

INTERVIEW *with...*

Flo Pearce & Joe Buckley



FLO PEARCE MBII AND JOE BUCKLEY MBII OF THE TOLLEMACHE ARMS IN HARRINGTON, NORTHANTS, ARE THIS YEAR'S BII LICENSEE OF THE YEAR AWARD CHAMPIONS. THE BII NEWS' EDITOR KATE OPPENHEIM CBII CAUGHT UP WITH THEM AT THE END OF THE SUMMER

It's true to say that for Flo and Joe it has been a whirlwind two years. Having entered and become finalists of Licensee of the Year Award in 2022, they launched themselves straight back into the awards, by applying again the following year. They were hungry to win and win it they did – and as far as we know, they are the only finalists to have ever gone on to win the Licensee of the Year Award title the consecutive year.

For those that don't know The Tolly, tell us what makes it a stand-out pub and business?

Flo begins: "It's a quintessential British pub that focuses on sustainability, local ingredients and great customer service. We take great pride in our offer and every customer receives a super warm feeling and welcome, which flows through every element."

Joe continues: "At the forefront of what we do is run a business that wants to create a better work-life balance for our staff. Our commitment to sustainability extends to our teams, in that we care about their welfare and we want them to want to stay in the industry."

"We do things differently: we're not black and white about starting times. We offer 4.5 day weeks, with hours capped at 44 a week. People don't work every Friday and Saturday, and we have benefits on site, including a gym, which has been well received."

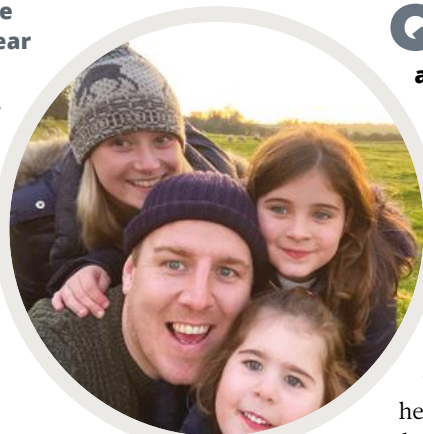
"Our staff want progression and every member of our senior team are on some kind of training course."

You mentioned before that on achieving finalist status in 2022, you took away everything you had learnt to help you win this year. What were the main takeaways?

"Taking part in the awards really helps focus your mind on the business," says Joe. "We had our business plans and projections in 2022 and over the following year, we were able to show how we had completed that pipeline and were in front of our projections. We had completed our outside expansion, and we could show the positive impact our investments had had on our customers, from our rebranding of the business to our

village shop and design work.

"We met many exceptional and motivational people over the awards' process, people like Chris and Jason



At the forefront of what we do is to run a business that wants to create a better work-life balance for our staff"



Black FBII [LOYA Winners 2021], who have inspired us. But the truth of the matter is that when you get to the finals, there's only a very fine margin between you. You are the six best licensee businesses in the UK."

Flo continues: "Having gone through the process before, we did work to improve on the areas we hadn't been so confident about or comfortable with in 2022."

"When we met the judging panels this year, we knew what to expect and we had a better understanding of our financials, and we were able to present the key figures in a much more proactive way. We were ready to answer the questions on our break-evens, GPs, wage costs and the knock-on effects that the cost-of-living crisis had had on our business. We made sure everything was front-of-mind and we were ready to bring it all to the table before they asked."

Can you share with us what you have taken away from this year's awards' process, as well as any plans for the future?

Flo says: "It's not just ideas from the awards process, but also the advice we've received from all the motivational people we have met and made friends with along the way – especially the multiple operators like Chris and Jason and Amanda and Nick Hemming MBII [LOYA Winners 2022]. They've explained to us the importance of streamlining the business and to make sure we are



Joe adds: "As sad as it is to see other businesses close, it does mean that there are more opportunities arising.

"These last 12 months have been our busiest ever year and that's because people come to The Tolly for what we give

them. This comes down to having a good, consistent offer. You can't vary it, it must remain as strong for every visit," says Joe.

