

Leisure Management Consultancy

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Where were you when Princess Diana did her famous “three in a marriage” interview with Martin Bashir in 1995? I was in a hotel room in Southampton working as a consultant on the final stages of a lottery bid to Sport England for what was then the largest single award they’d ever made. It was for £6.9 million towards the cost of The Quays, Swimming and Diving Centre which opened three years later.

I’d gotten into the consultancy business in the early 1980s. During my time with Gillingham Council I was responsible for appointing consultants to a country park project. The company, Land Use Consultants, were friendly, challenging, open to debate and came up with a good report and solid ideas. It appeared to me to be a good way to make a living so I became a leisure management consultant.

Here I am in 2019 still ploughing the same furrow having worked with a range of consultancies including L&R, Strategic Leisure, Torkildsen Barclay and, since 2001, with Tony Ploszajski in PLC. The idea was that when we grew to world domination we would be PLC plc. I’ve worked with some of the leading lights in leisure over this time including Richard Tibbott and Michael Ryan at L&R, Ian Cooper and Mark Sutcliffe at Strategic Leisure, my fellow director Tony Ploszajski at PLC and the best of them all George Torkildsen at Torkildsen Barclay.

It’s a business which suits me down to the ground. I’m curious, easily bored, good at writing and enjoy meeting and talking to people and am deadline happy. In a previous life perhaps I was a journalist. As a consultant no two days are the same, we get to go to all sorts of places not open to the public, meet people from all walks of life and make recommendations for the future. I could do without writing endless streams of proposals but that’s the price we pay.

Most of the work recently has been mundane working with a local authorities on playing pitch and sports facilities strategies linked to their local plans. As this has involved a myriad of site visits I have the world’s most boring photo collection with wobbly, white lines and rusty goalposts a speciality.

However, one of the glories of the business is that every now and then you get to work on a project which is a resounding success or which makes a real difference. Some of our highlights have included:-

London Olympic Bid 2012

Tony and I wrote the sports development plan for the five Olympic boroughs (Tower Hamlets, Newham, Greenwich, Waltham Forest and Hackney) which formed part of the submission to the IOC back in 2007.

Brixton Leisure Centre

I spent a year with London Borough of Lambeth looking to improve the trading performance of Brixton Leisure Centre. Their poison pill approach to competitive tendering meant that the centre simply wasn’t working in financial or sports development terms and needed a radical change of direction. Through a long internal and external struggle we (Strategic Leisure) managed to agree

an externalisation programme which resulted in a reduction of the trading deficit by £500,000 and facilities investment of over £2 million.

The Quays, Swimming and Diving Centre, Southampton

I worked with David Lambert (one of the nicest men in the world and a much under appreciated architect) of Saunders Architects on the £6.9 million Lottery Sports Fund bid from Southampton City Council. In those early days bids had to include fully worked up market assessments and business plans, designs to RIBA stage C along with QS costings and outline planning permissions. So the council had to wager very significant fees on the submission.

Thankfully, the gamble paid off and the centre is now a regional centre for diving.

Three Hills Sports Park, Folkestone

Out of the blue we at PLC had a phone call from the Roger de Haan organisation. Roger and his brother had sold their SAGA business to the AA for £800 million and Roger wanted to plough some of this back into his home-town of Folkestone. As a former member of Folkestone Cricket and Hockey Club his first project was a £6 million rebuilding of their premises including replacing the 1910 pavilion and installing a water-based and sand-dressed hockey pitches. We compiled the architectural brief, drafted the business plan and advised the constituent clubs on the most appropriate form of management. The centre opened two years later in 2011.

Willesden Sports Centre, Brent

Sadly one of my favourite clients Clifton Jackson died far too young a couple of years ago. I worked with him on a number of projects at the London Borough of Brent. The most significant of these was a rebuild of Willesden Sports Centre. When it was first opened in the 1970s it was a showpiece of pool design. Later a range of outdoor facilities including a track and astroturf were added. In 1986 it was such a well known centre that it was chosen as the venue for the Hockey World Cup final between Australia and England.

However, by the late 1990s the centre was in a poor state of repair, due in part, to a failed public/private partnership. With its by now antiquated design it was more economical to demolish and rebuild than to refurbish. The council chose to go down the PFI route and we worked with the design and build team led by Leisure Connection on the concept and then the detailed design, the outline business case and then the implementation. The final days leading up to opening were hectic with the PFI process requiring a formal sign off from every member of the project team. The competition certificate for the new track was signed at 10pm on a Saturday before the centre opened at 7am the following day.

Harrow School Sports Centre

How the other half live.

In 2018/19 we worked with Winston Churchill's alma mater Harrow School on their plans for a new £30+ million sports centre. The school's current indoor facilities are not as good as their county standard cricket pitches nor their golf course which sits in a Capability Brown landscape. There was a need for expanded and modern facilities to meet the school's needs and those of the local residents and schools who have access under a community use agreement. Our role was to work with architects Rivington Street Studio to review the design following a detailed local needs assessment. We also worked with the sports centre management staff on programming which

primarily had to meet the school's requirements but also make space available for the public. Based on this we drafted a detailed business plan.

The new facilities will include two 25 metre pools, two sports halls, climbing wall and large fitness studios. The planned opening is in two years time.

York Hall, Bethnal Green

The biggest man I've ever stood next to is Lennox Lewis, former world heavyweight champion. This was in 1990 at York Hall in Bethnal Green at the start of his career. I was working with the centre staff from LB Tower Hamlets on improving the venue's financial performance in the run up to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) in 1992. York Hall is famous as a much loved boxing venue and I was there to see how they worked with the promoters, Sky TV and the boxers themselves. I was watching a supporting bout and became aware of a very large presence next to me. Not only was he big but in pre-fight mood he was scary. He beat Liverpoolian Noel Quarless in 2 rounds and was on his way to the big time.

Following my brush with greatness, I was back to the day job of building a more customer friendly programme and approach to service and income generation across all the services at York Hall. These included not only boxing, but weddings, swimming lessons, Turkish baths and a laundrette. We also put together a long term investment programme which has come to fruition via GLL albeit 20 years later.

My grandson now swims at York Hall.

Natural History Museum

Back in the late 1980s the Thatcher government introduced admission charges for the national museums. This included the Natural history Museum in South Kensington which was, and remains, one of the most visited sites in London. In a free museum, customers took what was on offer and accepted it. Once they had to pay, they weren't so happy. Complaints spiralled about poor staff service, uninteresting interpretation and a simple lack of dinosaurs. They hired L&R to address the customer service aspects - it was one of the most fascinating jobs I've ever worked on. We ran a series of workshops for staff which included people at all levels and roles in the organisation, from PhDs in palaeontology to cleaners and porters. Discussions included the overall role of the museum - was it an academic institution or a visitor attraction; the role of frontline staff - to protect the exhibits or to engage the customers and the work of the exhibits - to tell a story or to be self-explanatory? We started a process of cultural change and improvement which manifested itself over the course of several years. And then the Blair government abolished entrance fees....

Cadbury's World

Whilst with L&R I worked on the concept, design and business plan for what became the Cadbury's World attraction at Bourneville. Originally, we'd been approached to advise on a museum of Cadbury family with the proviso that it had to be self-financing. We told the company that the story of chocolate was likely to be more appealing. The result is an award winning attraction which has around 600,000 annual visits.