Founder's Hall: Heritage Reimagined
For Publication
JW Lees DBA Design Effectiveness Awards Entry
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SQUAD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly 200 years, JW Lees has built its reputation on brewing heritage and traditional pubs, strengthened by a rebrand in 2017 that modernised the brand identity but kept brewing firmly at the heart of the business. In 2023, JW Lees faced a unique challenge: transform Duttons, a struggling city-centre wine bar that was out of step with the brand, into a venue that felt undeniably JW Lees.

This wasn't just a refurbishment. We needed to find a way to take a brand focused on beer and brewing, with an estate of characterful and historic pubs, and create a contemporary venue that appeals to the expectations of a modern audience. The brief demanded something new, but born from the brand: a contemporary, beer-led venue that captured JW Lees' soul while thriving in one of the UK's most competitive hospitality markets.

DESIGN SOLUTION

The result was Founder's Hall: a flagship city-centre food and beer hall that brought the JW Lees' brand to life in a new environment. Through naming, layout, product visibility and warm, atmospheric interiors, the venue paid tribute to the brewery's heritage and personality while expressing the company's future.

Designed for social connection over food and drink, Founder's Hall redefined what a JW Lees venue could be in a modern context. The beer hall concept was adapted to meet operational needs, reinforce food appeal, and amplify the JW Lees beer portfolio at the bar.

Agency design fee: [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]

RESULTS

+70%

Profit vs target (from loss-making to profit)

>50%

[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA] Average drinks sales (on target nights), exceeding target
Proportion of all beer sales that are JW Lees (outperforming estate averages)

+66%

Total sales year-on-year

+21%

Sales vs budget

+90%

Guest satisfaction (NPS)

These results are testament to the success of Founder's Hall in honouring JW Lees' heritage while embracing a new setting and audience, as well as enticing customers to try their beers.
The effectiveness of the design not only reversed commercial decline — it set a bold template for how JW Lees can keep progressing in a changing world.

COMBINING BREWING HERITAGE WITH CITY-CENTRE HOSPITALITY

Our client, JW Lees, is a brewery and pub company with almost 200 years of brewing heritage that owns and operates over 150 pubs, inns and hotels across the North West, North Wales and Yorkshire. Our work with them began in 2016 when we were approached to update their brand and offering to better fit a 21st century hospitality business. Still based at their original Greengate Brewery site in Middleton, Manchester, their strong roots have always formed an integral part of their identity. However, the changing tastes of modern audiences had led to increasingly large competitor set, with contemporary bars and craft beer brands forming part of the landscape alongside other pubs.

Through research and consultation, we arrived at the strategy of putting the brewery back at the heart of business, being true to those who came before, but living for those yet to come. This vision shaped the positioning of JW Lees as 'the modern traditional brewer'. The brand became a celebration of their esteemed brewing history, as well as the historic spaces occupied by their pubs, inns and hotels. Further investment in their reputation as a beer brand and a revitalised identity across their pubs, meant brewing and beer became part of the fundamental fabric of both the business and the brand.

In late 2023, a new challenge presented itself: Duttons, a wine bar concept located on the ground floor of a modern office block in the heart of Manchester, a highly competitive area with over 650 licensed premises nearby.

At the time Duttons was conceived in 2013, the idea was to develop a new trading format to complement JW Lees' traditional pubs, one that would be more city-centre orientated with a focus on food, wine and cocktails to appeal to urban audiences.

This was also at a time before the rebrand, when their brand identity was less of a defining feature of their business model. Therefore, Duttons was given a separate brand and product offering to the rest of their estate. However, by 2023, it was running at a loss and had become commercially unsustainable, and it was out of step with the new, distinctive brewing-focused DNA of JW Lees.

The decision was made to replace Duttons with a new concept. One that would fully align with the JW Lees brand and put beer and brewing at the heart of the experience, while remaining suitable for a city centre location and appealing to the audiences that Duttons had been designed to target.

OBJECTIVES

Business goals:

1. Move the financial performance from loss-making to profitable, delivering a target of [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL 2. 3. 4. DATA].
2. Increase the penetration of the JW Lees beer portfolio to account for >50% of beer sales.
3. Deliver a brand-led experience that is true to the JW Lees brand, without alienating existing audiences.
4. A business model that continues to deliver growth following launch.

Launch date: February 2024.

OPPORTUNITY

The brief in a nutshell was simple: take Duttons and turn it into a venue that is not only profitable but is somewhere to be proud of as a homage to the JW Lees brewery and its beer. The ultimate place to enjoy a pint of JW Lees.

