

Bishop's Palace and Gardens

Bishop's Palace and Gardens, WELLS, Somerset, BA5 2PD, England

Summary

RATING**Accredited****DESIGNATOR****Attraction****OVERALL QUALITY SCORE****90%****VISIT DATE****07 December 2023****VISIT TYPE****Day Assessment****ASSESSOR****Teresa Tolley****DEBRIEF CONTACT****Ms Lindsay Mann Marketing and Communications**

The Bishop's Palace and Gardens once again passes the assessment and continues to be a quality assured visitor attraction under the VisitEngland scheme. On this visit the overall score has reached 90% which is a 1% increase from the previous visit in 2022. There are also a number of exciting enhancements in planning with the potential to possibly improve scores further.

The Attraction continues to offer an excellent dining experience in delightful surroundings and is again nominated for the VisitEngland Quality Food and Drink Accolade. Nominations for accolades will be reviewed in the latter part of 2024 and awards will be made to successful attractions thereafter.

On this occasion the assessment comprised of a guided tour around the Palace with one of the volunteer guides, a walk around the grounds to view the Christmas light arrangement, a substantial lunch and a visit to the shop. The weather was cold and wet but the festivities were bright and cheerful!

The start of the day was relatively quiet, probably due to the weather however, a good sized group gathered for the tour which was interesting and informative, the Coronation display creating the most discussion amongst the group. The continuing focus on interpretation is sure to further enhance the guest experience. Many more visitors were noticed in the build up to the start of the Christmas illuminations.

The service provided in the cafe and by the welcome volunteers at The Gatehouse was excellent and other staff performed really well too.

The toilets remain the weakest section of the visit, most notably the facilities in the courtyard which serve the general public as well as visitors to the Palace. It is understood that there are plans in place

for their improvement next year. It may be worthy of note that a nomination for a Gold Accolade may well be achievable following improvements in the toilet facilities.

Once again this was a most enjoyable visit experience and the whole team are to be congratulated.

Quality Rating

How the Overall Quality Rating is Achieved

When VisitEngland assessors visit, they will evaluate and give a quality score to all assessed elements.

Elements in each section are scored as follows:

- 0 Unacceptable
- 1 Poor
- 2 Disappointing
- 3 Good
- 4 Very Good
- 5 Excellent

In order to achieve accreditation, a score of at least 60% overall and in all sections, excluding Pre-arrival is required.

Additionally, all individual elements must score 1 (poor) or higher.

A sectional or overall score below 60% or an individual element score of 0 (unacceptable) will result in a fail.

	SCORE	PERCENTAGE	RATING
Pre-arrival	9	90%	
Online Presence	5		
Leaflet/Brochure	4		
Arrival	13	87%	Accredited
First Impressions	4		
Layout & Entry Management	5		
Visitor Information & Signage	4		
Attraction	41	91%	Accredited
Layout & Visitor Flow	5		
Range of Content	4		
Visitor Information & Signage	4		
Appearance of Grounds & Gardens	5		
Appearance of Buildings	5		
Décor & Maintenance	5		
Presentation of Displays	5		
Quality of Interpretation (Fixed)	3		
Quality of Interpretation (Other)	5		
Cleanliness	19	95%	Accredited
Car Park & Arrival Areas	5		
The Attraction	5		
Toilets	4		
Catering Outlets	5		
Toilets	11	73%	Accredited
Provision, Location & Layout	4		
Décor & Maintenance	4		
Fixtures & Fittings	3		
Catering	23	92%	Accredited
Layout & Ease of Use	4		
Ambience & First Impressions	5		
Decoration, Furniture & Fittings	4		
Food: Range & Menus	5		
Food: Quality & Presentation	5		
Retail	18	90%	Accredited
Ease of Use & Visitor Flow	4		
Display Units, Fittings & Lighting	4		
Presentation of Merchandise	5		
Range & Appropriateness of Merchandise	5		
Staff	60	92%	Accredited
Appearance of Staff	5		
Admissions: Customer Care	5		
Admissions: Efficiency	4		
Admissions: Knowledge	5		
Guides: Customer Care	4		
Guides: Efficiency	4		
Guides: Knowledge	4		
Catering: Customer Care	5		
Catering: Efficiency	5		
Catering: Knowledge	5		
Retail: Customer Care	5		
Retail: Efficiency	5		
Retail: Knowledge	4		

Pre-arrival

Prior to the visit a number of random and specific searches were undertaken including a review of social media.

Bishop's Palace and Gardens appeared at number 2 of the Trip Advisor 'Things to do in Wells' up from number 5 last year and remains at number 19 of the Trip Advisor 'Things to do in Somerset'. The attraction maintains a score of 4.5/5 from 1706 reviews. The vast majority of reviews are excellent and all reviews are now replied to which is very good practice.

A Google search highlights the Attraction as achieving an overall score of 4.6/5 based on 2906 reviews.

