

Government-backed charity Arts and Business has £20,000 to invest in arts/business partnerships on the Isle of Wight. Louise Bateman finds out what it's all about

Art of the matter

In a few months time an outdoor sculpture will be erected on a 35-acre development site in East Cowes. But, unusually, the idea for the sculpture has not come from an artist or an art organisation but from a business.

A J Wells and Sons Ltd is an island manufacturing company that makes everything from the Charnwood brand of wood-burning stoves to signage for London Underground. But the company is also heavily involved in the arts, thanks to its durable and graffiti-resistant vitreous enamel materials, which have already been used widely in public art. Past commissions have included a garden design using brightly coloured enamelled balls by Diarmuid Gavin at the 2004 Chelsea Flower Show, while A J Wells even boasts 'artists in residence', such as Dale Devereux Barker, whose work has formed part of exhibitions at the Tate Gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum.

General manager David Gatrell said the company was inspired to offer its support 'in kind' to the East Cowes sculpture following the launch earlier this year of The Art of Business, a project to encourage island businesses to get involved in the arts. "This is something we wanted to be part of and we thought through the medium of vitreous enamel we could put something back into the island," he said.

The sculpture, which is still in search of a local artist to take it on, will be a free-standing monolith decorated in art and will form part of a major open-air art exhibition called No Barriers. It is amongst the first art projects to benefit from a £20,000 investment in arts/business partnerships by Arts and Business, the government-backed national charity dedicated to linking new and sustainable arts with business, which has teamed up with local award-winning art organisation Island 2000 on this and other art projects.

"For the island this is quite a coup - Arts and Business specifically asked to work on the island on this project with us," says Island 2000 director Ian Boyd.

Island 2000, which runs the award-winning Art Plus, a public art initiative backed by South East England



Diarmuid Gavin's 2004 Chelsea Flower Show installation using enamelled balls with the A J Wells

“For the island this is quite a coup - Arts and Business specifically asked to work on the island on this project with us.”

Ian Boyd, Island 2000



Island 2000's What If...? project to improve esplanades

Development Agency (SEEDA) and Arts Council South East, has already launched five projects through The Art of Business, that island companies can get involved in. These include, Gift to Art, where island businesses can commission or sponsor an artist to create new work for their businesses; Growing Places, an allotment planned, constructed and cared for by the students at Ryde School; West Wight Poetry Trail, a circular walking route featuring locally created poems in attractive installations, passing through the centre of Yarmouth; What If...? a public art project to encourage creative ways to improve the island's esplanades, and No Barriers the outdoor art gallery that has already started to be erected on the blue boards that surround the SEEDA development site in East Cowes.

"If businesses have an enthusiasm for being directly involved in commissioning new artwork for the island they should get in touch with us now," says Mr Boyd.

According to Arts and Business South East regional director Jane Chambers, A J Wells is one of a number of companies



that are starting to sign up to Arts and Business projects on the Isle of Wight and, as she points out, they cover a broad range of requirements. "We have a design consultancy that is opening new offices in the Venture Quays building (East Cowes) and it has signed up to take advantage of creative training programmes for its staff, using artists," she explains.

Another island company keen to get involved is Southern Vectis, which will be exhibiting poetry from the community on its buses. "Buses are perfect exhibition spaces and we want the company to contribute with poetry from the managers right through to drivers," says Mr Boyd.

This involvement at every level of a business is at heart of what Arts and Business is about says Mr Boyd. "It is getting businesses directly involved, not simply by sponsoring or being patrons, but in a way that benefits the workplace, the profile of the company and brand recognition."

Arts and Business, which is celebrating its 30 anniversary this year, is funded by the Department of Culture Media and Sport and the Arts Council. It was originally set up to encourage businesses to sponsor the arts, but the scope of its remit has broadened over the years so that it now works as much at getting business to help the arts as the arts to help business. "While we still deal in sponsorship we work much more broadly with business and arts," says Ms Chambers. "So we might, for instance, look at bringing the skills of business into arts by calling on business advisors to work with arts organisations. We also look at what the arts can do to help businesses be more creative – it could be an actor running a presentations skills training or a visual artist helping a company director

visualise the future of a business and write a business plan."

Ms Chambers admits that, despite the pot of money, at first businesses can be sceptical about what Arts and Business is trying to do. "It's quite a hard sell in a sense, but that's why we have a research department to show businesses that it does work," she says. "It's about going to businesses and saying there is a whole range of arts out there that can solve some of your problems."

By way of example, Ms Chambers points to a Brighton-based firm of solicitors, DMH Stallard, which applied for match funding from the Arts and Business investment fund New Partners to open an art gallery in its reception area.

"As well as using the space for corporate hospitality, the art gallery was used by the staff and was open to the public and set the company apart in terms of its brand and in terms of being a forward-looking law firm," she explains.

Another South East project that received Arts and Business backing was a £450,000 refurbishment of Folkestone Station by South Eastern Trains Limited. The refurbishment incorporated a 160-foot long artwork, installed on the approach wall, that displays handprints cast in bronze, set amongst glazed tiles from China. For a £20,000 investment by South Eastern Trains, the project brought an



“It's about going to businesses and saying there is a whole range of arts out there that can solve some of your problems.”

Jane Chambers, Arts and Business South East

additional £42,000 to the regeneration of the station.

But, projects backed by Arts and Business are not required to be either large scale or involve any major investment. All businesses, large and small, are being encouraged to get involved in The Art of Business on the Isle of Wight.

Ms Chambers says Island 2000 was an obvious partner for Arts and Business because of the art organisation's award-winning work and its work in the community and environment. But she says it is not an exclusive partnership and Arts and Business hopes to work with other art organisations and businesses on the island.

In particular, she notes the "fantastic support" the charity has received from the Isle of Wight Economic Partnership and the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce, Tourism and Industry. "We are hoping to work more closely with them in the future," she says.

In the meantime, Arts and Business and Island 2000 want to hear from island businesses that want to get involved with the arts.

Says Ms Chambers: "It's all to do with corporate responsibility and putting things back into the community, which has a pay-back for businesses in the long-term."

To find out more contact Ian Boyd at Island 2000 on 01983 298098.