"Training is huge here. We make sure our teams are clued up, both back and front-of-house. We are constantly developing their skills, with formal courses and on-the-job training. Creating a consistently good offer comes down to training, but also in ensuring that everything we do is manageable. A good example of this is having a menu that the kitchen team can deliver well. There is no point writing menus that they can't cope with. We can guarantee consistency, even if it's a busy Saturday night when the place is full.

"In terms of our ROIs [Return on Investments], our £120,000 Barn project – a new outside eating, drinking and entertaining space – was expected to give a return over three years, but we've done it within the first

year," says Joe.

"There's no doubt that all the media attention and marketing helped, when we won the BII Award and then went on to win another three awards at The National Pub & Bar Awards and also the Northamptonshire Food & Drink Awards. Local awareness is great, but national recognition is immense. And as the BII's Licensees of the Year,

we are invited to attend trade forums and events, which also serves to spread the word about The Tolly and what we do and the way we do it.

"For us it all feels super personal," adds Joe. "I've worked in this industry since I was 14 and I've been subjected to a lot of aggression, shouting and male testosterone, over that time. I'm glad to see the industry is changing. We try to be positive role models and work to create a wonderful atmosphere here. Our senior team are trained to be able to undertake multiple roles, both back and front-of-house, so they can support everyone across all areas of the business. We have management days away and it's a different and exciting place to work."

Tell us about any challenges you have overcome?

Flo says: "We were expecting the worst, last January, and so we made a very big effort to cut our costs and take control of any spending."

Joe continues: "Drink prices have been rising and there have been a lot of delivery problems. There are still supply issues, but we are lucky in that we try to only deal with local producers. When you're buying meat from someone who farms down the road it helps. In summer, we're able to get veg from allotment traders too."

Where would you like to be in another 12 months' time?

"On a yacht somewhere," laughs Joe. "We'd love to buy a freehold pub, but that's £1 million. We are not looking to replicate what we have done here, but we are talking to people in the local area, as we have children – Eliza, aged nine and Nancy, aged seven – and we're settled here.

"Weddings are something we are definitely interested in exploring, as well as external catering and events. We want to grow our Tollyfest summer festival too – we get 2,000 people visiting over 2.5 days.

"Everything that has happened hasn't just been an achievement for us, but the whole team has been involved," says Flo. "I'd love someone from our team to enter the same competitions some day and have the same ambitions as us," says Joe. It's great to have everyone involved and to know that it means as much to them as it does to us." ■

at a point where the pub runs well. For example, making the back-office admin simpler, implementing fool-proof plans that will allow us to be able to step away from the business and take on a second pub, which is what we're looking to do."

Joe adds: "Getting the right tech is key for everything, from staff holidays and rotas, to the payroll, etc, and we are looking for a one-stop-shop that we can run across two sites.

"We're also focusing on the small things, for instance, we have been rewriting everyone's job descriptions, so they know their roles and who they are responsible for. It makes everything a lot easier."

Joe continues: "As we grow, we want to make ourselves redundant, so that we're free to take on a new business." Flo says: "We've successfully made The Tolly a very special place. We know our skill set and what we need to do next."



In the current economic climate, why is now the time to invest and grow the business?

Flo says: "We've learnt a lot from seeing what other, successful operators are doing – and we enjoy a challenge.

"Our business is in a better position than it was 12 months ago and we are very comfortable in how we've got this place running."

AMANDA AND NICK HEMMING FBII ARE WINNERS OF THE COVETED BII LICENSEE OF THE YEAR AWARD TITLE - WHERE EVERY ELEMENT OF YOUR PUB OPERATION, STRATEGY AND TRADING RECORD ARE SCRUTINISED BY EXPERT INDUSTRY JUDGES. HERE THEY TALK ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS, THE HERON INN IN MALPAS, CORNWALL, THEIR SUCCESS AND WHAT WINNING MEANS TO THEM AND THEIR TEAM



INTERVIEW *with...*

Amanda & Nick Hemming

LOYA WINNERS 2022

Q Congratulations on being crowned winners of the BII Licensee of the Year Award 2022. Tell us about the last four months and what winning means to you?

Winning Licensee of the Year Award (LOYA) has put us on the map, says Amanda. We were doing well before, but have probably increased trade by 10-15% just from visitors and locals coming to see us after reading about our success in the news and on social media.

