

#### Good advice, Northumberland

Steve and Amanda White of the award-winning Market Cross Guest House offer helpful advice for any Northumberland-based tourism business:

- Invest wisely in your business even if cash is a problem
- Take free courses from bodies like Business Northumberland
- Promote on social media and maintain your online presence
- Ask for help and advice – there's always someone out there
- Give back to your local community, it doesn't take much
- Don't give up and look to the future

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](mailto:partnership@visitnorthumberland.com)

# Good job Market Cross Guest House



# As soon as lockdown was announced we lost everything.

It had always been Amanda White's dream to run a luxury B&B in Northumberland with her husband, Steve. Having completed several refurbishments and record bookings already in the diary, 2020 was shaping up to be the most lucrative year yet for their award-winning, five-star Market Cross Guest House.

"Confidence was high as we'd been shortlisted for the North East England Tourism Awards – our hotel and evening wear was booked. We had further refurbishment and designs for the garden ready to go after the summer season", explains Amanda.

Then, like other businesses, the realities of a global pandemic turned a nine-year dream into a nightmare situation.







#### **Q: How quickly was business affected?**

As the threat of the pandemic became clearer, we started to get cancellations. It was a real ‘what the hell’ moment. It wasn’t a sudden rush, but it was obvious guests were starting to become concerned about going on holiday. Then, as soon as the lockdown was announced we lost everything. All our bookings cancelled and we knew there wouldn’t be new ones until there was a massive shift in confidence. It was very strange. We went from rapidly gearing up to be full on for the season, to a dead stop.

#### **Q. How did that feel?**

Initially there was the obvious fear of, “Where is the money going to come from? How will we pay the bills? How long will it last?” This caused anxiety and worry because there was no way of knowing what was going

to happen. We knew we were in the same boat as so many others, but that only made us realise just how big a situation it was.

#### **Q. What were your toughest decisions?**

The hardest thing was pulling back to a mindset of “this is not the end”. ‘Failing to plan is planning to fail’ as they say. We refused to do that. As with everyone else, money was the major issue and we had to decide what was important and what wasn’t. Cut out the expenditure we didn’t need, cancel the plans we had for the immediate future and redirect everything we had to surviving. One of our big decisions, although it may seem trivial, was turning off the TV. We just didn’t want to hear bad news all day. We preferred to concentrate on what we could and needed to do.

#### **KEEP GOING**

#### **Q: What kept you going?**

Primarily, family support. But the amount of support we had from long-time returning guests was staggering. Following our email to everyone on our mailing list about the closure, the replies and phone calls we received were overwhelming and humbling. So many people wanted to reassure us that when it was over, they would be back, but they also gave us such encouragement to keep going. Sometimes people are amazing.

#### **Q: Do you remember a specific turning point?**

When reopening was announced in July 2020, we were inundated with booking requests. We believed then that there was light at the end of the tunnel. The income

gained through that period gave us a lifeline with enough funds to see us through part of winter. And this became vital when the area was placed in Tier 4 and were forced to close again.

#### **THE RESPONSE**

#### **Q: What changes did you make to the business?**

During the first lockdown, we made use of the free courses offered by Business North-umberland. We had a working knowledge of social media, but the courses increased our ability way beyond what we’d ever considered. We started to post videos and reels on Instagram – lots are food related as Amanda is a chef and that’s her passion. We posted walk-throughs of Alnwick Winter Gardens and Bamburgh beach. We started a YouTube





channel, again, mainly Amanda's recipes, and although Amanda is no Nigella and I'm no Spielberg, it kept our online community engaged and increased our following. We also added evening meals for the July reopening, giving potential guests added confidence to stay with us as they wouldn't have to go out to eat. Although it increased our workload, making our guests feel safer was our primary concern. We will be continuing the evening meals for the foreseeable future.

**Q. Have your changes paid off?**

We've been interviewed twice by BBC North East and Cumbria, once on radio Newcastle and featured in promotional material for Business Northumberland. The increased social content has gotten us noticed making it easier for potential guests to find us.

**GOOD ADVICE**

**Q. How important is investing even during a crisis?**

It's more important than usual. When the going gets tough you can either stand and look on or put on your gloves and work. Cash problems may mean you can't do much, but do something. Do courses, like us. They cost nothing and we learned a lot. The financial support provided by the government allowed us a little spare money and we used it wisely on improvements.

**Q: What about investing in your community?**

The local community really pulled together

in 2020. Everyone was offering their services to those that needed it. Amanda was making upwards of 30 loaves of bread a week for the elderly in Belford who couldn't get out. It doesn't have to be much to make a huge difference to someone else's life. As a business, we've always done this and had walkers and cyclists making their way round Britain for charity needing a place to crash at short notice, and we've been very happy to help for free.

**Q: What advice can you offer other business owners?**

Just don't give up. A glass half full is the better alternative and can save you from despair and the awful effects of something like this pandemic. Look to the future, do what you need to do even if it's unpleasant and weather the storm. And seek out advice. There is always someone out there who may be able to help. Swallow your pride and ask. It might be another business owner or if you need it, a health professional. Just ask.

**GOOD JOB**

**Q. How would you define doing a good job?**

It's all about knowing our guests leave happy. It's not the reviews or the smiles as they go out the door. It's when they phone you to come back, or they recommend you to their friends. Or they come back with friends. That's when we know we've done a good job. With an increasing returning guest list, we're pretty sure we're getting it right.