

NEWS RELEASE

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OXFORDSHIRE HOLDS THE KEY FOR NEW CULTURE MINISTER AND TOURISM CHIEFS

Lady Cobham, Chairman of VisitEngland, and John Williams, Chairman of Tourism South East visited top Oxfordshire venues on Monday 7 June. The visit included calls at Bicester Village, Oxford Castle - Unlocked and the newly refurbished Ashmolean Museum. Lady Cobham and John Williams were joined by Ed Vaizey MP for Didcot and Wantage and newly appointed Minister for Culture, at a lunch for local tourism businesses.

John Williams, Chairman, Tourism South East, said 'On behalf of the regional tourist board, I was delighted to welcome Lady Cobham to three such different and important venues, each of which demonstrates the innovation and investment that is going into tourism in the south east. Tourism is a vital part of Oxfordshire's economic and cultural life, contributing around £600 million to Oxford City and £1.3 billion overall within the county. It's a particular pleasure that our new Culture Minister Ed Vaizey MP was able to join us for lunch and meet representatives of local tourism businesses.'

Lady Cobham, Chairman VisitEngland said: 'I was thrilled to be able to tour the South East visiting such gems as the city of Oxford, the world famous Ashmolean museum and excellent shopping at Bicester Village. These attractions continue to delight tourists from both the UK and internationally. I was also proud also to present Oxford Castle - Unlocked with the VisitEngland Visitor Attraction Quality Assessment Scheme Award (VAQAS).'

Bicester Village, home to over 130 top designer outlet boutiques such as Gucci, Dior and Burberry, offers high-end value shopping. Strongest overseas markets are China, Hong Kong and Taiwan with significant growth from Malaysia, Korea, Russia and the United Arab Emirates leading to an overall 45% rise in Tax Refund Sales this year.

Lady Cobham and John Williams toured the Village and visited the on-site Tourist Information Centre. Helen Peters, Senior Tourism Manager UK & Ireland at Bicester Village said 'Our

relationships with Visit England and Tourism South East are extremely important and we pride ourselves on being one of the most visited tourist attractions outside of London.'

After receiving their VAQAS accreditation, Oxford Castle - Unlocked hosted a networking lunch with Lady Cobham, John Williams, Ed Vaizey MP and leading local Oxfordshire tourism businesses. Oxford Castle - Unlocked welcomed 70,000 visitors last year and has averaged 10% growth year-on-year since opening. Emily Hirons from Oxford Castle - Unlocked said 'We are pleased to have our hard work recognised by the VAQAS accreditation and it's a real pleasure to welcome Lady Cobham, John Williams, our new Culture Minister and colleagues from across the industry in Oxfordshire.'

The Ashmolean Museum was reopened by Her Majesty the Queen in November 2009 after a £61 million redevelopment. Escorted by Christopher Brown, Director of the Ashmolean Museum, the party's tour culminated in a visit to the 'Lost World of Old Europe' exhibition. Dr Brown, said: 'The Ashmolean's redevelopment has provided the City of Oxford and the south east region with a remarkable new resource – a beautiful civic space combining contemporary and classical architecture, and a building which does justice to the collections of an internationally renowned museum. Since we reopened in November we have welcomed more than 650,000 visitors.'

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For more information contact Dan Holmes on 023 8062 5449 or email: dholmes@tourismse.com

More information about Tourism South East can be found at www.tourismsoutheast.com

More information about Bicester Village can be found at www.BicesterVillage.com

More information about Oxford Castle – Unlocked can be found at www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk

More information about the Ashmolean Museum can be found at www.ashmolean.org

Note to Editors:

Tourism South East is the official tourist board for South East England, covering Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, East and West Sussex, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Kent, Oxfordshire and Surrey.

The South East is the largest region for tourism in Britain outside of London, worth in excess of £12 billion p.a. to the regional economy (7% of regional GVA) supporting over 300,000 jobs.

VAQAS is the Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme. It is VisitEngland's quality assessment service for all types of visitor attractions throughout England. The service was launched nationally in 2001 and today there are participants from all regions in England from Cumbria to Cornwall and from all areas of the industry. The service does not attempt to grade attractions but assesses each on its own merits using objective quality benchmarks, provided by the industry. Each visit is followed by an assessment report and, if successful, the accreditation of 'Quality Assured Visitor Attraction'.

Images attached

Lady Cobham visits Bicester Village Left to right shows: Miranda Markham, Group Community Relations Manager, Value Retail Management (Bicester Village) Ltd; Anna Keddie, Marketing Director, Value Retail Management (Bicester Village) Ltd; Mike Bedingfield, Chief Executive, Tourism South East; Lady Cobham, Chair VisitEngland; John Williams, Chairman, Tourism South East.

Presentation of VAQAS accreditation to Oxford Castle-Unlocked Left to right shows: John Williams, Chairman Tourism South East; Emily Hirons, Visitor Centre Manager, Oxford Castle - Unlocked; Joseph Hartshorn, Duty Manager, Oxford Castle - Unlocked ; Jo Jakobsson, Duty Manager, Oxford Castle - Unlocked; Ed Vaizey, MP; Helen deMay, Education Officer, Oxford Castle - Unlocked ; Amanda Coombs, Marketing Executive, Oxford Castle - Unlocked; Lady Cobham, Chair VisitEngland; Mike Bedingfield, Chief Executive, Tourism South East

Lady Cobham visits the Ashmolean Museum Left to right shows: John Williams, Chairman, Tourism South East; Lady Cobham, Chair VisitEngland; Antony Green, Head of Fundraising, Ashmolean Museum

the Beautiful South