

# First national Huguenot Heritage Centre

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Through its displays and activities, the Huguenot Heritage Centre will bring to life the Huguenot story; a story of persecution, of flight from their homeland, and of settlement and integration in England. Visitors will learn of the skills that the Huguenots brought with them to England; and be able to understand the impact of those skills on the development of modern Britain. They will also be able to explore their own historical Huguenot links.

The contemporary resonance of the Huguenots' story will be illustrated by examples of recent refugees' experiences in various areas of the display. The project will celebrate the Huguenot heritage through an exciting schools programme and bespoke community projects. These programmes will explore the rich culture and legacy of the Huguenots by teaching Huguenot crafts, including silk weaving and silver smithing, by exploring the reasons that Huguenots fled France, and also by exploring the issues faced by immigrants today.

The Huguenot Heritage Centre is the first museum in Britain dedicated to the history of the Huguenots, a group of some 250,000 French Protestants who fled from religious persecution in France, over a period of some 200 years, but most significantly at the end of the 17th century. Between 60,000 to 80,000 Huguenots settled in England, largely in the southeast: in Kent (Canterbury, Greenwich, Rye, Sandwich), the west (Bristol, Southampton and Plymouth), East Anglia (Ipswich and Norwich) and, predominantly, London (the City, Soho, Spitalfields, Wandsworth, Westminster). This represents the biggest proportionate influx of immigrants in

England's history. There were approximately 580,000 people living in London in 1700; the 40,000 Huguenots living there, represented approximately 14.5% of the population of the capital.

The inspiration for the Huguenot Heritage Centre came from the Directors of the French Hospital, which was founded in London in 1718 as a charity offering sanctuary to poor French Protestants, or 'Huguenots'. The French Hospital owns a highly regarded collection of paintings, prints, drawings, etchings, furniture, silverware, clocks, books, archival records, and other items illustrating the material culture of the Huguenots. These collections will be used to help to tell the Huguenot story, in the Huguenot Heritage Centre.

Peter Duval, Chairman of the Huguenot Heritage Centre, said: "The Directors of the French Hospital have been working towards the creation of a Huguenot Heritage Centre for many years. I am delighted by the news of this award, which allows us now to bring the little known but fascinating, and hugely important, story of Huguenot immigration and integration to a wide audience. It is an enormously important part of our collective heritage."

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: "This project will provide Rochester with a fascinating historical resource and visitor attraction enabling people to learn about a wave of migration that brought many advantages to British society. Giving people the chance to discover if they have Huguenot ancestry will, I'm certain, be especially popular."

Mark Reckless, MP for Rochester said: "The Heritage Lottery Fund is to be congratulated for granting The French Hospital in Rochester High Street vital funds which will be used to develop the first national Huguenot Heritage Centre.

"We are blessed with an abundance of heritage in my constituency, including nearby Eastgate House which is also benefitting from the welcome support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. This grant will help bring to life the story of the Huguenots so that the public may fully appreciate the contribution which they made to our society and their continuing legacy. My congratulations to everyone involved in this successful bid. My thanks also to the Heritage Lottery Fund for its ongoing support in my constituency."

## **Notes to editors**

### **About The Huguenot Heritage Centre and the French Hospital**

The Huguenots were a group of French Protestants who fled France throughout the 16th and 17th centuries because they were being persecuted there for their beliefs. 60,000 – 80,000 Huguenots settled in England, and the majority of them would have travelled through Kent. This settlement represents the biggest proportionate influx of immigrants in England's history. Today, it has been claimed that at least one in six of British people might have Huguenot blood, and their legacy can also be found in fine crafts (e.g. silk weaving, silversmithing, furniture-making), banking, insurance and other mercantile trades. The Huguenots serve as a brilliant example of immigration, and as an early experience of refugees (their flight from France to England brought the word 'refugee' into the English language). The Huguenots' acceptance and integration into English society, their contribution thereafter, and the degree of animosity shown to them by some, can serve as useful comparators when considering later and current influxes of immigrants to the United Kingdom.

The French Hospital was founded in London in 1718 as a charity offering sanctuary to poor French Protestants, or 'Huguenots'. It has had several subsequent locations and currently maintains 60 self-contained sheltered flats at Rochester in Kent.

The Huguenot Heritage Centre has been established as a charitable company limited by guarantee by the French Hospital. The French Hospital purchased a building on the High Street in Rochester, the ground floor of which is used (and will continue to be used as such) by the Medway Visitor Information Centre and includes toilets, a small gallery area, and a café. The first and second floors of the building will become the Huguenot Heritage Centre (the remainder being converted to flats).

### **Further information**

Claire Adler, Internal Project Manager for the Huguenot Heritage Centre on 01223 411555 / 07970671965, email: [claireadler@btinternet.com](mailto:claireadler@btinternet.com).

Laura Bates, Heritage Lottery Fund press office on 020 7591 6027, email: [lbates@hlf.org.uk](mailto:lbates@hlf.org.uk).