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Good advice, Northumberland

Ray Biggs, founder of Heritage Walks Northumberland offers helpful advice for any Northumberland-based tourism business:




- Put customer service top of your priorities
- Investing demonstrates confidence in your offering
- Be a good communicator with colleagues and customers
- Recommend other local businesses
- Collaborate – working together will see our region grow
- Enjoy yourself and enjoyment will become infectious

Across the country, the COVID pandemic has adversely affected the tourism and hospitality sector. Visit Northumberland has championed real stories from businesses who have adapted, pivoted and triumphed to inspire others. Discover more Northumberland tourism businesses that have delivered a #goodjobnorthumberland.

Visit Northumberland is the official Destination Management Organisation for Northumberland. To find out how you can benefit from networking, promotion and business support, please email us at partnership@visitnorthumberland.com

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Good job Heritage Walks

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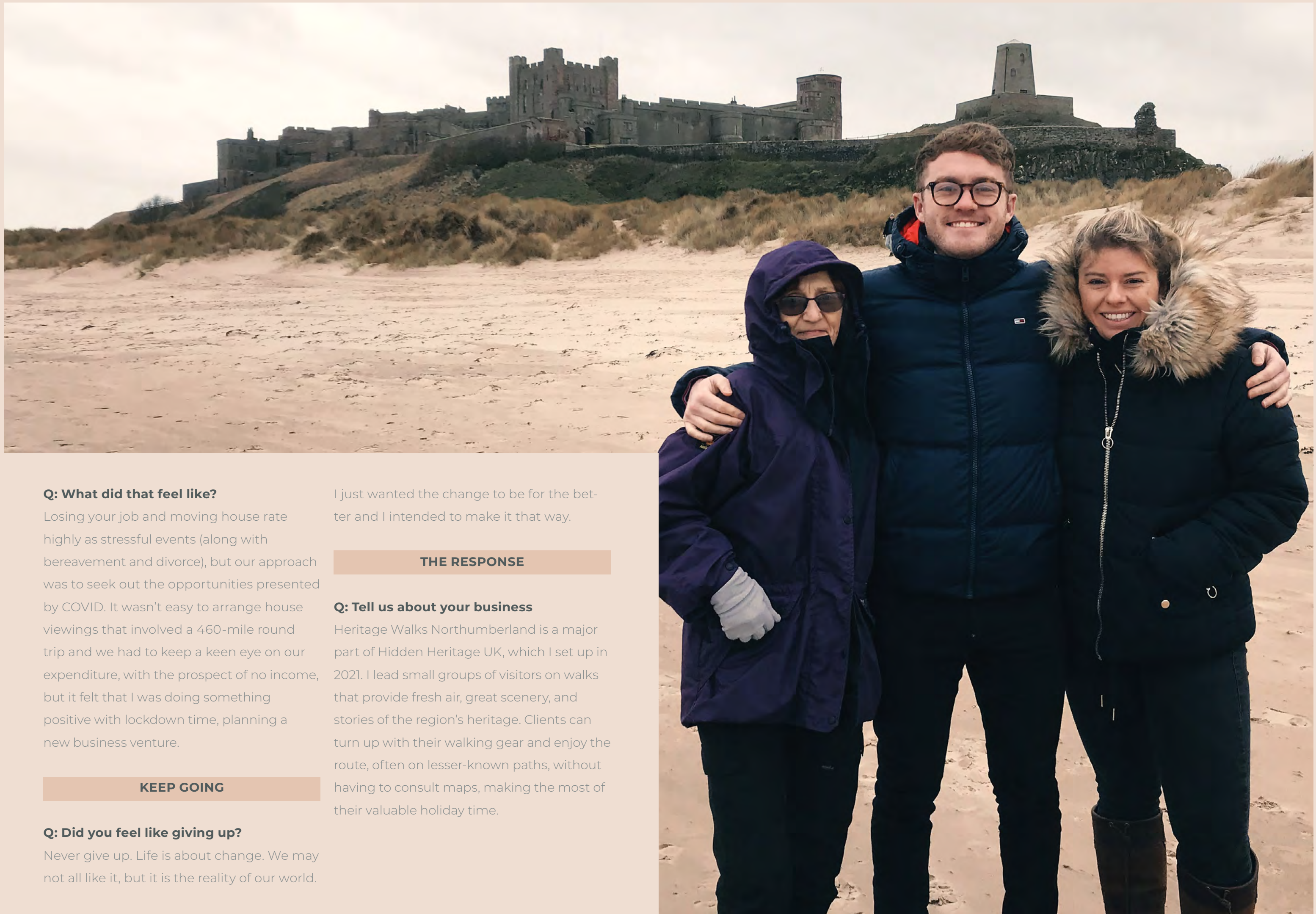
It couldn't be retirement. It had to be a new beginning.

