



SOUTH MILL ARTS

ANNUAL TOWN REPORT

FEB 2020 UNTIL MARCH 2021

Foreword

Dealing with COVID-19, over the last 14 months we have experienced some of the most turbulent and challenging times for since we originally opened back in 1963. The ebb and flow of the pandemic with its ever changing rules and demands, has not only impacted on us through business interruptions but, like everyone else, has touched us all personally.

As we came towards the end of the 2019/20 financial year we had been experiencing one of our most successful year's to date. Highlights being our new panto had just completed its run to rave reviews and in February we hosted a sell-out 1960s music show where we launched our 1960s music heritage project – the future was looking bright indeed.

March 20th saw our doors closed for the first time resulting in the cancellation of our classes, social activities and our theatre programme. Shortly thereafter the majority of staff were placed on furlough with only a “skeleton crew” to keep the building maintained. What followed has been a year that has seen catastrophic damage wrought globally upon the performing arts, heritage and hospitality sectors, our heartfelt thanks are sent out to the staff and trustees who have worked so hard to keep us afloat, our wonderful volunteers who have rallied and helped whenever we were able to actually open the doors and, of course, our wonderful customers who have backed and supported us every step of the way.



**South
Mill
Arts**

The COVID diary of South Mill Arts

APRIL

During the first lockdown work began on converting the Rhodes Birthplace Trust into a new Charitable Independent Organization or “CIO” as part of a revision and update of our governance arrangements. This process included delivery of a new Artistic Policy and proposals for a rebrand which would include a change of name. The new CIO status was accepted by the Charity Commission and the name change of South Mill Arts accepted by the Trust.

This rare period of extended closure gave the museum the opportunity to start a redisplay of the Cecil Rhodes collection, aiming to build on the recent successful completion of an education project that had explored Cecil Rhodes, his actions and legacy.

Although closed to the public we were able to continue working with our community, opening our facilities to a local school enabling them to return additional pupils to the classroom as well as hosting several National Blood Transfusion Service donation sessions.

MAY

Work started on making the building “COVID secure” in anticipation of reopening. This included the installation of screens along our bar area, appropriate signage, updated risk assessments and the purchase of PPE equipment for both staff and customers.

By late May we were able to partially re-open serving take away refreshments and were delighted at the volume of customers who visited.

JUNE

By mid-June we were welcoming customers back into the public areas for drink-in refreshments and saw many of our “regulars” return to enjoy the socially distanced company of their friends within our community groups.

JULY

Three local primary schools used our facilities to hold their end of term performances with the assistance of our Technical Crew who filmed and edited their end of term performances. This enabled the schools to share this great experience with the other pupils and parents. We were delighted to be able to provide this facility, enabling the children to escape from the restrictions of COVID on the classroom and enjoy performing in a real theatre.

The museum was also able to partially re-open, albeit with tight restrictions on the number of visitors allowed, a one-way system and a strict booking system in place.

JULY cont.

We also began a limited film screening offer including dementia friendly and Parent & Toddler screenings. Our ushers / volunteers returned. Four 'live' cinema screenings attracted a socially distanced audience with positive feedback on our environment feeling comfortable, safe and secure.

The Team were delighted to receive notification of achieving a "See It Safely Award". The award, which is run in conjunction with Theatre UK acknowledged venues who were COVID safe, following all Government Guidelines and ensuring that customers were welcomed into a secure and safe environment.

National Blood Transfusion Service sessions continued and Grove Cottage used our Maltings Bar for fun and recreation where they could meet in a safe social distanced environment. Bingo was enjoyed by all!

We were delighted to receive financial support from the Arts Council through the Arts Cultural Recovery Fund.

AUGUST

By beginning of August our adult classes started to return - we were able to accommodate classes of up to 16 participants thanks to the large size of the dance studio and its air handling system and the museum was able to provide booked holiday craft sessions and new quizzes and trails for families to do as they visited the museum.

Performance is at the heart of what we do but there were strict restrictions on indoor performances so, not to be deterred, as the weather improved we diversified our programme and held three socially distanced live music events in our garden which attracted audiences of over 100+. We were really lucky with the weather and received excellent feedback as customers once again enjoyed live entertainment, this is one thing we learnt in COVID that we definitely intend to repeat!

Following our 'change of name' work began with a graphic designer on our rebranding of South Mill Arts.

SEPTEMBER

As schools returned we welcomed back our performing arts and exercise classes. We provided additional facilities to a local choir and drama group as our larger premises meant they could operate within social distancing rules.

We were aware that many potential visitors were still worried about going out in public so the museum team developed a "virtual tour" of the museum so that off-site users could access the displays remotely.

OCTOBER

Continued easing of the restrictions meant we could bring live performances back into the auditorium within social distancing guidelines. Six performances were staged for children over half term with an additional cinema screening, and, by working with partners we 'live streamed' a music event.

The museum team joined in the fun by running craft activities themed around to support the live shows – mastodons, wyverns and sabre-toothed tigers all made appearances!

NOVEMBER

As we entered another brief "circuit breaker" shut-down we used the time to plan our "re-invented" Christmas offer

DECEMBER – MARCH

We staged three performances of "Santa's Christmas Cracker" and worked in collaboration with our panto Producer who wrote, produced and directed a new live stage performance of 'The Revellers'. The auditorium was redesigned to accommodate socially distanced cabaret tables and our panto cast returned to perform for us.

Santa's Grotto was new initiative developed in the Victorian room located in the museum. The room was enchanting and we sold out all performances. Unfortunately, as a result of us entering 'tier 4', the grotto had to be cancelled just 18 hours before opening. Shortly thereafter we went in to our third 'lockdown' and returned to a skeleton staff with most staff placed on 'flexi furlough' but never fear, we are rescheduling for 2021/22 so watch this space.

In March 2021 East Hertfordshire District Council announce the new development at Old River Lane will now be cinema led offer as opposed to the new theatre that was initially planned. South Mill Arts now remains as the only theatre space in Bishop's Stortford.

Happily, as I write this, we are once again opening back up and welcoming back our many friends and supporters, but you can't help but wonder what 2021/22 has got in store!

Paula Holland
Operations Director