

Wickham Market's George Community Pub secures vital National Lottery support

Asterisks in following refer to the relevant text in the 'Notes to Editors' section.

The George Community Pub, Wickham Market, Suffolk has received initial support** from The National Lottery Heritage Fund Heritage Enterprise Scheme for the reconstruction of the historic, fire-damaged George Inn as a community-owned pub, it was announced today. Made possible by National Lottery players, the project aims to restore what was the village's last surviving public house as a going concern at the heart of the community. It will incorporate community space for a wide-range of activities, including heritage-related experiences, intended to make Wickham Market a better place to live and to combat loneliness and isolation by bringing all walks of life together in a convivial and welcoming atmosphere.

Development funding of £82,000 has been awarded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund to help The George Community Pub (Wickham Market) Limited* progress their plans to apply for a full National Lottery grant at a later date. There is still much work for the Society's volunteers and its professional team to do, but with the full grant, additional funding (including a second share offer – details for which can be found on the Society's website <http://www.wmgeorge.co.uk/>), detailed plans and planning permission in place, reconstruction work is expected to commence in 2022 with 'the first pints being pulled' in mid-2023.

The project will restore the George Inn, latterly the only pub in Wickham Market (a community of some 2,300 people), which, without it, has no viable commercial future. Once restored, a sustainable community pub business will bring economic benefits to Wickham, and create local jobs. The George will be 'more than a pub' – during reconstruction works an ambitious programme of heritage activities will engage professionals, students and the widest possible range of local residents through volunteering, training, hard hat tours, workshops, oral history, research, photography and arts projects; its impact, subsequently, being sustained by a dedicated Community Activity Co-ordinator, using the pub and its dedicated community space to promote the village's heritage, and heritage in general, to a wide audience. In operation, The George will host weekly events such as Dementia Cafés, Mother and Toddler Groups, arts groups, music and talks. Wickham Market will become a better place to live, work and visit as a lasting legacy of the project. In the future, trading surpluses will be used to support other community groups and initiatives for the benefit of all. Widespread support for the Project has been demonstrated through consultation, fundraising events, volunteering and the sale, to date, of nearly £130,000-worth of intentionally affordable, shares to some 330 residents and supporters from all walks of life.



The George

Community Pub, Wickham Market



When The George burnt down in April 2013, it became clear that Wickham Market was in danger of losing not only an historic building (Grade II[2]-listed and, after the fire, placed on the Suffolk Historic Buildings at Risk Register) but also its last trading public house. Just over a hundred years ago there were no less than seven inns and pubs in the village, then with a population of about 1,400. These establishments served not just as social meeting places, but as, at various times, venues for auctions of properties, farm produce and goods; places where rents were paid, debts were settled, inquests held and where wills were executed; collection and delivery points for goods, livestock, passengers and mail (Wickham was on the major stage coach route between Yarmouth and London and to the London markets), as 'lost property offices; meeting places for local administration and public groups; and, as 'recruitment agencies' for workers and servants (see the Society's website <http://www.wmgeorge.co.uk/history/history-by-gones/> for stories of The George's past). A number of these roles continued into the living memories of the village's older residents. The community were determined that The George, and the community history and social amenity it represented, should not be lost, having it listed as an Asset of Community Value (see https://mycommunity.org.uk/take-action/land-and-building-assets/assets-of-community-value-right-to-bid/?qclid=Cj0KQCQjw5MLrBRCIARIsAPG0WGwxqfeXHfcH07yOTQRTFDlx9cVX2nXIVHqt2BXXQIRSPzJyJMBcjBQaApVWEALw_wcB) in early 2017.

Up until the fire, The George had been a public house, for, at least, 360 years. Indeed, the fire revealed that the building, thought to date to the 18th century, in fact had its origins in the late 15th or early 16th century and, from structural evidence, may even have been purpose-built as an inn then. Surveys established that major parts of the historic structure could be conserved and restored and, so, its demolition was strongly resisted not only by the community but also by local council Conservation and Planning Officers.

Quote

Commenting on the award, Society Chairman, Bill Wolfe-Evans, who lives less than 30 metres from The George, said:

“By George we did it!

On behalf of shareholders and supporters we are absolutely thrilled and extremely grateful to have received support from National Lottery players. For centuries The George Inn has served Wickham Market and it was almost lost forever following the fire. Thanks to our community's generosity, that of previous funders who have recognised and shared our vision, and now the National Lottery Heritage Fund we can now look forward to restoring this wonderful building for future generations.”



The George
Community Pub, Wickham Market



Notes to editors

About The George Community Pub (Wickham Market) Limited

* The George Community Pub (Wickham Market) Limited is a Community Benefit Society (for details of 'BenComms' see <https://communityshares.org.uk/resources/handbook/community-benefit-societies>).

The Society (website: <http://www.wmgeorge.co.uk/>; Facebook:

@thegeorgecommunitypub), run voluntarily by members of the community, was founded in December 2016, in response to proposals by the then-owner to demolish the historic inn, the last public house in Wickham Market. The Society was set up with the aim of "taking ownership of the George Public House, and restoring it to use as a viable community pub and Social Enterprise offering services, facilities and opportunities for the community benefit. As a Community Benefit Society, it will allow individuals in the community to have a democratic stake in a key community enterprise and will engage in other village activities with a view to re-investing any surplus for the benefit of the Social Enterprise, the community and stakeholders."

Following extensive feasibility studies and initial design work (based on the results of a village-wide survey to establish what the community wanted from the 'new' George) the Society was confident in launching its initial Community Share Offer and, at the same time, making a major grant application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (then Heritage Lottery Fund) Heritage Enterprise Scheme in May 2018.

The Society's work has been funded by community fund-raising events, donations and grants from the Architectural Heritage Fund, Power to Change (under the More Than A Pub scheme, administered by The Plunkett Foundation – see <https://plunkett.co.uk/more-than-a-pub/>) Suffolk Coastal District Council (now East Suffolk Council), Suffolk County Council and the Wickham Market Partnership. Local volunteers, crucially, have contributed thousands of hours of their own time and free professional expertise to the project.

The Share Offer, again prepared by community volunteers with further support from grant givers, including The Hive (see <https://www.uk.coop/the-hive/about/what-hive>), was awarded a Community Share Standard Mark, attracted over 300 individual investors, each contributing between £50 and £10,000 to a total of nearly £130,000 which enabled the Society to purchase the building, carry out safety checks and make improvements to the scaffold structure which supports and protects the surviving historical remains. The 'makeshift' fencing around the site was also replaced by a more secure and attractive hoarding, construction of which was sponsored by local house builders, Hopkins Homes.



The George

Community Pub, Wickham Market



The grant application in 2018 was unsuccessful but with the overwhelming support of the Society's members, expressed in a ballot in April 2019, and based on constructive feedback from the Heritage Fund, further work was done to address issues raised in a new application, submitted in May 2019, resulting in the announced award.

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

** National Lottery Heritage Fund grant applications over £250,000 are assessed in two rounds. The George Community Pub has initially been granted round one development funding of £82,000 by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, allowing it to progress with its plans. Detailed proposals are then considered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund at second round, where a final decision is made on the full funding award of £989,000.

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we **Inspire, lead** and **resource** the UK's heritage to create **positive and lasting change** for people and communities, now and in the future. www.heritagefund.org.uk.

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