A score of 4.7/5 is achieved on Facebook with 240 reviews and 10k followers. Very good use of a Christmas headline banner and plenty of advertising of seasonal events. The inclusion of links through to ticket purchase is a particularly useful feature. All comments are replied to. X (Twitter) indicates over 3,600 followers, an increase on last year although there is a move away from this platform towards Tik Tok with the aim of reaching out to a new audience. Instagram now has over 5k followers, again an increase on the previous year.

The website www.bishopspalace.org.uk was checked on a laptop and Smart device.

The website is quick to download and opens onto an attractive page with a seasonal headline banner advertising forthcoming events. The site is clearly laid out and straightforward to follow, the drop down tabs aiding navigation. Key information is provided under the 'Visit' option with each area of the attraction having the option to delve further.

The 'swan cam' is a great feature and provides regular updates on a key part of the Attraction. Very useful information included regarding directions by car with links to car parking information sites and alternative modes of transport.

Plenty of access information is included and an Access Guide is available in PDF format.

The site includes the opportunity to purchase tickets online, a straightforward process tested up to point of purchase as tickets were purchased on the day. Plenty of onsite opportunity to donate and Gift Aid fully explained.

Good to note the inclusion events due to be held at the start of the New Year.

A folded A3 brochure was picked up from a welcome volunteer at the time of visiting. An attractive leaflet with a very good selection of photos, useful site and contact information included.

Recommendations

- Add FSC logo to leaflets/brochures if applicable

Arrival

Bishop's Palace and Gardens are clearly indicated with white on brown signage on the approach to the centre of Wells. The Attraction is listed by name on Google Maps and Sat Nav directions are straightforward. A number of car parks are close by, the most convenient of which are listed on the website. The City map boards on display are a useful reference for visitors arriving on foot.

First impressions are very good with visitors drawn towards The Bishop's Eye and pathway to The Gatehouse. Banners either side of the path help to build up expectation. The moat with resident swans is a key feature. Plenty of visitor information is provided inside The Gatehouse on wall boards and chalkboards; volunteers were a welcome sight highlighting the Palace tours and encouraging a visit to the cafe and new shop area. Clear directions were given to the ticket office.

The new ticket office is well signposted and conveniently located adjoining the cafe and also houses the retail area. A smart, light and bright office which is clearly identifiable. The ticket selling process was quick and efficient. Directions were given to the Attraction entrance where tickets were again checked and the meeting place for the tour highlighted.

Recommendations

- Consider location of special events A-board signage. The welcomers in The Gatehouse were very helpful and perhaps the board could be moved nearer to the cafe to act as a reminder to visitors and also to free up some space
- Enhance promotion of the guide books and upsell features such as the cafe and shop as part of the ticket purchase process

Attraction

An attractive historic property and gardens, the Bishop's Palace and Gardens present to an excellent standard and appear to be very well maintained. The seasonal decor adding to the interest inside the Palace whilst the garden Christmas illuminations are a great attraction for the evenings.

The log fire alight in the entrance to the Palace provides a warm welcome and helps set the scene. The free flow system around both the Palace and Gardens allow visitors to wander through at their own pace. Laminated information sheets in key areas are provided to aid visitors on their self tour. The sheets are available in several languages. The volunteer guided tour was popular and took in all open areas.

A number of festive events were being prepared including dining in the Undercroft and Santa's Grotto. A collection of eco themed children's Christmas works was on display, an example of the fostering of links with the local community. The timeline interpretation was both interesting and informative and the Coronation display generated a great deal of conversation. Interactive opportunities have been enhanced. Activities for the younger visitor included dressing up in period costume and photos with the dragon.

The gardens are maintained to a high standard throughout the year and on this occasion presented very well, despite the horrendous weather. The impressive collection of illuminations was beautifully presented and certainly drew in more visitors as the switching on time approached. The outdoor children's play area adds a further dimension to the Attraction.

Recommendations

- Continue with the plans to enhance internal interpretation and establish the Attraction as an all weather attraction
- Perhaps turning down the festive music during the tours to avoid the guide having to raise their voice
- Consider introducing technology based, personally managed interpretation such as an app or QR coding
- Ensure that all staff / volunteers are aware of changes to the tour meeting place. On the day of the visit the tour meeting place was altered due to the inclement weather and not everyone was aware

Cleanliness

Cleanliness across the Palace and Gardens is maintained to an excellent standard.

Plenty of rubbish and recycling bins are available and appropriately placed across the site. No rubbish or debris was to be seen and cafe bins in particular were noted to be emptied on a regular basis.

The Palace interior was exceptionally clean and dust free.

Cleanliness within the cafe was excellent. The server counter was clean, dining tables and surrounds thoroughly cleaned between customers.

Standard of cleanliness in toilet areas did vary. Those within the Palace were of an excellent standard. The courtyard toilets present to a good standard and are more of a challenge to keep clean as they are available to the general public and heavily used.

