

# **NEWS RELEASE**

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**For immediate release**

## **Torre Abbey.....the story so far**

In February 2004 news of a £4.9million lottery windfall prompted celebrations at Torbay Council and marked the start of a restoration project for Torre Abbey.

The project will be split into three phases over the next ten years. Phase 1 will make the abbey suitable for people with disabilities, including a new entrance, new ticketing and reception areas. A stunning new cloister garden will become the central feature of both the abbey and gardens.

The start of phase 1 was celebrated when David Suchet, known as Agatha Christie's Inspector Poirot, performed the official closing ceremony in November 2004, and it has been full steam ahead for abbey staff ever since.

In April 2005 the gardens were also closed to the public. This was done for three main reasons:

- 1) Health and safety - this is not remedial work that will be taking place. We have very large vehicles coming in and out of the grounds and there is a danger of flying debris whilst work to the outside of the building takes place.
- 2) Security – due to vandalism, particularly to the palm house, it became increasingly important to be able to secure the abbey and gardens whilst the work is underway. It is very difficult for the contractor, when appointed, to secure the abbey when the gardens are still accessible.

3) Economical benefits - the palm house costs at least £6,000 per year to heat and maintain. We sought advice from an expert from the Eden Project, who reported that the plants within the palm house were capable of surviving in the mild conditions that we have here in Torbay. We will also be able to cut back on gardening costs, and to use the money saved in the months leading up to the reopening, when we will be able to restore the gardens to their former glory.

Many of the plants were removed from the garden to other areas around Torbay where they could be enjoyed by residents and visitors.

In October 2005 an award winning horticultural training scheme for students with disabilities agreed to maintain and develop the gardens at Torre Abbey during its extensive restoration.

The agreement with Four Seasons, which provides training for students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities and mental health issues, means that Torbay Council can make the best use of its limited funds whilst also responding to the Heritage Lottery's request to develop the gardens in sympathy with the house.

Cabinet Member Councillor Jeanette Richards said: "Torre Abbey has been in danger of falling into disrepair since the 19th Century. We are all delighted to help save the building and be able to open it up for generations to explore and enjoy.

"Following its refurbishment and presentation, Torre Abbey will continue to play a significant role in promoting tourism and combating local deprivation."

### **What has happened so far?**

- The galleries have been completely stripped and the collections have been carefully packed, labelled and placed in secure storage. Conservation standard materials

such as acid-free tissue paper were used to help minimise damage along with hundreds of metres of bubble wrap to protect each individual item from damp, dust and vibration.

- The entire project has been broken down into detailed packages of work, each of which has been put out to tender and costed. This was an enormous undertaking because of the scale of the repairs and alterations. Many hundreds of drawings have been produced along with huge bound volumes of specifications.
- The asbestos has been stripped out of the building.
- The whole of the medieval cloister has been excavated by the Museum of London. They found evidence of major rebuild of the cloister, probably during the 14th or 15th Century. They also found around 40 graves of members of the monastic community, one of which was plaster lined. An elaborately carved slate grave slab of the 13th to 15th Century was found in front of the sacristy and is the best preserved medieval grave slab of its type ever to have been discovered.
- Various temporary access improvements have been made, including removal of one of the gate piers. The pillar and gates have been put into safe storage until they are put back following completion of the work.
- Various minor additions to the abbey have been demolished, including the chapel corridor and associated toilet. This is to make way for the scaffolding.
- Investigation of the building is continuing. Recent discoveries include the uncovering of part of a decorated plaster scheme in the new entrance corridor. Francis Kelly of English Heritage considers this to belong to the 13th Century.
- A new page on the council's website has been set up to keep people informed of the abbey's progress. Those logging onto [www.torbay.gov.uk/torreabbey](http://www.torbay.gov.uk/torreabbey) can read

about the people working on the project, visit the photo library, catch up on the latest news and read extracts from the diary of Dr Michael Rhodes, Head of Museum Services.

- An Education Officer has been appointed for Torre Abbey in response to a condition set by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Graham O'Callaghan will be overseeing the educational element of the abbey when it re-opens. In the meantime he will be meeting with community groups around the Bay and other heritage projects in South Devon to develop an educational programme for future visitors.
- An open day was held on Sunday 12 February to give people the chance to look around the abbey, find out more about the restoration and ask any questions they had. Over 2,000 people attended the day.

### **What happens next?**

- Negotiations with the main contractor will be concluded, the remaining museum staff will move off site to alternative offices and the contractors will take over.
- The contractors will begin by creating a builders' compound in front of the tower and be erecting a huge scaffolding structure over the roof. They will begin by stripping out the internal room linings and various partitions that are not required. They will also be stripping off parts of the external render.
- The stripping out phase is expected to reveal some extraordinary archaeological surprises and new information about the abbey. This will be recorded by the Museum of London Archaeological Service. They will eventually incorporate the findings into a detailed report on the whole of Torre Abbey.
- Fundraising is always ongoing. Contributions to the £6.5million total cost will come from the council's capital fund (£631,000), English Heritage (£360,000) and money

raised from the Friends of Torre Abbey (£120,000). There nevertheless remains a significant capital shortfall. Torbay Council is working relentlessly with the Friends of Torre Abbey to secure the completion of the project and is investigating external funding sources.

- Four Seasons will be using its trainees to sympathetically develop the gardens and the palm house.
- The museum staff will be working on new displays and will be organising various events to let people know what is happening. Work is underway on a heritage centre for the barn and staff will also be available to give talks to local groups.