

## Conferences & Events

# From Peterloo to political conferences

“Manchester is the conference capital of Britain.” You might think that is quite a claim, but the words were spoken by Hazel Blears MP, following the city’s hosting of the Labour Party Annual Conference in 2010. Not a surprising stance, given that her Salford and Eccles constituency is just a stone’s throw across the River Irwell from the conference quarter in question. But even leaving aside local loyalties, Manchester does have an enviable track record for the delivery of its business tourism product.

That record follows over a decade of investment in the sector by Manchester City Council, by Manchester Central – the city’s flagship conference venue, and

by Marketing Manchester – the agency responsible for promoting the city on the national and international stage.

Their focus has been very much on rebuilding and rebranding the area known today as Petersfield. As with many parts of the city, there are historical links to the modern-day activity taking place. St Peter’s Field, as the area was known in the 1800s, has always been the city’s primary meeting point. It was here in 1819 that a gathering of around 70,000 people demanding reform to parliamentary representation resulted in the infamous Peterloo Massacre.

Today, Petersfield is home to not only Manchester Central and the Bridgewater Hall, but also to over 850 four- and

five-star bedrooms in the form of the Hilton Manchester in Deansgate and the Midland and Radisson Edwardian hotels. There are 2,500 hotel beds within a five-minute walk of the historic quarter.

It is the concentration of these facilities in a relatively compact area that has made Manchester such an appealing option to conference and event organisers.

Manchester Central is, without doubt, the jewel in the city’s crown. Refurbished to the tune of £30 million, it has helped to secure bigger and higher profile conferences and exhibitions that, in turn, attract more business.

Most important of all, it has planted Manchester on the highly coveted politi-

Manchester Central: the city’s flagship conference venue



“Manchester does not consider London its primary competitor



Bridgewater Hall Manchester

## Understanding the power of face-to-face contact

To succeed in today’s corporate market, venues needs innovation, imagination and some strong client relationships, says **Liz Taylor**

While the virtual meeting is becoming increasingly popular, it still holds true that you cannot beat face-to-face contact for creating business opportunities and sparking exciting discussion. However, in today’s financial climate, when both time and money are tight, it is more important than ever to make the benefits of any investment both obvious and attractive.

It is a fallacy to think that business people haven’t always been concerned about the best use of time and money, but in 2011 it is also about making that prudence visible.

When I first started out as an events organiser 25 years ago, the main venues for business events were hotels. Ten years on and the number of possible venues had mushroomed. Suddenly we could hold events in stately homes, museums and art galleries, as well as purpose-built conference and event facilities.

For one client, we transformed a railway arch in Manchester into a stun-

ning setting for an awards dinner. At the time, the idea seemed completely off the wall, but it worked and the result was a fabulous event that people talked about for years afterwards.

The natural beauty of a venue such as Tatton Park is perhaps easier for a client to grasp, but it comes with its own challenges nonetheless.

As winner of Cheshire’s Large Visitor Attraction of the Year in both 2009 and 2010, Tatton Park is undoubtedly one of the region’s most impressive settings. You cannot erect marquees in the grounds of the Tudor Old Hall, which Taylor Lynn Corporation has done in the past, but you can still use other spaces around the lake that look on to acres of beautiful landscaped gardens.

Unfortunately, walking across fields is not everyone’s idea of fun, but you can work that to your advantage. For example, we have used carriages pulled by farm tractors to take guests from the main car park to the marquee, and such things always get the conversation going.

There was a time when you could create the wow factor simply by using a new venue. However, as the recession bites, there are fewer new premises on the market. It is exciting as event organiser, because clients are becoming more interested in my company’s creative use of space and styling. But it means that venues need to up their game, too.

Building good relationships helps to develop a better understanding of what event companies are looking for as well as trust in the delivery on both sides. Essentials include quality service, good transport links and suitable space offering the latest technology – which is why established Manchester hotels such as the Lowry Hotel, Great John Street, the Midland and the Hilton Deansgate will always remain popular. After that, flexibility in pricing and logistics – such as access times and freedom to dress a room – will give a venue the competitive edge.

Liz Taylor, owner of Taylor Lynn Corporation, has been organising high-profile corporate events for 25 years. [www.tlc-ltd.co.uk](http://www.tlc-ltd.co.uk)



Liz Taylor has been organising events for quarter of a century



was worth an additional £500,000. The Conservative presence in 2009 brought £16 million of business, and the 2011 event is set to break the economic impact record. To play host to the two parties on alternate years has meant a steady and much-valued financial boost at the end of each summer.

But it isn't just the political parties that Manchester has to thank. The 2007 annual convention of the Society of American Travel Writers, and the four-year deal to host the prestigious Soccerex European Forum from 2010 to 2013, have also helped to put Manchester on the conference map.

The national and international connectivity afforded to delegates is another of the city's trump cards. Manchester Airport has no rival outside of London in terms of route network, capacity and facilities. The transformation of the West Coast main line service by Virgin Trains – with the two hour, seven minute journey being made every 20 minutes at peak times – has brought Manchester closer to the capital than ever before.

That said, Manchester does not consider London its primary competitor, being well enough established on the European scene to pitch itself against many of the Continent's established conference cities. There are also more than enough unique selling points for the Manchester marketers to highlight as a means of securing new business.

The industrial heritage and sports pedigree for which Manchester is best known around the world has been put to work. Demand for the hire of venues

such as Manchester United's Theatre of Dreams and Manchester City's recently renamed Etihad Stadium is impressive. Equally, the neo-gothic Manchester Town Hall and the award-winning Museum of Science and Industry are two of the city's business tourism big-hitters.

Like many cities, Manchester also has an established Conference Ambassador Programme – a network of academics and business figures who help to attract their industry's events to the city. And with the largest student population in Europe studying at four universities across the city/region, it is no surprise that Manchester has more than its share of lecturers, doctors and professors willing to step forward and help with promotion.

It is this combination of product, infrastructure and sheer enthusiasm on all sides that has made business tourism in Manchester a £573 million a year business.

Manchester's profile shows no signs of fading. In 2012, the remaining BBC departments earmarked for MediaCityUK will arrive at Salford Quays, while the National Football Museum will reopen in the city's Urbis building following its move from Preston. Both look set to attract business tourism events from their respective fields and Manchester will no doubt be more than happy to accommodate.

For more information about conferences in Manchester: [www.visitmanchester.com/conference](http://www.visitmanchester.com/conference)

## A Central role

Angie Robinson joined Manchester Central as chief executive in September 2011. She was previously CEO of Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce – and, more recently, of the Manchester inward investment agency MIDAS.



"I have been on the board at Manchester Central for six years," Robinson says, "and it has always been one of my favourite board positions because the business itself is so fascinating – I can't think of any other that has the same diversity and dynamism about it."

"The fact that this is such a well-run business is also a big part of the appeal. My predecessor, Lesley Tomlinson, has bequeathed me a fantastic team of people and has teed-up some great opportunities for me to get my teeth into – there are plenty of those on the horizon."

Robinson also points out that, as the city's largest venue, Manchester Central plays a very significant role in the local economy. In 2010,

the venue generated £70 million in economic impact through events such as the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development), Soccerex and the political conferences. In recognition of this, in April 2011 Manchester Central was placed in the silver category for business tourism in the Enjoy England Tourism Awards for excellence. "Manchester Central is a fantastic and extremely successful venue," Robinson says, "and I plan to build on that. It is already on such a roll, I just cannot wait to get on with pushing it even further, and ensuring it remains best in class in what is an increasingly competitive market."

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