

Funkbunk, Wing, Bedfordshire

Funkbunk occupies a shed with a richly varied history – home to the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force during World War One, followed by dairy cows, then furniture. It has now been reincarnated as a workhub



The building

You don’t get much more rural than a farm. Glebe Close Farm is owned by the Cranwell family, who use some of the farm buildings for a furniture business and, in the case of one brother, an IT company. A little over a year ago Sam (pictured top right), who lives nearby in Leighton Buzzard, took over another of the sheds to accommodate his growing design agency.

‘These rooms had been variously derelict or used as workshops for the past 30 years and then they got flooded,’ Cranwell says. The main room is now painted a minimalist white and fitted out with modern designer desks, sofas and shelves, with only the exposed steel roof supports hinting at earlier incarnations. And potentially offering an alternative use. ‘We liked the idea of a space we could play basketball in,’ Cranwell says.

The room next door, which had served as a gallery/events area, is for now closed. ‘An inspector came round from the council and decided we were between 5-10 square feet over the small business relief limit,’ Cranwell says. Funkbunk is now looking for a single company to rent the space, ‘ideally one that would want to collaborate with Funkbunk workers’.

What’s special

Not surprisingly, given Cranwell’s main job, Funkbunk has an exceptionally strong brand. The website is striking and makes for a lively and informative read. So effective is it, Cranwell has been invited to set up a franchise in Austin, Texas, which he says might be jumping the gun a bit. There’s a few boxes still to tick establishing Funkbunk One.

Funkbunk is also a rare workhub in a part of the country where home-working is widespread but under the radar. It might never have come about had Cranwell not tired of home-working. He set up his own design agency eight years ago after years working as a graphic designer, mainly in London. He first rented a serviced office at a nearby business park but rising costs prompted him to shift the operation to his home.

‘There were some days when I never stepped outside and it was really taking over the house,’ Cranwell recalls. ‘Also I was used to working for a company with a lot of people so I was mentally exhausted.’ When the chance to rent space at the family farm came up, he leapt at it. Cranwell senior raised a bank loan to renovate the shed, but Sam furnished and decorated the rooms.

The decision to invite others was partly driven by the need to subsidise the rent, and partly to fill up a space far larger than Sam and his team of two needed. Cranwell’s partner, then running her own marketing agency, took deskspace, and added her professional expertise to the mix. Others were found through sometimes less conventional routes, including the local pub.

Today Funkbunk offers an environment that provides intellectual stimulation and a sounding board for ideas. ‘Open plan encourages collaboration and, with just one exception, we’ve all collaborated on projects one way or another,’ Cranwell says.

‘Opportunities come up more times than you’d imagine. Two of our regulars are technical engineers who produce vision systems for production lines. They asked us to build them a website then some time later we needed a projection system for a visual installation we were working on and they wrote the software for that. It was great for them and a departure from their usual work but they now use it to show others what they do.’

‘We don’t want people to feel they have to donate their own services, which some of the London hubs do,’ he adds. ‘We’re just asking for some money for the desk. The people here are serious about doing business and when everyone in the room is doing well there’s a great feeling.’

Funkbunk is currently enjoying its moment in the sun, having being named one of the ‘10 best

co-working spaces in the UK' by reputable creative community website *Creative Boom*. 'This kind of exposure is fantastic for us. It doubled our website traffic for two weeks and has generated new enquiries,' Cranwell says.

Management and staff

Funkbunk is in the process of formally becoming a non-profit company limited by guarantee. Cranwell runs Funkbunk as a sideline to his main business – running the design agency. 'Most of the work is in promotion – letting people know we're here,' he says. He and his team, Rob and Josh, help with the keeping things running smoothly. 'The cleaning?' says Cranwell. 'That's probably down to me.'

Tariffs

Inspired by Forward Space, Funkbunk has introduced a range of membership options. 'I'm trying to formalise the membership and in fact people have said it's better that way for them,' Cranwell says.

Funkmonk: £25 per month

- Up to 16hrs (two days) desk time per month
- Broadband internet (wireless or wired)
- Free black and white printing (fair usage)
- Use of meeting room and spaces
- Free tea and coffee
- all business rates, buildings insurance, electricity, water, security, cleaning and health & safety

Funkchunk: £70 per month

- Up to 48hrs (six days) desk time per month
- All of the above plus:
- Promotion of business on the FunkBunk website
- Own mail box at FunkBunk

Funktrunk: £140 per month

- Up to 96hrs (12 days) desk time at per month
- All of the above plus:
- Dedicated storage space for files, stationery etc

Funkbunker: £200 per month

- Own dedicated desk
- All of the above plus 24hrs access
- A sign with your logo on the door.



The finances

The building is rented on a short lease, with rental and running costs per annum coming to approximately £14,000. The cost of decorating and furnishing the workhub came to circa £5,000. Rental from others using regular space or hotdesking is the main source of income. The main outgoings are rent and business rates, followed by electricity, phone, broadband and keeping the kitchen stocked.

Businesses and members

Funkbunk now has 22 businesses on its membership list now, including seven homeworkers. An events organising company, with two staff, has taken full-time space. Regular users include an engineering consultancy and a web development company. Among Funkbunk's home-based members are a graphic designer whose primary base is her garden shed, an author who develops Flash applications and a freelance web developer. 'When he comes in he'll work from 8am to 11pm because he has a baby at home and it's easier to get all his work done in one go,' Cranwell notes.

The challenges

The two biggest struggles have been finding people locally to rent deskspace, and the local authority's rates office decisions on business rate applicability (Funkbunk's floorspace was marginally too large to qualify for a reduction).

Finding more potential Funkbunkers is a priority. 'The difficulty for us is reaching self-employed people working from home,' Cranwell says. He subscribes to a service that sends out lists of new businesses set up locally in the preceding month. 'I look them up on Google Earth and if it's obviously residential, target them.'

Otherwise it's a matter of building up contacts. 'We've tried advertising, but it's expensive, so all our promotion is done on the website or Twitter. I also attend tweet-ups, which is basically a bunch of geeks in a room. We usually meet up in a pub and we've gained a few members through that.'