

Background to Somerset Carnival

Carnival is one of the most special and unique features of Somerset's autumn season. Every year more than 150,000 people visit Bridgwater carnival that is believed to be the largest illuminated carnival in the world. In addition to Bridgwater carnival there are another 21 carnivals during the season.

Each area is organised into carnival circuits, which are a friendly competition.

There is the Wessex Grand Prix Carnival circuit (which also encompasses a small bit of Wiltshire and Dorset) comprising the nine towns of Sturminster Newton, Trowbridge, Mere, Frome, Shaftesbury, Gillingham, Castle Cary, Wincanton and Warminster. The South Somerset Confederation Association circuit that comprises Wellington, Ilminster, Chard and Taunton. The County Guy Fawkes Association circuit which starts with Bridgwater carnival, quickly followed by North Petherton, Burnham – on – sea, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Glastonbury and Weston –super – mare.

There is also Midsomer Norton carnival with Yeovil carnival hoping to be resurrected this year.

Carnival clubs and groups travel many miles to line up and parade in colourful spectaculars that bring light, music and business to the towns. Most importantly, they also raise thousands of pounds each year for local charities and good causes.

There are at present over 50 carnival clubs with floats (known as carts) which are 100 foot in length. Some carts have two decks of performers with moving parts, turntables and other moving elements with excellent sound systems and up to 30,000 light bulbs. More carts are reducing the energy used by moving to energy saving bulbs and LED's. Creating carts of this size involves heavy engineering, electronics, carpentry, stage and costume design and the choreography of dance routines.

Carnival has a 400 history in Somerset beginning with bonfires and burning effigies of Guy Fawkes in Bridgwater. Torchlight processions followed therefore starting the tradition of 'carnival processions', which have developed over 400 years to the spectacular processions of today.



Other rural carnivals have a different history. For example Castle Cary began in 1920 to celebrate the return of soldiers, who were known as a "Tommy", from the First World War. These processions used decorated hay carts pulled by horses, lit by torchlight, and accompanied by walkers and like the original Bridgwater processions ended in a bonfire in November.



Carnival is a huge source of creativity, needing people of diverse talents to work together as a team. There are few organisations that encompass people from such diverse backgrounds and of all ages and who have such a wealth of creative talents, as carnival does.

If you visit Somerset in the autumn, you must be prepared and should not miss one of the world's best-kept secrets. i.e. illuminated carnival processions. The county can boast that it has the largest night time illuminated carnival processions any where in the world. It is estimated that a million spectators gather in the streets of carnival towns to see these giant parades with such spectacular all electric light shows and with performers producing a magical show worthy of a West End stage.