Rosslyn Court in Margate: Setting up a community-based accessible and inclusive folk venue in England

Morag and Christopher Butler[1]

Abstract: This reflective paper describes the process of setting up a community folk venue in a deprived coastal area of Kent. The demographic of the area is described together with the background of the founders. Initial business considerations are briefly recounted in the context of modern management theory. The process of linking with the local community is described, first in practical terms, then with reference to art-led regeneration theory. Initial steps and early contacts are described as well as how initial setbacks, such as the Covid pandemic, were managed. The authors argue that it is possible to run a successful folk venue in a more inclusive and progressive way and encourages folk organisers to embrace a community focused approach with all its challenges and opportunities.

Morag – Beginnings

Five years ago, we set up a folk music venue in Cliftonville – a deprived area of Margate, a holiday resort in the south-east of England. We bought a derelict ten-bedroom hotel in 2017, renovated it and turned the large ground-floor room that had once been the hotel lounge and bar into a small, accessible music venue, which comfortably seats audiences of up to 40 people (Bailes, 2019). Upstairs, the first floor offers B&B accommodation in three ensuite rooms, which are available for performers, for audience members interested in staying over or for general tourists interested in the cultural life of Margate. The building had been constructed in the 1880s as Cliftonville was developing as a very genteel suburb of Margate catering to wealthy Londoners desirous of an out-of-town retreat. It was built as a large double-fronted three-story villa with its own stable and a strict covenant of use to ensure respectability. Sometime between the two World Wars it was converted into a ten-bedroom hotel catering to the London Jewish community; at this time, Cliftonville was still an up-market holiday destination. However, the area fell into steep decline in the latter part of the 20th century with the downturn of the British seaside holiday trade. According to local residents, the building then became a brothel and illegal drinking venue around the turn of this century; with the imprisonment of its owner in 2007, it became a house of multiple occupation, still with an unlicensed bar.

We had little experience of this sort of thing when we started, apart from having attended folk music events regularly: me as a singer and guitar player, and Christopher as an audience member. We both began our professional lives as carpenters, before segueing into non-manual work in mid-life: I became a college lecturer supporting migrants, while Christopher became a psychotherapist and then a university student welfare manager.

[1] Morag Butler (BA, MA, she/her) is a folk singer and venue promoter at Rosslyn Court in Margate. Having graduated from The London School of Economics and Political Science with a degree in sociology, she has worked as a carpenter, a college lecturer and now runs a venue and B&B. Morag holds an MA in Post-compulsory Education from the University of Greenwich. Christopher Butler (BA, MA, MBACP, he/him) is retired. He graduated with a degree in Classics. Working in the building trade until 1990, he also trained and qualified as a psychotherapist and worked as a psychotherapist and as a manager in the field of student mental health and welfare. He has a MA Management from Greenwich Business School and now, as well as helping Morag run the venue, is completing a PhD in ethnomusicology at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Interestingly, despite being apparently irrelevant to running a music venue, our past careers turned out to be extremely useful to us in addressing the many practical, psychosocial and managerial issues that managing a folk venue involved. This experience has inspired us to want to share some of the issues we have faced and the theoretical and practical components of their solutions. I will focus on the practical issues, while Christopher will give some of the theoretical perspective.

Margate, in eastern Kent, is a coastal town of around 55,000 people (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Its population is mainly white, and its age profile is close to the English average, with a slant towards being more elderly. It is exceptionally deprived, with most central areas coming in the top centile of the Office of National Statistics' recent survey documenting deprivation in the UK (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). Cliftonville, however, has also begun to acquire an alternative reputation – it was considered the eighth trendiest place in the world in a recent *Time Out* survey (Muir, 2022) and is also a regional centre for LGBTQ+ community activity (Gallagher, 2002).

