
The Marlowe Theatre is a 1200 seat theatre in Canterbury, rebuilt between March 2009 and October 2011. The previous theatre had been adapted from a cinema in the early 1980’s and seated approximately 950.

The subsidy to the theatre has reduced from £400k per annum during the penultimate year of operation of the old theatre, to zero in the most recent financial year.

The economic impact of the theatre, measured using the Shellard formula, was £13m for the penultimate year of operation of the old theatre, £23m in its first full financial year and £33m in the most recent financial year.

A group of 24 Councillors and Officers attended a fact-finding visit to the new Marlowe Theatre. The visit comprised of a tour of the theatre, a Q&A panel with Councillors, Officers and local businesses, lunch and networking, followed by the option of viewing the stage production of ‘Grease’ the Musical.

The tour of the theatre highlighted the need to use expert advice in the design and build of the auditorium, backstage and other areas of the theatre. The approach of the architect at the Marlowe was to aim for an intimate auditorium with a feeling of warmth and tradition.

Their brief was for a mixed programme of theatre and resulted in a ‘general’ acoustic. It is considered to be fantastic for spoken word and natural sound but also excellent for electrically amplified sound. The Marlowe emphasised the importance of having a range of acoustic options. The Marlowe’s audience are educated and discerning about their seat position. Shows tend to sell from the top of the auditorium downwards for symphony performances, because it is in the upper circle where the sound is considered best.

Interesting details about the auditorium design were shared - the seats were originally going to be cloth upholstered but the decision was taken to use leather instead, based on it being cheaper over the course of 25 years. However, the hard leather caused sound issues when the auditorium was only partially full. Consequently, the underneath of each seat is perforated, which absorbs the noise in the same way an upholstered seat would.

The front two rows of seats can be removed individually to cater for different sizes of bands, choirs or orchestras depending on the performance. Beyond that, a further 3 rows of seats can be removed in total for a full orchestra such as that for Glyndebourne touring events. The front five rows comprise a total of 104 seats,
which is lost revenue potential. There are novel ways to deal with this including, as they do for most commercial musicals, putting the band up on the stage (as was the case for Grease) or for their panto, where the band were placed into the boxes on either side.

The design of the auditorium seating was undertaken using computer analysis of sight lines. The patron's experience is of being surrounded by the audience and sharing their experience of a performance which is over and above sitting at home watching TV or going to the cinema. It was noted that the box seats on either side were offered for sale at half the price of the least expensive seats elsewhere in the auditorium, due to the restricted views from them. The auditorium is not air conditioned - they have air handling to move air around and heat air up, but not air conditioning to cool down.

On the back of many seats was a plaque dedicated to a donor. Each plaque represented a £500 donation to the theatre. Not all seats have a plaque and the Marlowe indicated it was a fundraising campaign that was currently on hold but could be resurrected at any time if required. A 1200 seat theatre could attract donations of up to £600,000 through such a scheme. It should also be noted that even the lift had been sponsored and a full list of all major benefactors could be found in the main foyer on the ground floor. £4.5m in total was raised through donations and other fundraising schemes. Fundraising Schemes were advised, by the Marlowe’s consultant, to be less successful until a build decision has been made and people can see the project progressing.

Moving to the stage and backstage area, the group ascended the fly tower to observe the 48 multi-purpose bars / bays used to suspend the scenery, lights and other equipment used for shows. There is 18.4m from the stage to the bars / bays in the fly tower. Each is able to lift a tonne of weight and the heaviest items lifted so far are 5.5 tonnes for Cats and Dirty Dancing.

Although The Marlowe Theatre is a substantial rebuild, the original stage and fly tower were retained. The technical team highlighted the need for a quality mechanical and electrical installation. The Marlowe shared problems experienced between the contractor and the architect and some problems they were still having with parts of it not fully functioning. However, the highly skilled theatre team are able to deal with and workaround the problems experienced.

