

Forward Space 'The Old Church School', Frome

The Old Church School is the first of three workhubs set up under the Forward Space banner. It opened in 2007 and today offers a mix of studio space for small businesses and, on the ground floor, shared workspace and meeting rooms

The building

A short walk up the hill from Frome's town centre brings you to The Old Church School, a Grade II listed stone building facing a church graveyard. The interior is bright and stylish with a mix of bespoke, designer and budget furniture, including adjustable desks for hotdesking. Functional graphics create an attractive decorative motif throughout the building.

The ground floor offers shared workspace, separated from three meeting rooms by floor to ceiling glass walls. Around the corner is a kitchen and relaxed seating area with sofas. Upstairs are five self-contained studios for full-time tenants, all businesses that have flourished and grown since renting open plan desk space on the ground floor.

'For us it's important the building comes with some heritage. Buildings like this have a local character,' says Gavin Eddy (pictured), the driving force behind The Old Church School. 'People relocate here because they want to be part of something unique – a business community. They want the networking, the mentoring and something they can't get anywhere else.'

What's special

'We wanted to offer something a bit aspirational, so that when people come through the door they go wow!' says Eddy. 'By the time your visitors find out that you're a freelancer working in the corner occasionally, it doesn't matter. The impression's been created and they see you as a serious company.'

Management

Gavin Eddy is co-director of parent company Forward Space with business partner Nick Kirkham. Nick is a sculptor, but also an entrepreneur responsible for a string of studio complexes for creatives in London. Gavin Eddy's career in law was diverted early on into investment banking.

He left the City three years ago. 'I did the Frome workhub as suck it and see,' he says. 'It's quite an



artistic town and I had the feeling something like The Hub in London could work here.'

Facilities

Open 8.30am to 6.30pm, Monday to Friday, offering:

- 600 sq ft of office space (28 work stations for hotdesking/21 work stations in five studios upstairs)
- three meeting rooms with digital projectors and flip charts
- kitchen and lounge area with sofas
- 24Mb broadband (wireless and wired)
- VoIP phone system
- IT support
- business advice/support
- regular Business Link clinics
- colour A3 printer, photocopier, fax and scanner
- bike rack
- free car parking for tenants and visitors
- disabled access and toilet
- free Fair Trade coffee
- regular 'coworking' events (Frome Jelly)
- secure storage space
- virtual PA facilities
- mail boxes.

'Downstairs is open plan, a combination of hotdesking and co-working. You can rent space by the hour. So you can do most of your business from home, but still be part of our set up. Everyone on the ground floor works from home part of the time and as their business grows we bolt on another desk. If they get too big, and there's space upstairs, we move them.'

Gavin Eddy, director

Tariffs

- Connected @ £20pcm: eight hours desk space in coworking area, broadband, use of office equipment, meeting rooms @ £10 per hour, use of coffee/lounge, price includes business rates, cleaning, energy consumption, etc
- Space 30 @ £100pcm: 30 hours desk space plus mailbox and optional VoIP (internet phone)
- Space 60 @ £150pcm: 60 hours desk space plus eight hours free use of meeting rooms
- Space 120 @ £225pcm: 120 hours desk space plus free use of meeting rooms and digital projectors
- Open Space @ £250pcm, unlimited use of desk space and facilities
- Extras: faxing, printing and photocopying, line rental and phone calls.

Luke Wilde

twentyfifty.co.uk

Six years ago Luke founded his business advising businesses on their social impact and environmental sustainability. His clients today include some of the world's biggest firms, among them mining conglomerates Rio Tinto and Anglo American plus pharmaceuticals giant Merck. 'It's my job to make a paper commitment happen through organisational change or leadership,' says Luke.

TwentyFifty has eight employees working remotely on portfolio roles. It has a registered address in London and uses a virtual phone service but Luke spends two to three days here each week. Today he is joined by colleague Nick 'from the other side of the Mendips'.

Having a place where colleagues can meet is important, he says. 'I don't believe you can be a totally virtual organisation – you need to spend some time together.'

With one employee in Latvia and another in the south of France, that can be a tall order, but his work is global. 'Some weeks I'll get on a plane or a train. Other weeks I'm here a lot. I do a lot of work on the phone.' Knowing the hub was there was a factor that influenced his move to Frome. 'My son's school is just a three minute walk from here and my house is three minutes in the other direction.' The Old Church School also has useful services on tap. 'We've used Tickbox Marketing upstairs to do our website. I do a lot of printing here and use the meeting rooms extensively for company team meetings.' He imagines the alternative would be renting an office locally or sharing space. Commuting is out. 'I had a meeting in London at 9am yesterday. I'd forgotten quite how awful the Tube is.'



The finances

THE OLD Church School is entirely privately funded, with Eddy investing his own money after failing to secure a bank loan. The building cost £300,000 and the fit out cost a further £100,000. 'I was dubious about the economics and demand but the building was very affordable so if it didn't work out it wouldn't be a disaster,' Eddy says.

