

Somerset illuminated carnival histories

A couple of the south-west illuminated carnivals can be directly traced back to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Many carnivals have had several incarnations, and this piece mainly refers to the present incarnation of each illuminated carnival, rather than related carnivals in that town which may have taken place before (for example, Burnham-on-Sea carnival in its present incarnation started in 1967, but there was a previous Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea carnival which ran from 1945-1960). Most, if not all, carnivals lapsed during the war years. Therefore the numbers in the third column of the tables refer to the anniversary of the first carnival held in the current incarnation rather than the actual number of carnivals held, as there have been gaps in all of the carnivals.

The origins of carnival vary between different towns in the south-west but can usually be linked to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, to end of war celebrations following both the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 wars, to fundraising for a local facility such as a hospital or a community centre, or to a local enlightened individual who decided to establish a community carnival. If any readers have information on the origins of Wells, Wellington, Ilminster, Gillingham, Trowbridge or Warminster carnivals then please get in contact with CISPP. CISPP would also be interested to hear of any of the histories of the East Devon illuminated carnival circuit carnivals.

Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association

The Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association was formed on Saturday 10th February 1951. Rules for judging and points awarded were made uniform between carnivals and safety and standards were also made uniform. The original affiliated carnivals were Spaxton, Bridgwater, North Petherton, Minehead, Highbridge, Wells, Midsomer Norton and Glastonbury. By 1954 Spaxton had left the circuit and this was the last year that Minehead was included. By 1961 Midsomer Norton left the circuit. For several decades, the seven affiliated carnivals have been Bridgwater, North Petherton, Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Glastonbury, and Weston-super-Mare. This long-standing sequence will change for the 2012 season for at least a three year trial period.

*The oldest carnival in the UK, **Bridgwater** carnival can be directly traced back to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (405 years), but the first carnival officially organised by a committee is more recently in 1881 (130 Years). The famous Cornhill bonfire was central to the celebrations from 1605 until 1924 (319 years). The first carnival concert was staged in 1883 initially as a one-off event to fund the celebrations of the opening of the River Parrett*

Bridge, but has continued to this day (128 years). The squibbing arguably predates the carnival itself and continues today.

North Petherton carnival started in 1949 because in 1948 local resident Mr. Bunny Wheatley formed the North Petherton Carnival Club initially to enter Bridgwater carnival. Shortly after, the club decided to concentrate on the revival of North Petherton carnival and in December 1948 it became the 'North Petherton Guy Fawkes Carnival'. The date was fixed for 5th November 1949, and it has continued ever since.

The first Highbridge carnival was organised by the Welcome Home Fund for the forces at the end of the Second World War in 1945. It consisted of a procession, giant bonfire and a squibbing display in the town square. The event was abandoned in 1947 and in 1948 the carnival committee decided to revive the event. In 1953 a Coronation Day Ball was added to the event. In 1960 the last Highbridge carnival was held as the event had suffered financial losses and it was apparent that there was a distinct lack of carnival interest in the town. However, in 1967 the event was revived as the Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea carnival.

Shepton Mallet carnival started in 1965, and celebrates its 46th anniversary in 2011. A group of enthusiastic volunteers decided to arrange a carnival at a meeting on 9th June 1965 to assist the Local Community Association who at the time was working hard to raise funds for the purchase of a community centre. In 1978 the decision was made to no longer contribute money to the community centre fund as it had become apparent that it would not be built.

The first carnival in Midsomer Norton was held on Friday 12th November 1948. The current generation of Midsomer Norton carnival was initiated in 1975. Midsomer Norton was part of the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association between 1952 and 1961, but is now an independent illuminated carnival.

Wells city carnival was first held in 1902 and celebrated its centenary in 2002. The event lapsed during the 1939-1945 war and was revived in 1946.

Glastonbury carnival celebrations can be dated back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. Records show that in the 1840s bonfires and a carnival were organised by the 'bonfire boys'. In 1854 an organised procession took place on 5th November. In 1891, the bonfire boys and a new organisation known as the Glastonbury and District Carnival Club held separate carnivals on 5th November. Until the 1920s there were only feeble carnival celebrations and a lack of processions. 1920 was the turning point in the attitude towards Glastonbury carnival celebrations. Old timers at the Rifleman's Arms in Chilkwell Street were stirred to form and reorganise the carnival and a committee was established: 'Chilkwell Guy Fawkes Carnival'.

