

St Piran Trust

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PRESS RELEASE - *for immediate release*

16 January 2014

BE PART OF HISTORY – JOIN THE EXCAVATION AND FUND-RAISING DRIVE

Long-awaited work to uncover St Piran's Oratory from the sand dunes at Perranporth is due to start on February 17 – with the launch of the excavation, plus a major fund-raising drive.

Following a 15-year-campaign, the St Piran Trust plans to unearth and conserve St Piran's Oratory, believed to be amongst the oldest Christian buildings on mainland Britain. The site has been of central importance to Cornish people for over 1,400 years as a place of worship and pilgrimage, and as a focus for cultural expression. Today, many hundreds of people gather at the site annually to mark St Piran's Day. The saint's flag (which features in a stained-glass window installed in Westminster Abbey in 1888) - a white cross on a black field, is flown the length and breadth of Cornwall.

The scheduled ancient monument is a listed building and was buried in 1980, for "its own protection". Since then expert opinion has shifted, amid calls for it to be uncovered and conserved in a more sympathetic way.

Last summer, the Trust awarded a contract to Cornwall Council's Historic Environment Service to start exploratory works which will now lead to the full excavation, preservation and interpretation of this historic site.

Trustee David Barrie said, "I am delighted that we now have a start date and it's great news for our hard-working volunteers and all those who care about Cornwall and its heritage.

"We are now asking the public to get involved and become part of history – either by volunteering to help and/or by donating funds. We need to raise £150,000 to ensure this dream comes true."

The Oratory is a key cultural icon for Cornwall. Its precise date has yet to be determined but it is certainly early medieval and likely replaced a yet earlier structure, which tradition suggests was built by St Piran himself.

To reflect its unique status, Perranporth resident Eileen Carter formed the St Piran Trust in 2000 to campaign for its excavation and future protection.

The Trust's project has been drawn out as the Oratory lies within a Special Area of Conservation – one of the most protected landscapes in Europe. As a result, a huge amount of preparatory work and investigation was required before permission to excavate could be granted.

Looking ahead, St Piran Trustee Ian Saltern added, "Many people in Cornwall have longed for the Oratory to see the light of day, once more, and now expectation is becoming reality. It is my personal view that had the site been associated with the bringing of Christianity to English-speaking peoples, I doubt very much that it would have been buried and remained buried for 30 years".

“Until the excavation begins, we are unsure what we will find. The remains of the Oratory were covered by a concrete protecting structure in 1910. This was then buried in 1980, forming a new sand dune on Gear Sands.

“Upon excavation, we will need to assess and examine what lies within. Until then, it is very much a case of wait and see.

“We expect our conservation work should be completed this year, followed by careful consideration of how to protect the Oratory in future years.”

GETTING INVOLVED:

The excavation will be managed by Cornwall Council’s Historic Environment Service. Those wishing to volunteer to take part in the excavation should contact James Gossip at Cornwall Council on 01872 324303 or jgossip@cornwall.gov.uk

The first viewing of the newly exposed Oratory is set to take place on Sunday, March 2, when the St Piran Trust stages the annual St Piran play at 2pm. The audience will be invited to make a contribution towards excavation costs.

Likewise, the Trust is encouraging all those who are holding events to celebrate St Piran’s Day to consider making a donation towards the Oratory’s excavation.

St Piran Trust founder Eileen Carter said, “Whilst we have some of the money needed to excavate the Oratory, we still desperately need to raise more. There could be no better way of marking St Piran’s Day than by collecting money to help uncover and conserve the earliest building associated with the saint”.

To make donations, please send cheques to Ian Saltern 2 Corner Gardens, Stratton, Cornwall EX23 9BT.

Notes for Editors

- The St Piran Trust is a voluntary charity and a company limited by guarantee. It has worked tirelessly over the past 15 years to protect and interpret the historic sites associated with Cornwall’s national saint (the Oratory, Old Church and Perran Round).
- The St Piran Trust acknowledges the continued cooperation of Cornwall Council, English Heritage, Heritage Lottery Fund, Ministry of Defence, Natural England, Perran Sands Holiday Park, Perranzabuloe Parish Council, and the generosity of all its supporters.

For more information, please see the leaflet, which is attached to this accompanying email, or visit the Trust’s website - www.stpiran.org. Alternatively, contact:

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