

St Mary's Stockport: Brief for Interpretation Planning and Historic Research Consultant

Location: Stockport, Greater Manchester

Project Value: £2.2 million (£1.7m construction)

1. Church Overview

St Mary's in the Marketplace, Stockport is a Grade I listed, pre-Reformation church and the oldest building in Stockport, within the Market and Underbanks Conservation Area. The chancel and oratory date from 1320, with roof timbers dendro-dated to 1017. The nave and tower were rebuilt in 1817.

St. Mary's now has an aspiration to develop the church into a heritage centre (whilst remaining an active place of Christian worship) with activities aimed at a wide range of ages and interests; and repairs, maintenance and improvements to the building.

We currently host Stockport Heritage Trust. Our ambition is to significantly increase access to heritage by also providing tower tours, self-guided tours, a heritage escape room and a professional cafe or restaurant. We would like to develop a programme of activities that increase engagement with the heritage of the church and the local area for people who might not normally get involved. This will include working in partnership with new and existing partners such as Stockarts, Eat Good West and local schools to increase use of the church for gigs, food festivals and educational tours.

2. Project Overview

We are delighted to have secured funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support a development stage project which will set out costs and proposals for us to take forward to delivery stage. At delivery stage this project will deliver:

- Urgent repairs to roof, gutters, stonework, windows, plasterwork and floor tiles.
- New facilities including heating, entranceways and safe tower access.
- New interpretation within and outside the church to tell the story of the building and people connected to it through heritage escape rooms, a tower tour, self-guided QR code tours, and other potential ideas suggested within budget and capacity.
- A programme of activities that will engage a wide range of people with the heritage.
- Commercial and income generating activities and events that will help to secure financial resilience and ongoing maintenance of the building.
- Potentially establishment of a new organisation to run the activities beyond the life of the project.

3. Interpretation Planning and Historic Research Consultant

We are seeking to appoint an interpretive design team to undertake historic research and develop proposals for interpretation at St Mary's Church. The team will need to have a strong track record of working to National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Development and Delivery Phase requirements (demonstrable with 3 projects in the last 5 years). The consultant will ideally have experience of working in historic churches and of working with volunteers. The consultant must be experienced in team working across disciplines and have a clear understanding of NLHF's priorities for Saving Heritage; Protecting the Environment; Inclusion, Access and Participation; and Organisational Sustainability. We are looking for creative ideas and a collaborative team.

Governance: the consultant will report to Rev. Chris Blunt (client) and Peter McIlhagger of PMC Squared (Project Manager) and will attend regular on line project team meetings (monthly). The consultant should plan for 4 of these meetings to be in person on site. alongside the Activity Planning and Volunteer Coordination consultant, Business Planner, Evaluation Consultant and Architect/Design Team.

Safeguarding: given this role's work with volunteers, schools and vulnerable or marginalised groups, the consultant must agree to work within the PCC's safeguarding policy or submit their own for approval.

The role will include:

- Heritage research – work with volunteers and Stockport Heritage Trust to identify key stories linked to the church and create a narrative for the heritage.
- Development of a historic narrative that summarises the heritage, assets and key stories.
- Work with client team, architect and activity planners to develop ideas for new interpretation that will engage visitors in the history of the church and the area.
- Develop visuals and costed proposals within budget to help demonstrate the ideas.
- Undertake consultation (with the activity planning team) to understand needs and interests of current and potential audiences.
- Produce an Interpretation Plan that meets NLHF guidance with costed proposals for interpretation in and around the church.

The budget for this role is £10,000. The budget for interpretation at delivery stage has not yet been finalised.

This fee is inclusive of all expenses and disbursements, but excludes VAT. The consultant must hold Professional Indemnity insurance (minimum £1m) and Public Liability insurance (minimum £2m).

