

North East England Tourism Awards 2009

Small Visitor Attraction of the Year

Large Visitor Attraction of the Year

Gold award winners

Washington Wetland Centre

Hartlepool's Maritime Experience

The Washington Wetland Centre and Hartlepool's Maritime Experience both entered the 2009 North East England Tourism Awards determined to better their previous successes. Susan l'Anson, visitor services manager for Hartlepool's Maritime Experience says, 'In the past we've won two awards and last year won Silver for our web design.'

Leanne McCormella, marketing manager for Washington Wetland Centre explains, 'The main reason we entered is that in 2008 we won Silver in the large attraction category – and we didn't want to leave it at that!' Each has succeeded, with the Wetland Centre achieving Gold as small visitor attraction of the year, and the Maritime Experience winning the large attraction Gold award.

But this was not their only motivation for entering. Susan continues, 'We always try and support One North East's initiatives where we can. In the past the awards have given us great pr coverage, both pre and post the award process. Even if we don't get through to the shortlist (as last year), we'll put something out in the press – it still gives us some publicity.'

Leanne says, 'Prior to 2008 we hadn't entered for several years, although we feel it's a very important thing to do. Our visitor numbers are on the borderline and last year we were only one thousand visitors into the large attraction category. This time for 2009, we entered as a smaller attraction as our total number of visitors was a thousand under.'

'We had done lots of redevelopment since 2005 and we saw the awards as an opportunity to shout about our improvements. Also, there is such a wealth of attractions in the region, entering is a chance to let organisations, such as Tourism Tyne and Wear, know what we're doing. We also enter for the recognition – since to win awards is proof of all the hard work put in by our staff and volunteers.'

'Winning is also a brilliant thing to be proud of within the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. Of nine WWT centres around the country, I believe we are the only one to have won Gold this year.'

Both attractions are looking at ways to use their Gold award in their marketing and pr. Susan says, 'We have already produced a large banner and hung it up on the front entrance. We're redesigning

our lapel badge stickers to show the awards suitcase logo and our new leaflet will have a slash saying we're Gold winners. I also think we were the first to put the logo on our website – it was up there the next day! Our marketing manager, Claire Munroe also attended the pr workshop, which One North East arranged for all award winners.'



'I thought the pr workshop was excellent,' says Claire. 'The presenter, Alison Rice, was obviously very experienced. She gave us a great insight into how journalists' minds work and what they look for in press releases, etc. It was good to have some follow-through after the event with an opportunity to meet other award winners. I really enjoyed that and hope they do it again next year.'

Leanne says, 'We're adding the award logo to our centre leaflet for next year. To get the message out there, we'll use it on all press releases and everything else we send out. We're aware a lot of local people don't visit us (which is always the way when something's on your doorstep) but we hope they will pick up our leaflet and be encouraged to come.'

'We're adding the award logo to our leaflet ... we'll use it on all press releases and everything else we send out.' (Leanne)

'It's a seal of approval being an award-winning venue. However, it's also something to live up to. If we generate good press coverage from the award and attract new visitors, we must be sure to match up to their expectations.'

Asked which of the activities highlighted in their entry form, they believe best demonstrate their commitment to running an award-winning attraction, Susan and Leanne said they were particularly proud of the following.

'I feel the award is a great endorsement of all the development work we've undertaken on the site over the last two years.' (Susan)

'I feel the award is a great endorsement of all the development work we've undertaken on the site over the last two years,' says Susan. 'We have made lots of new additions and improvements around the Quay, in the Museum and on HMS Trincomalee. We hope these will all appeal not just to those coming for the Tall Ships next year but to our repeat visitors as well. It's very important to offer a fresh experience.

'We have undertaken an accessibility audit of various sections of the site. We're working our way through improvements to our accessibility subject to budget. For example, the area in front of the attraction entrance was slightly uneven, and there was no dropped kerb. We've now corrected both of these.'



Susan continues, 'Our staff are really good at going out of their way to get the community and visitors involved. We put on themed events throughout the year, such as Spoo-quay and Christmas Cracker. We have a limit of 1800 visitors and always manage to sell all the tickets. The events are non-profit making as all the revenue from ticket sales goes into the evening to give the community a good time.'

Visitors can make comments and join in discussion on the Hartlepool's Maritime Experience website. Claire explains, 'We try to make our website as interactive as possible and Milly's Guestbook is a good, fun way for people to contact us. I can access messages, check there are no problems before posting them on the site and also answer as Milly. People can make comments or suggestion, or even book a pirate party. We hope by involving people via the website, we can turn their interest into an actual visit to the attraction.'

'Our friendly and knowledgeable staff were mentioned at the awards ceremony... [this comment] shows the team is really coming together.' (Leanne)

A really key aspect for the Washington Wetland Centre is development of their staff, especially those who are customer facing. Leanne says, 'Our friendly and knowledgeable staff were mentioned at the awards ceremony and the assessment noted that "their friendliness was palpable". We have a lot of volunteer staff who are not there all the time and we've also seen quite a lot of staff changes in the last few years. So we were pleased to receive that comment as it shows the team is coming together.

'We are very committed to development work at the Centre. As a charity it's not always easy to find the funds for development, but it's important to keep things fresh and new. With some investment starting to come through we have recently done work, for example, in the Hollowoods area. This has really flourished since it was established and we now have bats and nesting owls.'



Leanne also highlights the work the Washington Wildlife Centre does with the local community and other groups. 'We do a lot in the community. A local astronomical society has a base on our site and we host a lot of free events with them. The Wetland Bikers meet in our car park, and they do charity runs for us. We also do things for them, such as creating a memorial bike ride in the adventure playground.

'Skimstone, a group of young artists on the autistic spectrum, made a video at the site for them to sell. We also take placements of people with special needs, for example working in the shop. This type of involvement is really rewarding for everyone.'



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