

Big interview **Dave Butt****Why Torbay can become a regional centre for culture and punch well above its weight**

NEW Arts Centre for Torbay — Princess Theatre to be redeveloped to attract top West End shows... hopefully, that's got your attention but I must own up and say we aren't there yet.

These are just two of the projects I would like to see taking place over the next couple of years.

Am I living in cloud cuckoo land? Are these really achievable? Here's why I believe Torbay can become a regional centre for culture and punch well above its weight.

OK — what do I mean by culture in Torbay? Culture means different things to different people but some examples are heritage, performance, music, art in all its varieties, libraries and museums plus exhibitions and events.

Or to put it another way, it's the stuff we enjoy either seeing or doing and my wish is to make it easier for people to access all sorts of things.

Over the last few years we have seen top exhibitions at the Spanish Barn with Antony Gormley's *Field for the British Isles* then Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child (Divided)* illustrating what we can bring to the Bay.

Arts Council England has given us great support to make our dreams come true.

Last October, we brought about 150 arts people, in a broad sense, together and asked them a simple question 'What could Torbay's cultural future look like?'

There was no set agenda and people decided what they wanted to talk about with like-minded people joining them.

So, we had loads of groups of all sizes discussing a huge range of ideas.

Pulling it together, a dedicated arts centre came top of the tree.

However, the big outcome was the bringing together of like-minded people, who have since started to develop different projects and activities.

Arts groups have formed or been revitalised with actual bids for funding coming forward.

Torre Abbey re-opens later this summer after a multi million pound investment funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Torbay Council, various other grants and a fantastic fundraising effort by the Friends of Torre Abbey — a big thank you to them.

I can't wait to see the finished layout and I really hope everyone gets along and visits.

'Afloat' — an exhibition centred on Torre Abbey from September

DAVE BUTT is Torbay's executive lead for culture and the arts. Here, in his own words, he takes a look at the future of culture in Torbay and exciting things waiting in the wings



8 to October 19 with a maritime theme — will have paintings, sculpture and exciting water fountain features in the garden.

The centrepiece of the exhibition will be *Collective Spirit*, a legacy from the Olympics — a 30ft sailing boat (pictured) made from publicly donated wooden items, each having a story to tell. Words fail to do her justice, so please do visit.

As part of the *Collective Spirit* experience, she will be visiting our three harbours during August with loads of activities taking place to celebrate the visit.

Thanks to Arts Council funding, Torre Abbey, Torquay Museum and Brixham Museum are working together like never before.

Until now Torquay and Brixham have had to be reliant on council grants to keep them going.

We all know that central government cuts will hit this in the future, so the top bit of the Torquay museums project is to develop new ways to run and operate in anticipation of this.

It's tough but we must make it work.

Using our Geopark status will open the window to many opportunities, with plans under way to bid to host the Global Geopark Conference of 2016 in Torbay. If we are successful, the benefits should be immense.

Did you know Torre Abbey, a Brixham sailing trawler, is languishing at Tilbury Docks in a dire state and, unless rescued, soon will just end up as a pile of scrap wood?

A campaign is underway to bring her back to Brixham and seek funding to restore her.

Somehow we must ensure this happens; she is part of our heritage.

To deliver the arts centre will be a challenge but Torbay Development Agency is currently working with Torbay Action for Art and has already identified a possible site.

Current thoughts are to be centred on an arts innovation centre roughly based on two dimensional art forms which will provide artist studios, community arts areas and exhibition space.

But, at present, the financial

case has not been developed so it really is at a very early stage.

The Princess Theatre stage and backstage area desperately need enlarging to enable bigger and better shows and plans are moving forward to deliver this.

Obviously dependent on grants, we are developing a business case in partnership with Ambassador Theatre Group which runs the theatre ready for a future bid.

Personally, I believe this is essential to our future cultural offer.

While on the theatrical theme, I always enjoy our local amateur dramatic performances — only in the audience, mind, I'm no performer.

Torbay has a number of well supported local groups who deliver some great productions.

Hopefully, we can help them to access grants and funds in the future.

Last September, Torbay launched a new music hub — I know it's a rubbish name but the purpose is to make music easy to experience for our children and, since starting, we have seen some great activities, culminating in the recent music festivals at the Palace Theatre and Riviera International Conference Centre.

Working with top music teachers and orchestras, our children are able to do things they never could before, but without getting too highbrow, we also ensure we support modern music in all its forms.

I've had recent talks with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra about future performances, and am absolutely delighted that they will be returning for the next two years.

The next performance will be early 2014 and will be publicised when we know more.

The BSO, in partnership with the music hub, work with our schools most weeks to help many children with their musical dreams.

Who knows how many future star performers will be developed?

We have put in a bid to bring the Welsh National Opera to Torbay, again with performances and helping our musical talent.

We will know at the end of the month if this will happen this year.

If not, we will be resubmitting for a 2014 start.

The London Philharmonia has developed some really exciting participation programmes for schools



VENUES: Torre Abbey, above, the Princess Theatre, below, and Palace Theatre, bottom

and has put a bid in for a regional wide project.

If it comes off, we will have another really exciting training programme.

But please don't think it's all about classical music, it is just that when opportunities like these come forward we must grab them with both hands.

The more we have for our school children, the better. Public performances also give everyone the chance to experience something we don't see every day.

Our library service provides a really diverse service, the old saying it's not all about books really is true.

Our libraries have very active friends groups and, by working with our library staff, devise some really great activities — from children's clubs to stroke victim support.

But to enable our library service to continue, it is crucial we now look at new ways of working; central government cuts are now the norm so we will explore all options.

But we must not close any branches, and I am delighted that the mayor supports me in this stance.

Paignton Picture House, next to the steam railway, has been crying out for someone to save it, and parts are really in danger of collapsing, possibly beyond repair.

I am delighted to be involved with a project that will, hopefully, save and restore such an important part of our heritage.

I believe it is the oldest surviving purpose-built picture house in the UK which really does make it a local and national treasure — so please get behind the project when it is launched.

Agatha Christie was probably the most famous patron always sitting in seat two, row two of the circle!

The Arts Council's aim is to 'Achieve Great Art for Everyone' and



if I can help to develop this in Torbay I will feel I have achieved something special at this stage of my life, and it really is an honour to work with many like-minded people who share this dream.

Being a member of the South West Regional Arts Council for the last three years has enabled me to meet many hugely talented people, locally and nationally and has put me in a unique position to influence our support. I hope to continue with this for a couple more years.

So where do we go from here?

We probably need to set up a small strategic group to set the direction for the next 10 to 20 years otherwise we could be in danger not getting the most out of our current special relationship with the Arts Council.

We really do have an opportunity that is here right now.

We need to link all of the things I have highlighted here with the mass of others that are coming forward to develop a joined up approach in everything we do.

Finally, a big thank you to all the amazing artists and groups involved in culture and arts in its widest form, without you Torbay would not have developed such a diverse offer, and you are definitely the future.

Let's make it happen together.

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