4. Deliverables for this role

Interpretation and research proposals must be inclusive and accessible for historically marginalised communities, and must align with NLHF's Inclusion, Access and Participation and Organisational Sustainability priorities throughout.

a. Interpretation planning

- Draw on the historic research and set out key stories, themes and a big idea for the historic narrative.
- Engage with local stakeholders and congregation to identify key stories and heritage assets, ensuring no duplication with the Activity Plan consultation.
- Work with Stockport Heritage Centre group to discuss how to integrate the new interpretation ideas into their plans at the Church.
- Test out ideas with community groups, especially those from under-represented groups, to inform the interpretation approach and tools.
- Outline storylines, principles, and themes suitable for ideas such as heritage-themed escape rooms and guided church tours and tower tours; self-guided tours, incorporating digital elements such as apps, audio guides, or QR codes.

- Provide sufficient design briefing information for the proposed activities and interpretive materials, ensuring they are engaging and accessible.
- Develop costings in sufficient detail to inform the Interpretation Plan, budgets, and capital costings for the delivery phase.
- Propose ideas for digital interpretation to complement traditional methods, ensuring accessibility and engagement for diverse audiences.
- Ensure that all interpretation ideas and designs are inclusive and accessible, with specific strategies to engage historically marginalised local communities.
- Include considerations for diverse formats, such as multilingual materials, sensory-friendly options, and accessible physical layouts.
- Develop a cohesive Interpretation Plan, ensuring it aligns with NLHF priorities to make heritage engaging, inclusive, and accessible.

b. Historic researcher

- Conduct research on St Mary's history, including archival research, oral histories, and exploration of physical artefacts.
- Focus on uncovering stories and heritage details that will inform the conservation and activity planning processes and engage with new audiences
- Work closely with the architect team to share findings and collaborate on the development of the Conservation Plan (being produced by the design team).
- Support local volunteers including the existing Heritage Centre volunteers to actively participate in the research project including supporting them in the basics of research and storytelling
- Create opportunities for volunteers to contribute to the dissemination of findings, such as through exhibitions, talks, or online content.
- Ensure that the research findings can be integrated into the interpretation and activity plans.
- Ensure research findings enhance the engagement strategies for diverse audiences, particularly local residents and school-aged children.
- Produce a comprehensive Historical Research Report, detailing key findings.
- Provide regular updates to the project team and ensure all findings are well-documented for future use.

5. Essential Experience

The consultant will require a range of skills and experience including:

- Demonstrable experience delivering NLHF-funded interpretation planning and historical research, ideally in historic churches or similarly listed buildings. Demonstrable with 3 projects in the last 5 years.
- A strong track record of inclusive community engagement and co-creation with under-represented and marginalised groups.
- Proven ability to produce costed, deliverable plans (Interpretation Plan, Historical Research Report) that translate research into accessible, engaging visitor experiences.

- Strong collaboration and reporting skills, given the need to work closely with the Activity Planning and Volunteer Coordination consultant, the architect/design team and the wider project team.

6. Timeline

The project team are currently working towards a May 2027 submission of the application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The consultant must also allow for a NLHF mid-term review.

Key milestones (dates to be confirmed unless stated):

- Appointment of consultant team: Sept 2026
- Research, consultation and testing: Oct–Dec 2026
- Draft Interpretation Plan for mid-term review (date to be confirmed by NLHF)
- Final plans, costings agreed – March 2027
- NLHF Delivery Phase submission – May 2027

7. Evaluation Criteria

Applications will be assessed against:

- Understanding of the brief and proposed approach
- Relevant experience and track record (2 case studies)
- Team skills, capacity and value for money

8. Submission

By Friday 25th September, interested consultants should submit an application to include: CVs, relevant experience and a methodology for the work. Methodologies should be no more than 6 sides of A4 and CVs no more than 2 sides of A4 per person. Interviews, if required, will be held by video call on Monday 28 or Tuesday 29 September

Applications should be sent to: c.blunt@stockportparish.net and copied to peter@pmcsquared.co.uk and stephen.roche@pmcsquared.co.uk

It is expected that those intending to bid for the work should at least call Rev. Chris Blunt (07503 706906), The Rector of Stockport and Brinnington, to discuss the project prior to submission. Subject to existing commitments, visits to see St. Mary's and discuss face to face are also encouraged.

To assist, if requested, the PCC will supply digital (pdf) copies of:

- The other briefs being sent out that make up the full package of work; and
- Our initial Expression of Interest for the project.