

## **The Jane effect pulls in the crowds**

The world's first sculpture of local author Jane Austen and a fascinating exhibition about her connections to Basingstoke have marked a new chapter for the Top of the Town.

More than double the usual number of visitors have been spending time in the town's cultural heart discovering facts about the much-loved novelist at The Willis Museum in a trend that is being dubbed 'the Jane Effect'.

After taking photos of the life-size bronze figure of Jane in the historic Market Place, literary fans have enjoyed a free exhibition - Retail and Romance: Jane Goes to the Ball - in the museum, which is run by Hampshire Cultural Trust.

The success of the Sitting With Jane art trail of 24 Austen-inspired BookBenches sited around the borough has also boosted the number of visitors to the town centre.

Visitor figures were up 80 per cent in July, with a daily average of 200 people at The Willis Museum, compared with around 80 visitors a day at quieter times.

The unveiling of the Jane sculpture on 18 July attracted huge crowds and widespread media coverage - The Willis Museum's Facebook video of the event has received more than 100,000 views.

Austen fans are being encouraged to take a selfie with the sculpture and post the photo at #LoveBasingstoke on Twitter or Facebook.

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council's Cabinet member responsible for arts and heritage Cllr Terri Reid said: "It has been thrilling to see the Top of the Town bustling with more visitors than ever before this summer.

"Jane Austen was born in the borough, spent more than half her life here and drafted some of her greatest works here.

"We are immensely proud of Jane's strong connection to Basingstoke and our cultural tributes to her legacy to mark the 200th anniversary of her death have captivated residents and visitors alike.

"By coming to see the marvellous sculpture of Jane in Market Square and finding out at the museum how Jane shopped and attended balls in the Top of the Town, we have really captured people's imaginations and, as a result, the area has thrived too.

"This 'Jane Effect' has allowed us to showcase the very best of what the borough has to offer and I hope it will encourage more people to visit very soon."

The Sitting with Jane art trail continues until 30 August, and the BookBenches will then be sold to the highest bidders at a prestigious auction event. This will be held on Friday 15 September at the Ark Conference Centre, Basingstoke, to raise vital funds for the Ark Cancer Centre Charity's £5million campaign in support of the new

local cancer treatment centre. The charity will receive 75 per cent of the proceeds raised at the auction. Find out more at <http://www.sittingwithjane.com/charity/>

The Top of the Town's traditional market continues to flourish on Wednesdays and Saturdays in Market Place and Wote Street. Look out for a new flower stall on both days at the beginning of September, and a fresh fish trader every Wednesday.

For more information on the market, and other events, see [www.topofthetown.org](http://www.topofthetown.org) or 'Like' and 'Follow' The Top of the Town – Basingstoke and Basingstoke market on Facebook and Twitter.