

The future's electric: investin

We were delighted when the Electric Pub Company agreed to sponsor our relaunch issue in October. This month we meet Alasdair Warren, the man behind this exciting business – and it turns out he's been making waves in other parts of town, too.

The phrase 'giving something back' is well worn, but there's one local businessman and philanthropist who's taking it to a new level. West Dorset native Alasdair Warren made a lot of money in the City; now in his 50s and back for good, he's spending it on the town he loves: Bridport.

Alasdair grew up on a smallholding near Melplash, where his family roots go back over 200 years, and went to Hardye's Grammar School (now the Thomas Hardye School) in Dorchester. After taking two gap years, during which he backpacked his way around the world, he studied geology at Nottingham University and vowed he'd never work in London, but changed his mind after finals.

"I left university in 1989 with a big

overdraft," he says, "and I had to get a well-paid job to pay it off. Luckily, I managed to do just that on the strength of my experiences at uni, where I'd started a couple of businesses for the student community, running security for parties and hosting nightclubs."

Alasdair worked in the City for 30 years, including stints in top management at Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, but would always come back to Bridport every couple of weeks. Then a few years ago he started to invest in the town, a step that would lead to a permanent move back 'home'.

One weekend in 2014, Alasdair was showing a London friend around Bridport, and the tour included the Electric Palace. "I have so many happy memories of that cinema and I was reminiscing about how my dad had taken me there to see my first 'proper' movie – 'The Spy Who Loved Me' – in 1977. Then later I saw that the place was for sale, so I called Peter Hitchin [the previous owner] and started the process of striking a deal."

The Electric Palace dates back to 1926 and was originally built as a theatre and opera house, later becoming a cinema as movies gained popularity. It closed in 1999 when the building was condemned as unsafe, then reopened in 2007 after a partial refurbishment. When Alasdair bought the venue it needed an injection



Alasdair Warren

of serious money – something he was able to provide.

"I set out to preserve and enhance the building and refurbish it in the original style, and we're pretty much done now," he says. "I've made a point of using local suppliers and tradespeople – Bridport Upholstery, for instance, re-covered all the cinema seats for us. This might not be the cheapest way of doing things, but local businesses have to survive and I believe it's important to give them as much support as possible."

Alasdair, still based in London at the time, asked his sister Sue if she'd like to come home to Bridport and manage the Palace. Between them they put in place ambitious programming plans, aiming to build on the events of the previous few years, with greater diversity and more live theatre, both professional and community productions. One standout result of this determination to work with local groups was the 2017 musical 'FLEA!', which involved more than 200 local people of all ages and inspired Alasdair to create the Dorset Performing Arts Fund (see panel).

There have also been some exciting new events for children at the Palace. "I loved Saturday-morning cinema as a kid, so we've brought it back. It's very popular – before Covid we were getting audiences of up to 200. The live screenings have been a hit, too, with



Left: Bridport Arts Centre

g in our entertainment scene

about 150 people coming along to enjoy the ballet.

“For much of this year it’s been about survival, as we’ve barely been open, and when we have been, we’ve only been able to sell a small number of tickets. Thankfully, our survival was underpinned by a grant of £50,000 from the government’s Culture Recovery Fund in October, but we can’t wait to re-open properly and continue our work. I want the Palace to be something the people of Bridport can be proud of.”

Expanding his portfolio

The most successful people never stand still for long before looking for a new challenge, and Alasdair has also taken a confident leap into the hospitality industry. In summer 2019 he bought the Pymore Inn, just outside Bridport, and gave it a stylish facelift before reopening to the public.

“About that time, I started spending less time in London and more time down here,” he says. “I noticed that there were very few pubs where you feel really good about everything – the hospitality, the beer, the food and the surroundings – so I thought I’d do it myself.”

Since then Alasdair has added the Elm Tree at Langton Herring, the Antelope at Hazelbury Bryan and the World’s End on the A35 between Wimborne and Bere Regis – plus wine merchant Morrish & Banham – to his hospitality portfolio, which operates under the name The Electric Pub Company.

Then at the beginning of 2020 Alasdair bought the Bridport Arts Centre (BAC). “When the chairman of the BAC trustees contacted me last year, they were facing some serious financial difficulties and needed to find someone to buy the building,” he says. “So I did just that. While the ownership has changed, very little has changed for the people who use the building, but the BAC now has the benefit of greater financial security.”

Alasdair’s Electric Pub Company is planning to open a seafood restaurant in the cafe area of the building and outside on the piazza in front – “it’s an amazing location, particularly in the summer”. He’s also hoping that the Allsop Gallery will be able to host more ambitious,



expertly curated exhibitions following investment in its lighting, atmospheric controls, access and security. And of course, his role with both the BAC and the Electric Palace will ensure an enhanced relationship between the two venues; for instance, the BAC’s mainstream cinema offer will move to the Palace, which has better equipment and more seating capacity.

You can’t take it with you

Alasdair is clearly enjoying his money – or, rather, he’s enjoying watching what it can do for his beloved Bridport. “I grew up with very little – we weren’t grand at all – so I know that people genuinely don’t need much to be happy,” he says. “And if you have enough, you can give it back in a meaningful way.”

There are also some other, more tangible perks. Alasdair has now returned to West Dorset permanently to live in Long Bredy, and his children certainly appreciate the fact that their dad owns a cinema. “On Christmas Day a couple of years ago we all came in and I put on *The Great Escape*. They thought it was so cool – although they were surprised to discover that the film has an interval!

“One of my greatest pleasures is going into the auditorium incognito when it’s busy and listening to people admiring the building. It’s an amazing venue, and I really appreciate its magic. I know we can do some really great things here – and also at the BAC – and I’m excited to be so involved with the cultural life of this very special town.”

The Dorset Performing Arts Fund

The success of ‘FLEA!’ in 2017 led Alasdair to create a fund to allow other Dorset communities to take on theatrical projects. The Dorset Performing Arts Fund (DPAF) supports local groups in developing performing arts projects that reflect their audiences and locations, enriching community life, sparking enthusiasm for the theatre and raising aspirations.

Alasdair worked with producer Sally Vaughan, community dance practitioner Anna Golding and theatre director Niki McCretton – who had all been involved with ‘FLEA!’ – to define DPAF’s principles and purpose.

The fund is now managed by the Dorset Community Foundation, which uses expert support from the Arts Development Company to ensure DPAF grants – about £75,000 a year – are targeted in the most effective way.

www.dorsetcommunityfoundation.org/managed-funds/the-dorset-performing-arts-fund

DPAF also offers funding for talented young Dorset residents to realise their ambitions in the performing arts. Details of this bursary are here: www.dorsetcommunityfoundation.org/the-dorset-performing-arts-bursary