In 1921 the carnival was restarted which remains today in this format. Between 1939 and 1945 there was no carnival due to the Second World War. In 1946 the Glastonbury and Chilkwell Guy Fawkes Carnival recommenced. In 1963 the committee decided they could not organise a carnival as the combined loss of the two previous carnivals was £90, carnival assets were less than £80, and the cost of producing the 1963 carnival would be around £300. However, on 22nd November it was decided by local carnivalites and members of the public that a carnival of sorts would be held. Several hundred people turned out to see members of the King William Carnival Club and Wick Carnival Club stage the event. King William paraded the carnival queen and Mr Ian Underwood was carnival queen! Wick entered 'Fiesta Time' and Lime Kiln Carnival Club of Bridgwater took part, and £100 was collected thus saving the carnival. There were still hard times by 1965 but collection methods were subsequently improved, and the carnival survives until this day.

Original carnival lapsed in Weston-super-Mare in 1913 with world war threatening. Attempts were made in 1925 to revive it, but 1937 saw its disappearance again due to impending war. 1969 saw the formation of a committee from the Lions Club of Weston-super-Mare who pushed through a plan to revive the event. With the co-operation of the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association, the town was allowed to be number seven on the circuit as the newest carnival.

| <i>Carnival</i> | <i>First held in present form</i> | <i>Number of years since first carnival</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Bridgwater</i> | <i>1881 (1605)</i> | <i>130</i> |
| <i>North Petherton</i> | <i>1949 (1880s)</i> | <i>62</i> |
| <i>Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea</i> | <i>1967 (1945)</i> | <i>44</i> |
| <i>Shepton Mallet</i> | <i>1965</i> | <i>46</i> |
| <i>(Midsomer Norton)</i> | <i>1975 (1948)</i> | <i>36</i> |
| <i>Wells</i> | <i>1902</i> | <i>109</i> |
| <i>Glastonbury</i> | <i>1922 (at least 1854)</i> | <i>89</i> |
| <i>Weston-super-Mare</i> | <i>1969 (before 1913)</i> | <i>42</i> |

South Somerset Federation

Around 1970, Chard, Ilminster, Taunton and Wellington formed the South Somerset Federation, and Yeovil was admitted at a later date until it was last held in 2005. Although the town parades have been going longer, the federation was formed to provide a competition for the best entries from the five towns taking part with an overall federation winner in addition to the individual town results. The federation was formed by Bob Hurlstone of Ilminster and Colin Critchard of Taunton.

| <i>Carnival</i> | <i>First held in present form</i> | <i>Number of years since first carnival</i> |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Wellington</i> | <i>Not known</i> | |
| <i>Ilminster</i> | <i>Not known</i> | |
| <i>Chard</i> | <i>1967</i> | <i>44</i> |
| <i>Taunton</i> | <i>1966 (at least 1814)</i> | <i>45</i> |

Wellington carnival and Ilminster carnival were both founder members of the South Somerset Federation in the early 1970s.

Chard carnival was revived in its current format in 1967 after a meeting of the League of Friends and Chard Youth Centre representatives to discuss ways in which to raise money for the respective groups. Gerald Quick, Mervyn Ball, Tom Miller and Wendy Clulow decided that the best option would be to revive Chard Carnival after a break of 13 years. The proceeds of the first carnival were divided between the two organisations. The carnival was in danger of collapse in the mid-1980s, but new committee members ensured its future and the carnival celebrated its 25th consecutive year in 1991. The carnival celebrated its 43rd year in 2010 and has risen over £85,000 for local charities and organisations, including Chard Christmas Lights, Children's Hospice South West, Chard Hospital and all the local schools.

Taunton carnival can be traced to the Taunton Festival of 22nd June 1814 to celebrate Peace in Europe and the end of the Napoleonic Wars. On 5th November 1868, a gang of boys paraded a 'guy' dressed to represent Serjeant Cox, Lord of Taunton Deane Manor, and then burned it before the house of a prominent Conservative in the town! The Taunton Bonfire Boys organised a grand walking procession in fancy dress on 5th November 1883. The first modern carnival was staged on 15th October 1891 by Taunton's cyclists in aid of the funds of Taunton and Somerset Hospital, and the torchlight procession included 130 riders. Thereafter the carnival continued

annually with a gap in 1885. The September 1913 carnival revived the torchlight procession, and was a regular feature apart from the war years, and again was resurrected in the postwar period in June 1953. Therefore, the town has had many attempts at staging an annual carnival procession. However, they never survived as long as the current series of processions which commenced in 1966 to celebrate the jubilee of the National Savings Movement. It was the brainchild of the late Councillor H.V. Ellis and was organised by the Gala Celebrations Committee and staged in July. This was so well received that locally that it was decided to continue the entertainment on an annual basis, and the Taunton Carnival Committee was born at a meeting on 23rd September 1966. These arrangements continued on an annual basis until 1971, when difficulty was experienced in finding organisers for the various events. The committee considered moving the date of the procession from the summer to the autumn, and decided that the 1972 procession should be held on 21st October. Since then, Taunton carnival has been on the third Saturday in October.

