

The Great Stare and CB 300 12 Jan 2016

2016 will be one of the most important years in the Abbey's 1080 year history! A momentous year for the people of Milton Abbas, its school, and beyond.

Over 70 people were delighted to hear of the progress on both these projects in the New Barn Theatre at the invitation of the headmaster Magnus Bashaarat on 12 Jan 2016.

First Tom Roberts gave us an update on the Great Stare Project and progress of the bid for funding to the HLF. His presentation was embellished with lavishly illustrated professional handouts. These will certainly become part of the Milton Abbas Local History Group's archive documents!

The recent Abbey building decline began very recently with a leaky roof, then with the Victorian drain collapses, water has penetrated the floor. Important parts of the Abbey are now in a dangerous state and require immediate repair or it will rapidly become a ruin. It is important to realise that the Abbey belongs with the local people and is not intended to be a visitor centre for tourists. However for its long term future it must sustain itself and generate an income which will be used to keep it in good repair.

Submission of the Heritage Lottery Fund bid will be the end of Feb 2016.

Tom outlined the important phases in the history of Milton Abbey which have led to the situation both spiritually and topographically today:

On 11 March 1539, six centuries of monastic life at Milton evaporated with the Dissolution of the Monasteries. So began a succession of individual family ownerships. Some demonstrated immense vision, determination and creativity (for example, in surrounding the Abbey with one of 'Capability' Brown's finest landscapes), but the estate as a significant local focus of life, involvement, learning, and spiritual strength had been swept away. The 'magnet' had become a barrier between local communities.

Four hundred years on, in 1932, The Hambros, the last great family dynasty departed.

Today, a new vision is emerging which brings together the two previous phases. In addition to the restoration of Grade I listed buildings and registered historic park, the Benedictine principles of welcome, hospitality, learning, spiritual strength, and re-evaluation of the importance of landscape and wildlife are returning. The Great Stare is a reawakening of the vitality that once existed at the heart of Dorset - and local people are at the centre of the vision.

The Great Stare Project has some key targets - to save the Abbey building from decay and collapse, to rediscover its voice, to build a new relationship with local people and to make the Abbey and its landscape sustainable.

The timetable for this project:

1. Commencing the restoration and repair of the Abbey Church on site at the end of February. This will continue through the year.
2. Preparing during the Spring for the Summer launch of the exhibitions and events for the national Capability Brown Festival. Milton Abbey is the hub for the South West.

3. Submitting detailed information to the Heritage Lottery Fund at the end of February on the proposals, costings, management and programmes for the three-year programme of The Great Stare project - together with ten-year cash-flow for the various elements to demonstrate long-term sustainability. Ultimately it is all about proving deliverability. Final approval and commencement of The Great Stare HLF-funded project - June 2016, with completion in 2019.

Key targets

1. Repair and conserve the Abbey Church
2. Exhibition, display and seminar space in the south aisle
3. Visitor facilities in the north aisle - reception, books and merchandise sales and coffee area
4. The approach to design in the Abbey is to be non-intrusive, easily changed, and - above all - mobile to accommodate different functions
5. In terms of the landscape element, the objective is to provide safe, secure and sensitive visitor access to the site, to integrate pedestrian movement through the site linking Chapel, Abbey and Folly, to engage communities in the landscape through controlled walks, forest activities and creative interpretation of the landscape, and to restore elements of the 'Capability' Brown landscape and maintain them. It is fascinating that two of the most distinctive formative influences which make countries and cultures unique are language and landscape.

To achieve the outcomes we have listed, we need -apart from money -management.

Planning permission has already been granted for all the works. Including a car park near St Catherine's Chapel 10 spaces, another car park near the Hilton track 16 spaces, a footpath from St Catherine's Chapel through the woods, across a new pedestrian bridge alongside the grass steps and across to the Abbey, another footpath from the Abbey to the Folly, or Ruins as it is known. The car parks are small and have no provision for coaches. Any coaches will have to be with the consent of the school, and the low bridge will not encourage them either.