This was a fresh and unique opportunity for JW Lees that offered us the chance to:

- Reimagine a loss-making venue as a commercially successful home for their brand.
- Create a new format, adaptable for city-centre locations and audiences.
- Use the space to increase awareness of the JW Lees beer range.
- Showcase the seasonal ales and small batch beers from the JW Lees Boilerhouse microbrewery.
- Demonstrate how the brand can evolve, without sacrificing authenticity.

This was more than just an extension of the rebrand. It was the chance to turn around a failing site and to amplify the JW Lees brand in an urban context. But what made this particularly exciting for us was the opportunity to create a flagship venue— a temple to JW Lees brewing history, celebrating the best of their range.

CHALLENGE

How to create something born of the JW Lees DNA that would resonate with the modern urban audience?

To tackle this fundamental question, we would need to navigate multiple challenges:

- A defining feature of the JW Lees brand is its use of characterful, historic venues that celebrate place and personality.
- The modern architecture of the space meant using the standard branding concept would be a poor fit.
- Food, a key part of Duttons, would need special attention. Without it, we wouldn't be able to attract the audiences we needed.
- Duttons had a very different spatial layout from other JW Lees venues, meaning the seating plan and materials would be a key design consideration.
- Internally, we would have to navigate the differing views on what elements should be included.

DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

As well as the opportunities and challenges, we identified a series of specific requirements with JW Lees:

- Incorporate the full JW Lees beer range as hero products.
- Create a warm and welcoming environment using high-quality, yet practical elements.
- Avoid Manchester clichés and excessive extravagance.
- Account for the day-to-day operational needs (e.g. secure storage, resilience to wear and tear).

DESIGN SOLUTION

The opportunities and challenges meant that every aspect would need careful consideration — from name and branding, to interior and food.

STRATEGY AND CONCEPT

Discussions with key stakeholders uncovered different opinions on which elements should comprise a JW Lees flagship venue. What everyone agreed on, however, was that the venue needed to be an emporium — a space that could house these different elements and act as a temple to Manchester's finest brewery. An environment conducive to 'clank and chatter, banter and grub', laying the foundation for a brand-led experience.

The inspiration for our solution came from continental beer halls — temples to beer, complemented by perfectly paired food. They have the informal, unpretentious atmosphere of a pub, but first and foremost, they are places to chat. Furthermore, their interior design style is more suited to modern buildings. This concept of a food and beer hall provided the perfect focus for how we could recreate the atmosphere of a traditional pub, but in an inclusive, modern setting.

NAME

Our next task was to devise a name — a key touchpoint that should encapsulate everything about the concept. We knew the word 'Hall' would feature, but what to pair it with? As the ambition for the site was to be a temple to JW Lees' heritage, who better to honour in the name than their founder, John Lees. Founder's Hall became the name.

INTERIOR DESIGN

With the name decided, we turned our attention to the space and how to use it to showcase the brand. We had the advantage of being located only a few miles from Greengate Brewery, where we had access to a wealth of materials, artworks and ephemera amassed over the years from various JW Lees pubs and the brewery itself. By repurposing these items, we could celebrate the brand and heritage in a way that was truly and undeniably authentic.

BAR

The overall look and feel of the bar achieved the aim of creating a shrine to JW Lees' beers, thereby increasing their visibility. New 3D illuminated keg badges, bespoke keg and cask handles and eye-line height display showcased the full JW Lees range.

Handwritten beer chalkboards provided tasting notes on the JW Lees beers to inspire and educate customers. These could be regularly updated with rotational beers and draw attention to the JW Lees range.

SEATING

Flexible seating plans and table arrangements were introduced to cater for drinkers, as well as dining and larger parties. A beer-hall style layout brought our concept to life, catering for a broader audience than a traditional pub. Small details were added to enhance the brand experience, such as engraved wooden blocks and newspaper racks on the wall.

FOOD

As well as designing the menus for use in Founder's Hall, we worked with JW Lees to develop the food offering. We needed the ultimate food to go with a pint of JW Lees — with a focus on being simple and unpretentious but catering for a wide audience. Food to talk over, not about.

TEAM

Along with the extensive staff training programme provided by JW Lees, a new uniform was introduced for Founder's Hall. Burnt orange t-shirts with a white screen-printed logo, olive knee-length unbranded aprons, and black trousers matched the environment and helped create a more consistent brand experience.