For the first year he leased one floor to the company he'd bought the building from, ensuring a steady revenue stream. 'That was my safety net. But within four months we'd completely filled the ground floor and were desperate to get them out.' The main source of revenue today is rental on the first floor studios. All are full-time but with a VoIP phone service, they also have the flexibility to work at home. Some companies have more staff than deskspace.

Securing additional premises for the Forward Space brand is essential. 'Standalone, this building would not be economic,' Eddy says. 'We need a small network of workhubs to make the economies of scale work.'

We will then be able to centralise our billing, marketing and administration. Right now this only works because I give my time for free.'

Claire Sully

www.tickboxmarketing.co.uk

Claire and her business partner John Brunson run a marketing agency specialising in online marketing, now in its third year. 'We help public sector, charities and commercial businesses plan and develop their online and offline marketing, including strategic planning,' Claire says. Claire started Tickbox Marketing working from home, progressed to hotdesking on the ground floor and is now a permanent fixture in a larger space upstairs.

Co-director John divides his time between his home in Malmesbury and Forward Space. 'We've won some major national contracts since we moved to The Old Church School and we've taken on more staff,' says Claire. 'I don't think we'd have been able to grow at this rate if we hadn't been able to attract clients offering higher end revenue. When you're starting out you have a minimal portfolio and it helped being in a great space shared with other like-minded ambitious companies.'

Both directors have families and employ staff with children, so all benefit from a workspace that supports flexible working, using VoIP and VPN. 'It makes us more productive and the clients get a better service,' Claire says. 'And when we had bad weather recently we just flipped the VoIP phones and worked from home.'



www.tickboxmarketing.co.uk



Staff

- Business advice/mentoring: Gavin Eddy (now provided gratis, saving £20-30,000)
- Building management and admin: Cherish (part-time but role envisaged as becoming full-time, with one manager for each workhub)
- Strategic projects: Alison (one day a week, otherwise employed as economic development officer by Mendip DC).

Businesses and members

The Old Church School has 20 registered businesses, among them environmental consultancies, marketing and website design, human resources consultancy, food company, IT company, and a firm advising global corporations on human rights and social policy.

Women make up 70% of users and a similar proportion previously home-worked full-time. Some clients are very young, including two young men in their mid-20s organising licensing, marketing and distribution for their food company.

Target markets are businesses working in: information technology-related businesses, environmental technology or consultancies, creative industries and aviation/science-based technologies.

Collaboration

All clients are invited to regular meetings downstairs and social events are held every six weeks. Eddy says he can 'guarantee every business in The Old Church School has used the human resources consultancy based there and IT experts AF-IT'. Website consultancy and marketing experts Tickbox are also widely used by others using the building, including Forward Space.

Business support

All the users are small businesses. 'We're focused on businesses at a certain stage in their evolution. They all tend to have the same issues and some are quite basic, like "How do I register for VAT", "Do any of you know an accountant?", or "I need a legal agreement drafted to protect my contract".'

Business Link runs a regular outreach clinic. 'I had to fight to get it,' says Eddy 'because they're very Taunton and Yeovil focused. We give them free space and our businesses get priority for one-to-one sessions, 90 minutes where they can address every issue from marketing to cashflow.'

Eddy's professional background makes him a particularly well informed business mentor. 'These are basic things I've encountered with companies I've invested in myself or because I had a background as a lawyer but for a lot of small businesses, particularly in rural areas, they're big issues. I think too you can draw comfort from having other people around you who can



The Old Glove Factory (see right)

say “It’s no big deal”. Not one has gone bust in the time we’ve been here. I think that’s because we’ve been very good at finding issues we can help with and working closely with Business Link.’

The brand

Since buying The Old Church School Eddy and his business partner Nick Kirkham have actively sought out new locations for the Forward Space brand. The Glove Factory opened in the nearby Somerset village of Holt in late 2009.

Just weeks earlier they completed the purchase of The Collar Factory in Taunton and advanced negotiations are in hand over a fourth site in Bath. ‘We’re now close to securing a site there after the council rebuffed us two years ago. They’ve suddenly realised they’ve had a huge exodus of creative industries to Bristol, have hardly any start-up businesses and they approached us on the back of the Dyson Academy falling through.’

The Old Church School is a limited company owned by Eddy, The Glove Factory is owned by Kirkham and Taunton’s Collar Factory was a joint purchase. ‘Forward Space, the parent company, will own them all,’ explains Eddy.

The challenges

Borrowing from banks has proved the major sticking point. ‘The banks say you have no credit history and because your clients are often start-ups they are high risk. Our argument is we have diversified risk. We have 20 businesses so if one goes down, though it’s

Jelly: reaching the homeworkers others miss

The Old Church School has recently become the meeting place of choice for Frome Jelly. Jelly is a New York concept and, according to organiser Judy Heminsley, far superior to some more established types of networking. ‘Unlike a business breakfast no one is there to sell themselves, which tends to make people feel a bit uptight,’ Judy says. ‘With Jelly you come along to work but in a social environment. It’s a mix of chatting, exchanging ideas, giving or getting advice and finding people to collaborate with. People turn up in casual dress, plug in their laptop or whatever else they’ve brought, make themselves comfortable and work away. ‘It’s free and it’s surprising how much work you get done – often the sort of thing you normally put off – and when it’s time for the first coffee you start to chat naturally to the others.’ The laidback nature of Jelly extends to timing. You turn up and leave when you want, says Judy.

