

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Developing a rural festival:- the Brinkburn experience</b> <b>Jane Blackburn</b></p>
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It is a universally acknowledged truth that you never learn anything from things that go well, so I have based my talk today mainly around the things that we have done wrong, with just an occasional nod to things that Brinkburn Music got right. So what follows are a few dos and mainly don'ts. Although in the spirit of what I really think festivals and events are all about – I wouldn't dream of trying to give you advice as you are all probably a lot more experienced than me.

Anyway, I will take my starting point from the title and sub-title of this presentation “Developing a rural festival: - The Brinkburn Experience. And subtitle:- Marketing a rural festival to a niche audience.

So to begin the dos and the don'ts. Don't try and develop your festival in the hope that there is some sort of rural paradigm, and, equally, don't try and market your festival only to a niche audience.

What I mean by this is that if you choose to describe yourself and define yourself in too narrow a way, you may find yourself up a cul de sac with no paddle – to mix a few metaphors.

Yes, Brinkburn *describes* itself as “outstanding classical music set in a beautiful 12<sup>th</sup> century priory in the heart of Northumberland” when it suits us, but our aspiration is greater. So far example, we try and position ourselves as:

- A local employer, as being part of the visitor economy
- as developing the skills and talents of Northumberland communities

- as sharing our skills with other festivals and learning from them and
- as being a player on the Northumberland and regional stage.

So we may look like a classical music festival based in rural back of beyond, but clearly our alter ego wants nothing less than world domination.

And next this business of marketing a rural festival to a niche audience. Well I am never very comfortable with the concept of niche. Niche says small, niche says unambitious, niche says “back in your box small country folk and leave the real job of entertaining the masses to us urbanites.

I wonder how this talk would have been titled for Brendan Foster. “Developing an urban festival:- The Great North Run Experience. Subtitle:- Please explain to us how on earth you market this concept to the very small section of the population who think that running 13.1 miles is normal behaviour.

Consistently, independent research shows us that the Great North Run is the only festival seen from space, so it seems that Brendan didn't get very hung up on the word niche.

Now I hear you say, the marketing professionals would argue that niche is not a negative word, it means clever, it means cost effective, it means working harder not smarter and, of course, I agree with this really.

If you were a farmer, would you sew your seeds on stony ground just to make life difficult for yourself? I don't think so. So, equally, the Berwick Military Tattoo made sure that the armed forces knew about their event. Kim Bibby Wilson, long-serving manager of the Morpeth Gathering is likely to see traditional music fans as one of her core audiences and Keith Taylor from Cramlington Folk Festival tends to start with marketing to folk enthusiasts.

So, in the spirit of my three aforementioned Northumberland friends I am going to rename this talk Passionate People, Passionate Places as a tribute to them and all who serve in the north of the region (which admittedly is very rural and therefore one of the main reasons we all like it so much).

Anyway, talking of letting people know about your event brings me to the first 2 classic Brinkburn mistakes.

In the early days, I used to run the festival alone. Great Board, really knowledgeable and enthusiastic, but they behaved like a good board should, ie not interfering in how I ran the event. So, back then, I took on more and more responsibility, didn't (or wouldn't) ask for help and gradually got more and more exhausted until I was behaving like a rabbit caught in the headlights. Just a quick digression, where did that saying come from. I'm sure I used it all the time in lived in down south. Where were the rabbits on the roads of London. I would like to think that at night Tottenham Court Road became a playground for frolicking bunnies, but somehow it doesn't quite ring true. Anyway, back to the how not to do it lesson. This particular year I produced beautifully designed leaflets, proof-read to within an inch of their life, all logos present and correct and all dates and phone numbers checked and double checked. But, by this time I wasn't thinking straight and I had run out of money, so when the Board asked the inevitable question, "so Jane, what is the distribution plan", my blood ran cold. The true answer was that lots of cardboard boxes were all lined up in my hallway at home and I was hoping that if I covered them with a nice tablecloth then the elves and fairies would come in the night and spirit them into all the right places. So learn from my lesson – distribution is quite important.

This was also the year that I forgot to book Mrs Noye. We were doing a monumental production of Noyes Fludde and the message in this particular disaster is simple. Force yourself to do the things you don't like doing first, rather than letting them stack up and get forgotten. Despite having worked on West End musicals and films, including in the casting department, I was really intimidated by this opera singer's agent. So I buried the actual contract negotiations for Mrs Noye, never progressing beyond an availability check. My artistic director kept raving about how good she was but I was too scared to call the agent and try and negotiate a lower fee. So we didn't get quite the Noye Mrs Noye combination that Paul McCreesh thought we were getting. Actually, that was a bit of artistic licence, the real reason we swapped spouses was that Mr Noye got the most terrible sore throat that turned into full blown flu – on the day of the first performance. Poor Neil Davis couldn't sing a note, and poor Jane Blackburn had to get a replacement from London to Northumberland that day to open the show, with only the briefest of rehearsals. We did it – and the performances are well remembered in our neck of the woods, but the worst was yet to come for poor Neil.

Accommodation in Northumberland in July is always busy, but on this occasion Linden Hall Hotel only had one room marked Mr Noye, so ill Mr Noye gallantly offered to move to another (less VIP) hotel until he had enough strength to crawl back to London. That was one day I really wished we were running Brinkburn a little closer to the Watford Gap. Actually there is another message in this tale – don't be afraid of the talent. It is us that is providing the work. Without us, admittedly lots of us, they wouldn't pay their gas bills, so be respectful yes, be clear in the negotiation, yes, but don't be afraid of

them just because they have snooty agents. Now talking snooty, I could go on to tell you about a certain “sensitive” pianist refusing to play a certain piece in his concert because he said Brinkburn had made his hands too cold, but that wouldn’t be fair and anyway we’ve asked him back this year, so please join me in praying for a heatwave this July.