Christopher – Marketing and management theory

The first area we researched before starting was demand and risk. Was there likely to be a potential audience for a folk venue in Cliftonville/Margate? The normal business method for determining this – especially if external financing were to be required – would be by means of a formal pre-launch product survey, but this was well beyond our means. So, we hit on a very ad hoc method of calculating possible audience footfall for a folk venue. We worked out that a possible proxy indicator of the number of people willing to pay to visit a folk venue weekly and listen to English folk music would be closely related to the number of folk club members existing in England. *The Living Tradition* (Living Tradition, 2021) listed only 105 clubs in the whole of England. Assuming – based on our reasonably extensive knowledge from being active members of several folk clubs around the south-east in the past - that each club probably has a following of about 100 individuals and that there is possibly one unlisted club for every listed one, this gives a very modest total of only 21,000 possible folk event attendees in the whole of England. As the population of England is approximately 56.5 million (ONS, 2021), this suggests that one out of every 2,700 people was a potential audience member. Therefore, ignoring the possibility of large regional variations, a town the size of Margate should yield a potential regular clientele of about 20 for a venue such as ours, and – surprisingly, given its wildly approximate nature – that is precisely what we have found. Big names like Martin Carthy or Granny's Attic fill the venue to capacity, with a small waiting list for returned tickets, and lesser-known artists produce smaller audiences, but large enough to cover our costs.

Our initial research also told us that recorded crime is high in Margate, as is drug use (Buck, 2023), so we investigated whether there was any record of violence against small venues. We were able to ascertain that there was no evidence, as far as our contacts in the local police and club security were able to tell, of protection rackets or targeted violence against music venues; had it existed, it would have dissuaded us from opening one. Our research also showed us that there was no significant local competition. Neighbouring town Broadstairs was well known on the folk calendar, but Margate/Cliftonville was not, and there was no regular folk performance venue (excluding places running participatory folk sessions) in the whole of the local district of Thanet.

Having studied management and management approaches, we borrowed from several different schools and theories. Modern management theories (e.g., total quality management, just in time management, lean and agile management) are greatly influenced by post-war Japanese management learning and place a huge emphasis on designing and delivering products highly acceptable to customers with minimal over-elaboration (Cobb, 2019).

Followers of these theories increasingly recognise that we live in rapidly changing times, and they all note that the important thing is to get up and running as quickly and as cheaply as possible. We have sadly seen other more ambitious music venues near us consume major initial sums in set-up costs only to fail very quickly. We could not have known when we started that we would be facing a pandemic, a lockdown and a recession, but we have been very fortunate that our flexible, low-cost management model has allowed us to adapt very quickly and cheaply to each of these events. These approaches emphasise the importance of being close to the customers and of generating one's offering quickly, without, in our case, making an initial over-commitment to a particular approach in advance of being able to engage with the local community to sample the response and to shape our offering accordingly. We have introduced flexible ticket pricing according to our audience's own estimate of whether they feel in a position to pay for a standard ticket (£12), a reduced price ticket (£6) or a contribution ticket (£18); all ticket holders gain admission to exactly the same experience. There are also free livestreams as part of every concert, with a request for donations but no paywall; in-event opportunities for audiences to interact directly with performers; and links to local community groups who influence programming and introduce themselves at events. The rudimentary, ad hoc method of calculating audience potential described above is another example of an agile management approach in action.

Morag – Community involvement

The first thing we decided to do was not to build a reputation in the folk world but rather to establish ourselves as a positive asset to the local community who were to be our customers. This was made easier for us inasmuch as our definition of 'English folk' embraces vernacular acoustic music performed by communities of people who are settled in England. So we have, for instance, supported Klezmer – the acoustic music of members of the local English-Jewish community; Ajay Shristav, a British born artist of Indian heritage, and associated musicians, playing acoustic songs of protest and change; Anglo-East European music from the local Polish and Ukrainian communities; Black English folk music – particularly but not exclusively via our work with Angeline Morrison; and Traveller music – having developed a close working relationship with Phien O'Phien, a local and well-known Pavee activist. It is important to note that we are not alone in this broadening of the definition of English folk but are working alongside the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS, 2020) and other groups such as the Access Folk research project at the University of Sheffield (Butler et al., 2023).

