

# Art gives shopping venue visitor boost

By **ANDREW NOWELL**  
andrew.nowell@jpimedia.co.uk  
@ANowellWIG

**Wiganers are voting with their feet and turning out in force to support the transformation of a shopping centre into a cultural hub.**

Town hall figures show The Galleries Shopping Centre having six exhibition rooms and performance spaces installed in its upper level to support the borough's new cultural manifesto means the venue is bucking a national trend for declining numbers heading to the shops.

In addition the new artistic offering in the town centre has drawn bosses from some of the biggest arts venues in the country to Wigan.

A total of 23,672 people coming through the doors on the day The Fire Within was launched was a 12.6 per cent increase in footfall from the same day 12 months before.

During the entire first week of the galleries and stage being opened there were 103,841 visitors to The Galleries, a 5.3 per cent rise on the same week the previous year.

The week after saw a 6.4 per cent increase on 12 months beforehand, while the Saturday of that period saw a 34 per cent year-on-year spike.

At the same time the Wigan figure was a 13 per cent increase on the national benchmark for shopping centres across the UK.

Wigan-based artists Al and Al, the artistic directors of the ambitious project, said: "The



Al and Al on the emoji stage in the main headquarters of The Fire Within inside The Galleries

Fire Within is transforming the heart of our town centre.

"We have been overwhelmed by the response to all the great work local artists have created and everyone is really excited about the future.

"People are visiting Wigan from across the nation to see the show and discover Wigan's magnificent heritage. Everyone across the cultural world is talking about Wigan."

Among the high-profile visitors was star of stage and screen Ian McKellen, who took a tour of the premises as he returned to the town he spent some of his childhood in to do two sold-out shows at Wigan Little Theatre during his 80th birthday celebrations.

He saw the new portrait of himself located in The Fire Within and described the work to Al and Al as "beautiful".

A number of national curators from top arts institutions have also been coming to Wigan for guided tours around the exhibitions.

Representatives of Manchester venues The Whitworth Gallery and Home Arts Centre, the Manchester International Festival and Imperial War Museum have all made the trip to the borough along with senior executives from Arts Council England and Historic England.

Wigan Council leader Councillor David Molyneux said: "We are

absolutely thrilled with the reaction to The Fire Within. It's fantastic to see a surge in footfall to The Galleries thanks to the new atmosphere we are collectively trying to create in the town centre with more events and a different offer.

"Culture is a driver in reducing social isolation and in improving health and wellbeing. Increasing cultural activity, seeking investment and putting resource into cultural activity is a key priority for us.

"This work will help to position Wigan as a culturally thriving district in the North West and will provide fantastic economic benefits as we know that culture plays a big part in regenerating areas."

# Major award for borough arts icon Lemn

One of the borough's best-known cultural exports has scooped the latest major award in a glittering career.

Poet and playwright Lemn Sissay, who was fostered in Atherton and then spent his teenage years in the borough's care system, has been given the PEN Pinter Prize.

The award is named after celebrated dramatist Harold Pinter and is awarded to writers who take an "unflinching, unswerving" look at the world.

That certainly applies to the work of Lemn, who has spoken about being bullied, imprisoned and physically abused by staff in care facilities in the borough.

He recently brought legal action against Wigan Council for the treatment meted out to him, receiving an out-of-court settlement and an apology from the town hall.

Lemn has also produced acclaimed work about identity, including documentaries on the subject of his search for his family.

Judges praised his ability to "from his sorrows, forge beautiful words and a thousand reasons to live and love".

Writer Maureen Freely, one of the judges, said: "In his every work, Lemn Sissay returns to the underworld he inhabited as an unclaimed child."

Lemn, 52, said: "I met Harold Pinter when I was 36. We were on stage at The Royal Court. I was too intimidated or self-conscious to speak to him. And so I will now. 'Thankyou'. What I like about this award is that it is from a great writer and a great organisation."

Lemn will receive the award at the British Library in a ceremony on October 10.

# Family film fun at town's arts hub

Award-winning film enthusiasts are joining in the transformation of the borough's cultural scene by bringing cinema for children to Wigan town centre's new arts hub.

Volunteers from Leigh Film Society are hosting a screening of Disney Pixar animation Inside Out this weekend at The Fire Within HQ, the arts centre created inside The Galleries Shopping Centre to support the borough's cultural manifesto.

The group has teamed up with Wigan-based artists Al and Al, the artistic directors of the ambitious project, to

put on what it is hoped will be the first of a regular weekend programme of family-friendly films.

It all starts on Saturday with a high-tech screening of the tale of a young girl called Riley who is led through life by personifications of five of her emotions: Sadness, Joy, Anger, Fear and Disgust.

The movie will be shown on four giant screens around the main room of The Fire Within HQ, with viewers able to sit on the emoji stage or on a cushion to enjoy the adventure.

Leigh Film Society hopes to rekindle Wiganers' memories

of going to the cinema for Saturday matinees as a family and bring the magic of the movies to film fans of all ages.

Al Taylor said: "I was so happy when Leigh Film Society suggested Inside Out for the first family matinee.

"This is one of my favourite films, there are scenes which make me belly laugh, scenes which bring a smile of joy and touch me deeply, and scenes which reduce me to tears. It's an absolute cinematic masterpiece."

Al Holmes said: "When I was a kid I used to imagine people running around inside

my brain doing stuff, making things happen.

"When I first saw Inside Out I was blown away because the film makes that a reality."

Leigh Film Society chair Paul Costello said: "Leigh Film Society has always wanted to reintroduce Saturday family cinema and The Fire Within has created a great opportunity to stage that.

"We would love to screen family films on a monthly basis and provide something for all the family to enjoy together."

The free screening is on Saturday at 1pm.

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