

## **The George Community Pub (Wickham Market) Ltd.**

### **Report for the Annual Parish Meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

At the last Annual Parish Meeting in April 2023 we reported that we were poised ready to commence the restoration and rebuild of The George, but high building quotes had set us back and we had to apply to The National Lottery Heritage Fund for a further grant. In June a grant of £545k was confirmed and our contractors (Seamans) finally commenced work in mid-July.

#### **Restoration and rebuild**

The first task was the clearing of vegetation and waste and removing most of the internal scaffolding. The external scaffolding supporting the weather canopy was checked and re-modelled. After checks and tests on wall foundations, work began to remove the rotten wooden flooring in the old part of the building and then excavate subsoil. The focus then moved to a detailed investigation of the structure of the old and historic front part of the building with individual timbers inspected to see whether they could be retained, repaired or required replacement. The excavated sub floor was consolidated with a new base on which an internal independent scaffolding was erected to provide access and to allow large timber beams to be raised by hand to their new positions.

After several weeks of careful work to reveal the detail of old and often rotting timber and structure the reconstruction of the oldest part of the building could commence. The contractor's brief, required by the terms of the Heritage Funding, was the retention of as much as possible of the original structure. The George was not in a good state of repair when the fire happened in 2013 and the intervening ten years of weathering had led to further discoveries of timber and coverings that were too deteriorated to save. However, much remains and Seamans inserted new timber where necessary to create a viable structure. The new beams are a combination of onsite carpentry and some preparations offsite. The panels between the structural framework were originally 'wattle and daub' using wood that retained its natural shape and curves and some of these survived the fire and subsequent weathering. The roof of The George was destroyed in the fire and has been wholly replaced with new timberwork and the 'new' 1970s extension at the rear of the building was demolished.

After the disastrous fire of April 2013 a protective scaffolding and corrugated iron roof was erected in a bid to give the remaining fabric as much protection as possible. This structure had dominated and overshadowed the Wickham Market High Street for the best part of 10 years but on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023 it started to come down. An historic moment for the George project and for the community. By mid-January the roof had been felted and battened; floor joists re-installed on the first floor; gable end brickwork repaired and panelling to the internal walls started. By now the first floor Activity Space was taking on real shape.

Progress continued in spite of one of the heaviest February rainfalls recorded in the village, which turned the excavations for the new rear building foundations into a pond for days at a time.

Dealing with the renovation of a 500-year-old Grade II listed building will always bring the unexpected. For example, at the very last point of digging foundations for the new extension it was found that the smaller of our two chimneys had no foundations and neither was it keyed into the old part of the building. Standing alone, unsafe and exposed, all work had to stop whilst opinion was sought from our experts in heritage and restoration as to what we should do. For reasons of safety there was no option but to demolish the chimney stack and although it will not be in use, we are required to rebuild the section that protrudes above the roof in order to ensure that the outside appearance of the building remains unchanged.

The steel structure for the rear of the building, which will house the new kitchen, toilets, stairs and lift, is in the process of being erected. Next will be the finishing of the battening and tiling of the roof on the old part of the building. Floors are going down at ground level with underfloor heating throughout and special features to display the ancient origins of the building with wattle and daub panels and a preserved 'hidden' staircase. At the same time we have been working with professionals on the detailed design and layout of the interior including the bar, kitchen, restaurant area, Activity Space and cellar. These plans draw on the advice and input of the User Group convened in the early days of The George project and whose ideas are now approaching reality.

### **Community and Volunteering**

The community element of The George project is the more difficult side to explain not least because it is unique. There are nearly 200 community pubs in the country but none, as far as we know, that has the space and people devoted to community that The George project gives. With the addition of the new Activities Space, and staff and volunteer training, the vision is to make The George 'More Than a Pub'. It will be accessible and inclusive to all irrespective of their physical, mental or financial situation and set up to provide funded and managed activities aimed at delivery of the five wellbeing themes.

A key element in achieving this vision is the recruitment of a Community Engagement Coordinator (CEC). Christine Abraham was appointed in October and has been busy identifying and reaching out to the local groups, and all parts of the community, to engage and support them in the availability and use of the Activity Space which should be available in late summer. In the interim and during the pub restoration Christine has engaged with the community and professionals in a programme of activities to display and explain the heritage of The George and its historic construction. These include a number of Hard Hat tours.

During the last year we have attended the Wickham Market Festive and Spring Markets and updated the displays on the site hoardings. These have published our work, our continued fundraising and our volunteering opportunities. There are many ways individuals can get involved – during the build and once The George is open. For more information on volunteering contact [cec@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk](mailto:cec@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk).

The Management Committee currently has 10 members covering a wide range of skills. However we are always looking for more to help us bring this part of the project to a close and then be involved when The George is open. This particularly relates to Legal, IT and Business Management skills in the pub/leisure industry.

### **Fundraising**

In order to minimise costs so that we could obtain the required funding, we had to remove some of features we wanted in the pub. We are therefore now running a 'Gilding the Building' fundraising campaign.

It is possible for the public to still buy shares in The George (for more info contact [secretary@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk](mailto:secretary@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk)) and also enter our 200 Club draw at a monthly cost of £5 – 50% is paid back in prizes. For more information on the 200 Club please contact [info@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk](mailto:info@thegeorgecommunitypub.co.uk).

### **Looking Forward**

The restoration continues to throw up issues and we cannot yet be certain when The George will open for business. Our hope is by the end of 2024. We will continue to post information via our website, on Social Media and our bimonthly Newsletters.

The George Management Committee

7<sup>th</sup> April 2023