

News Release - 16 December 2021:

The George Community Pub, Wickham Market, Suffolk has been awarded a £988,200 grant by The National Lottery Heritage Fund to help restore the five hundred year-old Grade II-listed pub that was severely damaged by fire.

The George Community Pub ('the Society') has been awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund Heritage Enterprise grant of £988,200 for an exciting project to restore the historic pub which has been closed since a major fire in 2013. The grant, made possible by National Lottery players, will support plans put forward by the Community Benefit Society, which has over 320 shareholder members, the majority of whom live in and around Wickham Market.

Building a brighter future for Wickham Market

As the last remaining pub in Wickham Market, the Society's plans for the restoration of The George (granted planning consent in June this year) will create a much-needed social hub and preserve a significant heritage asset. With the support of The National Lottery Heritage Fund, The George will once again be an economic contributor to the village, bringing with it increased footfall and opportunities for other local businesses. The George will also provide training and employment for local people in the construction and hospitality industries. Above all, it will address issues of loneliness and isolation in the community and promote the wellbeing of local residents.

What the George will be like once restored

The aim is to make the George a comfortable and welcoming place for everyone to enjoy. A pub and restaurant at ground floor offering typical pub activities and services, but with fully-accessible community rooms on the first floor, where the layout has been specifically designed to accommodate a wide-ranging programme of social and educational activities, managed and funded by the Society, specifically targeting wellbeing. These activities are not available elsewhere in the village. This programme will be developed and managed in association with Wellbeing Suffolk (Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust) and existing community groups to ensure those, for example, living with dementia or loneliness will have a safe, inclusive place in which to meet and socialise in a post-Covid world.

Restoration and new features

The real historic significance of The George was revealed after the 2013 fire, when what was thought to be an 18th-century building was found to 'encapsulate' a late 15th- or early 16th-century timber-framed structure, which, it is suggested, may originally have been built as an inn. The substantial part of this original building which has survived, will be conserved, restored or reconstructed as part of the construction works, scheduled to start in autumn 2022, preserving and making it accessible

and understandable to future generations. New areas of construction will marry with the historic to incorporate a brand-new kitchen and modern toilet facilities.

The Project will bring previously unavailable parts of the building into public use for the first time. The first floor of the building will be accessed by lift or stairs, ensuring the whole building is accessible to all. The renovation of the upstairs community rooms will include an area of vaulted ceiling to demonstrate the roof structure, and the heritage of the building will be celebrated and interpreted throughout, with particular emphasis on its role in the community's and individuals' lives over its five centuries of existence.

Next Steps

The Society had a very well supported share issue in 2018, which raised nearly £130,000. A second share offer will be launched in January, soon after which the Society hopes to have finalised all funding for the project. The total project cost is estimated to be £1.45million. With this Heritage Fund grant, other grants already received (most recently one for over £8,000 to help prepare and promote the share offer from Co-operatives UK/Community Shares; <https://www.uk.coop/start-new-co-op/support/community-shares>), other fundraising and existing own funds, the total amount secured by the society, so far, amounts to £1.11million leaving £340,000 to find. A request for share pledges earlier in 2021 amassed £245,000 of pledges and so the remaining target is confidently expected to be met over the next few months.

Quotes

A spokesperson from The George Management Committee said:

“This fantastic award from The National Lottery Heritage Fund has now made this project possible. We are so grateful to the many shareholders and supporters who believed and invested in this project and particular thanks go to National Lottery players everywhere. Wickham Market has everything apart from a village pub. That has just changed and The George Community Pub will be far more than a pub, it will become a unique social hub and, in the process, an important piece of Suffolk heritage will be saved.”

Anne Jenkins, Director, England, Midlands & East at The National Lottery Heritage Fund says:

“Investing in heritage means investing in the community it belongs to, which is why we are so pleased to support The George Community Pub in Wickham Market. Not only will this grant conserve and restore this historic building, it will also help regenerate the local economy, ensuring that this heritage is enjoyed by locals and visitors alike.”