We've always attracted locals, but now people are driving 45 minutes from places like St Ives to visit.

Nick continues: People are coming in and comparing us to their experiences at other well-known restaurants in the region, and telling us that they enjoyed their visit to us more, which is a very nice compliment. It all builds awareness of the Heron Inn. We've never had to pay for marketing, with our success always having been driven by our social media and by developing a rapport with our customers.

St Austell, our brewery, has been brilliant too, creating lots of social media coverage for us, adds Amanda. There's a real buzz about the pub. Everyone wants to meet and speak to us. Customers are genuinely interested and want to know about the judging process.

Nick explains:

It was St Austell Brewery that got us interested in the awards.

We were their guests at the BII Summer Event in 2021. It was inspiring, seeing the finalists up on stage, and so we decided that we had nothing to lose by having a go ourselves.

It has been a huge boost for morale too. We took our team with us to the awards' lunch, and the whole event has become a special thing for them - something to share with their families and friends. They talk about our winning with passion and pride, says Amanda. We have a great team here and

when we look to expand, by taking on another one or two pubs, we will have people in place who are capable of running one of those other businesses.



“The BII creates a great buzz around the competition at every stage, especially as finalists and winners, you become very visible”



Q The award's judging process delves deep into every element of your business, from P&L to staff training. What are the stand-out elements of your business that you are most proud of?

For us it all comes down to our people. We are proud of how we bring new and young people into the business, individuals who want to forge a career in hospitality. We put a lot of time and effort into our team, knowing they will be the next generation of great operators, says Amanda.

Nick adds: If we don't attract youngsters into hospitality now, there's going to be no-one left to run our pubs in the next five to 10 years. Without their passion, energy and commitment, we can't be successful. It's a message that we have to get out there.

Off the back of winning LOYA this year, I've been invited to open the Fal Oyster Festival, with the Mayor this month (October). It's a massive local celebration and it's usually opened by well known chefs, like Nathan Outlaw and Pete Goss. But this year, I've been invited and it's a huge honour. I'll also get to cook with 10 school kids and I'll be able to talk about winning the award, plus tell everyone about the great career opportunities hospitality has to offer school and college leavers.

We have all got to remain focused on the long-term. The current cost of living crisis and supply issues will pass. We just need to concentrate on maintaining a successful business





and be positive. If we wobble, so will our team. We need to talk about all the good stuff – I still love what I do. Every day is different and there are so many rewards.

Q In the current trading climate, how do you maintain and continue to build the business? And

what strategies have you put in place for this winter?

Over the summer months, when the business has been in full swing, it's about keeping our heads down and working hard, says Amanda.

We like to stay on top of the trends to ensure we are offering the dishes that people will want to come out for, says Nick. We like to remain competitively priced too. For instance, when crab became very expensive, we dropped it from our menu. Now the price has fallen, we'll put crab back on.

It's important to keep having those conversations with suppliers. We have a fish of the day, so I need to understand what's coming in, what's the best buy, which fish prices will fall and what to stay away from. You've just got to stay on it. If you don't, you risk paying too much and you will put your business at risk, says Nick.

We will also stay on top of our service, which is about training and recruiting inhouse. We understand that people make a real effort to come to us, says Amanda. Creating a fabulous experience is what we are about. The Heron is located in an area of outstanding natural beauty and we want our customers to return soon and to bring along new friends.

We maintain a good spend per head, which is between £28 and £32, but on a good day that can go up to £36. We find that our customers are happy to spend more and will buy our more expensive wines. They aren't always looking at the price, says Nick, but more importantly for a great experience.

When it comes to the stuff outside of your control, like rent and energy costs, it's about being as careful as you can. We need to keep costs down and focus on maintaining profit.

We recently took on two chefs to live in, plus we have a live-in Manager who looks after the pub and our shop, The Heron Farm & Coffee Shop. Their package is rent free, bills included, which means our labour costs are slightly reduced. It's a good deal for them too. We had wanted to create B&B accommodation on site, but that's something we'll look to do in the future.