The group learnt of some constraints the Marlowe had to work within - part of the building is on a flood plain (the back of the building is on stilts) and so they were unable to increase the footprint of that part of the building, although they were able to reconfigure it.

Following the tour of the theatre, the group heard from a panel of officers, councillors and local business people from Canterbury at the surrounding area.

- Colin Carmichael, the Chief Executive of Canterbury City Council
- Chief Executive of Canterbury Connected BID (Business Improvement District)
- Ben Fitter-Harding, a Canterbury City Councillor and Chair of the Regeneration Committee, also owns a local creative studio.
• A local businessman running a manufacturing organisation in Herne Bay
• The Business Development Manager at a local hotel, which has two restaurants attached to it and is within a short distance of the theatre.
• Paula Gillespie – Theatre Director
• Mark Everett – retiring Theatre Director

The following summarises the information shared by the respective panel members.

Colin Carmichael, Chief Executive of Canterbury City Council explained how a core of 10 officers comprising of a project manager, core theatre officers, head of service, quantity surveyors, finance and planning staff members delivered the project. There was also a Councillor working group, cross party in composition, who met once a month and had input into the selection of the architect and other matters.

Mr Carmichael explained how the origins for the new Marlowe Theatre date back to a bid to be the European Capital of Culture. Though the bid was ultimately unsuccessful, the process of discussing the bid led to a cross party consensus that rebuilding the theatre was something that the Council ought to do. Although there was a huge amount of debate all the way through the rebuild, there was never an opposition to it, everybody agreed that improvement was necessary.

The Council committed in principle in 2000 to doing something - a refurbishment or a rebuild. The Council had to do a lot of work looking at both options. They had to look at the refurbishment to work out the cost and how close those costs would be to a full rebuild.

The costs were for £10-11m refurbishment within the shell, with £24m for a full rebuild, including £3.5m of land purchase - an old garage (which had to go through a CPO process).

Relocation as a possibility was also considered due to the prolonged closure of the theatre associated with a rebuild. Canterbury City Council looked at a number of different sites but limitations on available sites and planning constraints within the city meant the only realistic option was the Old Tannery on the outskirts of the city, near the ring road.

A trip to Milton Keynes persuaded Canterbury to keep their theatre in the city. Milton Keynes' theatre is on the outskirts and outside of performance times is lifeless and doesn't give anything else back to the area.

Councillors weighed up the risk to keep the theatre at its present location - closure was a risky option as they didn't know if audiences would return. Their economic impact research (using Shellard) showed there was probably going to be a successful operation but the panel intimated that it is possible to do studies and assessments "until they come out of your ears". Ultimately Councillors had to take a leap of faith and so took the decision to rebuild the theatre in 2002/3.

Stage 2 costs came back higher than first estimates, at between £28-30m. They undertook value engineering to reduce the costs by £2.5m and went out to tender. By this time, the financial crisis had hit and bids came back much lower due
to the recession. The team were in the happy situation of being able to put back most of the items they had value engineered out, to arrive at a final cost of £19m.

During the two year closure for the rebuild, the Marlowe kept its name alive through outreach work in St Augustine’s Abbey and holding the panto in a marquee in a car park. The intention was to keep the name alive in everybody’s memory, rather than to generate revenue.

In return for the £19m cost of the theatre, the Council expected the theatre subsidy to reduce to zero within a reasonable timescale. In the last year of operation of the old Marlowe Theatre, the subsidy was £400k per annum and it is now down to zero after 4 years of operation. The theatre will now be put out to a charitable trust to run it in order to be more successful.

The new Marlowe Theatre opened 5 years ago. The capital project did not overspend but the revenue operation was overspent in the first 6 months of operation as they found forecasting for an unknown operation very difficult. Although they received some negative press coverage about this, the publicity since then has been positive.

The Chief Executive of Canterbury Connected explained that there are 600+ businesses in Canterbury’s BID. They had always supported the theatre, as any centre thrives on footfall and consequently businesses were concerned about the possibility of a peripheral theatre.