RESULTS

1. MOVE THE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE FROM LOSS-MAKING TO PROFITABLE, DELIVERING A TARGET OF [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]

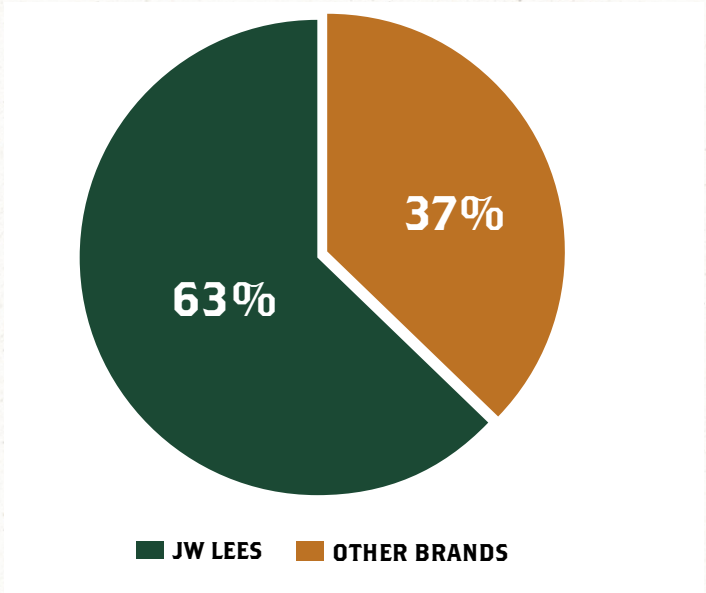
The site went from being loss-making to profitable within the space of a year.
The revitalised bar and food offering were key drivers of this, helping to strengthen sales for both food and drink when compared to the previous year.

- Sales were 66% higher than the previous year.
- Sales exceeded the budget by 21%.
- Total profit exceeded the target by 70%.

	ACTUAL	VS BUDGET	VS PREVIOUS YEAR
TOTAL SALES	[REDACTED CONFIDENTAL DATE]	+21%	+66%
DRINK SALES	[REDACTED CONFIDENTAL DATE]	+20%	+69%
FOOD SALES	[REDACTED CONFIDENTAL DATE]	+24%	+58%
PROFIT	[REDACTED CONFIDENTAL DATE]	+70%	WAS LOSS MAKING

Figure 1: Profit analysis (after one year of trading)

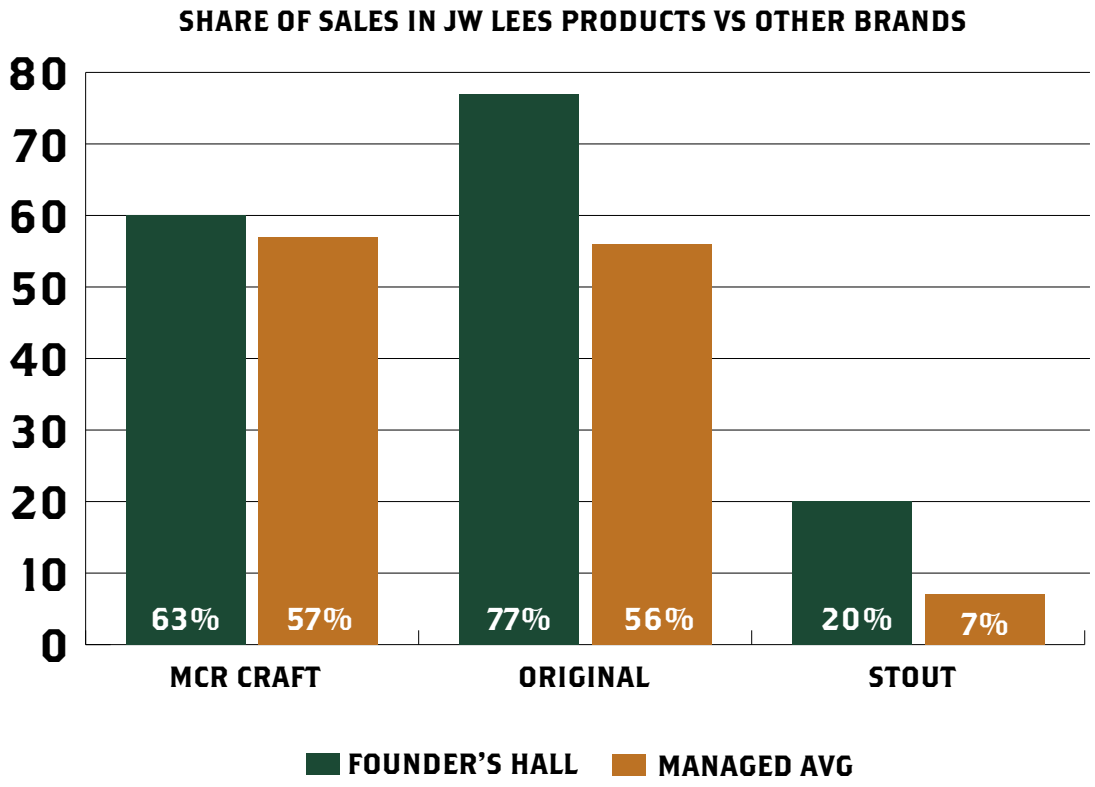
2. INCREASE THE PENETRATION OF THE JW LEES BEER PORTFOLIO TO ACCOUNT FOR >50% OF BEER SALES



By showcasing the full range of JW Lees beers, amplified by the design of the bar, sales of JW Lees' beers were significantly higher than other brands sold in Founder's Hall, accounting for the majority of sales.
This ensured JW Lees products became the key focus and helped to drive profitability.

