

*Article written by Isle of Sheppey u3a member, David Jones a retired newspaper editor for the Third Age Matters magazine:*

A renowned heritage champion with a famous father had only a short stroll from his front door to give members of the Isle of Sheppey u3a's wine appreciation group a guided tour of an £8.5m restoration project.

Will Palin, son of author, globe-trotting travel presenter and former Monty Python star Michael Palin, is chair of the Sheerness Dockyard Preservation Trust, which is aiming to give a new lease of life to a fire-damaged former St Paul's Dockyard Church.

Will and his fellow trustees are nearing the end of a two-year project to restore the iconic building at the former Royal Naval Dockyard on the Isle of Sheppey, which sits astride the North Kent coast, where the Thames and Medway estuaries merge.

Some 20 members and friends of the Isle of Sheppey U3A's wine appreciation group were shown around the church by Will, who lives in a period house in Naval Terrace, just 100 metres from the now-redundant church.

Group member Bernie Watson, who knows Will Palin, first sounded him out about the possibility of a church tour, and Lynda Jones, David's wife, made the arrangements with Will.

The church was built at the entrance to Sheerness Dockyard in the 1820s to serve the thousands of officers, sailors and dockyard workers who formed the naval base community.

A Grade 11 listed building, the church building has been described as an architectural masterpiece.

The dockyard, which commanded the approaches to the Rivers Medway and Thames, closed in 1960 and for a while the church continued as a place of worship, until it was de-consecrated in 1970. The building was put to a variety of uses after that, ranging from a sports hall to a furniture store.

In 2001, this local landmark was severely damaged by fire and it remained in a derelict state for a number of years, but since 2015 it has been in the care of the Trust.

The Trust was successful in obtaining a £4.2m Heritage Lottery grant, which was matched by fund-raising, donations and other grants. Restoration work began in November 2020, and the project literally began to rise from the ashes. The installation of a new roof and the dismantling and re-building of the monumental clock tower using the same bricks were among the most difficult and expensive parts of the work.

Will, who has been associated with the project since its inception, says it is hoped the official opening of the building will be in Spring, 2023. It is being transformed into a community hub, with space for young adult enterprise start-ups, a café and other facilities. A huge scale model of the dockyard dating from 1820 will be on display on the ground floor.

Said Will: "This is a building which just few years ago appeared to be on the brink of collapse. The church will now become the focus of major investment to give it a new future at the heart of life in the region."

After the church tour, Will, who also has a home in Spitalfields, London, invited the u3a group to look around his 200-year-old house in Naval Terrace, which was built by the Admiralty for senior

naval officers in the 1820s. Heritage projects keep Will busy in the capital, too. He is also CEO of Barts Heritage, a conservation body dedicated to rejuvenating the historic parts of St Bartholomew's Hospital in London.

Will first came to Sheppey in 2007 as a trustee of the Spitalfields Trust, which was overseeing the restoration of Shurland Hall, a Tudor house at the eastern end of the island. While exploring the rest of Sheppey, Will first discovered the dockyard, then Naval Terrace. He bought one of the houses, which was in a bad state, and spent years restoring it to its former glory. His passion for heritage preservation soon encompassed the dockyard church, which is about to enjoy a new lease of life.

Ken Pugh, the Isle of Sheppey u3a's wine appreciation group leader, said: "We are really grateful to Will for devoting such a large chunk of his time to show us around the church. It was also especially pleasing for us all to be invited to enjoy a glass or two of wine in the magnificent surroundings of his house, which is truly breath- taking."

*The Isle of Sheppey u3a was formed late in 2019 just a few months before the Covid outbreak caused a shutdown of almost everything. But the fledging branch weathered the storm and is now going from strength to strength.*



Wine appreciation group leader Ken Pugh (right), Will Palin, Lynda Jones, and Ken's wife, Heather



The church and a section of Naval Terrace



One of the church's restored windows