

CAMBS TIMES

Priests launch project to transform Wisbech into a ‘beehive for the arts’

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St Peter's Lodge near St Peter's Church in Wisbech will become an art precinct. L-R Father Regan O'Callaghan and Father Paul West.

A SELF-PROCLAIMED “artist priest” believes a new art project can help the residents of Wisbech fall back in love with their town.

St Peter's Lodge near St Peter's Church in Wisbech will become an art precinct. L-R Father Regan O'Callaghan and Father Paul West with visitors from the Thomas Clarkson CC.

Father Paul West, vicar at St Peter’s Church, has enlisted the help of Father Regan O’Callaghan, a former artist in residence at St Paul’s Cathedral, to help kickstart the new scheme.

Fr O’Callaghan, originally from New Zealand, has been holding art workshops for schoolchildren this week. Students have flocked to his masterclasses at St Peter’s Lodge - part of the historic vicarage and former home to the assistant priest.

But Fr West is aiming to secure funding to expand the project. He hopes to attract international artists to the heart of Wisbech, which he says could become an “arts precinct”.

“I love Wisbech,” said Fr West. “This is a fantastic town but people will often put it down. I want to recreate that confidence that this is a wonderful place, all through creativity.

“We want this to be a beehive for the arts. When other places have hit hard times, artists have come in and set up this bohemian culture and then the

place comes to life.

“This is not just a church project but a way of loving the town again.”

Fr West, who is also artist in residence at Wisbech Grammar School, has been at St Peter’s for almost two years. Previously he had been a successful artist in Australia.

He said: “This is not just a church that wants its own religious clubhouse, we want this to be a gift to the community. That is my reading of the gospel - not to spend all your time in the temple but to go out and meet people.

“There are lots of people who think that the best days of Wisbech are gone and all we have got is further to climb. I don’t accept that.”

FATHER O’Callaghan, whose work is displayed beneath the High Altar in St Paul’s Cathedral, is the first artist to set up a studio at St Peter’s Lodge. He said: “I have always found art projects quite important for cohesion in communities. I call it the ministry of encouragement.

“I don’t see it as a way of converting people but the link with religion is strong. Religious education can be quite dry in schools so to do a creative alternative is good.

“Art is often pushed to the sides due to the other pressures in education but the need to create, and create in a safe place where you’re not judged, is very important.”

MODEL skulls and willow sculptures will fill St Peter’s Lodge on Friday as the students’ work is displayed at a special exhibition.

Young artists from Elm Road Primary School, Thomas Clarkson Community College and Wisbech Grammar School have taken part in Fr O’Callaghan’s workshops, which were based on the Mexican ‘Day of the Dead’ holiday.

The exhibition will run from 3.30-5pm.