

Somerset Carnivals: The Economic, Social and Cultural Benefits

Illuminated carnivals in Somerset, as well as those in the adjoining counties of Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon, have been a key element of the economic, social and cultural fabric of many rural communities for over 400 years. Dating from the celebrations following the failure of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, carnival has evolved from ad hoc street celebrations and bonfires to the spectacular organised parades witnessed today which typically consist of over 50 illuminated floats plus around 50 masquerading walking entries taking over two hours to pass. It is estimated that there are around 220 traditional 'English' carnivals still taking place, which can be differentiated from English 'African-Caribbean style' carnivals that have originated from the immigration of black communities to the UK, exemplified by the Notting Hill carnival. There are currently around 30 illuminated carnivals in south-west England, the most famous being the 'magnificent seven' of the Somerset County 'Guy Fawkes' circuit in November. These parades have important economic, social and cultural benefits for the area, although there are a number of threats to the future of these spectacular and unique parades.

Each year it is estimated that the local economy benefits to the tune of up to £40 million during the carnival season which lasts from late August until mid-November. Local businesses within the service sector benefit, particularly accommodation suppliers, retailers, pubs and other leisure facilities. Around £120,000 is raised from street collections during the parades which goes towards the cost of staging the carnivals with the rest being donated to local charities and voluntary organisations. In excess of £2 million has been raised from these collections alone since 1980. In addition, clubs and committees fundraise and spend in the local economy the whole year around.

Carnival is also a social way of life for many people and communities across the south west of England which revolves around carnival-related and other events throughout the year. It is estimated that over 10,000 people are actively involved in carnival, including those in clubs, on committees, and those who act as helpers. 'Carnivalites' (as people involved in carnival are locally called) are committed all year round, taking part in fundraising activities, building of the carnival entries, running and attending social and awards events, and stewarding and participating in local events such as Glastonbury Festival. Through these activities, people of all ages and social backgrounds learn and develop an array of practical, team working, and social skills and attributes. These encompass a wide range of fields such as engineering, electrics, carpentry, painting, costume making, performance arts, public speaking, administration, and accountancy. An average club member can spend anything up to 1000 hours a year involved in carnival-related activities.

Carnival also has a rich cultural tradition. Due to their historic roots amongst communities themselves, the illuminated carnivals remain bottom-up community-led events. Carnival is a tradition which glues communities together and is organised by and predominantly for these communities on an entirely voluntary basis. This is in contrast to the majority of other carnivals and festivals in the UK which are funded and run by local authorities with other generous public and private sponsorship. Usually city centre-based events, these have much more recent origins based on economic regeneration rather than cultural tradition and heritage.

Despite their recognised importance amongst local communities, the public sector and local businesses, the illuminated carnivals face a variety of threats to their future vitality and viability. The economic downturn is affecting carnival clubs, as floats can cost up to £20,000 to put on the road when considering construction materials, fuel, tractor and generator hire, costume and make-up costs, and insurance and health and safety costs. Carnival organising committees face similar outgoings, which include insurance, licences, barriers, road signs and prize money, and can total between £10,000 and £30,000 annually. Illuminated carnivals receive little in the way of private sponsorship and limited financial support from public sector bodies, and thus rely on fundraising activities and voluntary donations. Committees and clubs also face the burden of ever-increasing levels of bureaucracy associated with health and safety, various licences, and compliance measures before they can enter the carnivals. In addition, there are problems with enthusing the younger generation to get involved in carnival in the age of the internet and other competing interests. Clubs are also losing the older generation over time meaning a shortage of members in many clubs, some of which have subsequently folded.

In the 2009 season, 58 different carnival floats appeared in the seven Somerset county processions along with around 50 walking entries. Although the standard today is undoubtedly of much greater quality than in past decades, this number compares with 90 floats in the early 1990s. Some smaller towns and villages have lost many or all of their carnival clubs which had acted as a focal point of

their local communities and as a pastime for many of their residents. However, carnival as a tradition has survived threats from officialdom since the mid-19th century, and has come through many past economic downturns and other events.

Illuminated carnivals continue to thrive and contribute to the rich tapestry of traditional festivals in the south-west of England, and continue to have economic, social and cultural significance for the life of a largely rural area. Carnival has been celebrated and central to many of our communities for over 400 years, and with continued support and appreciation, they will be for the foreseeable future.

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