

Shining lights in lockdown

Events professionals shed light on their experience of organising safe winter experiences whilst navigating tier restrictions and lockdown

Malvern Winter Glow

“I now have more grey hairs and a growing gin collection,” says Zoe Bottrell, director of Culture Creative when asked how life is.

Bottrell is talking to *Stand Out* as a nation is gripped in local lockdown. It's December and Bottrell has produced 10 winter light trails; eight are running and two are on hold because of the Government's new tier restrictions.

“How are you coping with everything?” *Stand Out* asks.

“I'm battle hardened,” Bottrell says. “I've been making shitty decision after shitty decision so much so that everything is now just a decision.

“I was on a two-hour call the other day, answering lots of questions, everything was running fine; six hours later, we lost two shows.”

Bottrell is referring to Christmas at Bedgebury and Christmas at Kew. Both events sit within areas with high rates of COVID-19. Restrictions mean that both shows are on hold.

“To say ‘it's complicated’ is an understatement,” Bottrell continues,

taking everything in her stride. “The shows are on hold but they are not on hold because there's a problem with the show, they are on hold because of the areas they are in.”

Tier restrictions are proving tough for Bottrell and the Culture Creative team. Whilst the shows are on hold, technical equipment still needs maintaining. So now her attention must turn to making sure staff are OK and can travel to site safely.

Cog in the visitor economy

Culture Creative worked with the Government (in Scotland and England) to ensure that illuminated trails were permitted to go ahead. It “made sense” for Bottrell, the Culture Creative team and Raymond Gubbay (the promoter of Christmas at...) to align themselves with the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA).

Bottrell's public sector background stood her in good stead. “I am good at wading through paperwork and understanding where your arguments are,” she adds. Sadly, it was more powerful to be seen as

a cog within the visitor attraction economy rather than the events economy in order to get things moving and obtain the appropriate permissions.

“We were a trail that operated in kinship with the ALVA. We argued that if you walk through Belton House, for example, during the day, why not at night?”

Adapt and review

Culture Creative and Raymond Gubbay agreed to put a series of measures into the winter light trails (stewards, signage etc etc) that would protect visitors.

“We also said that the public would have to use some common sense and that's where the local authorities didn't agree. They wanted us to ‘police’ the events. I wanted to say to them: ‘Have you been to a local shopping centre? The public have to play their part.’”

Culture Creative engaged Public Health England and a number of local authorities. Plus, the producer contracted IPS, Whitelight, Adlib, FGH, Flying Hire, SHB, Bradshaw



Enchanted Light Trail

Buggy Hire, NuKleen and Sunbelt Rentals to provide equipment and services for the trails.

“Our workload was 50 per cent more,” Bottrell continues. “The guidance was so generic that it led to many different interpretations but I have a great team who constantly adapt and review. The hardest thing has been that nothing has stood still but the best thing has been that the trails have given some people a good lug of work.”

Satisfying growing interest

As well as produce Raymond Gubbay's Christmas at... series, Culture Creative also produced Ignite at Gibside and Polesden Lacey, two National Trust properties.

“Our challenge was to get the audience to view Ignite as a different production. Ignite is not Christmas at... – it's designed for families but it's not a light show. The venues we are working with did not want generators, cables and truss. They wanted a smaller, 'gentler' show.”

Ignite has been 12 months in the making and six months in

delivery and was borne out of growing interest from heritage venues for a trail that would work in a smaller environment. “Ignite is a new production and needs a bit of tweaking but we'll probably look to roll it out in a similar way to Christmas at...” Bottrell explains.

Challenges

Ignite was not the only experience to launch over the winter period. Tarren Production delivered two new winter light trails in December, one at Three Counties Showground and one at Adam Henson's Cotswold Farm Park.

Malvern Winter Glow was a mile-long trail of handmade illuminations across 90 acres of grounds and Enchanted Light Trail was a partnership with Adam Henson's Cotswold Farm Park.

Chris Tarren, founder and production director of Tarren Production, explains: “We developed the light trail service in spring 2020 and selected a hand-picked group of regional venues, historic houses and visitor attractions to pitch to.

We then began working directly with Adam Henson's Cotswold Farm Park and Three Counties Showground to develop site-specific installation plans/trails. We also opted to work with joint venture models, with both parties bringing together their expertise and skills to create two very different and unique winter light experiences.”

