

Willmott Dixon hands over a Bristol icon

2 years ago



[Willmott Dixon](#) has completed the once-in-a-generation £132m transformation of Bristol Beacon, one of the most iconic cultural landmarks in the South West of England.

It has taken five years and involved more than a million hours of time to create a flagship venue that will attract thousands of people each year to see some of the world's best entertainment acts. Described by Arts Council England as "one of the great cultural icons of modern-day Britain", the largest concert venue in the region also represents the second largest investment in the arts in England by the Arts Council in the last 10 years.

Thanks to the structural refurbishment led by Willmott Dixon, Bristol Beacon now boasts four new world-class performance spaces, allowing it to deliver over 800 events a year and generate an estimated £13 million annually to the economy. Its music education centre in the transformed and previously inaccessible cellars, called Bristol Water Sound Studios, will enable 30,000 children a year to use new state-of-the-art practice and rehearsal spaces.

As well as having some of the best acoustics of any concert hall in Europe, it will also have some of the highest levels of physical accessibility throughout making it truly accessible to everyone, both artists and audiences.

Sustainability has also been built in – the environmentally conscious design of the transformed venue will contribute to its net zero goal by 2030 and adapt Bristol Beacon for a lifetime of sustainable use.

The Beacon is celebrating its opening night on 30 November with a performance from the pioneering Bristol-based Paraorchestra, who has collaborated with celebrated electronic composer Surgeons Girl and AV experts Limbic Cinema to create a dynamic audio-visual collision of sound and light, 'Trip the Light Fantastic'.

A complex refurbishment

Willmott Dixon has a track record for modernising some of the UK's best-loved entertainment and culture landmarks. This includes the Globe Theatre in Stockton-on-Tees, East Wing at Alexandra Palace, the Halls at Wolverhampton Civic, the Box in Plymouth and Darlington Hippodrome Theatre.

However, the transformation of the 156-year-old Bristol Beacon is the most complex yet, with a myriad of challenges. Some of the unexpected discoveries included three Elizabethan wells ten feet deep in the cellars, sinking below the level of the floating harbour, a Victorian heating system, and hollow pillars that they had thought were solid supporting columns.

When the building roof was removed, the 120-tonne birdcage scaffolding put in place to hold the original walls in place was believed to be the largest of its kind on any building project in Europe. Thousands of tonnes of concrete – enough to fill 1,280 baths – have been poured in to shore up the foundations.

Richard David, director who led Willmott Dixon's team at the Bristol Beacon, said:

"I can't emphasise enough just how proud Willmott Dixon is to be a part of Bristol Beacon's renewal. Its complexities and challenges have been like nothing the team has ever undertaken, yet everyone has risen to the challenge and both our team and our supply chain partners deserve recognition for their commitment and dedication.

"The project has required intricate planning at every stage, and we have ensured that since the start we have truly respected the heritage of the building, its conservation, restoration and renovation, as well as understanding the building structure and fabric. An extraordinary amount of work and skill has been required to resolve the issues we faced; archaeological, historical, logistical and technical.

"The building that has been delivered is incredible. Bristol Beacon is so much more than a construction project and will have a fantastic impact on the city for generations to come."

Willmott Dixon's involvement was also supported with a public art programme. Four artists were commissioned to produce public art for the venue, bringing a contemporary response to the building and adding a richness to its interior design whilst drawing on its history.

The £132 million transformation has been made possible by funders and supporters that include: Bristol City Council, Arts Council England, HM Government, The National Lottery Heritage Fund, WECA, Bristol Water, Burges Salmon, Foyle Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, Jack and Monica Britton Trust, St James Place, John James Bristol Foundation, Nisbet Trust, Quartet Community Foundation and The Wolfson Foundation.

Louise Mitchell, chief executive, Bristol Beacon, said: "The skill, hard work and love poured into this huge refurbishment has resulted in one of the best and most accessible performance and music education spaces in Europe. What excites all of us here is the potential of the new Bristol Beacon, which will allow us to continue delivering transformative musical moments to all Bristolians."

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, said: "Delivering a world class music and arts venue for Bristol signifies a major investment in our city's artistic reputation and its cultural roots. The generosity of funders and donors, alongside our city's major investment, has brought to life one of the finest music venues in Europe

and an inclusive centre for community learning and education. It is thanks to the city's significant investment that Bristol Beacon will create hundreds of jobs for residents and has the potential to generate £253.7 million to Bristol's economy. To those who have contributed to this project in all shapes and forms, I thank you, and look forward to the Bristol Beacon thriving for many years to come as part of Bristol's strong and diverse cultural sector.

"Bristol Beacon is not a two, three, or even five-year project. It is a 100-year legacy for Bristol; from the main stage to the cellars' recording studio, it is a venue designed by the people of Bristol, for the future of Bristol."