



Press Release

St Mary le Strand announces project to restore and develop one of our greatest baroque churches

Embargoed to 10am on Wednesday 19 October 2022

For 300 years, the church of St Mary le Strand has been a prominent London landmark, commanding the view down the Strand. In recent decades, it has been trapped on a traffic island with its external and internal splendour hidden to passers-by. It's been announced today, in conjunction with the current pedestrianisation of the Strand, this historic Grade I listed church will be restored, 300 years after its original construction.

The 'Jewel in the Strand' project has been awarded initial support* from The National Lottery Heritage Fund to carry out restoration and redevelopment to become the heart of the new cultural hub of Westminster. The project will carry out essential work to repair and clean the external stonework and restore the interior of the church. The changes will transform the church, maximizing space and making it more accessible for wider audiences, ensuring that the church can be enjoyed by everyone.

Made possible by National Lottery players, development funding of £520,000 (82% of a total cost of £624,000) will allow for a planning phase ahead of applying for a full Heritage Fund grant at a later date.

The hope is that construction work will start at the end of 2025, with the church reopening at the start of 2027. A three-year activity programme is also being planned to help local people and visitors engage with the history of the Strand and the building itself, which contains many extraordinary stories from the time of King George I to the present day. The scheme includes:

- conservation work to restore and redecorate the apsidal sanctuary and nave;
- a new lighting scheme to show off the church's magnificent plaster ceiling;
- the existing pews will be renewed, including replacing the curved Victorian pew ends with Georgian square ends, to reflect better the Georgian heritage of the church;
- sensitive conversion of the historic undercroft making way for The Strand Crypt. This will be an exciting new public space for a range of inclusive heritage activities, including 'Bringing the Wrens to life' a partnership with the Western Approaches Museum in Liverpool with its holdings of WRNS archive and associated material;
- 'Tales from the Strand Crypt': a heritage research project with people who live, work and study in the neighbourhood, including a project with King's College Archives, Oxford Archaeology, the Peabody Foundation and UAL, telling local stories and exploring the use of digital technology in churches to create an exhibition.

In delivering this project, St Mary le Strand Church wishes to be an exemplar of environmental sustainability. The church heating is presently supplied by an oil-fired boiler from the 1850s which will be replaced with the innovative use of air source heat pumps.



At the centre of one of the oldest parishes in London, St Mary le Strand has, since Mediaeval times, been stood on the main route between Westminster and the City of London. This is all changing, as the ground-breaking pedestrianisation of the Strand takes place, creating a truly democratic public space that prioritises people over automobiles and recognises the historic importance of the Strand with its concentration of landmark buildings. The area aspires to become a 'global cultural thinking quarter', with a predicted 14 million visitors a year who will pass by the church. The church is central to the project and its relationship with the public space will animate the character, function and atmosphere of the area.

Commenting on the project, Canon Dr Peter Babington, the Priest in charge, said

"Bus drivers used to call St Mary le Strand Church 'St Mary's in the Way', because it got in the way of the traffic going down the Strand. Thanks to all Lottery players out there St Mary le Strand can exist in a traffic free area and become the centrepiece of a new piazza at the heart of London. No longer St Mary's in the Way but St Mary's in the Middle!

"We are hugely grateful to the Heritage Fund for supporting this project. We look forward to working closely with The Northbank Business Improvement District (BID) and its member partners, as well as our close neighbours King's College London, to deliver this important conservation project alongside several exciting community initiatives.

Stuart McLeod, Director England - London & South at The National Lottery Heritage Fund, said:

"We are delighted to support St Mary le Strand Church with this important project. This is a building that is incredibly iconic in this London landscape but also is at the heart of the proposed regeneration which will transform this part of London. Investing in heritage means investing in the community it belongs to, which is why we are proud to support this project thanks to National Lottery players. This will not only preserve this important heritage but will also play a significant role in boosting the local economy and aiding this wider regeneration of the Strand."