To that end, I involved myself in a number of initiatives with the local community, both immediately around us in Cliftonville and also in Margate Old Town. This process started slowly, with my involvement in a local residents' group, but it gathered pace when Covid hit. We heard that local community workers were looking for somewhere from which to run a food distribution centre, and so we volunteered our venue. The results were huge. We found ourselves engaging with local counsellors and other community members that we may not otherwise have got to know so well. Out of this, we became a meeting point for a local group seeking to buy the derelict shul (Orthodox synagogue) opposite us, and were approached by various other groups keen to put on concerts to raise money for community projects or for national charities such as the RNLI (Rosslyn Court, 2024). We were also asked to host folk music events for the local Power of Women group and an evening of drama and music exploring the relationship between women and the growing world of artificial intelligence. All these initiatives involved a musical as well as a social element: the work with the synagogue group led us to stage Klezmer music concerts; the work with the RNLI led to links with local shanty groups; our work with women's groups gave us the opportunity to work with some

significant local and national folk artists; our work with food distribution linked in with a concert by Joe Solo, a national campaigner around issues of poverty and inequality.

To strengthen these links, I introduced a brief community call-out to our regular weekly folk events in which a member of a local community group would attend in person to give a brief description of their work. At the moment, this linking of folk music with community action has been helpful to use as a way of embedding ourselves in the local community and of linking folk music to community action.

Christopher – Theories of arts-led regeneration

Theory can tell us a lot about opening an arts venue in a very deprived area, a topic that has a strong relevance to Margate and Cliftonville. When Turner Contemporary (2020), a multi-million-pound arts installation on the seafront, was built, theorists such as François Matarasso (1998) were influential. He felt strongly that arts-based development would be a win-win situation, bringing capital, trade and cultural enrichment to an area, and his work has been the impetus for many initiatives in the UK and beyond.

However, the reality is far more complex than it might initially have seemed. The usefulness of arts-based development was tested through one experimental venture wherein the participants opened an arts café in Cliftonville not far from where Rosslyn Court is now situated (Lees and McKiernan, 2012). The two main events there were an exhibition of photographs taken in the East End of London and a performance by a celebrated classical pianist. The events attracted a positive response from visitors but not from local people. Our learning from this feedback was a distrust – certainly in Thanet – of art that did not have a definite connection to the local area. Rather, what is showcased had to be rooted in the local community. We have not found in Margate any lack of interest in celebrated national artists like Martin Carthy – far from it – but when choosing other acts, it was important to place an emphasis on people with local connections, or on artists with links to the local communities. This connects to the suspicion of what people in Thanet call the DFLs – those 'down from London'. Locals believe such people are to blame for the gentrification of a few areas while everywhere else remains in poverty. Elsewhere, Lees notes these pitfalls of failing to embed a project in local populations (Lees and Melhuish, 2015), where much more emphasis is placed on balancing what benefits a project brings – employment, enhanced local resources, development of local talent – against any negative effects such as gentrification, loss of local community resources and congestion. As a result of engaging with this theoretical work, we have been extremely careful to make sure we link closely with the local community.

Morag – Music and access

One way that we managed to establish ourselves in the community and get started came through a lucky break. We discovered that our neighbour was Peter Doherty, lead singer of English rock band the Libertines, and although he was not principally known as a folkie, Peter obviously had a yearning to be one (we had seen him perform solo at a folk festival in Kent in 2010) and he performed a series of acoustic gigs at Rosslyn Court, often with other members of the Libertines or his other bands. These events got us a surge of publicity, both locally and nationally (Bailes, 2019), and having such a big name perform helped us to quickly get up to speed on issues like security, networking within the music industry and how to build a relationship with the local council. We were also very lucky to form a close relationship with the local self-described queer folk band the Lunatraktors (2020), who opened for us and brought in members of the local LGBTQ+ community. However, probably the most pivotal moment was when we first met Granny's Attic – probably the most feted young band on the current English folk circuit. To make the visit worth their while, we set up one gig at Rosslyn

