHBT, its immediate operations and the delivery of its Business Plan. In spite of the persistent challenges presented by the pandemic the year has seen some significant successes: the completion of restoration and refurbishment, including the installation of heating in the West Wing; the award of grant funding for which the competition has been intense; the development of new staff roles; the recruitment and support of immensely valuable contributions from student interns and volunteers. None of these would have been possible without the unstinting efforts of paid staff, volunteers and trustees. No doubt, there are challenges ahead, as our imperatives of sustained public engagement and income generation will seem even more ambitious in the aftermath of Covid-19, but the momentum we have generated, and maintained against the odds, is promising.

1. EHBT

Board of Trustees

Tamsin Holiday-Scott has resigned. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her contribution and to wish her well for the future. There are now two vacancies. A call for expressions of interest was circulated through a variety of channels in October and one prospective trustee has come forward who may now be co-opted. The recruitment of a second candidate should continue so that the experience and expertise available to the Trust is further expanded.

Lease of St Nicholas Priory

In September EHB T entered into its third year as lessee of both wings of the remaining buildings of St Nicholas Priory. Sadly, it was not possible to schedule the ceremonial presentation to the mayor; of course, it is hoped that this can resume in 2021.

A variance to the 2018 lease has been requested from Exeter City Council to enable the sublet of storage and display spaces to Devon & Exeter Medical Heritage Trust. At the time of writing, a response is still awaited from the Council.

Tenancies

The tenants of 21B vacated at the end of September. At the time of writing the tenancy has not been refilled.

EHB T Administrator

Clare Maudling was appointed administrator.

2. Management of St Nicholas Priory

Staff

A new staffing structure for the operational management of the priory was approved by trustees in March. Thereafter, the appointment of the substantive roles was confirmed: Heritage Manager (Judith Morgane); Operations & Buildings Manager (Abigail Smith); Marketing Manager (Luke Jeffreys). Line-management has been distributed between the Deputy Chair and the Secretary.

Committee

A new structure of sub-committees has been in operation since March. Matters of fabric, finance and operations are directed and overseen in the first instance at this level. It has been decided not to convene a partnership subcommittee for the time being given the comparatively limited collaborative activity.

3. Grant Successes

Perhaps the signal achievement of 2020 has been the Trust's success in securing grant funding from the short calls issued by national funders in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

We won awards from both the Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF) and the Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage (CRF). The competition for these calls, regionally as well as nationally, was intense, and the positive outcome testifies to the dedicated efforts of all those trustees and staff who contributed to the application text and budget and to the progress that has already been made in the development of our Business Plan. Small grants were secured also from the Finnis Scott Foundation, to support the development of the garden, and the Belsize Trust, to support the purchase of furniture for the serveries. A record of funding success is an essential prerequisite for our future grant ambitions; equally important, of course, is evidence of delivery, and it will be important that our offering at the Priory is emerging with clarity when the CRF closes at the end of March 2021.

At the time of writing, further funding bids are in gestation for particular projects, e.g. research and recording of stone fragments led by Richard Parker. Of course, we must also turn our sights on a further major bid to NLHF.

4. Restoration and Refurbishment

The national lockdown imposed in mid-March delayed the start of the scheduled building works. The heating installation and the kitchen and servery facility have finally been completed. Both are critical milestones on our route to sustained income generation. The installation of Wi-Fi, funded under the HEF award, was approved by ECC at the end of October and will now proceed. CRF creates an opportunity to reconfigure the garden space; it will also enable some minor restoration and improvement works.

5. Partnerships

DEMHT

Approval has been requested from Exeter City Council for the Trust to sublet storage and display spaces to DEMHT. In parallel, the Trust has entered into a partnership agreement with DEHMT, initially for a period of three years, for the contribution of public engagement events connected with medical history, health and wellbeing.

University of Exeter

The Trust's engagement with the University has resulted in a series of successful internships funded under the University's Student Campus Partnership (SCP) Programme. These have provided valuable research and development input on

engagement and interpretation plans; one student intern has contributed to the Benedictine History event now scheduled for March 2021.

Exeter Heritage Network

The Trust is represented in this group, established in 2019 under the leadership of the University's Heritage Strategy Group with the purpose of fostering collaboration between the heritage organisations in the city and the region with a particular focus on developing collective responses to external funding opportunities.

6. Business Plan

When the year's disruption began, the development of the Business Plan was already far advanced. The CRF award has enabled the further evaluation and refinement of the strategy for income generation. It is critically important that as the CRF award closes, we are well-prepared for the implementation of the plan with, it must be hoped, the Priory and our public offering in fully operational mode.

7. Public engagement

The first national lockdown in March coincided with the close of the funding period of our first NLHF award. At the outset we had planned to attract some 500 new visitors; as it happens, to date we have seen in excess of 2,000.

While the pandemic prevented the delivery of a normal programme of events, it has been possible run a number of outdoor tours, family days and, after the lifting of lockdown, cookery demonstrations. The HEF award has enabled the first steps towards a virtual offer, including recorded talks accessible to browsers on our website. We will be adding further to the menu of talks in the run up to Christmas. These activities owe everything to the remarkable dedication of our trustees, staff and volunteers who have given time, energy and expertise in the most challenging of circumstances.

Stepping into the Chair mid-year, I would like to close with sincere thanks to fellow trustees, staff and volunteers for their assistance, and in particular to Jo Sinclair for her unstinting support as Deputy.

James Clark
3 December 2020