Councillor Adam Hug, Leader of Westminster City Council, sent a message saying:

"Congratulations to St Mary le Strand Church for being awarded such a significant grant from the Heritage Fund. It is testament to the cherished place this church holds in the centre of London both as a unique landmark and an oasis of calm for visitors.

"I look forward to seeing conservation work going forward and welcome the fact the Church we know as "the jewel in the Strand" will be a gem we can show off for years to come."

As part of the project, St Mary le Strand need to fundraise a further £4million so have launched their fundraising campaign. **Sir Simon Jenkins**, who is supporting the appeal, describes St Mary le Strand as *"The finest eighteenth century church in London"*, whilst **Sir John Betjeman**, who was a great supporter of the church and wrote a poem about St Mary's, called it *"a Baroque Paradise"*. If you would like to pledge money to St Mary le Strand then you can donate online via <https://stmarylestrand.com/donate/>

St Mary le Strand was built in 1714-21 to the designs of the renowned Scottish Architect, James Gibbs – his first building on his return from studying in Rome. It is often said to be one of our loveliest Baroque churches, with its fabulous, rose plastered, curved and coffered ceiling, unparalleled in Britain. St Mary le Strand was constructed following an Act of Parliament which called for 50 new churches to meet the demands of an expanding eighteenth century London. It was originally designed to make the most of



Queen Anne's regular use of the processional route from St James' Palace to St Paul's and the City, with its east and west sides reflecting motifs from St Paul's Cathedral while its north and south facades were inspired by the festive scenes and theatrical spectacles of the royal procession.

St Mary le Strand became the church of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) in 1984. The WRNS was formed in 1917 to "free a man for sea" and was subsumed into the Royal Navy in 1993 giving the women equal terms of service with the men. The church is now supported by The Association of Wrens and Women of the Royal Naval Services.

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For further information, images and interviews please contact (The Revd Canon Dr Peter Babington) Priest-in-Charge at St Mary le Strand on 07985 066 100 or revdpeterb@stmarylestrand.com.

Notes to editors

1. The church is currently open for visitors and for prayer from Monday to Thursday, from 12 noon to 4.00 p.m. every week. St Mary le Strand Church, Strand, London WC2R 1ES. <https://stmarylestrand.com/>; @StMaryleStrand.
2. The 'Meanwhile Phase' of the Strand/Aldwych scheme is due to be launched on 6th December 2022 . This project is being delivered by Westminster City Council along with key partners including The Northbank BID (Business Improvement District), King's College London, Somerset House Trust, St Mary Le Strand, The Courtauld, the Society of London Theatre and 180 Strand: <https://strandaldwych.org/>
3. For a full history of the Church see 'St Mary le Strand' by Peter Maplestone (2019)

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

* National Lottery Heritage Fund grant applications over £250,000 are assessed in two rounds. The Jewel in the Strand has initially been granted round one development funding of £520,000 by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, allowing it to progress with its plans. Detailed proposals are then considered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund at second round, where a final decision is made on the full funding award of £3,380,000.

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we **inspire, lead** and **resource** the UK's heritage to create **positive and lasting change** for people and communities, now and in the future. www.heritagefund.org.uk.

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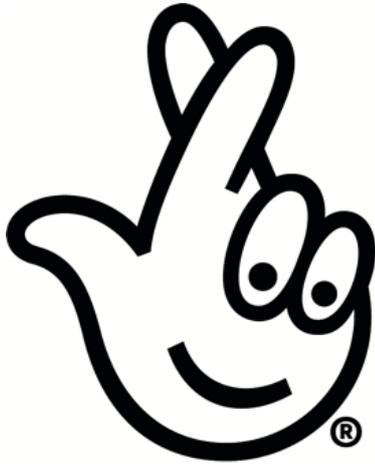
Since The National Lottery began in 1994, National Lottery players have raised over £43 billion for projects and more than 635,000 grants have been awarded across the UK.



The Jewel in the Strand



Logos



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