



MEET...

ANDY MACDONALD MBII

ANDY MACDONALD MBII MAY NOT BE YOUR TRADITIONAL PUB OWNER, BUT OVER THE LAST DECADE HE HAS CREATED A SUCCESSFUL AND UNIQUE VENUE, SHIPS & GIGGLES IN PRESTON, WHILE ALSO MAKING A GREAT NAME FOR HIMSELF. THE BII'S TEODORA PANCHEVA MBII REPORTS

Andy studied at the University of Central Lancashire, just a three minute walk from what was The Ship Inn, a pub that had been there for decades, but had somehow lost its place on the city centre circuit.

Having spent his student days partying, Andy decided to put his experience and knowledge of the area to good use, setting up a party business, running an email database network for house parties. This soon snowballed into promotions and events, before he expanded further and began using his expertise to help give lacklustre pubs and bars a new lease of life. Which brings us neatly

to The Ship Inn, a run-down pub with tons of potential.

Taking over the pub in 2012, Andy set about reviving it by bringing in changes that would appeal to the local student demographic, including securing a late licence, before introducing Preston to the newly named Ships & Giggles, a homage to the original pub name and a play on words for his life ethos.

A pirate themed pub and bar with game stations for Mario Kart and FIFA, a darts board, pool table and a carousel of themed quiz nights, Ships & Giggles was an instant hit with the university students. "We know we've got the students 32 weeks a year, so one of the first things we did was apply for a later licence so we could open until 3am on the weekends and 2am on the weekdays. We made sure we did it in a way that the Friday and Saturdays are aimed at everyone, so when the students go away, we still have our regular following."

The quirky pub opens seven days a week throughout the year. With its fun atmosphere and constant events, such as the themed quiz nights run by Andy's Regional Manager Jammy O'Brien, he manages to consistently draw people in from across the local area. "Our quiz nights are like no other, with 70% of it being your traditional theory and written answers, and 30% is practical – silly games. We really embarrass people in each team and we're PACKED for it."

Keeping it fresh

Diversification and constant reinvention to keep things fresh, is a big part of Andy's business model.

The Covid lockdown provided the perfect opportunity to redecorate

the pub with a shipwreck theme – vines appeared and a forest sprung up, adding something extra special to the unique customer experience. In fact, the huge appetite to get back to the pub in the aftermath of Covid-19, had Andy overwhelmed with more customers than ever before.

During the pandemic's enforced closures, Andy tried to keep his glass half full, always thinking of ways to keep productive. With the Government constantly changing the rules, he had to get creative.

So, when bars had to close and restaurants became the only establishments allowed to operate, Andy used his kitchen to supply free food locally.

"All of a sudden, we started getting families and older people in. They were so appreciative of what we were doing and we ended up getting overwhelming support for it."

He hit a bump in the road when the council told him he couldn't legally give out free food, threatening to close him down. But to no one's surprise, Andy found a loophole by charging people 1p for a meal.





bar in Scotland. “It should be overwhelming, but it was so gradual. It has taken me years and years and years to get where we are now.”

Secret of success

When asked for his best advice for other licensees, Andy said he felt like a magician being asked to reveal his best trick! But he says: “Always see yourself as a customer would and ask yourself what do you want? “What I want is a place with atmosphere, reasonably priced drinks and where I’m treated with respect. I still don’t see myself as the owner – I haven’t really changed from my student days.”

Customers

Not adopting the traditional pub role seems to be Ships & Giggles’ biggest advantage, in addition to being a mere three-minute walk from the city’s university. At its core, is a great offer, with a warm welcome and comfort, provided by well-trained staff that care for their customers and their safety.

Andy’s life ethos is one and the same as his pub’s – to stand out. He’s determined to keep the prices low, even when everyone else is raising theirs. “We’re powered by numbers – we keep prices low so we are dependent on getting lots of people in – and we get them.”

It’s clear that Andy has found a niche audience for Ships & Giggles and has used it to its full advantage. Not everyone could run a place like this, but his constant reinvention and fresh thinking has ensured the business has survived for 10 years, and is set to continue for many more. ■

“We had massive queues and were busy all of the time, which meant we had to open for longer. We partnered with a local food ordering app and found volunteer

drivers for free, and the next thing we know is that we’re getting thousands a night. We got donations of equipment too – we started off with two fryers and ended with 10! We fed 16,000 people with just deliveries.

“When we opened back up, we were busier than ever. We’ve got a really good local following.”

What started as a novel way to connect with his local community, turned a small gesture into something a lot bigger. Today, Andy views the free food initiative as his biggest investment. It cost him a lot, but the appreciation, customer loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendations spread like wildfire.

“WE’RE POWERED BY NUMBERS – WE KEEP PRICES LOW SO WE ARE DEPENDENT ON GETTING LOTS OF PEOPLE IN – AND WE GET THEM”

New revenue streams

Knowing the huge impact the pandemic has had on pubs and how the current cost of living crisis is continuing to provide many challenges, Andy

keeps afloat by working on new revenue streams to support Ships & Giggles. “We launched a festival and live music elsewhere, so the company as a whole is compensated by making money in other places. I run a festival in the North of Scotland, called *MacMoray*, which is about to sell out. We bring in a lot of income that way.”

Andy’s brand has grown over the years too. No longer just one pub, Andy has a second Ships & Giggles in Burnley, a three-day music festival and a newly obtained hotel and