Court and another in a Margate pub the next day, which meant they stayed the weekend. Over the course of the weekend, we were able to discuss the kind of management strategy that we needed to bridge the gap between the vast cohorts of diverse young performers in the folk world and the much less diverse older audiences. The members of Granny's Attic felt that if the folk scene is to survive, it needs to find a way to fruitfully combine the financial resources of our older generation with the creativity of the younger performers coming on to the scene. Given this perspective, it seemed apparent that the way forward for us as folk venue owners who had comparatively modest premises costs, could adapt the venue at will and were retired (thus with access to both time and sustenance) was to focus principally on how we could run an accessible and inclusive venue to give a stage to the performers out there – especially those trying to get a foothold in the industry and to present innovative and contemporary approaches to traditional English folk music. One might think that 2020, the year Covid struck, was not a great time to experiment with this model, but in fact it was ideal. There was the technology of livestreaming to explore – initially because that was the only permitted way we could stage concerts. Thereafter, when we could reopen with small, shielded live audiences, livestreaming was still a valuable means to enhance accessibility and participation. Finally, some costs could be defrayed as there was some support available from the local authority, as well as the Music Venue Trust and Arts Council England, all of which were anxious to keep grassroots venues afloat.

Christopher – Theories about accessible folk music

Theories about ensuring accessibility and community involvement have helped guide us in building Rosslyn Court. An excellent introduction to this literature was *Art Worlds* by Howard Becker (1982), who developed a sociological perspective on art. Becker suggested that the production of art was not merely the outcome of the artist's efforts but also depended on the whole community; so for painting, for example, gallery owners, paint manufacturers, framers and so on were all part of the creative process alongside the actual artists. This helped us to realise that our job as venue managers was not just to be a receiving house – putting on acts that agents or the folk press told us were good – but to work with the local community, finding what music they produced, what music they wanted to work with, what subjects appealed to them and what skills they were interested in learning and developing. So, for example, we not only employ a local musician as a sound engineer but have created an informal training place, which has led to a woman referred to us by a local support group for vulnerable young people being trained to manage our sound desk and our livestream. Similarly, we have set up classes for local children from the area to develop and improve their rapping skills, have created several opportunities for local performers to overcome stage fright and perform their work, and have launched a project to find what local people consider to be their own folk music and to showcase it (Margate Songbook, n.d.).

This broader perspective also meant that the venue was a place for us to bring our own social and political understanding of what voices might be present but unheard in the folk world and to work out if we could feasibly promote them. Niall MacKinnon (1993) is another sociologist whose work we have found really helpful. MacKinnon researched the English folk world and found that there was a particular connection between adherents of folk music and social change (ibid., p. 130). Participants who had moved away from their rural or industrial communities clearly felt a need to maintain a link with the values of their home communities. This research led us into a whole area of reflection on folk music as a medium for people to express and possibly achieve some catharsis of their grief over change.

We have also found insights from our other professions most helpful. For instance, there has been a lot of research in the counselling and psychotherapy world on making therapy accessible

to different racial groups, guided by, amongst others, the Runnymede Trust, which researches issues around race in the UK. In its current publication, *Making Change – What Works* (Runnymede Trust, 2021), the organisation analyses different attempts to promote progressive policies and notes that it is difficult to bring about any successful change unless, in addition to campaigners and educators, there are what they call 'cultivators': people who provide space and finance where different and more inclusive models can actually be tried and developed.

Then there are the insights given to us by people working in the area of disability, especially in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). This model successfully turned thinking about inclusion on its head by suggesting organisations must focus on the barriers they unthinkingly put in front of excluded groups by viewing exclusion as an individual rather than structural problem. These insights are crucial to sensitive provision of disabled access but have also been instructive in guiding us on how to reach out to other marginalised groups.

Finally, of course, there is the invaluable research and conclusions that are behind Sheffield University's Access Folk initiative, which has finally brought together a broad group of folk music practitioners to learn from those who are excluded and to examine why this happens (Butler et al., 2023).

