

CLUB SCENE

Viva Vivo!

Rod Gilmour reports on the transformation of the old Welsh Back Club in Bristol into a vibrant squash complex called Vivo

Bristol prides itself on its individuality – and it is no different for one of the few remaining squash clubs in the city. Vivo's new owners are all too aware that creativity is essential in a world where paying for hourly court space is simply not enough to survive – even with a pair of Egyptian aces up their sleeves.

So it was on New Year's Eve that an established club promotional company from London took over Vivo for the night. When tickets went on sale prior to the event, all 800 sold out in two minutes, even though many cultured Bristolians had no idea of the location at the city's Floating Harbour.

Party organisers turned each of the courts into themed rooms; clubbers played squash and table tennis; another court was used for a cocktail bar; and the show court on the first floor was the scene for a full light show and the main dance floor.

Ian Bamsey, one of Vivo's co-founders, stresses that clubs these days cannot operate on squash alone. "If you're not creative enough, you're going to close if you don't utilise the space you've got. Selling space for £7 per hour just doesn't work," he says.

Vivo's concepts are far removed from the image of their predecessor on the site – the Welsh Back Club. Their owners had struggled to confront challenges from low-

cost gyms as prying developers looked to purchase the lease and turn the site into an all-too-predictable block of flats.

Vivo are already surrounded by modern residential homes and glass-fronted businesses. They are housed in a spacious building that, from the outside at least, resembles a rundown factory.

However, Vivo have struck an unlikely alliance with Bristol City Council. In recent times there have been horror stories of councils across the country caving in to developers eager to demolish once-lively clubs into either residential homes or, heaven forbid, turn squash courts into 'well-being centres'.

By all accounts, the council have been keen to match the level of development in the harbour area, but with a cap on housing. By hook or by crook, Vivo seemingly did enough to obtain a 20-year lease from the previous owners and the work to revitalise the club cannot come soon enough.

A council spokesperson said: "The relationship with our leisure team is a sport development one and Elite Squash have supported council events and delivery in primary and secondary schools.

"The council will continue to engage the club in event-based activity and provide squash to a new audience linked to Sport England's Community Sport Activation Fund programme."

The location has forced

Vivo to become "modern, young and fresh", according to Bamsey. "Bristol is also such an energetic place to live," he says. "The geography creates a community and the city is well known for its individual status."

With their club motto 'Play. Train. Meet' at the forefront, Vivo have already seen a raft of different sports enter through their doors. Elite triathletes and members of Bristol City Football Club live nearby, while on reception one of Vivo's employees is a double British skateboard trick champion. The owners, who include former world no.2 Peter Marshall, want to embrace all these sports to create a social mix both on and off the squash court, and the refurbishment will take in these elements.

There is enough space to deliver on their aspirations. Enter the building off the cobbled streets on Floating Harbour and the reception morphs into the downstairs bar, the mainstay of any club. However, it was only in December, when Vivo were handed the keys, that they breathed life back into the area.

Before that, you were lucky if the club could find any tinned lager lurking in storage rooms.

Now there is a vibrant coffee/bar area. There is a shelf full of squash and racket sport literature across the glass-panelled windows, while plans are in place to open up the doors to create more space on the canal walkway.

Past the tight disco floor and the darts board lie four glass-backed courts in the



Vivo provides the club base for world no.1 Mohamed Elshorbagy (right) and his brother Marwan, the world no. 12



The gym and aerobics studio



The club boasts five squash courts, including a glass-back exhibition court

adjacent building. There is a cold, tired feel to the passage way, but the owners again want to replace the exterior with glass, which would look mightily impressive from the outside.

Three more separate rooms are situated on the first floor, two of which are dominated by 200-odd bits of gym equipment, varying in age and leased off by the previous owner. The second of these rooms in fact comprises back-to-back squash courts, while Bamsby has plans to turn one of them into a climbing centre.

The main show court is in the final room – Premier Squash League matches are held here while there is seating for 160 – and the stairs go back down to reception, complete with a hanging kayak, a nod to the club’s all-encompassing attitude to sport.

It is an impressive site and given the listless attempts by past owners to live with the times, you get a very real sense that the innovative ideas by Bamsby and co will be a hit with Bristolians.

Of course, it helps too that Vivo have forged inextricable links with two stars of the PSA Tour, Egypt’s Elshorbagy brothers. Both are coached by Hadrian Stiff, whose Elite Squash outfit have merged with Vivo.

Does this help spread the appeal of squash? Stiff is unequivocal. “On one Friday in January a brother and sister had just come off court. It just so happened that Mohamed was passing and he put his hand on the sister’s shoulder as he walked past. She just froze and couldn’t wait to tell everyone afterwards!”

The Elshorbagys’ geniality is part of Elite Squash’s ethos too. “It’s all about a lifestyle and how they enjoy being squash players,” says Stiff. “It’s about helping pro players and making them understand that it’s not a plod.

“You see plenty of players who implode and don’t get anything out of the tour, because they get stressed about rankings and the slog of hotels.”

The Elshorbagys have already hurdled this step with ease. Talk about being grounded, Mohamed, squash’s world

no.1, and Marwan still take the bus from their halls of residence to the club. “I love the atmosphere here; it’s a relaxed city,” says Mohamed.

Thanks to airport links, Bristol is also becoming an increasingly popular destination for other foreign squash players to train and play on the European circuit. During my visit there were players from Guatemala, Reunion Island and France relaxing in the bar area at the club, one of only two remaining in the city.

The court ratio in the city has diminished after Redwood Lodge, which had 19 courts at its peak, was turned into an old people’s home in April last year, so when Vivo contacted England Squash and Racketball, the national governing body were eager to offer “generous” funding for court-floor refurbishment across their five courts.

Vivo currently devote Sundays to a club day for children, with classes for those aged five and under containing agility and movement skills involving ballons and racketball-sized balls.

Movement is also a Vivo ethos under Stiff, who has run Elite Squash for the last 16 years. He will teach anyone from three-year-olds to professionals. “It’s not about people who can go all the way; it’s about delivery at every level,” he says.

Moreover, parents with older children can leave them at Vivo safe in the knowledge they will not get bored. There is a hangout vibe at the club. “This will only be sustainable if there is a social element to it,” adds Bamsby.

Vivo were taken aback by the model conceived in Poland. On Friday nights all 28 courts at the Hasta La Vista Sports Club in Wroclaw – the world’s largest squash club – are frequently taken up with three women on each court. The tagline ‘you’re going to get a better bum’ has paid dividends.

Vivo may be behind – excuse the pun – on Poland’s success, but the Bristol owners’ vision is to be admired. Here’s to a revival of life at Vivo.

- For more information: www.vivosports.club



The lounge and bar area look out over the historic Bristol Harbour