She booked space from 10am to 2pm for the first Frome Jelly, expecting to attract a lot of mothers. ‘In fact it was a mix of men and women. Most of them were people you’d never meet at networking events because as specialists in their field they don’t need to sell themselves.’ Much of the publicity is done through online media. At The Old Church School, Judy says, all she needs to do is turn up a little early to check everything is set up. ‘Because it’s Forward Space, of course it is.’ But if the Jelly visitors aren’t paying what are the benefits for Forward Space? ‘It gets home workers through our doors who might then be interested in using our workspace and meeting rooms more regularly,’ says Gavin Eddy. ‘And it provides a buzz in the building on days when we might not otherwise be at capacity.’ It’s also a low cost way of reaching people below the usual marketing radar, he says, and he gets useful feedback from potential users. ‘Lastly it raises our profile in the local community and lets us give something back that is aligned to our core business.’

Judy Heminsley workfromhomewisdom.com

part of our job to make sure they don't, that's only 5% of our revenue stream. And there's probably two or three ready to take up that space.'

In Bath, Forward Space hopes to secure part of a riverbank site for workspaces for small businesses. 'That'll be easier because we'll have a revenue stream and will be able to show to the banks we have occupancy.'

A SWRDA-backed plan to draw in public and private sector cash for Taunton fell through. 'Project Taunton, a SWRDA scheme to redevelop Taunton, was going to partner us with money from IBM and the council was going to put some money in,' Eddy says. 'That has completely fallen apart and it's all dropped back to county council level.'

Efforts to secure a deal with Somerset County Council to support a bank loan also faltered. 'This was not to guarantee it but maybe act as the tenant of last resort if we haven't got the level of free letting banks want,' says Eddy. 'They'd probably never have to exchange any cash.'

Instead he and Nick Kirkham have paid cash for their latest site. 'We now need to borrow £1m to fit it out and we'll probably have to give personal guarantees against our own properties. We can show that these places have significant regeneration benefits and retain skills that would otherwise move out of the town. The councils are generally very positive but until there's a diktat from a higher level nothing is going to change.'

Finding people to take desk space was a major challenge. 'The rural economy is opaque, so finding businesses was hard. But just walking around a town gives you a sense of its entrepreneurial potential,' Eddy says. He studied the demographics, attended business breakfasts and made what he describes as unproductive contact with the Chamber of Commerce.

Marketing was the best tactic. 'We did some flyers and got some good local press coverage. Suddenly all these businesses started appearing, some literally down the road. Now virtually all our calls are based on personal recommendation. How you market to home-based businesses is definitely an issue we've never pinned down.'

Forward Space now uses a more methodical approach, identifying the key companies in the region for each of their target markets. 'Typically there'll be one or two that are quite large and they'll have lots of other businesses they work with,' Eddy says.

He argues that neither the chambers of commerce nor town councils have a strong understanding of home-based businesses. 'The Chamber of Commerce here is heavily skewed towards retail – accountants, lawyers and shop owners and that's it.'

THE OLD GLOVE FACTORY

This is a new village based workhub in Holt, Wiltshire. Part of the Forward Space group, it is run by Nick Kirkham (below), a sculptor and co-founder of Great Western Studios and Westbourne Studios in west London. Having helped set up these larger creative business clusters in the city, he is now turning his attention to smaller scale rural facilities for business.

'We have 8,000 square feet here with space for perhaps 50 or so people to use either full-time or on a drop-in basis. What's different is that this is very much an open plan space. You can expand or contract within the building.' The tone is informal rather than institutional, with high quality (often reclaimed) furniture and fittings adding to the workhub's unique atmosphere. 'We think the workspace market is still largely stuck where hotels were stuck ten years ago – they all tend to look the same, brown and beige!' says Kirkham. 'We want places like this to lead a change in workspace that echoes the shift to boutique hotels.'

The Glove Factory, a designated employment site, has reinvented itself as a workhub from previous single employer uses including as a tannery, a heating engineers' office and a company selling playground equipment which outgrew the site. Now it is catering for those who do not want to commute to Bath. The first users in 2010 have been a diverse range of businesses ranging from a photographer and book illustrator to environmental consultants and IT and technology companies. The mix is part of the appeal, says Kirkham. 'They can share experience and knowledge.'

'It has a huge events space and we hope it will almost become, literally, the hub of village life,' says Kirkham's business partner Gavin Eddy. 'There'll be a film club, evening classes, maybe a farm shop and we're even moving the village Post Office there.'



Nick Kirkham, director of the Old Glove Factory, previously set up major creative studio spaces in West London