Conclusions: Things can be done differently

We hope we have demonstrated in this article that it is possible to run a successful folk venue in a more inclusive and progressive way. However, to achieve this has, in the case of Rosslyn Court, required a combination of deliberate and focused intent, together with committed community involvement and enough resources to allow us to stand independent of the constraints that having to pay rent or earn an income from the venue would have imposed. We have also had our fair share of good fortune – in terms of some of the contacts we have been able to make, in our ability to turn potential catastrophes like the pandemic to our advantage and in the fact that in Margate we seemed to have found a fertile space for the venture. We hope that this article may give a spark of hope and a modicum of guidance to others who are considering the possibility of a similar venture and that we might encourage others like us who are privileged to find themselves in a situation of modest abundance to consider investing time and resources in supporting the contemporary English folk scene.

References

Bailes, K. (2019) 'From "house of ill repute" to B&B and gigs with Pete Doherty – a look at Rosslyn Court'. *The Isle Of Thanet News*. Available at: https://theisleofthanetnews.com/2019/09/07/from-house-of-ill-repute-to-bb-and-gigs-with-pete-doherty-a-look-at-rosslyn-court/ (Accessed: 12 January 2020).

Becker, H.S. (1982) *Art Worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Buck, T. (2023) 'Margate, Kent Crime and Safety Statistics'. Available at: https://crimerate.co.uk/kent/margate (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

Butler, C., Butler, M., Hield, F. and Wettermark, E. (2023) 'Accessing Folk Singing in England'. University of Sheffield. Report. https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.24542122.v1

Cobb, C. (2019) 'Agile Project Management Training. Agile Project Management'. Available at: https://managedagile.com/what-is-total-quality-management-tqm-how-is-it-related-to-agile/ (Accessed: 14 March 2024).

EFDSS (2020) 'Equity, Diversity and Inclusion'. *English Folk Dance and Song Society*. Available at: https://www.efdss.org/about-us/what-we-do/diversity (Accessed: 14 March 2024).

Gallagher, L. (2002) ‘Margate is the unofficial queer capital of Kent’. Kent Online. Available at: https://www.kentonline.co.uk/thanet/news/seaside-town-could-be-new-queer-capital-of-kent-265401/ (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
Lees, L. and McKiernan, J. (2012) ‘Art-led regeneration in Margate: Learning from Moonbow Jakes Café and Lido Nightclub intervention’. *Art & the Public Sphere*, 2, pp. 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1386/aps.2.1-3.17_1
Lees, L. and Melhuish, C. (2015) ‘Arts-led regeneration in the UK: The rhetoric and the evidence on urban social inclusion’. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 22, pp. 242–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776412467474
Living Tradition (2021) ‘Homepage’. *Living Tradition*. Available at: https://www.livingtradition.co.uk/ (Accessed: 14 March 2024).
Lunatraktors (2020) ‘Lunatraktors – About.’ Music Glue. Available at: https://www.musicglue.com/lunatraktors/ (Accessed: 1 December 2020).
MacKinnon, N., 1993. *The British Folk Scene: Musical performance and social identity*. Buckingham; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
Margate Songbook, n.d. The Margate Songbook: Echoes of England. https://www.margatesongbook.com/ (Accessed: 9 February 2026)
Matarasso, F. (1998) *Use or Ornament?: The social impact of participation in the arts*. Stroud: Comedia.
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) ‘English indices of deprivation 2019’. Gov.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019 (Accessed: 1 December 2020).
Muir, E. (2022) ‘It’s official: this is the coolest neighbourhood in the UK.’ *Time Out*. Available at: https://www.timeout.com/uk/news/its-official-this-is-the-coolest-neighbourhood-in-the-uk-101222 (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
Oliver, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Office for National Statistics (2021) ‘Census’. Office for National Statistics. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/census (Accessed: 14 March 2024).
Rosslyn Court (2024) ‘About – Rosslyn Court.’ Rosslyn Court. Available at: https://www.rosslyncourt.com/about (Accessed: 14 March 2024).
Runnymede Trust (2021) ‘Making Change: What Works?’ Runnymede. Available at: https://www.runnymedetrust.org//publications/making-change-what-works (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
Turner Contemporary (2020) ‘About.’ *Turner Contemporary.* Available at: https://turnercontemporary.org/about/ (Accessed: 30 November 2020).