

In part two of our closer look at The Piece Hall Transformation project, we look at the successes and challenges along the way.

- Read: Part one: what saving Piece Hall did for Halifax.

Cultural cachet

There has been a knock-on effect on the cultural cachet of the town too. In 2018, BBC 6 Music named Halifax "the Shoreditch of the North", citing a burgeoning music and craft beer scene.

It has also recently been dubbed "Hollywood of the North" thanks to a boom in filming. The BBC/HBO series *Gentleman Jack* is filmed nearby including at Anne Lister's ancestral home Shibden Hall, while Channel 4 hit *Ackley Bridge* films in Halifax and uses local residents as extras.



Suranne Jones as landowner Anne Lister in the BBC/HBO series *Gentleman Jack*. Credit: BBC/Lookout Point/Jay Brooks

Inside The Piece Hall itself there have been many high-profile events including huge gigs with US singer-songwriter Father John Misty and rock group Elbow, and the start of the Tour de Yorkshire.

“Halifax is not what you associate with a typical northern town," Chris Southwell, Shibden Hall’s visitor services co-ordinator, told the *Halifax Courier*. "It is has a reverence about it now because of [*Gentleman Jack*] and because of the cultural offering, which has been raised by The Piece Hall,”

A sense of pride



Volunteer Maria Moska

On our train journey to visit the Hall, we overheard two locals – unsolicited! – proudly recommend it to a fellow passenger.

A large part of this pride seems to be the result of the promotion of the heritage of Piece Hall itself to different audiences, through interpretation rooms, learning programmes and guided tours. Heritage and Learning Manager Helen Moore says: “Local [people now] can really own that history. I think before that it was known as 'The Piece Hall and something to do with cloth', the real story wasn’t that known.”

Maria Moska, a volunteer tour guide, agrees: “before all this, it was a working building, people just walked past it”. She adds: “I love the building anyway, it’s just nice that you can show it off to everybody, especially now… Volunteering has given me pride for this place, and I’ve made a lot of friends. And just confidence!”

Facing unique challenges

The project has not been without its difficulties. From a heritage point of view, there was plenty to tackle, including conserving 18th-century stonework; creating 21st-century retail and public spaces; conserving what was a cobbled, sloping piazza into an accessible space for events; adding heating, electrics and wifi to neglected Georgian rooms.



The Piece Hall in 1956. Credit: Arnold Jowett

There was also the need to win round some sceptical locals. Nicky says: “You [can] have this pink-tinted nostalgia of places that never were… People don’t like change. A lot of the people who complain about it, never came and never come. There’s not a lot you can do about that. But we have won a lot of hearts and minds with locals who are passionate about The Piece Hall and understand why it needed to change.”

The Piece Hall’s income comes from tenant rentals and commercial enterprises, and funding from bodies like The National Lottery Heritage Fund is an important “part of the mix”. Creating a sustainable business, one of the key strands of our Strategic Funding Framework 2019-2024, has been a hard-won process. An operating deficit was recorded in its first year.

“There isn’t actually any business blueprint for this, apart from perhaps Somerset House,” says Nicky. “There was a business model but we had to change [it] when I came in.” One thing she and the Trust did was to change the catering, which originally saw an external restauranteur running the food offer. Now they run their own deli, ice cream parlour, restaurant and function rooms.

She adds: “[Its] role is not to be a cash cow in its own right, it can’t be, because it’s free and we want to keep it that way… but it’s an incredibly expensive building to run… you’re still left with a shortfall. But that shortfall actually generates its own cultural Calderdale pound for the region. We see the losses as an investment in Calderdale.

“If we took it away, what would happen to Halifax? Culture is an investment from the taxpayer’s pound, but it’s also a great generator of income.”

The National Lottery Heritage Fund grant runs out in 2020 and the Hall is in talks about further resilience funding. She says: “so many projects stop at capital investment and then they fail because they haven’t got the resilience to continue”.

Working with The National Lottery Heritage Fund

The benefits from The National Lottery Heritage Fund she says, alongside the money, include: “the support and the expertise”, and also: “It’s given us more profile to other stakeholders, to the public.

> "It’s demonstrated to the public that even if you don’t win the Lottery that weekend, you win the Lottery through other means, through investment in your local area and your local community.”

It also helps bring in other funders. For example, in 2018, The Piece Hall Trust partnered with Yorkshire Sculpture Park on their first sculpture commission. *The Blanket* by artist David Murphy, inspired by the Hall's textile past, was part-funded by Arts Council England, Foyle Foundation, BRP and John S Cohen Foundation.

As the new Heritage Horizons Awards launch, her advice to projects thinking about applying for large grants includes:

- Communicate. Take advice. Be bold. Do it: you never know until you try.
- There’s a wealth of experience and advice within The National Lottery Heritage Fund – draw upon it.
- Be really clear about your plan, and that it is something that can genuinely be sustained.
- Understand how you can operate it in a meaningful way post-capital investment.
- Ensure you are taking people along with you.
- Be honest about some of the challenges. And work with the organisation on a solution, don’t try to have all the answers yourself.



A concert at The Piece Hall. Credit: Danny Payne Photography

What’s next for the Hall

The council is proud of the project. Cllr Swift adds: "The Piece Hall project is already strengthening the local and regional economy, enhancing local pride, encouraging inward investment and kick-starting the regeneration of Halifax and beyond.

> "It has raised the profile of Calderdale across the UK and abroad."

A key part of the project’s sustainability is getting the next generation involved. The process begins with the smallest children who love the water features and ice cream parlour, family learning activities, curriculum-linked school visits, the young ambassadors programme and eventually possible work experience placements, apprenticeships or even jobs.

The Trust is planning a Piece Hall "takeover" with young people later this year.

Nicky says: “We can look back, but we also have to look forward. For me it’s about preserving its history, but also attracting young people. Because if we don’t, who’s going to take care of all this?”

You might also be interested in...





Children get together before The Big Sing at Halifax's recently restored Piece Hall Calderdale Museums



g Sing!

Think big: how to apply for the Heritage Horizon Awards