

THE BANK ARTS CENTRE... A BRIGHT NEW CHAPTER

The Bank Arts Centre is a non-for-profit community hub in Eye making the arts and digital accessible and inclusive to all. Based in a charming grade-II listed ex-Midlands Bank building, this volunteer-led creative centre offers a vibrant mix of exhibitions, live music, theatre, comedy, arts and digital workshops, all designed to engage and inspire. At the heart of their operations is a family and dog-friendly café, providing a welcoming space for community members to gather, share, and create. The Bank is dedicated to fostering positive and lasting change through creativity, community and learning.

Built in 1921, The Bank at 2 Castle Street, Eye, operated as a Midlands Bank, later becoming a HSBC. After nearly 100 years operating as a working bank, the branch permanently closed back in 2006 and remained untouched for the next 6 years. Until December 2012, when a group of 4 creatives - Rebecca Lyne, Christopher Parr, Ian and Donna Harvey - established Eyes Open CIC as a not-for-profit company driven to providing rural mid-Suffolk with inclusive access to the arts and learning. The team began leasing The Bank along with significant renovations to transform it into the Arts Centre it is today. With government funding and incredible donations from members of the community, Eyes Open CIC purchased The Bank on behalf of the community in 2015, ensuring the centre remained a safe, exciting and inspiring space for all to socialise and create. The founding Directors parted ways in 2016, leading CIC into some challenging years.

However, in 2022 The Bank started an exciting new chapter with a new leadership team of volunteer Directors – Jon Betts, Abbie Schug and Liam Hayes - coming together and committing to a vast re-development of the Centre. The team's significant contributions and fresh perspectives are already driving the Centre forward.

In Spring 2022, Jon Betts joined the team and established The Vault Digital Hub, an innovative project providing subsidised digital training and learning opportunities for young people aged 8-16. Collaborating with industry-standard tutors, The Vault has hosted multiple free school trips for Hartismere School and local primary schools, and offered hundreds of highly subsidised workshop places to local children. Jon was later appointed General Manager, overseeing the daily operations of the Centre and transforming all aspects of its functions.

In Summer 2022, local artist Abbie Schug joined to lead the re-development of the Centre's creative direction. A passionate advocate for the arts, Abbie has revitalised the exhibitions programme, ensuring The Bank remains a dynamic platform for local artists. She has curated a vibrant programme supporting regional artists and re-launched The Bank's annual Young Artist Award to recognise and nurture exceptional young creatives.

Gislingham resident, musician and tutor, Liam Hayes, joined the Board of Directors in December 2023. Liam is set to expand the Centre's music programme, focusing on supporting local and emerging musicians, providing uplifting experiences for the community, and attracting new audiences to The Bank.

Further exciting changes came in 2023 with Sean Sibthorpe joining the team as Volunteer Chef. Sean came to The Bank as a customer after moving to the area, and with a wealth of experience in the catering industry has now taken on role as Catering Manager. Sean works tirelessly to diversify the café's offerings, and since July 2024 has been serving an exciting new hot lunch menu 4 days per week. Advocating supporting small businesses through using locally sourced ingredients and providing high quality, healthy meals at an affordable price.

Together the team has achieved significant successes, including beginning to refresh the interior, welcoming a record number of visitors and taking tentative steps towards becoming financially



self-sustaining, running community projects with partner organisations to host community projects including Immersive town audio trail (Eastern Angles Theatre Company) and a summer exhibition for learning disabled artists (Suffolk Artlink), providing digital learning for over 500 children and young people, and being recognised at District and County level as a Cultural asset and commissioned by BMSDC to host a community open call exhibition. Finally in December 2024, celebrating The Bank's 12th anniversary.

The Bank Arts Centre thrives because of the dedication and passion of a small team of volunteers who share a love for the arts and a commitment to our rural community. Looking ahead, the new team have laid out ambitious plans for the coming years, focusing on substantial improvements to the Centre's facilities and launching innovative programmes that cater to the diverse interests of our community. However, the path to progress is not without its challenges. While the Centre is slowly becoming more self-sustaining and has secured some funding packages needed for these essential works, to maintain current offerings and work towards expanding services in the future, they are in need of much greater additional financial and volunteer support. Particularly volunteers to help with Daytime Café, evening events, exhibition installation and marketing. If you feel you have any time to spare and would like to get involved, please do get in touch.

Despite challenges, the team are committed to re-building it into the community hub Eye deserves. The Bank Arts Centre is more than just a venue; it is a community cornerstone where creativity, learning, and collaboration flourish. As they navigate this exciting new chapter, they invite you to join them in making a lasting impact. Whether through volunteering, attending events, or simply enjoying a coffee at the café, every bit of involvement helps this cultural hub to thrive. With the collective effort of volunteers and the backing of our community, The Bank is poised to continue its mission of enriching lives through the arts and learning for years to come.

Find out more at - www.thebankeye.org

Contact us at - info@thebankeye.org

2 Castle Street, Eye, IP23 7AN

General Opening - Wednesdays to Saturdays. 10.30am–3.30pm. Free WIFI & Dog Friendly