Management to achieve a resurgence of the religious life of the Abbey. Management of programmes of learning, engagement and events which will draw people in and support volunteering; and management of the operation of the place as a small business which must pay its way. Heritage Lottery is happy to support management costs, but also wants long-term reassurance -the comfort of knowing that the place will continue in the years ahead, and not fold soon after the three-year project period is over. Volunteering will be a kingpin in the project.

Protect, create, inspire - volunteering

The key to making this project possible lies with our volunteers. The Abbey and its sublime landscape will thrive if it is rooted in the lives of local communities; cared about, looked after, used, and supported by local people.

But what is in it for you, the volunteer? Whilst the traditional role of volunteer as steward will be important in the Capability Brown Festival exhibitions year, we are on the threshold of a new concept of volunteering. In new roles you will be able to build on your skills or learn new ones (conservation skills in the Abbey and in the landscape, for example, and working on the

living archive project); building your social circle of friends and developing a sense of community; building your knowledge about this wonderful place and making sure it stays open to visitors. There will be volunteers in education, events, media, website management, cleaning, catering, land management, plus guides, etc. There will be ways to help where it is not necessary to visit the site. There will be feedback, and your views will be important. You will be respected, work with a supportive management framework, and have opportunity to attend conferences and training workshops. This will not happen all at once - the new mindset will take time.

We are hoping to appoint a part-time Activities Manager by the Autumn of this year or beginning of 2017. This person will be involved in much outreach work, together with a senior volunteer to support a team of (eventually) 40 or 50 volunteers.

We are embarking upon a courageous adventure, an exciting one, and one no less significant than the day John Damer arrived here and said 'you've seen nothing yet.' He was right, but we have a vision which matches up to his. There are funders waiting in the wings to support us providing we can demonstrate the commitment and show that we have caught the vision.



Artist's impression of the planned visitor facilities in the south aisle.

The target number of visitors will be 10 000 annually so this project will be very small scale in comparison with other local attractions such as Kingston Lacy 270 000, or just one fifth of the National Trust's smallest attraction - Treasurer's House (York) 50 000. Note in 2014 with the Pug in exhibition there were about 4 000 visitors to the Abbey in July and August.

In last month's Bulletin, Michael McAvoy wrote a 4 page insert on the history and importance of Capability Brown. He added to the CB 300 project by telling us of the latest situation. The landscape which Joseph Damer built to Capability Brown's design is thought by the landscape experts to be in the top 10 of the 250 designs which were implemented. As such it ranks with Blenheim Palace, Chatsworth, Stowe, Stourhead, etc - can you believe that Milton Abbas is that important - it is! Of course we cannot, and do not, want to achieve those visitor numbers, so we can enjoy its beauty without the hordes. Now that's what I call a win-win situation!!

Milton Abbas has been chosen by the CB 300 festival organisers as one of the 12 hubs covering the whole of England and Wales, We are the hub for the south west region. The national festival is supported by around 20 organisations.

Michael McAvoy is the coordinator for this hub. Already five days of photography have been taken by Tony Shearn, including drone footage, and commentary by John Phibbs. We were treated to a short section of the film. Not only is it beautifully composed but I was enthralled with further revelations such as the incorporation of Hilton Village and particularly its spire, as part of Brown's landscape. This being one of Brown's last works where he had achieved such a mastery of views that he composed just like a landscape painter. The footage flying over the Abbey and looking up Hilton Valley and Delcombe Valley reminded us of just how amazing this area is. There will be a dedicated multi-media exhibition in the school. The artist Stephen Farthing RA has been commissioned to paint an eight foot landscape view.

£16 000 has already been raised towards the £30 000 target. If anyone has any ideas of who might be interested in sponsoring please get in touch with Michael McAvoy.

A lively question and answer session followed showing just how passionate this community is towards these projects.

The key to the success of both these projects will be the volunteers. They are a signal to the sponsors and funders that Milton Abbas is worth supporting, and nothing will happen without their commitment.

Please get in touch with Tom Roberts or Michael McAvoy if you can help in any way. There are many duties with which we can help these important projects, and I can't wait to learn more. See you there!

Web sites for more information:

<http://www.miltonabbey.org>

<http://www.capabilitybrown.org>

<http://www.parksandgardens.org/places-and-people/site/2296>

<http://www.stephenfarthing.com/index.htm>