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Star Pubs reopens Exeter pub after a £542,000 refurbishment

The two-year-closed site, renamed The Engine House, is Heineken UK’s largest Just Add Talent overhaul of 2026.

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Heineken UK’s pub arm has reopened a long-shuttered pub in Exeter after investing £542,000 in the property, marking the company’s largest refurbishment this year under its Just Add Talent operating model.

The pub, now called The Engine House, opened this week after being closed for two years. The site was previously known as the Angel. It sits near Exeter Central Station, and Star Pubs said the new name is meant to reflect both the building’s new direction and its location in the city.

The investment was made by Star Pubs, the Heineken-owned business that owns about 2,350 pubs across the UK. Around 240 of those, or about 10.2%, operate under Just Add Talent, known as JAT. Under that model, Star funds and controls the pub while an operator runs the business day to day.

The Exeter project is the 26th major JAT refurbishment completed by Star so far in 2026, according to the company. Star said it has been increasing the number of wet-led JAT sites this year, with about half of its new openings under the model focused mainly on drinks rather than food.

That approach is clear at The Engine House. The venue has been repositioned as a drink-led pub aimed at shoppers, workers and evening customers in Exeter city center. Its menu and bar offering center on premium lager, cocktails, and low- and no-alcohol options.

The refurbishment included exterior work on the 1870s building and a full redesign inside. The pub now has a public bar, a lounge area and a snug. New sound equipment has been installed, and drop-down tables were added to create more space for live music and late-night dancing.

The site will be run by Greg Gearing, 28, who started three years ago as a bar staff member at a JAT pub in London. Star said his appointment reflects a wider effort to move people through the business into operating roles.

Rob Clark, head of property at Star Pubs, said demand for newly refurbished pubs under the JAT format had been strong this year, especially at drink-led sites. He said the model gives first-time operators a way to gain experience running a pub with backing from the company.

Clark also said Star had developed internal training for staff who want to move up into more senior roles. He said the company wanted to promote from within and pointed to Gearing’s move from bar staff to operator as an example of that strategy.

On the building itself, Clark said Star tries to repeat design features that have worked elsewhere while still adapting each project to the needs of the individual property. In Exeter, he said the company aimed to create a modern pub for a younger late-night crowd without losing the character of the historic structure.

The reopening adds to a wider period of estate investment by Star Pubs. Earlier this year, the company announced a £6.69m program for garden and exterior improvements across 850 sites. It also carried out a £280,000 JAT refurbishment in Edinburgh. The Exeter project stands out among those investments because of its size within the JAT estate this year.

The move also comes at a time when Heineken’s pub business is reported to be in talks over a possible acquisition of around 300 Stonegate pubs in a deal that has been valued in reports at about £300m. If completed, such a transaction would significantly expand Heineken’s reach in the British on-trade market. The Exeter reopening is much smaller in scale, involving a single site, but it shows the company continuing to put capital into venues where it has direct control over investment, layout and operating model.

That matters because JAT gives Star closer oversight of how pubs are positioned and run than in a traditional leased arrangement. In a wet-led venue like The Engine House, that can shape the drinks mix and help support distribution of branded beer, premium lager and alcohol-free products. At the same time, the company has not disclosed sales targets, expected returns, employment numbers or beer volumes linked to the Exeter reopening, so the investment does not by itself show broader growth in the UK pub market.

What it does show is that Star continues to put money into sites that have been closed or underused, particularly in city locations where late-night and drinks-focused trading can be rebuilt around a new concept. Exeter, with a city-center location near a train station and a mix of office workers, visitors and nightlife traffic, fits that strategy.

The building had been closed for two years before reopening this week. By bringing it back to market as a renamed, refurbished JAT pub, Star is trying to turn a dormant property into a site that can capture city-center drinks trade across different parts of the day, from after-work customers to late-night visitors.

The company has given no indication of whether similar investment levels will be used on future JAT conversions this year, but its comments suggest it sees continued demand from operators for refurbished, drink-led pubs. In Exeter, that strategy has produced a reopened venue with a new identity, a younger target audience and a format closely aligned with Heineken’s managed pub model.