

## Cultural Enterprises Podcast

### Series 3, Episode 3 – Creative Commerce in Lockdown

Thanks for tuning into my first ever podcast, I'm very excited to be part of series 4 of the Association of Cultural Enterprises podcast! I'm Alex Nicholson-Evans, Commercial Director for Birmingham Museums Trust and today I'm going to be talking about lockdown, or rather specifically what we did here in Birmingham in the last year. I guess I'll start with who I am!

So, I've been Commercial Director for 5 years now, I came to Birmingham Museums from the medical technology industry and prior to that the NHS. In my spare time, which is a fairly laughable phrase really, I run Living For The Weekend Limited – the company behind a number of festivals in the city; including Birmingham Cocktail Weekend and Birmingham Wine Weekend. I like to describe my career as museums by day and cocktails by night, which really is not such a bad set up!

For those who don't know Birmingham Museums Trust, we have a portfolio of nine sites. Perhaps best known is Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, home to a world-renowned collection of Pre-Raphaelite art and (pause for one of my favourite quotes of all time) "the best and most stylish museum café in the universe" according to author Bill Bryson. I was sat in said most stylish of museum cafes, The Edwardian Tearooms, when I was first struck by the entrepreneurial spirit of my team in the face of the complete unknown and an emerging global pandemic.

The museum had closed to the public, so it was just staff on site. I recall watching staff queue at a makeshift shop – the fast thinking of our Food & Beverage Manager Noor. He was committed to ensuring we didn't have huge volumes of food waste from this unplanned closure so he was selling fresh produce at bargain rates to the workforce. I have to say, being entrepreneurial is absolutely a strength of my management team and it's something that has really shone through, throughout this last year.

I suppose that make-shift shop set the tone for the rest of lockdown in some ways. We refused to let the pandemic beat us, from day 1 we found ways to trade no matter the circumstances.

It was actually one of our lesser known sites, Sarehole Mill that kept us physically trading when every other museum was forced to close their doors. Nestled in the heart of Shire Country Park, Sarehole Mill is the 250-year-old idyllic watermill that inspired world-renowned author, JRR Tolkien. It's a bit of an urban oasis, and might previously have been described as a hidden gem in the city of Birmingham. Perhaps not so hidden anymore!

Just before lockdown we successfully completed a project at the mill to develop a small bakery operation on site. This was 100% easier said than done. Building a modern kitchen in a listed building with terrible power supply was not without its challenges! Of course, we did it nonetheless. Then, just as we began to get a glimpse of the success this project might bring, lockdown was enforced. We had literally only launched the Bakehouse at the end of February so we were determined not to lose momentum. We swiftly turned our gift shop into a Community Shop, selling essential food items that we sourced through our food and beverage supplier and of course freshly baked bread from the new bakery. We soon became a safe space for the local community to shop. Word spread and we continued to develop the operation, we launched an online pre-order system, named 'Bake & Take' and as government advice allowed, we introduced takeaway coffee too. The love for the Community Shop continued to grow as we developed and we even had a visit from local celeb Joe Lycett.

As government advice allowed we introduced on-site dining, creating our 'Pizza in the Courtyard' dining concept, then as the weather began to turn we introduced our Pizza Pods – these cool igloo like structures which were incredibly popular. Sadly we were then back into lockdown so we reverted to our Community Shop model – we've flexed across those different visitor offers to suit government advice. Right now we're back offering Pizza in the Courtyard.

From a financial perspective Sarehole Mill's Community Shop and Bakehouse has been a major step forward when it comes to the property's long-term sustainability. Compared to the previous (pre-pandemic) year of trading (and you must remember that in that year the whole site was open), visitor numbers were actually only slightly down by 4% and the most exciting part is that trading income tripled.

But the success has been so much more than just financial. I dug out a review a customer left for us, which puts it better than I could:

"Sarehole Mill has been a lifeline for us all the way through this awful year. They have served coffees and pizzas, gingerbread people and amazing soda breads. They've also showed that a small museum can adapt and survive when everything feels like it's falling apart. So, they sold pasta when almost nowhere else was open. Briefly in late summer their indoor space was open as well. I sheltered in there with my toddler and she learned the word dragon. I will always remember the Mill with gratitude and pleasure. Thank you to them."