He gave his view that town centres have changed to become more experiential. He explained that it is critical to make as many small improvements and additions to the experience to make it worthwhile coming and the Theatre provides so many opportunities for those moments. He also stated that Canterbury without the Marlowe is unimaginable.

The introduction of HS1 (high speed one train line) helped to prop things up when the Pfizer site closed but now people are choosing to live in Canterbury because they can get to London quickly by train. The quicker train journey allows people working in London to get back to Canterbury in time to go out to the theatre.

A local businessman shared the experience of his hotel during the rebuild and following its reopening. He explained that when the site shut down, the whole area of town around it went very flat, like someone pulled the plug on the life support, the business almost went under. The restaurants attached to the hotel just couldn't work without the theatre.

He related that it is hard to sum up the benefits of the new theatre - they’re largely intangible and invisible. Since the Marlowe reopened it has brought employment to all the businesses around. Those that had 2 or 3 waiting staff and 1 chef now have 10 waiting staff and 3 chefs. He stated that there are now two jewels to the City - the Cathedral and the Marlowe Theatre and urged those present to be brave and go for it.
Ben Fitter-Harding, a Councillor who also owns a creative studio close to the theatre, felt that the quality and quantity of restaurants and bars has got better, possibly because of the Marlowe. He also believes that creative industries will continue to grow thanks to the potential of this “phenomenal asset”.

He explained that the theatre will be going out to a charitable trust in January, but will still be a council owned building – he felt it was akin to a child growing up and needing to leave home. Mr Fitter-Harding further explained that the local heritage museum is closing and will be handed to the Marlowe to run as part of the theatre.

A businessman in Herne Bay explained that although the Marlowe Theatre does not directly impact his business, he felt it was our duty as people of the world to leave the world in a better place. He set the decision in clear terms - if your theatre is currently going downhill and going backwards, and you then look five years ahead where do you expect it to be? His challenge was whether that was really what councillors who have been voted in have been asked to support.

He also shared his experience of fundraising. The Council set up a charitable trust to handle the fundraising and employed a consultant to write a strategy. Fundraising continued through the design and build and achieved its target by the end of the project. The advice was not to ask for anything in the very beginning – demonstrate a viable project first and a vision that people can buy into.

Mark Everett, retiring Theatre Director, responded to questions about the Shellard formula. Mr Everett understood people’s cynicism about the Shellard formula but countered that it’s a hugely helpful way of calculating a theatre’s economic impact. Mr Everett’s observation was that because you are using the same formula to measure performance, you can demonstrate that there has been growth over time. Even if the reality is half of what the formula predicts, it is still a lot of economic growth from the old to the new theatre.

Shellard economic impact:

- £13m – penultimate year of the old theatre
- £21m – predicted impact of new theatre
- £23m – 1st full financial year
- £33m – most recent financial year.

Mr Everett shared that the catering offer was not right to begin with and lost money in the first 6 months. They completely rethought it, made changes after a year and now food & beverage contributes towards finances.

Ms Paula Gillespie and Mr Everett shared some further key information about the Marlowe Theatre during the tour.

- The first six months of performances following the reopening were sold out. Since then the average ticket sales per performance have been 923. The average ticket sales per performance at the old theatre were 710.
- The Marlowe sells up to 400,000 tickets for over 400 performances a year.
- The audience comprises of very few tourist or students, despite their contribution to the overall economy of the city. The vast majority of patrons are from the local area.
- The pantomime turns over £2m per year.
• A greater capacity of 1500 seats was never considered, 1200 was always considered the right number of seats.
• There is no coach drop off outside the theatre. This is an issue for the theatre, as audiences have to walk approximately 5-10 minutes to the coach park. Neither is there any dedicated car parking, only a few disabled spaces.
• The Friends Group for the theatre is one of the strongest in the country with over 14,000 members.
• Booking fee goes completely to the Marlowe.

All Councillors and staff paid for their own ticket to the production of Grease.

Travel to and from the venue in Canterbury was provided by the Council.