But what about challenges? “What didn't challenge us?” Tarren continues. “The project development phase began during lockdown one. We then launched with the introduction of the tiers and part way through the initial ticket sales launch we entered lockdown two. We fully launched against a backdrop of tiers and halfway through the live run, we were hit by high winds, torrential rain, floods, snow and ice, which resulted in a number of cancelled nights at Malvern Winter Glow. The final tier changes at the end of December resulted in the Enchanted Light Trail closing three nights early.”

Tarren and his team capped the total event numbers below national

COVID event guidance and worked with local councils. Timed entry slots with pre-booked online tickets only and extra stewards and event management staff ensured that visitors stayed safe. At Malvern Winter Glow, which had the greatest capacity, Tarren created two-metre queuing markers on entry and at popular areas of the trail. The trails were purely one way, with social distancing monitored, hand sanitiser stations/facilities were placed throughout the site and customer-facing staff wore face coverings.

Tarren continues: "COVID-19 was the defining golden thread to both of our light trail ventures in 2020. We faced one challenge after another – all but the weather were COVID-related and we rose each and every time, with our partners, to conquer and overcome.

"We have learnt what an adaptable and tenacious bunch our staff are and that they really do put their heart and soul into everything they do. We have also learnt that contingency planning for live events in the COVID era is a must. Plan for the worst and expect the worst, that way anything else is a bonus!"

Nice end to an awful year

The launch of Ignite, Malvern Winter Glow and the Enchanted Light Trail was positive news for the sector, providing event suppliers and freelancers with much-needed work.

Silverstone also launched a COVID-safe and family-friendly Christmas extravaganza – Lap Land.

"The concept was to try and do something for Christmas that would be unique and put a nice end on an awful year," explains Hayley Smith, head of sales at Silverstone Circuits.

"We thought that if we could get 5,000 people to pre-register their interest we'd do it. We got 50,000."

Lap Land took place at the home of the Formula 1 British Grand Prix. Visitors drove round the track, experienced a laser and light show and had the opportunity to watch *The Snowman*. Smith continues: "The demand was there. Lap Land engaged children, grandparents, petrolheads and families.



Creative messaging at Christmas at...

Image © Kat Gollock



Christmas at Blenheim Palace

Image © Rikard Österlund

WINTER LIGHT TRAILS



Silverstone Lap Land

"We turned a negative situation into a positive and pulled together a great event in a short time. Now we've got a base for future events."

Smith and her team learned so much from working on events such as F1, albeit behind closed doors, that they had a wealth of experience to draw upon in terms of COVID-secure measures.

"The demand for Lap Land was high so we increased the number of time slots that we had by looking at our logistics.

"We followed the AEV's COVID-secure guidance and now we think we've got a model and something to run with in the future.

"Seeing what we achieved, bringing a smile to people's faces was enough. As cheesy as that sounds. We catered for all – we had several generations in one car – all smiling," Smith comments.

ADI, Energy Generator Hire and Sky Scaffolding Midlands all worked on Lap Land, providing kit and services to the event. Thomas Taylor, business development manager at ADI, explains: "We

worked directly with Alex Lacey (operations director at Silverstone Circuit) and her team and Dave Crowther, head of technical solutions at ADI, led the project."

Lap Land had two elements; an immersive lights and laser show on the world-famous track, followed by a drive-in cinema. ADI provided LED screen solutions across both parts of the experience. On the track it provided smaller mobile LED screens for wayfinding, branding and experience. For the drive-in cinema it delivered three large modular LED screens and supporting structures across three different car parks.

Taylor continues: "The number and size of the drive-in cinema screens increased, as Silverstone began to quickly sell huge numbers of tickets in November. We also advised them on how to keep attendees engaged and entertained while waiting for the screenings of *The Snowman* to begin. Knowing how popular it's been previously, we brought in our friends at Piing, who create

multi-player gaming for big event screens. Using just their mobile phone and without the need for an app, people in the audience could compete against each other on the large screen in front of them.

He adds: "Lap Land was a very different concept to the other events we deliver at Silverstone – including Formula 1 British Grand Prix, Moto GP, Silverstone Classic, etc. Nationwide COVID restrictions only allowed the drive-in format for live events, but this was actually incredibly well-suited to Silverstone, especially since it gave the public a rare opportunity to drive a lap of this world-famous track.

"The experience on the track was fantastic, and the lights and lasers were really impressive, especially down the Hamilton Straight.

"Silverstone Lap Land was such a huge success, it would be great to see it continue beyond 2020. It allowed the circuit to host an exciting live event for the public in the winter season, which has traditionally been a quieter time for the venue," Taylor concludes.