This period of Brinkburn’s life also reminds me of another vital lesson, if someone approaches you with a genuine offer of help, don’t do what I did and try to make them go away. Never put a gift horse in your mouth as we used to say in Yorkshire.

So, it was foot and mouth year, and we were due to have the season launch party at Belsay, but the House was closed and at short notice, I moved the party to the Arts Council. That was the first time that Alison Robson offered to help out at Brinkburn. She tried another few times, just to meet me for a chat and eventually I thought I could spare a moment from my soo busy schedule to meet someone who was offering support – for free. Well, there is no doubt in my mind that I wouldn’t be standing here today, still working on Brinkburn if it wasn’t for Alison. Sadly, no longer free gratis – but I think that Alison and I would want one message out of today’s conference and that is to pay tribute to all the people across the region who organise their festivals and events for absolutely no financial gain. In fact the opposite, when you consider the personal phone bills, the mileage on the family car – oh the family, they are the people who sit mournfully at your dinner table, saying “ are you going out again tonight Mummy”.

Back to Alison, what happens, as you know, when you are running a festival, is that you are so busy you think that you are better off doing everything

yourself and no one else would understand your filing system or how you balance the petty cash with a handful of change from the piggy bank and some green shield stamps.

Now, not every offer of help will be as successful as Alison's was, and in fact, they can be a real problem for us organisers.

Haven't we all had the offers – oh- I'll help go round the pubs with the buckets after the concert, oh, I'll be there to help put out the seating and hang the bunting, oh, I'm sure I can spare an hour to man the box office. This help is most often as problematical as it is usually unreliable. Some of the best excuses for not turning up I had in my early days – although thankfully not know – “But it's the Wimbledon final, no-one will come to the festival on mens final day anyway”, “But Aunty's coming to tea and she so looks forward to seeing me”, and my all time favourite, “but it's raining”.

Ah, so now we have arrived at the big one for many festivals and events. Weather. In my experience, Brinkburn audiences are a lot better at coping with weather than I am. The great British stiff upper lip seems to get dusted down from the attic at the beginning of festival season, along with, in our case, the golf umbrellas, the waterproof picnic rugs, the water proof trousers, the Wellington boots, the attractive pac a mac and rain hood combo. Yes, Brinkburn has had its fair share of rain. Actually rain itself isn't too much of a problem for us. If the monks in the 12 century Priory cloisters could cope with flash floods, why can't we.

Although Zoë Bottrell, who was just visiting the site to deliver Culture 10 branding to Brinkburn, may remember having to pull me off the particularly assiduous health and safety enthusiast from English Heritage who was trying

to put huge orange bollards all over my beautiful matting solution, which was a perfectly suitable solution to people slipping on the flagstones. Both he and I nearly came to blows over his bollards, but thankfully the sun came out just at the right moment.

So we can cope with rain, but we can't cope with mud, especially in our farmer's field car park. So here the lesson is clear. Don't assume parking will look after itself. It won't. Human beings are largely the same – you can put on the most exquisite music in a pitch perfect acoustic, but you will be judged on your parking, your coffee, but mainly your toilets.

Last year, Brinkburn went for gold in the lavatorial stakes. We booked, as well as our 10 flushers and a loo suitable for disabled people, a “gentleman's convenience” gentle listener – by which I mean a urinal. We were so proud of ourselves, but Alison and I obviously been delicate souls didn't go into it to check it. Well, what followed brought us the most negative feedback that Brinkburn has ever had – There were no handtowels provided. Well good grief, call me old fashioned but I have been using the back of jeans for years, so I thought they were all being a bit over sensitive. But the customer is always right, so this year we will be providing full valet service for each male audience member complete with Indian head massage and “something for the weekend sir” on their way out.

No seriously, it feels sometimes that most of our audience would prefer a damn good interval rather than the performances before and after. I may just suggest that English Heritage knocks down Brinkburn Priory and builds a fully landscaped car park with a coffee shop and, how many does Brinkburn seat, 390 separate lavatories.

Anyway, message to self – sometimes thinking about the small things means that you get the audience on your side when you drop a real clanger.

Now as you can tell, I could go on talking about Brinkburn's little peccadillos for ever, but there isn't time. I am now in planning phase for my 12<sup>th</sup> Brinkburn Festival. Brinkburn celebrates its fourteenth birthday, the year in Yorkshire you are legally allowed to have your ears pierced and wear nylon tights to school, so we will have to come up with a suitable celebration for our wildly excitable teenager festival too. Certainly, building upon our successful partnerships is one way. A few years ago we co-invested with English Heritage in beautiful new lighting for the Priory. This gives us an enormous amount of satisfaction, and the audience quite like it too as it replaces what has to have been the ugliest lighting truss in the history of lighting trusses. We are also pleased with our new relationship with Fresh Element, our locally-grown catering partner. When we interviewed for a new supplier, after Northumberland Cheese Company retired after 10 years of sterling service, we were very specific. But we didn't specify the sandwich fillings, or the hours required to fulfil the contract, what we said was you must really want to want to become part of our family, you must understand our obsession with customer service, you must understand that we have no running water so you will have to bring it down yourselves (that got a bit of a laugh) and you have to put up with Jane going on and on about the waitresses not wearing tops up to there and trousers down to there, with grubby bra straps showing. Yes, I have eaten at the The Baltic. Anyway, Fresh Element's response was just what we wanted to hear. They did want to become part of the Brinkburn family, hard

work was key to their own success, and the directors would get their mums and their aunties to be the waitresses. Perfect.

So, here endeth the lesson. Find similarly passionate people, in our fantastic passionate places in the North East, and our stock of festivals and events can only go from strength to strength.

Thank you.