After falling in love with Northumberland as a boy on a school trip to Hadrian's Wall, Ray Biggs knew that despite living and working in the Midlands, one day he'd return to settle in the "special place which captured my heart and soul" all those years ago. Fast forward to summer 2020, and the effects of a global pandemic had left Ray not only jobless, but with a huge decision to make on his future

Q: What were your plans pre-COVID?

January 2020 was a different world for me. I was planning my 23rd year as operations manager at a stately home in Lincolnshire. 2019 had been a record season for revenue, visitors and events and I was feeling optimistic about the season to come. By 1 April I was furloughed, as so many were. By June a decision was taken to keep the site closed for the whole of 2020, and in July my management role was made redundant.

With no prospect of alternative work, I accepted the redundancy and immediately began thinking about my future. I knew we would have to leave our home of 20 years so our 'retirement plan' to move to Northumberland was fast-tracked by a few years. But it couldn't be retirement – it had to be a new beginning.



Q: What did that feel like?

Losing your job and moving house rate highly as stressful events (along with bereavement and divorce), but our approach was to seek out the opportunities presented by COVID. It wasn't easy to arrange house viewings that involved a 460-mile round trip and we had to keep a keen eye on our expenditure, with the prospect of no income, but it felt that I was doing something positive with lockdown time, planning a new business venture.

KEEP GOING

Q: Did you feel like giving up?

Never give up. Life is about change. We may not all like it, but it is the reality of our world.

I just wanted the change to be for the better and I intended to make it that way.

THE RESPONSE

Q: Tell us about your business

Heritage Walks Northumberland is a major part of Hidden Heritage UK, which I set up in 2021. I lead small groups of visitors on walks that provide fresh air, great scenery, and stories of the region's heritage. Clients can turn up with their walking gear and enjoy the route, often on lesser-known paths, without having to consult maps, making the most of their valuable holiday time.



Q: How important is being able to adapt for businesses?

Setting up a business from scratch has meant I've had to acquire new skills and hone old ones. The digital world impacts on most businesses, even those like mine that are based outdoors, and I'm happy to get involved with it. I make new discoveries that help my business perform better.

Q: And investing?

During the 2008 recession, I argued the case for spending more on marketing. I won and it paid off. It's a cliché but, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going". Investing is a way of demonstrating your confidence in your own venture to others.

Q: What about investing in your community?

I love collaborative working. I see that altruism has a real role to play in the visitor economy. Recommend each other's businesses. We risk tunnel vision by focusing too much on our own business in isolation. The visitor sees the whole region and if we can too, by working with others, the region will see its reputation grow as a great place to visit. The more we talk to each other, share ideas, plan strategies, the better we will be equipped as a destination to compete strongly with other regions.

Q: What do you love about being a business owner?

Having worked in the visitor economy for over 30 years my biggest reward is meeting new people and helping them to make new discoveries. Storytelling is as old as the spoken word – it brings people together for shared experiences. I love it when people tell me they've really enjoyed their day out and I get satisfaction knowing I was part of it.

GOOD ADVICE

Q: What advice can you give other business owners?

Put customer service top of your list. It doesn't have to be a chore. I love being able to exceed expectations. Be a good communicator – with colleagues, clients and business associates. It's good to talk. And have fun. It's what our visitors, clients and customers want.

Q: How do you define doing a good job?

Waking up each morning with the aim of enjoying the day. My enjoyment comes from my efforts helping people have a good day themselves. It's not always going to be easy, but the difficult bits are just part of the bigger picture. Having a can-do, positive approach. Enjoying yourself and then that enjoyment becomes infectious.