

North East England Tourism Awards 2009 Outstanding Customer Service Award

Stuart Buglass, Newcastle Marriott Hotel Gosforth Park (Gold award)
Wendy Clarke, Hartlepool's Maritime Experience (Bronze award)
Brian Collins, English Heritage (Bronze award)

'Communication is important for me – I try to break down barriers and ensure guests enjoy their stay. I want to be there for them – always there and approachable,' says Stuart Buglass. It is this commitment to ensuring all his guests have the best experience which has brought Stuart his Outstanding Customer Service Gold award. It's an attitude and enthusiasm shared by all his fellow award winners.

Stuart is full-time duty manager with the Newcastle Marriott Hotel Gosforth Park. Matthew Horne, director of sales and marketing says, 'I would say Stuart's premier strength is his love of dealing with people. A number of clients are now personal friends of Stuart. His communication skills and commitment to customer service make him a brilliant ambassador for the hotel and North East England. He will often tell people where to go off the beaten track, to places they wouldn't normally find.

'Stuart prides himself on delivering the best customer service. He builds a rapport with people and makes them feel special. For example, it was the birthday of one of the hotel's regular customers, who is a keen Chelsea supporter. Stuart spent several weeks tracking down a pictorial history of the football club to leave in his hotel room as a welcome gift. It is small things like this which get noticed.'



He adds, 'Stuart doesn't differentiate between guests – whether you're an industrial leader or

someone on a summer tour, his smile is a true smile – you can feel he's doing it for the love of doing his job.'

Stuart confirms that it's the interaction with guests that gives him most satisfaction. 'I enjoy that it's very face to face – whether for a positive or negative reason. Hopefully, there's always a way to turn around a negative,' he says. 'In fact, I have gained long-term friendships starting with someone having a negative experience.'

'Fantastic' was Stuart's response to being nominated and winning the Gold award. He says, 'You don't really think about it until it happens – it's just my job! North East England is renowned for being helpful and friendly.

'The experience of the awards night itself was brilliant. Winning was great for me personally – but for the hotel as well. If we can have a competitive edge, it's good to use it.

'But as I said on the night, everyone's a winner. For me, the North East England campaign Passionate People, Passionate Places said it all – and you could feel the passion in the room.'

Stuart also appreciates the support of colleagues. 'There's no way I could be nominated without the backup of my team. It's not just about one person – it's the overall team. I couldn't do it without them.'

'Marriott is all about people,' Matthew agrees. 'The previous year we had won the large hotel award and so we felt it was right to put forward some of the people who had helped us win that award. Entering was for those who work hard at the coal face and who don't always get the recognition they deserve.'

Susan l'Anson, Visitor Services Manager of Hartlepool's Maritime Experience acknowledges that pride in their staff was also one of the key reasons they decided to enter the award. She says, 'We are proud of our staff and believe they offer excellent customer service.'

The Maritime Experience's nominee for the award was quay assistant, Wendy Clarke, who has been with the attraction for 15 years, since it opened. Susan explains, 'We put the choice of nominee to a staff vote and Wendy was their unanimous choice. They spoke of her warmth and compassion – the perfect candidate.'

Susan continues, 'Nothing is ever any trouble for Wendy. She is dedicated to the customer and the job. She makes visitors feel at ease and goes out of her way to make everybody's experience memorable - whether it's a group with disabled children, a family or a party of over 60s. She is always ready to help everybody around the museum – both visitors and colleagues.'

'It was a great honour to be nominated,' Wendy says, 'and so many people said such nice things about me. The fact that people think you're doing your job well does give you confidence. It meant a lot to me. We have such a good team here.'



'The awards night itself was great. There was a good atmosphere and I met some really nice people. I was nervous – especially doing the video interviews – but they made me feel at ease and it wasn't as bad as I thought! I was so proud to accept the award, which is now on display in the shop.'

Wendy works mainly on the historic quay, but also helps in the museum, retail and reception areas. 'My main responsibility is to meet and greet visitors to the quay and be around to help them get the most out of their visit,' she explains. 'I'm part of the display team performing musketry, cannon and sword fencing. I also do rope-making with the children.'

'The museum lets me be quite creative, for example designing a treasure trail when putting on a pirate party or creating props for big themed events such as Halloween. Although they give me a free hand there's usually no budget, so I beg, borrow or recycle everything I can!'

Susan says, 'Wendy is always willing to change the format and delivery of presentations to suit the needs of particular visitors. For example, she was giving the usual introduction to a group of autistic children and their carers about to go round the Fighting Ships display. However, it became clear that the children couldn't cope with being in the dark, so Wendy turned the lights on and the audio off. She then walked round with the group giving her own interpretation for them at each stage.'

'The team see it as wonderful that Wendy won the award,' adds Susan. 'It's the whole team who benefits. We're striving to be the best and hope next year to put someone else forward.'

'The fact we were so successful last time played a part in us deciding to enter again this year,' says Natalie Sullivan, marketing executive for the north territory at English Heritage. 'Like many attractions, English Heritage has very high levels of customer service. We pride ourselves on the experience we offer and this is therefore a natural category for us to enter.'

'Winning a Bronze is a brilliant endorsement from the industry. It's given a boost to Brian and gives him a formal recognition internally. Winning the award is also really good for team morale.'

Brian Collins is a member of the visitor operations team at Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens. He also works at Tynemouth Priory and Castle. 'It was a great experience to be singled out by English Heritage for the dedication I've shown to the job,' he says. 'It gave me great pleasure to be at the awards ceremony and to be an award winner.'

'My confidence is now sky-high, especially when customers refer to the various write-ups in the newspapers. I now intend to pass that confidence on to other team members. I must say, that you don't win awards on your own – I'm part of a great team.'

Natalie says, 'Anyone who meets Brian can't help but like him. He does go above and beyond the call of duty. He's very passionate and this motivates other members of the team as well. We have standard customer service training, but Brian finds ways to adapt it and personalise it to the visitor. He enjoys giving them a good experience and gets a lot from it himself.'



Visitors might turn up because they want to visit an historic home or priory but Natalie believes they get a lot more out of their visit because of Brian. 'He'll spend time to get to know them and ask questions to understand what they want to get out of their visit to the area. He then tries to relate back to this when making suggestions on what they should see. He's remarkably knowledgeable about the region.'

Natalie adds, 'Brian will take time to sit and talk to older visitors, or point out the best routes for families with pushchairs. He has even been known to walk round the site with visitors with access difficulties. Brian builds a real rapport with the visitors – he is part of the visitor experience as well!'