Figure 2: Beer split of JW Lees vs other brands (March 2024 to March 2025)

Not only did Founder's Hall achieve its target as a venue, it outperformed other pubs within the managed estate in terms of sales of JW Lees' beers versus other brands, proving the effectiveness of the design at showcasing the brand's own beers.



	TOTAL	WEEKLY	FOUNDER'S HALL	JW LEES MANAGED ESTATE
MANCHESTER CRAFT LAGER (JW LEES)	15703	614	60%	57%
SAN MIGUEL	10466	409	40%	43%
ORIGINAL (JW LEES)	6459	253	77%	56%
CALSBERG PILSNER	1948	76	23%	44%
STOUT KEG (JW LEES)	1971	77	20%	7%
GUINNESS	8023	314	80%	93%

Figure 3: Sales of JW Lees beer vs other brands (March 2024 to March 2025) Share of sales in JW Lees products vs others brands

3. DELIVER A BRAND-LED EXPERIENCE THAT IS TRUE TO THE JW LEES IDENTITY, WITHOUT ALIENATING EXISTING AUDIENCES

Putting the brand at heart of the Founder's Hall experience was a fundamental design challenge, but to retain audiences, we needed a positive guest experience across a broader audience. Since the refurbishment and launch, Founder's Hall has enjoyed consistently high ratings on JW Lees' NPS guest reviews at +90%.

In online commentary, the elements from the project are clear drivers of the positive customer engagement, showing the broad appeal of Founder's Hall and its delivery of a beer-focused and authentic JW Lees experience.

Mar 2024 ★★★★★
Fantastic new pub
Large selection of fantastic drinks, great new layout and design, fabulous tasty food with friendly and welcoming staff. Located in the heart of Manchester, I look forward to visiting again!

May 2024 ★★★★★
Perfect for Pre-Theatre Dinner
Been here before but not since it changed to Founders Hall. Great choice for a pre-Theatre Dinner in relaxed surroundings. Good choice on the menu and our two mains were served by friendly staff. Would recommend for either a light bite or a full meal.

May 2024 ★★★★★
New place to visit
Popped in here on spec as it looked enticing and good to support independent brewers. So, the decor is wooden beer hall but different styles of tables. Beer choice was around 20 from memory so really good. The chestnut bitter that I had was pretty tasty - nutty enough - and reasonably priced. Glad I popped in!

July 2024 ★★★★★
Really enjoyed the newly refurbished JW Lees flagship bar.
(Used to be Duttons) Lots more choice of their own ales available and great decor with pictures showing JW Lees from many years ago.

Figure 4: Reviews from Tripadvisor and Google

4. A FORMAT THAT CONTINUES TO DELIVER GROWTH FOLLOWING LAUNCH

Founder's Hall continued to grow its revenue, with sales and profits rising steadily after its launch. After an initial rise in sales, a secondary target was set in August 2024 to grow sales [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA] on target days in October to December. The allowance for seasonal beer and food within the design meant Founder's Hall continued to grow in these months, and the target was not only achieved, but exceeded, demonstrating how a flexible approach allowed for continued growth.

- Drinks sales after 7pm on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from March to May 2024 were on average £1.7k per day.
- In August 2024 a target of £2k average for these days was set.
- Result: £2.1k average per day from October to December, exceeding the target.

OTHER INFLUENCING FACTORS

Significant building works have been ongoing at Manchester Town Hall, which sits opposite Founder's Hall on Albert Square. These commenced before the reopening and are still ongoing, causing disruption in the area around the site. If anything, this will have suppressed sales, meaning a further boost in performance can be expected once the square returns to normal.

Following the launch of Founder's Hall, a series of regular events have been hosted, including regular quiz nights, meet the brewer events, and live music. Whilst these undoubtedly have a positive impact on the commercial activity for Founder's Hall, similar events took place at Duttons, as well as at other JW Lees venues.

Similarly, promotional offers around food and drink were introduced and will have made a contribution to the figures. However, these offers are available at other JW Lees pubs and are a standard part of their pricing structure.

Therefore, whilst the impact of these factors should be considered, it cannot account for the strong performance Founder's Hall has demonstrated when compared to its performance as Duttons, not the specific instances where Founder's Hall has outperformed other JW Lees' venues.

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