

Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No.04/20

Date: 2 March 2020

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Regeneration, Culture and Environment
Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Purpose: To provide further clarification on the use of animated
cartoon characters to promote the Medway Open Top
Bus in Summer 2019.

Medway's Open Top Bus has been running since 2013, providing visitors and local people with the opportunity to visit and learn more about the historic sites of Medway in one day. We take a very deliberate targeted approach to our marketing to drive the largest number of visitors to it each year, with a clear target market.

Our marketing campaigns for tourists in Medway have always featured the open top bus prominently with footfall figures indicating that the service predominantly appeals to and attracts Medway residents and primarily young families. Seeking to offer something new, which focused clearly on our target market to generate numbers and income, in 2018 we changed our product and marketing approach by making it into more of a themed, fun experience for our visitors which incorporated small challenges along the route for people to enjoy and learn from. Families had to spot certain well-known characters that help to make Medway famous such as Miss Havisham – underscoring our strong links to Charles Dickens, a modern Royal Engineer soldier (RE Museum) as well as a Napoleonic soldier (Fort Amherst) – celebrating our strong military heritage, and Norman the Knight who lives at Rochester Castle. We worked closely with the Historic Dockyard, the Royal Engineers Museum and Fort Amherst on this campaign. This approach resulted in a hugely successful campaign, culminating in the largest numbers riding the route.

Passengers joining the bus were given a guide booklet (Appendix 1 for 2019 version) to follow as they travelled around on the bus, containing information on the different attractions and Medway's history.

The Royal Engineers Museum placed a discount voucher in the booklet, which we gave out to all those who went on the Open Top Bus, and the Museum reported it was their busiest summer to date, with many visitors buying an annual ticket instead of just the day ticket being promoted. Fort Amherst were so

pleased with the campaign they said they'd "work with us on anything in the future."

Public feedback was also very positive - "It was so good we rode the bus twice; my son wouldn't get off. He loved spotting and even learning all about the different characters!".

Following this success, in 2019 we took a similar approach - with travellers spotting characters along the route. We decided to base the 2019 theme around Grunt the pig, who was first created back in 2015 in order to commemorate the siege of Rochester Castle. Grunt the pig took his origins from the famous historical event when King John set fire to the fat of 40 pigs as part of the siege of Rochester Castle. Grunt was hugely popular and we had many people taking selfies with our cardboard cut-outs placed around Medway. We still use them as part of our Heritage craft sessions today.

In the same way that we used characters to bring a story alive in 2018, so Grunt was used to illustrate the different venues on the Open Top Bus tour last year. We used Grunt dressed up as Miss Havisham to celebrate our strong connections with Charles Dickens. A mum told us that her six-year-old learned that "Charles Dickens lived in Medway" and he hadn't been aware of this before.

Last summer, Fort Amherst created a special commission, The Chatham Witch, to celebrate the opening of the new Amphitheatre. We used this hook to promote these two events. Feedback from Fort Amherst was positive with attendance at the performance being high.

Grunt in mud was used to seize the imagination, just as other exhibitions such as "Grossology" at the National Science Museum brought the science of the human body alive, or Horrible Histories have brought our national history to life in different ways. And this resulted in a significant increase in visitor numbers to the Castle when compared to the same period the year before which was high already.

These are just some of the comments we received:

- "We had such fun and laughs on that bus, I think we should go again."
- "We had a great time yesterday, thank you."
- "Grandchildren loved the bus and looking for Grunt and hopping on and off at various spots."
- "Been today with my granddaughter. Lucky we got the first bus and she enjoyed looking for Grunt."
- "It's a cheap, fab, fun interesting ride."
- "We are on it now, so excited."
- "Me and my two grandsons and daughter-in-law are going on Saturday and we can't wait to spend time with them and have fun looking for clues."

- A 67-year-old lady, who has lived in Kent her whole life said “I had no idea about Will Adams. I found that extremely interesting. I went away and researched him further – amazing!”

The 2019 campaign saw a record number of people, 4,186, enjoying the bus, an increase of 51% when compared to 2018 and 76% up from 2017. This increase is even more exceptional when you consider that it ran for only five weeks this year, and all other years it ran for six weeks.

To continue building on this success and to help celebrate the Dickens 150 commemorations, we plan to have Dickens characters around the route in 2020.

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