

Case Study – Ellen Rowlinson

<p>Overview</p>	<p>Ellen was a graduate of the thriving hospitality provision at West Somerset Community College (WSCC) in 2013. The facility in this remote location was an essential training provision for the key employment skills in the area, namely agriculture and hospitality. The area suffers from low social mobility, aspiration, and training opportunities. EDF the organisation behind the Hinkley Point project have made generous funding available to the surrounding region to help alleviate some of the impact of the project and provide a legacy to assist the area to provide opportunity and prosper. The hospitality section was one such project. EDF funded a well equipped professional kitchen. The training restaurant at the WSCC was open to the general public giving the young people the opportunity to hone their culinary and service skills in a quality environment under the supervision of industry professionals. Additional part time industry experience was embraced by the many visitor economy businesses in the vicinity, providing students with income, operational experience and eventually full time employment. The facility was closed several years ago. We are at this time experiencing the largest skills crisis in local hospitality recruitment in living memory with many operators constraining capacity and reducing operating hours which has a direct impact on visitor satisfaction, the local economy and VAT tax revenue.</p>
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Ellen's Story	<p>13 years ago, I was finishing my GCSE's and planning my next steps. Although no one really expects to 'fall in love' with an industry at an early age, having demonstrated a passion, enthusiasm and a good working mentality for Hospitality, I was encouraged by teachers and my part time employers to explore a career in this sector. Having completed my GCSE's at WSCC, I decided to remain at the college and went on to study Hospitality at BTEC Level, alongside Drama & Business at A-Level.</p> <p>Within the hospitality course, we were fortunate to have access to some fantastic facilities which were newly installed at WSCC and in having access to these during the course really allowed me and my peers to develop our professional skills and confidence within a number of areas; including front of house management, team work, food safety & some of the administration involved in running an establishment. The training restaurant facilities were extremely well equipped and provided students with a wonderful platform to put the skills and experience we had learned into practice as we opened up to the local community for food & events.</p> <p>As we were preparing to leave and graduate from WSCC, the question of whether we were heading to University was lingering. University was something that I was always keen to give a go but equally, if I couldn't find the right thing then there was no pressure to take that route. I explored a number of universities that had a good reputation for their Hospitality Management courses and ended up starting at Bournemouth University in September 2013. This 4-year degree with a placement year at year 3, allowed me to network with like minded peers, industry professionals and gave me an opportunity to develop my foundation of knowledge of which I was taught during my time at WSCC.</p> <p>With a specific interest at the time in Events, I was fortunate enough to have secured myself a third year work placement in the Special Events team at Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity which I was then invited to join the team again following my graduation a year later.</p> <p>During my time working for the charity, I worked on a variety of events from smaller scale patient parties, to larger fundraising gala dinners at some of the most incredible venues in London, including the Natural History Museum, the Olympic Velodrome and some of the top London hotels including The Savoy & Claridges (to name a few). I was also fortunate to have been part of the smaller team to work on High Profile Royal Visits to the hospital as well as visits and events hosted at No 10 Downing Street and got to explore the behind the scenes at the Silverstone F1 weekend each year.</p>
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After a couple of years working for the Charity, I went on to join the Private Dining & Events Team at Fortnum & Mason, in Piccadilly, London. After a couple of years 'off the floor', I really enjoyed getting back into the busy hospitality environment with a key focus in my role on providing an excellent hospitality experience through a variety of events. I was fortunate to work closely with some of the best in their game and was supported in managing product launch events, workshops, private dinners & exclusive hires which were hosted across a choice of 4 private dining spaces, 5 restaurants and 2 iconic London locations.

During my time at Fortnum & Mason I began thinking about running my own hospitality business, and an opportunity arose for purchasing a lease on a small hotel and restaurant in Exmoor. After a lot of discussion and business plans - we (my husband Billy & I!) finally made the move from the big smoke back to the west country to take on Cross Lane House. The business had previously been run successfully, but due to unforeseen circumstances took a bit of a knock after a couple of changes in ownership. Having the insight in the local area, and with experience in my roles in London me and my husband were confident that we could develop an offering that would appeal to the locals and visitors.

We took over the business at low season, with no future bookings in the pipeline and lots of work that needed to be done to improve both inside the house and the surrounding gardens. We opened our doors for the first time on December 1st 2019, after having achieved the bare minimum of what we needed to do in order to open to guests and start trading. Little did we know, 20 weeks later - we'd be heading into the unknown with the first of COVID-19 Lockdowns.

Despite the uncertainty this brought around finances, and business stability - we seized the opportunity to continue redecorating and fine tuning so that when we were able to re-open, we could open in a strong position and start the season well. Of course, we had no idea how long this would be going on for - so needed to make the most of the forced closures and crack on!

It became apparent that COVID-19 wasn't going to be disappearing any time soon, so we decided to start a takeaway offering for our local communities which was available over the weekends. We varied this up from meals, afternoon teas and cheeseboards (it's amazing what you can put in a pizza box!), we also offered drinks to take away and cocktails in jam jars. This kept us busy, and although not a huge money maker for us - it was an important step to take as a new business, as it allowed us to meet lots of our locals.

	<p>... We had business cards printed and sent them out with every takeaway, which meant that when the time came to re-open our doors, we had lots of lovely customers keen to come and see what we were doing.</p> <p>When we eventually were able to re-open, we launched a thriving and popular restaurant with the help of a wonderful team, we became a popular event venue for small weddings, family gatherings and other celebrations, the rooms were getting booked up for overnight stays and online reviews were on the rise! We entered a couple of awards and within the first year of trading were successful in going on to win Gold, Silver & Bronze awards for the Bristol, Bath & Somerset Tourism Excellence Awards, as well as a Bronze in the wider South West Tourism Awards for Small Hotel of The Year! Our Social Media platforms were all grown organically and our website was something that we've worked on and developed ourselves.</p> <p>A lot of what we have learnt and achieved during our time running Cross Lane House has been very hands on (turns out there is always lots to learn, just when you think you might have nailed it!), but looking back, it all very much stems from the valuable experience we have both gained in our working lives to date.</p> <p>If it wasn't for the facilities at WSCC that kickstarted my interest in the industry, I don't know where I'd be or what route life would have taken. I'm eternally grateful for the opportunities that have been opened up to me following on from my graduation of college, university and the jobs that I have been exposed to in the hospitality sector and the people that I have met and that have supported me along the way.</p>
Conclusion	<p>There is a critical need for a partnership network of stakeholders to drive the agenda for skills in hospitality in the rural economy where 60% of all employment is reliant on the visitor economy. We need to train the skills to meet the needs of local business, upskill business and create a thriving well trained dynamic sector for local residents and visitors alike. This also encourages local young people to reside in this area where there is little progression opportunity, and also contributes to addressing the demographic of one of the highest aging populations in the UK.</p>

Quotes	<p data-bbox="406 248 1406 472">“ If it wasn’t for the facilities at WSCC that kickstarted my interest in the industry, I doubt I would have been able to achieve what I have done! I’m eternally grateful for the opportunities that have been opened up to me following on from my graduation of college, university and the jobs that I have been exposed to and the people that I have met and that have supported me along the way.”</p> <p data-bbox="406 521 1406 551">Ellen Rowlinson</p> <p data-bbox="406 600 1406 745">“The training provision at WSCC provided the sector with a funnel of profession well trained young people to meet the needs of business, many of whom have progressed onto fulfilling careers in the hospitality industry”. Max Lawrence, FIH MTMI</p>
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