



A venue for all seasons

Jim Evans reports on the recent opening of Stanmer House as a multi-purpose venue.

UK - Set in picturesque parkland just to the North of Brighton, Stanmer House has recently opened for business as a multi-purpose centre for conferences, business meetings, exhibitions, weddings and other events - the latest chapter in the colourful history of this Sussex stately home.

Built in 1727, Stanmer was once the ancestral home of the Pelham family and the Earls of Chichester; a place frequented by Winston Churchill and Queen Victoria. Now, after years of decay, occupation by squatters and a brief spell as an administration centre for the nearby Brighton University, it has been restored and refurbished in a £5m programme under the ownership of Brighton-based Cherrywood Developments - and the watchful eye of English Heritage.

Stanmer House now promises "the complete solution for day conferences, meetings, corporate training days and team-building events". Available spaces include a suite of meeting rooms on the first floor, all of which offer a high standard of IT/AV equipment and services. For larger conferences and meetings, the ground floor function rooms are also available for use. During warmer weather, delegates can also take advantage of the countryside setting of Stanmer Park.

The restoration programme has been meticulous in detail, including ornate plasterwork, replacement oak

floors, and new chandeliers. Behind the oil paintings and the suits of armour, six miles of cabling have been installed as part of an IT infrastructure masterminded by Cherrywood managing director Vincent Holland and IT manager Jon Harman. Each of the main rooms has a large plasma screen, while discretely placed white Bose loudspeakers take care of audio distribution.

"Technology is obviously a vital ingredient in this project," says Holland who has worked in IT for some years. "We are not setting out to impress people with technology as such, rather with what it can do for our clients. We want to impress on people how easy it is to come here and do business. You focus on your business and the technology is going to make that so much easier for you. It's all in place to make your business go more smoothly. We offer the complete package - no extra costs, no hidden costs.

"You come in, plug in your laptop, access the internet, use the monitors. If you want to use more than one room then we can distribute video and data all at the same time and over the entire building. You don't have to be localised to one room. You can hire the whole building or just one room and use the gardens as well. Flexibility is the key.

"In research we undertook prior to embarking on the refurbishment, we checked out available conference facilities in and around Brighton and were surprised to

discover how few offered more than just a room, chairs, white boards and the occasional overhead projector. Anything else would have to be hired in."

At the heart of the installation is the NTI Veemux Cat5 AV Matrix which, says Jon Harman, gives the system great versatility. The Matrix is capable of connecting to as many as 32 video sources and 16 video displays. A single computer audio/video output can be routed to one or more destinations. Each image is as clear as if directly connected to the original source. Buffered video outputs and digital transmission of audio signals ensures integrity is maintained throughout the system. Amplification is via Speakercraft's Big Bang amplifiers.

The loudspeakers are white Bose 161s, which blend seamlessly into the decor. "They're very clever, unobtrusive little speakers that fill the rooms really nicely with sound," says Harman. "They adjust themselves automatically to the acoustics of the rooms. For the most part, you can't really tell where they are unless you're looking directly at them. They also have a nice bass range which a lot of similar-sized speakers tend to miss out on. We couldn't really have a subwoofer parked in every room."

The 50" and 61" plasma screens are from Pioneer and there is a Lutron lighting system with four preset modes. In addition to the wired network, a wireless set-up is available throughout the building - even extending to the cellars, where Holland has plans to hold wine tastings.

The external lighting system features Martin Architectural units with control via DMX. "This gives us all sorts of variations," says Harman. "The fact that it is controlled via DMX will be most beneficial when we stage outdoor concert events and visiting lighting directors will be able to plug into the system and combine the facilities with their own to give even more options."

Much of the installation work was carried out by local Brighton-based company, JP Garrett Electrical, working closely with Holland and Harman. "Initially, we spoke with and consulted a number of specialist installation and integration companies, including a couple of big names," says Harman. "However I have to report we were most disappointed with the results. "Getting these companies to appreciate what we wanted to achieve was almost impossible. Going our own way has paid dividends and saved money. I know these companies need to make profits, but some of the prices we were quoted were astonishingly high. And if it hadn't been for my knowledge and experience of working in IT, we'd have probably bought into this."

Overall, Holland is extremely happy with the way the project has progressed to date. He admits the conference side of things will take time to establish and they are now working seriously on marketing and promoting the facilities. Future plans include the opening up of the north wing to provide accommodation facilities and the installation of a state-of-the-art preview theatre. The wedding diary is heavily booked for 2007, and this summer will see the staging of a series of outdoor concerts, The Music Park, the first of which will feature the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

"I like to say that if we aspire to anything, it's to become the Gleneagles of the south," says Holland. "I know we're a lot smaller, but that is the best example of a multi-purpose hotel or stately home that has got it right. We're not trying to be a jack of all trades, but what we do we aim to do well and efficiently."

Meanwhile, Cherrywood Investments has bought another Sussex landmark building - The British Engineerium in Hove, a working steam museum that was threatened with closure. "It has huge potential on several fronts, especially education," says Vincent Holland. "It has some fabulous spaces and there's a lot of work to be done before it can be re-opened to the public."

Jim Evans

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