



Welcome to the experience economy

Paul
Benneworth



BEFORE leaving work for Christmas, I handed in my notice after nearly a decade which felt very strange. But I didn't have long to reflect on that as we soon flew back to the North East to spend the whole holidays with our local family at the coast.

We'd decided to have a proper traditional Christmas this year, taking the kids to the Panto and the Wallington Hall Santa's grotto. Christmas Day itself was a turkey dinner, and on Boxing Day I headed down to the Whitley Bay Links for the Woodlawn Pudding Run.

This charity event raising funds for the special school has grown recently in popularity and the mild festive weather encouraged a record turnout.

So many runners turned up to register that start had to be delayed, but couldn't spoil a good-humoured stretch to burn off the festive cheese and biscuits.

The fun run's backdrop was Whitley Bay's Spanish City, now fully open after rebuilding works that have gone on for as long as I can remember. The freshly painted Dome sparkled in the morning sun providing a beautiful backdrop for the finishing strait.

It's great to see some of the seaside's former romance and attractiveness restored. But I was astonished when friends told me that Whitley Bay had just recently topped a list of cool shopping districts globally.

My expat mindset was still that since Ryles closed down it didn't offer much more than discount stores and charity shops. I admit to being pleasantly surprised in the summer to

find a bike shop to replace some cycle lights but I wouldn't have thought of it as a shopping town.

As a card-carrying CAMRA member, I regularly enjoyed a relaxing pint in the Dog and Rabbit or Left Luggage. But even then I still didn't realise how much Whitley Bay's shops, cafes and bars has developed this trendy atmosphere.

The key to its success seems to lie in offering a quality shopping product. Whether a tasty cup of coffee, home-cooked comfort food or champagne in the Art Deco dome, part of what Whitley is selling is something that tantalises the senses.

The term 'experience economy' was first coined 30 years ago by a pair of economists who observed that businesses were increasingly selling happy memories to their customers, not physical products.

It explains the rise of the multiplex cinema with the latest films on laser-sharp quality of huge screens, but it's surprising to see it in a washed-up holiday town.

The rise of the foreign package holiday in the 1970s put paid to our coastal resorts and since then nothing took their place. But to take a stroll down Park View is to witness the way that blending fashion, nostalgia and

landscape can help bring new investment to these once-forgotten places.

Finding a livelihood for left-behind places is arguably the greatest challenge for the country today, particularly if we want to remain a United Kingdom into the future.

And central to building new livelihoods is in increasing productive investments that can build new industries and sectors.

It's vital that the North East continues to expand its high-technology engineering base to create well-paid private-sector jobs.

But encouraging investment into small-scale food and drink production with the allure of the seaside is just as important in creating places where people want to live and can happily work.

Flying to Newcastle Airport in December reminded me of how beautiful and unique our regional landscape is.

It surely offers with huge opportunities to build livelihoods in creating these happy memories. I wish you all the best for 2019, and hope for the year of the North Eastern experience economy!

■ Tyneside-born Professor Paul Benneworth is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

4-0). The pair ended up cornered in a corridor of the stadium and were only saved from a kicking when Barnes appeared.

"It was a bit obvious but they really liked it and it was broadcast," said Ishy.

He carried on working the cabs - Snookered was written on a laptop in between jobs as he worked.

"I used to deliberately work the graveyard shift, so I would get time in between jobs to furiously type away in my cab, coming up with ideas for this play," he said.

Much of the inspiration came from the chats he had with fares. Ishy once worked out he had around 160,000 conversations in his cab.

"That vast experience of life gives you an ear for how people talk, ideas for characters, little stories, little incidents that you remember and feed into your work. Writers are magpie-like. Life is our raw material."

Over the years his radio credits since include *Life's Like That* and *Pakoras*. He has written another full-length play, *Wipers*, about the first Asian soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross, which premiered at Leicester Curve in 2016.

After that he collaborated on two seasons of the Channel 4 drama *Ackley Bridge*. In 2018, his work *Taxi Tales* was part of BBC2's *Performance Live* series.

Not bad for a man who hates writing. "I like talking about writing and what I'm going to write," he laughed, "it's the doing that's so hard."

"I wish someone had told me how long it would take."

■ **Approaching Empty** by Ishy Din is being staged at the Live Theatre, Broad Chare, Newcastle, from February 6 to February 23. Tickets cost £10 to £22, concessions from £6. For tickets and times go to the Live Theatre or visit its website: www.live.org.uk



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