Recommendations

- Carry out high dusting in toilet areas, particularly tops of cubicles and cleaning behind toilet doors
- Polish off finger prints on cutlery (photo 1)

Toilets

The provision and standard of the toilets remains very much as it was on the previous visit.

The facilities are fit for purpose and are mostly in full working order. Toilets out of order were noted as such.

The cubicle partitions in the ladies continue to present to a very good standard and posters promoting events are evident, which is good practice.

It is understood that the toilets are due for an upgrade in 2024 and this is sure to further enhance the visitor experience. Currently the weakest area of the assessment, future improvements may well help secure a nomination for the Gold Accolade.

Recommendations

- Repair damage underhand dryers and refresh paintwork where damaged or stained (photo 2 & 3)
- Replace the mirrors that display worn edges
- Replace rusting toilet roll holders

Catering

Outlet(s) Visited The Bishop's Table
Food & Drink Sampled Coffee, Tea, Scampi and Chips

The cafe is sited across the lawn from the Palace. Access is not restricted to those visiting the Palace and it is therefore a popular venue and meeting place. A light and bright space with full height windows along one side with Palace views. Good use of wall space for advertising the Palace and Gardens. Well configured with sturdy dining tables, chairs and bench seats. The outside seating area is a lovely space in good weather!

The old trailer ticket booth has been refurbished and is now a smart trailer providing takeaway beverages on the lawned area adjacent to the cafe. This new addition is sure to be of great benefit and reduce some of the loading on the cafe which gets very busy.

A well presented servery counter with plenty of cakes and cold products on display. The surface of the counter has been treated and presents in excellent condition. Menus are available on tables and on wall mounted chalk boards behind the servery. Pricing is clear to see. Orders are taken at the servery, receipts offered and meals served direct to the table.

The menu is varied and offers a wide selection of snacks, cakes, teas and barista coffees as well as a selection of more substantial meals. The onsite chef produces meals of an excellent quality using local and fresh ingredients. The scampi and chips was a very good size portion, attractively served on a hot plate and accompanied with a fresh side salad, peas, tartare sauce and a wedge of lemon. Service was quick and efficient.

Alternative diets are catered for.

Dogs are welcome in the cafe and water bowls provided.

Retail

Outlet(s) Visited The Shop
Purchases Made No purchase made

A new retail area has been established and conveniently located within the ticket office. Again, this area is not restricted to those visiting the Palace but may well encourage more to do so.

The shop area is well arranged to ensure ease of use and displays a small selection of merchandise which is sure to appeal to a variety of ages. Included are high quality items which are not likely to be available elsewhere in the Cathedral City and a range of home produced and labelled products are planned. As far as is practicable, new stock items are environmentally friendly with eco packaging.

Shelving is in excellent condition and each tier well stocked. Items are clear to view although a little less lighting available at lower levels. Items were clearly priced.

Recommendations

- Consider how to enhance lighting of lower level shelves

Staff

All of the staff and volunteers encountered on this visit were friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. All were easily identifiable with names on lanyards.

Admission:

The welcome from the volunteers at The Gatehouse was outstanding. They were pro-active in meeting visitors, provided a warm welcome, offered directions and answered questions with confidence. The ticket office staff were equally welcoming and friendly.

Volunteer Guides:

The tour was interesting and informative. The guide introduced herself and tailored the tour to take account of the inclement weather and therefore allow additional time inside the Palace. The tour was conducted at a steady pace and a very good level of knowledge displayed.

Catering:

All of the staff at The Bishop's Table were pro-active in greeting customers, friendly and knowledgeable about the products available. Service was extremely polite and efficient.

Retail:

All visitors to the ticket office / shop received a warm welcome as they entered. Staff were observed to be able to provide great help in finding items on behalf of customers. Visitors were also allowed time to browse the items uninterrupted - which is also good practice.

Recommendations

- Encourage upselling at the ticket office
- Ensure that guides are aware when visitors on a tour do not speak English as a first language. On this occasion a group of Spanish speakers were part of the tour and they wandered off on their own when they found it too hard to understand

Images

Grubby cutlery



Ladies courtyard toilets



Ladies courtyard toilets



Useful Numbers

Customer Support

All property enquiries, including assessments, reports, ratings, signage, training, and logo requests

01256 338350

VisitEnglandAssessmentServices@aamediaigroup.co.uk

Assessment Services Accounts

All financial and payment enquiries

01733 207324

VECreditControl@aamediaigroup.co.uk

Useful Links

Online Details Portal

Change your online information on RatedTrips.com; add up to 20 photographs and showcase your facilities.

www.ratedtrips.com/update

Business Support

Advice and support for your business, including training opportunities and discounts.

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Action Plan

Record the key recommendations from your assessment, assign the action to an individual person and keep track of progress across the year.

Action	Assigned To	Completed On