

Behind the scenes at Ipswich's newest music venue

Music lovers are in for a treat when St Stephen's Church opens its doors to a host of touring acts. By **Danielle Lett**



If you're an avid music lover and gig goer like I am, then you know there's few things more exciting than the opening of a music venue.

This summer, Ipswich will welcome a brand-new medium-sized music venue that its owners hope will inject a new lease of life into the town centre.

St Stephen's Church – formerly the town's Tourist Information Centre – is currently in the process of being renovated to host a variety of touring acts, as well as comedians, club nights, events, and pop-up markets.

And I was keen to find out all about what was going on behind the scenes, so I sat down with Joe Bailey, who is spearheading the operation, to find out more.

Music has always been an integral part of Joe's life. "I've always been involved in music, and played in bands at a young age."

Growing up in the 90s, Joe listened to artists such as The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Pavement, Television, Blur, Super Furry Animals, and Teenage Fanclub.

"I studied film production at university, but once I graduated I realised I didn't want to pursue a career in that industry and that music was my first love."

In 2007, Joe moved to Suffolk and began working in a record shop in Sudbury before taking on a role with a nationwide musical instruments company.

However, following redundancy from that role in 2008, Joe decided to make a more permanent musical mark on the town and opened his own recording studio in 2009.

"The industry was rapidly changing so I begged, stole, and borrowed some money and purchased a small recording studio off South Street in Ipswich, Soundback Studios. I rebranded it as Punch Studios and opened it on January 1, 2009.

"I slowly built up the recording studio, using it for rehearsal rooms and running rock schools for young people to learn instruments and song craft. As time went on, I noticed there were not many opportunities for young people, or even up-and-coming bands, to play in Ipswich. Venues like The Blue Room had shut, and The Steamboat changed ownership and wasn't focusing on

live music as much."

With that in mind, in 2014 Joe set up Out Loud Music, a not-for-profit organisation which aims to give young people and those with additional needs to same access to music he had growing up, through the use of music technology and performance.

"In 2016, I was successful in getting funding from the BIFA Award scheme and local Labour councillors to create a new community music venue, which became The Smokehouse. We opened that in September 2016 and we went from doing two to three gigs in the first months to over 14 a month by the end of that year. It was incredible to see there was an appetite for live music and to play in our venue."

Going from strength-to-strength, Joe has since cemented his place within the music ecology of Ipswich.

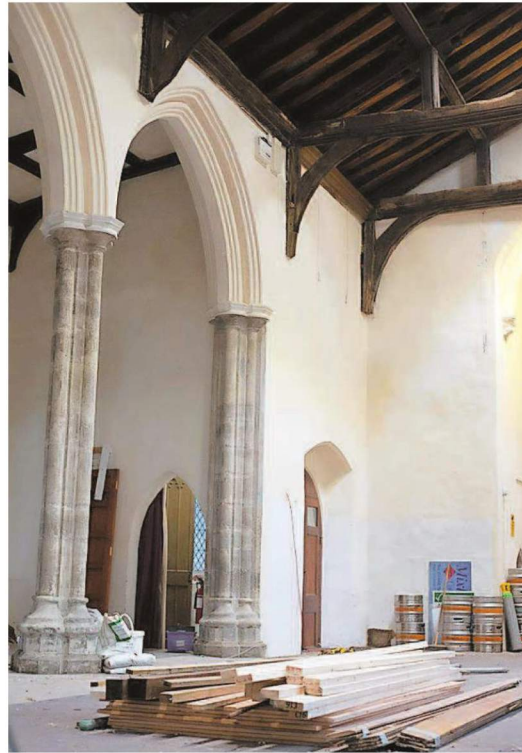
With the clear expertise and skills to get music off the ground, Joe soon found himself approached by Arts Council England and Sound City Liverpool, tasked with arranging a multi-venue festival in the town in 2019.

"We pulled it off, and it was a great success in bringing bigger touring artists to the town and showcasing Ipswich as a touring destination. But one thing that was highlighted by Mark Davyd, of the Music Venue Trust, was that Ipswich is the biggest town of its size without a medium-sized music venue. There was nothing between The Smokehouse and The Corn Exchange, so you'd go from a 70-capacity venue to a 1,000 capacity one, so where could the bands from The Smokehouse play next?"

Seeking the perfect venue, Joe got his hands on St Stephen's and began running a series of trial live music events for Sound City 2021 and a one-day festival in 2022.

"We used it for Sound City Ipswich 21, and it was a great success. We were able to show the council the need for a venue that size, and how much it could bring to the town. We were approached by Ipswich borough councillor Colin Kreidewolf directly to see if we'd be interested in St Stephen's as a permanent venue, so we then worked with Ipswich Borough Council to apply for a Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund."





St Stephen's Church as a music venue during its trial run

Above, renovations are under way in St Stephen's Church

Right, Out Loud Music's Joe Bailey outside St Stephen's Church in Ipswich - the town's newest music venue

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After securing that, alongside match funding from the council, Joe was able to start work on St Stephen's, turning the medieval church into a 225-capacity music venue and café.

"We're looking to officially open as a music venue on Friday, June 9 as part of our new festival Brighten The Corners. But we plan to do some warm-up events in May to start testing the equipment and infrastructure."

Work is currently under way at the church with contractors Mixbrow Construction, turning the historic church into a state-of-the-art music venue.

"We're having to do a lot of alterations, including ripping out the current infrastructure, ready to install the flooring, toilet pods and a bar area. We're also

soundproofing the venue, and when the main building works are done, we can install the stage and lighting systems.

"A new fire exit will increase the capacity from 100 to 225. And there will be some historic works taking place as well, to preserve the heritage of the building which is important to us as well."

Joe estimates the stage will be big enough hold touring bands of seven to eight members comfortably, and the venue will be using an industry-standard PA system to provide the best sound and lighting.

"We will install a tour-grade quality production infrastructure to ensure the right acts come to our town, and we hope to attract lots of up-and-coming artists, both regionally and locally, as well from

the EU. The venue lends itself well to all genres of music - whether it's folk, jazz, indie, hip-hop, and more. It's really going to be a versatile space which will look and sound spectacular."

In addition, the venue will also be available to third-party clients who wish to host events, club nights, and pop-up markets.

The new venue is expected to create four full-time and five part-time positions as well as opening up hundreds of freelance opportunities for live sound, lighting, and events management per year. "We expect to increase our volunteer database to over 100 people in the first year," adds Joe.

"We're also starting a meaningful partnership with the University of Suffolk, as we want

to make this an exciting cultural meeting place for young students and creatives alike. We hope St Stephen's becomes a cultural centrepiece for Ipswich. It's right in the centre of the town and easily accessible, so we hope to have lots of great artists coming through the doors as we show the town off in its best light.

"We're excited to be within touching distance of opening as we know arts and culture can really drive change for the town, and bring people outside of town is important to us. I love Ipswich and I've been investing in it since 2009, so I want to keep helping it grow and flourish."

To stay up-to-date with St Stephen's Church, visit brightenthecorners.co.uk

Independent Venue Week 2023

Independent Venue Week (IVW) is the UK's annual seven-day celebration of independent music and arts venues and the people that own, run and work in them. This year, Brighten The Corners will be hosting a number of live events across its current venues - The Smokehouse and The Baths. The week, which kicks off on Monday, January 30, will see the likes of Pet Needs, Opus Kink, DEADLETTER, and Caswell gracing the stages of these two venues.