We have always invested in the business each year, but while the economy is so uncertain, we're going to sit tight, says Amanda. It's about taking the risks out, looking after the team

and making sure we're in a secure position when things start to improve.

It's about knowing what's coming in versus what's going out. We set our managers' labour targets, to help control costs. We stagger start and

finish times too, so people will begin their shift at 12:00, instead of 11:30. It's only half an hour, but it all adds up.

We operate a four-day week for the busy kitchen staff during the summer months, and

we see the winter as our time to play: to visit suppliers, do training and be more relaxed.

Q Why would you recommend BII members enter the Licensee of the Year Awards?

It has been a huge eye-opener for us, says Amanda. It makes you assess your business. It's easy to become blinkered, when you're working in your pub

all of the time. I feel the judging process really delved deep into our soul. You have to be prepared for constructive criticism, but none of it is negative. It's about business improvement and how we can all do things better.

Nick adds: It was really good to get to meet other people too, from our fellow finalists to the judges. If you believe in your business, you can allow someone else to delve inside. If you don't share, you'll never get any better.

At the end of the day, we're just a small pub on the river in Cornwall. It was good to feel part of

something bigger and the event itself was brilliant. Our St Austell Area Manager, Clive Greene, even drove up from Cornwall on the day of the train strike to be with us. It was such a great day. ■



CREATING A BUZZ

The amount of marketing and PR that comes from with being involved in the Licensee of the Year Award (LOYA) is immense, says Nick and Amanda.

"The BII creates a great buzz around the competition at every stage, especially as finalists and winners, you become very visible.

The BII is powerful and professional and you really benefit by being involved."



INTERVIEW with... Jason & Chris Black



BII CEO Steven Alton (left) with Jason and Chris Black, and Damian Saunders, Managing Director of Sky Business

JASON AND CHRIS BLACK MBII ARE THE WINNERS OF THE BII LICENSEE OF THE YEAR AWARD 2021. BII NEWS' EDITOR KATE OPPENHEIM CBII SPOKE TO CHRIS ABOUT THEIR ACHIEVEMENT AND GOALS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

Q What does it mean to you both to be crowned winners of the BII's Licensee of the Year Award 2021?

Winning has been a massive achievement for us, bearing in mind that we have only been licensees of our own business for three years.

Receiving recognition from industry experts, especially during this time when the sector has been so hard hit, made it all the more intense. It has been a rollercoaster of emotions getting through to the finals, with each stage of the competition giving us an opportunity to reflect upon our business and everything that we have achieved.



monotony and boredom of cooking at home every day.

Everything we achieved during lockdown has helped us build a better business moving forward. For instance, when we first reopened our garden for trade in April 2021, we had the single biggest sales day on record.

Doing what we did gave people a reason to want to come back and we made them all very welcome.

We also opened our shop, which focuses on selling local produce to our community. It's a farm-shop style offer, that has a strong environmentally sound ethos, for instance, we sell milk in glass, returnable bottles, that people bring back for refilling. We also stock our frozen ready meals and it has been so successful that it has become a permanent fixture, utilising an area of the pub that wasn't particularly well used before.

With three sites in Cornwall with St Austell – the Pityme Inn, Rock; the Lugger Inn, Polruan; and the Weavers Inn, Bodmin – we also launched our new app, called Cornish Inns. This

allows our guests to collect reward points, order click-and-collect takeaways and access exclusive deals, as well as our 'pay at the table' facility,

and get information on upcoming events. Ultimately it gives them access to everything they need to know about our pubs and encourages repeat visits. We see it as a great way to future proof our business and is another initiative we'd like to share with our fellow BII members.

Q How are you ensuring your business is sustainable, not only for now, but for the next two to three years?

We have invested a lot in new systems over the last six months, to give us better control over our GPs and stock, and to get all of the elements of the business interlinked. In terms of environmental sustainability, we are looking to grow more of our own produce, like herbs, to avoid having to buy in pre-packed goods in plastic, and we invested in an electric vehicle to deliver our takeaways. Reducing waste and food miles is key, which means we keep our menu seasonal and try to use local suppliers.

Q What pearls of wisdom and inspiration would you like to share with our members?

