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Press Release

Coronavirus lockdown puts historic Sussex properties at risk

Historic Sussex properties are at risk of permanent closure unless funds can be raised to keep them open to the public, the Sussex Archaeological Society warned today (June 16).

The society, one of the oldest archaeological societies in the UK, has been hit hard by the coronavirus lockdown and has seen its income fall dramatically.

Founded in 1846, it cares for buildings and museums across East and West Sussex, including Fishbourne Roman Palace, Britain's largest roman villa, Lewes Castle, an 11th-century Norman fortification, and Michelham Priory, a historic house and garden near Hailsham.

It also looks after significant archaeological and historical collections and provides employment and volunteering opportunities across the two counties, as well as drawing tourist cash to the area, Lewes in particular.

Without sufficient funding the properties, closed since the lockdown in March, may not be able to reopen; collections would then have to be dispersed or disposed of.

To ensure the society can survive until its 175th anniversary in June next year, it today (June 16) launched an urgent fundraising appeal as part of a Celebrating 175 campaign.

The appeal's patron is author and historian Tom Holland. The launch has been planned to coincide with Sussex Day, in more normal times a day of celebration around the two counties.

CEO Catherine Cavanagh said the society received no core Government funding and relied on cash from the sale of admission tickets and the generosity of its members.

It usually welcomed more than 160,00 paying visitors a year, but the lockdown had meant the temporary closure of all properties, just at the beginning of the important summer season.

Other income streams had also been affected: gift shops were shut and all planned events and educational workshops had been cancelled. Only one of its cafes, at Fishbourne, had been able to reopen, in accordance with government guidelines.

The dramatic loss of income threatened the society's future and its aim of conserving and sharing the county's heritage, added Ms Cavanagh.

"We are due to celebrate our 175th anniversary in a year's time," she said. "Sadly, our plans to build up to this date with some special events have been severely curtailed and we are concerned that we may not even survive until then.

"Today is Sussex Day and many Sussex residents will have visited our properties as adults and also as school children on educational trips. Their closure will be a loss to future generations. We hope they will hear our call for help and support our work by donating to our Celebrating 175 Fund."

The society, which has its headquarters in Bull House, Lewes, hopes to raise around £1 million in the next 12 months. This will cover lost revenue and ensure it can survive the winter and protect collections, including those in the award-winning Collections Discovery Centre at Fishbourne Roman Palace. To donate visit:
<https://sussexpast.co.uk/shop/donation>.

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Note to Editors

Sussex Archaeological Society is a registered charity operating under the name Sussex Past. Its charitable aims include the understanding of local heritage in Sussex. To achieve this it carries out research and runs a variety of events, walks, talks and school workshops, open to all. It has more than 2,000 members, holds an annual academic conference and publishes the Sussex Archaeological Collections, a scholarly contribution to the study of local archaeology and history. The collections are the first port of call for anyone researching the past of Sussex, and more than 150 volumes have been completed since 1846.

The following sites are cared for by the society:

Fishbourne Roman Palace: Roman Way, Fishbourne, West Sussex, PO19 3QR. Tel: 01243 785859.

A nationally renowned Roman site with outstanding mosaic floors, including the famous Cupid on a Dolphin. The site includes an award-winning collections discovery centre.

Lewes Castle: 169, High Street, Lewes, BN7 1YE. Tel: 01273 486290.

A Norman fortress and scheduled monument. The site includes the Museum of Sussex Archaeology in Barbican House.

Anne of Cleves House, 52, Southover High St, Lewes, BN7 1JA. Tel: 01273 474610. A late 15th-century hall house gifted by Henry VIII to his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves.

Michelham Priory, Upper Dicker, Hailsham, East Sussex, BN27 3QS. Tel: 01323 844224.

An historic country house with a large medieval moat, set in the grounds of a ruined Augustinian priory.

Bull House, 92, High Street, Lewes, BN7 1XH. Tel: 01273 486260.

A former home of the revolutionary and writer Thomas Paine. The medieval building is now the administrative headquarters of Sussex Archaeological Society.

The Priest House, North Lane, West Hoathly, West Sussex, RH19 4PP. Tel: 01342 810479.

A furnished 15th-century hall house hosting the Museum of Sussex Folklore

Marlipins Museum, High Street, Shoreham-by-Sea, West Sussex, BN43 5DA. Tel: 01273 462994.

The oldest secular building in Sussex, if not the UK. A 12th-century listed building and scheduled monument housing a maritime museum.

The Long Man of Wilmington, near Polegate, East Sussex. A mysterious chalk figure set in the South Downs.

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Issued 2 June 2020

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