



Rye Heritage Centre 2018-2019 season report.

Rye Heritage Centre is owned and operated by Rye Town Council. It is based in the Old Sail Loft on Strand Quay and hosts the '**Story of Rye**' **Town Model Sound and Light show**, the **Old Pier Penny Arcade** and has a **large shop** stocking books about Rye, maps, local crafts and souvenirs. As there is no longer a full Tourist Information Centre in the town, the Heritage Centre has become the main coordination point for tourism in Rye, and acts as an official **Visitor Information Point** for Visit 1066 Country. The centre also provides a **last-minute accommodation booking service**, hires out **audio guides** of the town, and organises **regular historical and haunted walks of the town**.

In the last financial year, we have worked to promote Rye by:

- Working closely with both **Visit 1066 Country** and **Rother District Council** to help promote Rye to both domestic and overseas visitors. We have hosted journalists from all over the world in the centre, sourced information and images for domestic and overseas promotional materials and guide books, helped coordinate filming enquiries, and led guided walks for national press representatives.
- Arranging for the dispatch of both the **Visit Rye Bay Guide** and **Visit 1066 Country brochure** to potential visitors outside the region. We receive an average of 7-10 brochures requests a week, which are then dispatched by Rother District Council's chosen distribution company- Brochure Connect. Although the demand for printed materials is on the decline in the digital age, there are still a sizable group of potential visitors who either prefer a hard copy of a brochure to plan their trips, or are not suitably internet- proficient. By continuing to coordinate the dispatch of these materials, we are helping to ensure that a wide range of visitors choose to make a trip to Rye over another potential destination.
- Continuing to provide a **comprehensive telephone and email enquiry service**, answering questions with regards parking, bike hire, attractions, events, accommodation, access to the town, business opening hours, lost property, supermarkets and many, many more topics on a daily basis. If you run any kind of public facing enterprise in Rye, we have probably directed people to you this year!
- Building on our relationship with local festivals by sponsoring the **Festival of the Sea** in September, providing visitors with extensive information with regards all the major festivals and arranged guided walk events as part of festival programmes. We have also liaised extensively with other Rye visitor attractions such as **Lamb House** and **Rye Castle Museum** to coordinate both group and general public visits.
- Updating the **Rye Heritage Centre website in- house** to improve the quality and accessibility of information with regards both the Heritage Centre itself and visits to Rye in general. There is more work planned for the website in the 2019-2020 financial year to further improve the user experience and increase the information available for potential visitors to the town.

We have contributed to the economy of the town and wider area by:

- **Successfully working with a local start-up tour guide to bring regular guided walks of Rye back to the town.** These now include regular public access to the Town Hall for the first time, enhancing the tourist offering in the town. This is a real area of potential growth for the town, and we hope to expand these further in the coming season.
- **Expanding our range of locally produced crafts, souvenirs and food items.** Wherever possible, we are striving to replace generic and mass-produced souvenirs with products that have a more tangible connection to Rye and the wider 1066, Romney Marsh and Sussex areas. New ranges in 2018 included: handmade fridge magnets and ceramics from **Fairlight- based artist Paul Raynor**, local jams and Chutneys from **'Strange Fruits' based in Hurst Green**, handmade ice-creams from the **Ashford based Simply Ice Cream**, commissioning a new walking guide to Rye from local historian **David Clarke**, and Hastings Lemon Ketchup from the **Hastings Ketchup Company**. All of these products have been immensely successful, and we wish to continue to expand our Rye and Sussex/Kent products. All ideas for new suppliers and products will be gratefully received.

We have ensured that the Heritage Centre is constantly working to improve the visitor experience and potential revenue generated by:

- **Entering the Tourism South East 'Beautiful South' Awards** for the first time, under the category 'International Visitor Experience of the Year'. These awards are run by the South East England department of the Visit England board to recognise the valuable contributions of visitor attractions and information centres, and we were delighted to be nominated for entry by Visit 1066 Country. Although the Centre did not make it to the finals in Brighton this time, we scored highly across all customer service categories, and have received valuable feedback on how to improve the services that we offer in terms of accessibility and online presence.
- **Undertaken the first full renovation and repainting of the Town Model since it was installed in the purpose- built extension at the Old Sail Loft building.** We are lucky at the Heritage Centre to have a dedicated team with craft, painting and cleaning skills to undertake this monumental task in- house. Over the years, the model had suffered from extensive light damage and degradation of the original organic materials such as the natural string for fencing, sago for the cobbles and lichen/ horsehair foliage. In addition, the passage of 40 years had resulted in warping, separation of the 28 base plates that form the topography of the town and curling and crumbling paint at the edges of the model. These have all now been repaired with appropriate, durable materials and artist quality UV resistant paint. Feedback from visitors is already overwhelmingly positive, with an increase in shows over the same period last year. There are lots of images of the 'before and after' on our Facebook page, or even better, come and have a look for yourselves!

Our plans for 2019-2020:

- Further increase our range of Rye, Sussex and UK-made products for the Centre to support local businesses, with the ultimate aim of all products sold in the centre being sourced as close to Rye as possible, environmentally sustainable and of direct relevance to the town.
- Build on the feedback from the Tourism South East awards and expand our social media presence across more channels. Continue the work on the website to make it a valuable tool for domestic and international visitors planning a trip to Rye.
- Reach out to more local schools for educational visits, by highlighting the relevance of the Town Model to the National Curriculum.
- Continue to develop the guided walks of the town run by the centre.

We welcome any comments, ideas or feedback that local residents may have, and can be contacted on 01797 226696, via email at ryeheritagecentre@gmail.com, or in person during opening hours.

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