



Burrough Court places a strong emphasis on workplace wellbeing

## BURROUGH COURT NR MELTON MOWBRAY LEICESTERSHIRE

### WHY IT WORKS

- Providing access to nature through farm walking routes and beautifully landscaped gardens as the 'anchor'
- Achieving the 'power of 10+' through offering a cluster of complementary businesses and activities
- Constantly responding to feedback from customers

Burrough Court is a thriving business park and 495ha (1,200 acre) farm in Leicestershire. In an often homogenous market focused on rent, this rural office complex is differentiating itself with a focus on quality and wellness. We asked Fred, Dawn and Becky Wilson to explain to Ed Mansel Lewis, head of Strutt & Parker's Rural Ambitions team, how the business has evolved and how they've created a unique and contemporary offering. Strutt & Parker is not involved at Burrough Court, but, it has a business approach that we admire.

**Ed Mansel Lewis (EML):** If I want to rent an office in Melton Mowbray, I would pay about £13.50 per square foot. Yet at Burrough Court, it's £21 per square foot, and people are queuing up to take it. How are you achieving that?

**Fred Wilson (FW):** By having a differentiated, but valued, offering that sets our office space apart. What we've got isn't right for everybody (we don't host start-ups, for example), but it's perfect for a sector of the corporate community. We are very much about successful, established, owner-managed businesses who want something specific. When you consider that rents are only about 6% of an average business's overhead, it tends

to be a very short conversation when people say 'what discount will you give us?' Generally, the issue is whether we've got the right space for them, rather than the price. Comparing us to some complexes is like comparing a gastropub serving locally sourced produce with McDonald's.

**EML:** You have added a pilates and yoga studio, a coffee shop, a gym and countryside walks. Was it always the plan to create a hub of complementary activities?

**FW:** No. When my wife took control of the family farming business we had, from a modern farming point of view, a redundant courtyard, which we turned into offices. From then on, my aspiration was to create a brand that had a consistency that was reassuring to potential customers, but also set us apart.

Any brand has to evolve to reflect the needs of the moment and to make a best guess at what to invest in. Things that we're doing now would have seemed utterly daft 10 years ago. Having people walking up a corridor carrying a yoga mat while a few feet away others are working at computer screens would have seemed completely at odds with office life back then. Fortunately for us, each generation gets a chance to make their own contribution and a year ago our daughter, Becky, arrived back from the smog of London.

**Becky Wilson (BW):** My background in London was in sports, events and marketing, so I'm very focused on the wellbeing industry. I saw that there was huge potential for a place like Burrough Court.

We already had the hardest bit, the infrastructure, and I am fortunate to have a number of contacts within the wellbeing industry who run their own retreats. I did a lot of market research and looked at the competition, and saw there were no rural offices in the area that really offered the wellness benefits we do here. I thought: Why not put walking routes through the estate? It isn't a huge capital investment, just a few signs, and they really do attract people – more so than I ever envisaged. And people do have walking meetings, which is great.

I took the same approach with the pilates and yoga studios. They're in the centre of the courtyard in what was previously an office, so we did have to sacrifice that rent, but it's a way to get members of the public to come in, too, whereas previously people only came here to work. By having the coffee shop, it draws new people in to have a coffee afterwards and make it more of an outing. So it's creating that community and another way of drawing in the locals and increasing awareness, which also adds to the income stream.

**FW:** The COVID pandemic has been an accelerator and it will be fascinating to see how customer needs change. We're really trying to create new business in areas where it leverages the innate qualities of the farm because, quite frankly, it's difficult for other people to compete with that. That's why we've planted 75 acres of trees, as we recognise that the natural capital side is increasingly going to tie in to our customers' values.

The environment our customers are immersed in here is increasingly of value. Whilst we're offering an increasingly mainstream business park, what we've got at Burrough Court are all sorts of facets such as air quality and the farm backdrop.

**BW:** We're gradually bringing all the different aspects of the business together so they have some connection with the farm. We're also trying to be as kind to the environment as possible. We have no plastic – everything is recyclable or compostable. And all of the leftover food and coffee is collected by one of the charities we have based here to use on their allotments.



**EML:** This is a big investment. When do you have enough confidence in a plan that you put in hundreds of thousands of pounds?

**FW:** We've got a well-run, financially sound business by virtue of past generations borrowing for the potato stores, but paying it back. So you borrow, pay back and go again. Entrepreneurship is really just risk taking and often if you wait too long then the moment has passed. As long as you listen to the customer and your vision is very customer-centric, it minimises the risk.

**EML:** So are those extra layers of the business that you have added linked to what the customer has told you?

**FW:** Absolutely. The fact that Becky's passionate about wellness is not the principal driver – what is of interest to us as a business is that it's aligned with a growth curve that keeps going up year after year.

That's also why our broadband is as fast as Leicester University's and why our car parking is free. One car parking space might cost one of your admin staff £1,300 a year out of their taxed income elsewhere. When you factor in things like the car parking, broadband and the wellness benefits, it doesn't take long for customers to see that whilst they're paying a premium for being at Burrough Court, what we've got here is actually good value. There's no snob appeal to office space, you have to offer value for money.

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BURROUGH COURT

**EML:** How are you gathering information from your customers about what they would buy if you sold it to them?

**BW:** The number one method is face-to-face. A lot of it's actually just chatting, which they love doing. A prime example is when the coffee shop opened, I worked in it for the first two weeks because I wanted to have that contact with customers to understand from them what they like and what they don't like. One of the outcomes of that was that they wanted a menu that changed on a regular basis. So from November 2020, the menu has been seasonal.





The coffee shop serves seasonal, locally produced food



Offices come with super-fast broadband and free parking

**Dawn Wilson (DW):** I think that's the value of the coffee shop; it is so important in giving Burrough Court its identity as a place.

**FW:** That's a very good point. And this is where having generational layers is good, because it makes you ask questions of yourself that you would not have otherwise asked. The coffee shop in itself doesn't make money so it could be asked why we're doing it. Ditto the gym. But they add to the sense of place. It's got people out of the office; it has redefined the place.

**EML:** Do you track your occupancy rates? And do you have a target rate that you like to hit?

**FW:** We aim for 100%. Our warehouses are 100% occupied and our offices are almost fully let, we only have two to go. During COVID, we have more occupied square footage than when we started.

**BW:** The enquiries started picking up when the first COVID lockdown ended in May 2020. It's partly due to the new website that we had built and investment in SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) and PPC (Pay Per Click).

**DW:** People are fed up of working from home, too. There was a man who was brought to Burrough Court recently by his wife to enquire about an office space because she was fed up of him working from home!

**EML:** Becky, you have put a lot of work into the website; there is video and imagery, detailed floor plans, walking route maps, lease terms, prices. What gave you the sense that this was important?

**BW:** If I put myself in the shoes of the customer, I would want to know the price, what it looks like, what amenities there are, where it is, floor plans etc. We want to make the customer journey as easy as possible. During COVID, we added a 360-degree internal tour of one of our offices and that allowed us to let the office even without the customer coming to the site.

**FW:** The great benefit of putting the price on the website is that, when people come here, they know that's the price. It doesn't waste our time in viewings because they know what to expect.

**EML:** What advice would you give yourselves if you were starting out now?

**FW:** Stay authentic.

**BW:** Listen to your customers and do the research to understand what the customer needs because without your customer you don't have a business.

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