It would be to always think about your business in terms of having a long-term strategy. We view our business as a career for us and our team. We try not to take on seasonal staff, but employ a full-time team throughout the year, as we believe seasonal staff are less engaged with the business. We look to promote and develop our people through the business from team member to assistant manager and onto general manager, and we move people around the three pubs too, to give

Q What are the standout successes of your business over this last year?

Our ethos is always to keep going. When the pandemic hit, we started to do meals-on-wheels and with a team of volunteers, we delivered up to 200 meals twice a week to the vulnerable, disabled and old people living locally. It was important to us that we kept the supply chain going, as we recognised that our suppliers were really struggling.

We started offering takeaways too, fish and chips on a Friday and roasts on Sunday, as we saw it was important to give our customers a break from the

“ It has been a rollercoaster of emotions getting through to the finals, with each stage of the competition giving us an opportunity to reflect upon our business and everything that we have achieved ”



other venues can be an eye opener. We get out every week and encourage our staff to use other venues too – we pay for them to go to and drink/eat elsewhere, and when they come back, we ask them to tell

us about it – what they liked or what they would change.

All this means we have a high level of staff retention, with 10 of our team members having relocated from M&B in London to Cornwall.

Q As the winners of LOYA, you will have the ear of the industry, its governing bodies and even the Government. What will be the key messages you'd like to get across?

It's that hospitality needs to be seen as a career. We all need to make hospitality even more relevant to new candidates and better promote everything this industry has to offer.

Also, sustainability – both financial and environmental.

Everyone should be growing their business year-on-year, while also looking to be more sustainable: being greener is a selling point.

Q Finally, it wouldn't be the 'Oscars' of the licensed trade without giving you the opportunity to thank those who have had the greatest impact on your success...

Fundamentally our teams have got us through the tricky times. We couldn't have done any of this without them. Also, St Austell has been hugely supportive and the BII has been really helpful, both in terms of advice about growing our business and also career development for our teams. ■

 @pitymeinn
 @pityme inn rock

As winners of the Licensee of the Year Award, Jason and Chris Black MBII will receive

a year's free pubs and clubs subscription to Sky Sports, £500 towards a party in their pub to celebrate with their staff and a model of their pub created by artist Bunty May Marshall to commemorate their win.



them the broadest experience possible.

While we are in a heavily touristy area, we work hard not to alienate our locals during the peak seasons. In winter, we diversify more and hold a Christmas market, along with themed nights, live music, etc, to create a meeting and social space for our locals. It's not just about the food and drink.

These days, it's very easy for people to drift from one pub to another restaurant, and so on, but we place huge value on developing and growing our brand for the long-term. We keep our brand relevant and engaging all year, making it as easy as possible for people to want to return to us.

Our branding has been created to have a broad appeal – it is as applicable to the high end, second home owners, as to the camp site visitors on a tight budget, and it is for the locals too. We also do a lot on social media.

We have also started using a software system called *Feed It Back*, which provides a dashboard of all social media engagements. It identifies any recurring issues and also makes it easy to gather the positive messages. You are given an overall score at the end of each week too, which provides a good guide to what you're doing well and what's going wrong.

Facing up to any problems is important, because if things are wrong,

you need to own it. If you're getting four out of five, it's about working to achieve five out of five.

Q What do pubs and the wider hospitality sector mean to you?

Both Jason and I have grown up in and around pubs, Jason was a General Manager with Mitchells & Butlers for eight years and I have a degree in business and food, and I worked for a food importer doing product development across Europe, developing ranges for the major supermarkets. We believe that our experiences give us a wider and very balanced view of the industry.

We are absolutely committed to what we do. We see hospitality, especially pubs, as vitally important to all our communities, and this has never been more true that over these past couple of years.

Creating a viable and community focused business is what we are passionate about, and taking part in this awards process has helped us view the bigger picture and see things with fresher eyes too.

We, as a sector, need to make pubs more viable and work to create outlets that are seen as being vital in providing community support and valuable, long-term careers.

Hospitality workers should feel proud to go to work every day. As an industry, we need to cultivate and grow the next generation of licensees: we need fresh, new blood to create even better venues for future generations.

Getting out of your business to visit