Reading that gives me goosebumps. I'm so proud of what we've achieved and how we've served the community.

And as we look to the future, the success we've experienced and the feedback from our visitors will shape our plans. Phase 2 of developing Sarehole Mill will be exploring wholesale options, evening openings plus securing our alcohol license and rolling out a bar.

This year we're perhaps most excited about reintroducing access to the museum itself, as government advice allows.

There is so much more I could talk about when it comes to Sarehole Mill not least the perils of developing our very first recipe book, which - let me tell you - was a much more labour-intensive experience than any of us had imagined! But that is a story for another day!

Over in our main kitchen at Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum, we went down a different route to keep trading. In May we brought two recipe boxes to market, giving customers the opportunity to enjoy some of our best selling dishes at home, including our popular brunches from the Edwardian Tearooms. Back in May, recipe boxes hadn't really become the established concept that they are now. We traded profitably, were able to bring some team members back from furlough and got some great customer feedback. Sadly this was one of the ideas that didn't have longevity - we couldn't maintain the numbers we needed to as more and more recipe box products flooded the market. We pulled this initiative but I still look back on the idea and the little gif we created to explain what the box would include, with a smile on my face. I'll forever be proud of the speed we went from idea to launch and for doing something well, that others just couldn't figure out the logistics on for some months.

During lockdown we also revisited our Environmental Sustainability Strategy and we refocused our efforts within the trading team to really look at how we could play a bigger role in caring for our planet. We started work with Too Good To Go, who I would definitely recommend looking up - if we have food going to waste at the end of the day we now sell it via the Too Good To Go app, to their very flexible customer base who are looking for a bargain and a way to shop more sustainably. We also rolled out sustainable or recyclable packaging for online retail, a long overdue move, began a full scale supplier review and even created a little icon that we now use online and will soon begin using in-store to show customers products that have been developed with the planet in mind.

That brings me nicely onto Retail. We worked hard on our online shop during lockdown - we actually took the opportunity to completely rethink our store, working with local agency Digital Cake on a major journey that started with a full-scale audit.

The online shop had delivered 704% sales growth in 2020/21, which in part will of course have been due to the shift in consumer purchasing habits when physical outlets for non-essential retail closed. None the less, something to build on.

Following the audit we rebranded and relaunched [shop.birminghammuseums.org.uk](http://shop.birminghammuseums.org.uk). Through the rebrand exercise we wanted to create a brand that would feel trusted and familiar for existing customers. Traffic to the old online shop was predominantly via the main museum website so our new brand needed to speak to those customers in order to protect existing revenue streams. But to grow we really needed a brand that appealed to a much broader audience - one that didn't alienate BMT's traditional museum customer base

but that would also resonate with a young and diverse audience in Birmingham who want to shop local, find new designer-makers and support independent businesses.

In short, we repositioned to focus on local makers and Birmingham related products, as opposed to majoring on collections led items. Visitors to the home page will still find products relating to Birmingham's world-famous Pre-Raphaelites with ease but it's no longer the primary message.

One of our new key goals for the online shop is to become the city's go-to store for Birmingham related merchandise. We've definitely got more work to do on product development but we've got some great products launching in the coming months that will really help push us on with that and help us achieve our goal.

If you're listening to this, I'd love you to have a look at the space we've created, just so long as you won't judge us for using the word curated to describe both content and retail collections. Feel free to purchase while you're there too!

It is really too early to assess the success of the new shop, we only launched in March, but I'm sure you'll be wondering if there are any early indications. The initial response has been very positive – comparing sales for March 2021 with same period previous year, we saw an increase of 2816%. Our ATV is finally closing on £30 having been closer to £20 in prior years. Again, a long way to go but strong progress.

So that's a short run down of some of our lockdown activities. It's fair to say that beyond everything I've shared on this podcast, there have been unbelievably challenging and difficult times – we have undertaken a restructure, we've made redundancies, there have been tears, battles and trials a-plenty, but one this is for sure, we didn't rest on our laurels. We took the hand we were given and we did our very best with it. We innovated, we challenged each other, we learnt new skills and one thing I am absolutely sure of is that we will build back stronger and better than ever before.

Thanks for listening.