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## OXFORD MAIL BUSINESS NEWS

### WORK ON £5.8M HERITAGE PROJECT BEGINS

# CASTLE UNLOCKED

By Andrew Smith  
Business Editor

A MAJOR part of Oxford's history is set for business — for the first time in 1,000 years.

Work has started on a new multi-million pound heritage attraction at Oxford Castle which, it is claimed, will be the first time the people of the city will have been able to openly access St George's Tower, the Norman Crypt and the Castle Mound for a millennium.

Debbie Dance, director of the Oxford Preservation Trust which is overseeing the project, said: "There are people who have lived in Oxford all their lives, but where is their history?"

"No-one thinks about it but we are about to bring it to them."

Ms Dance claims the Castle site is the only piece of Oxford's history to belong to the "town" as opposed to the wealth of attractions owned by the "gown" or the university.

The £5.8m project being carried out by Oxford-based developer the Clarkson Alliance, will create an attraction known as Oxford Castle Unlocked.

This will see the construction of a heritage centre telling the story of the city over the last 1,000 years from Saxon times to the present day.

Visitors will then be able to visit St George's Tower and climb the Castle Mound as well as going down to the Norman Crypt and Well Chamber.

The development has been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund which stumped up £3.7m, while a further £1.4m has come from the Osborne Group which developed the recently completed restaurants and bars on the site.

In exchange for his part of the deal, developer Trevor Osborne agreed to restore the tower and the external shell of the former prison's D Wing which will form the Heritage Centre.

Ms Dance said the combination of commerce and heritage on such a large scheme was a first for the UK and had huge potential implications for the site as a whole.

She added: "It means the castle



**HISTORIC: Debbie Dance at Oxford Castle heritage centre with John Dymock, left, and Graham Clarkson; right, an aerial view of the former prison site**

Picture: Antony Moore Order No. 180106733

becomes much more of a destination. Without the commercial element, it could have become just another museum site which would have been stagnant. "But this is a partnership for the 21st century."

And a local building firm, Oxford-based Knowles & Son, was deliberately chosen for the contract.

Ms Dance said: "This project is for the Oxford people and it was important local people were involved in restoring it."

The Heritage Centre itself will also be run as a business, with an operator that has yet to be chosen.

It will include a new public square, 60-seat cafe, shop and an education centre. Overall about 20 jobs will be created.

Ms Dance said: "We have been able to enhance public access and our heritage in a commercial way.

"You could argue no-one has ever been in St George's Tower — this is the first time in 1,000 years it will be open to the public."

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