Wessex Grand Prix

The Wessex Grand Prix Carnival Circuit celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2010. It was the brainchild of Keith Berry of Frome Carnival Association and Gordon Stockman of Castle Cary Carnival Society. Seeking to support and encourage local carnivals, Keith Berry made approaches to Shaftesbury and Gillingham carnival committees in the early 1980s, with a proposal to form a new circuit of carnivals. Keith respected that each carnival town had its own character, and that this needed to be preserved, but the formation of a circuit remained a pipedream. In 1985, Keith Berry met Gordon Stockman whilst judging at Midsomer Norton carnival. Gordon was inspired by Keith's concept and together they arranged meetings with local carnival committees. The circuit was based on the Formula 1 racing principle, so that the circuit was a supplemental competition over and above local competitions to encourage clubs and carnivalites from each town entering the circuit to compete for another range of awards. The formation of the circuit would not affect existing local carnival town awards and judging. In 1986 the Wessex Grand Prix circuit was established with the member carnivals being Frome, Shaftesbury, Mere, Castle Cary and Wincanton. Such was the success of the circuit that Gillingham carnival joined, followed by Warminster and Trowbridge shortly after. Sturminster Newton carnival also joined the circuit in 2003, although Wincanton was last held in 2009, and the sequence of carnivals changed in 2010.

Sturminster Newton carnival started in August 1951 to mark the Festival of Britain. A few traders and citizens organised a procession of decorated carts with people in fancy dress. This proved to very popular in the town

and so it was decided that the money raised from the street collection during the procession should be used to repeat the event the following year. This too was very successful both socially and financially - around £100 was raised, a considerable sum for the time. However, it was felt that the responsibility and financial risk should not fall on a few citizens, so the £100 was given to the Town Council who formed an organising committee to arrange the event. From then on, any money raised from the event was handed to an independent committee of 'trustees' to be distributed to local charities and organisations. The committee extended the carnival to a week of varied events culminating with the evening procession.

Mere carnival dates back to 1920 just after the end-of-war celebrations. The old Rutter shield confirms this which is now in the town museum. It is currently second in the sequence of eight parades on the Wessex Grand Prix circuit having being one of the founder members.

In 1927 staff at the Butler and Tanner factory in Frome were discussing the fantastic Bristol Rag Parade and decided to hold one in Frome. In the September, Frome had its first Rag Parade and a profit of £50 was divided equally between the Victoria Hospital and the Queens Nurses. A second parade was held the following year along with a dance which was held in the new Memorial Hall. A profit of £60 was divided as in the previous year. It was then decided that an annual event should be held called 'carnival', and the support of local organisations and leading citizens of the town was enlisted. The minutes show that the first committee meeting was held on 28th June 1929 in the Victoria Hospital. The first carnival was held on 28th September, three months after the initial meeting.

Shaftesbury carnival celebrates its 134th year in 2011, having started in 1877. It started with the Bonfire Boys torchlight procession through the town from the hospital and down the High Street and possibly back again. All of the funds raised went to the hospital so it was known as the hospital carnival for many years.

It is understood that in Castle Cary in 1919, a carnival procession was planned for 1920 to celebrate the return of soldiers (Tommys) from the First World War. The carnival in Castle Cary continued as torchlight processions until the recession in the 1930s. In 1976, Maureen Higgins approached the Town Council, Hazel Merrifield, and Sue and Gordon Stockman to resurrect the carnival on 5th November to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 and it has continued ever since in October.

Until 2010, Trowbridge had been the first or second parade on the Wessex Grand Prix circuit, having joined in the late 1980s. From 2010 it has occupied the slot previously taken by the now defunct Wincanton carnival.

Warminster has been holding regular carnivals for over a century. Warminster carnival is the last illuminated parade on the Wessex Grand Prix circuit, which it joined in the late 1980s. The week preceding the carnival features several events promoting and funding the grand parade. The fun fair also visits the town at this time, occupying the central car park.

| <i>Carnival</i> | <i>First held in present form</i> | <i>Number of years since first carnival</i> |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Sturminster Newton</i> | <i>1951</i> | <i>60</i> |
| <i>Mere</i> | <i>1920</i> | <i>91</i> |
| <i>Frome</i> | <i>1927</i> | <i>84</i> |
| <i>Shaftesbury</i> | <i>1877</i> | <i>134</i> |
| <i>Gillingham</i> | <i>Not known</i> | |
| <i>Castle Cary</i> | <i>1977 (1920)</i> | <i>34</i> |
| <i>Trowbridge</i> | <i>Not known</i> | |
| <i>Warminster</i> | <i>Not known</i> | |

Andrew Tallon, March 2011