

CARNIVALS IN SOMERSET PROMOTION PROJECT

West Country Illuminated Carnivals

Their Economic, Social and Cultural Importance

Illuminated night-time carnivals in Somerset, as well as those in the adjoining counties of Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon (comprising the West Country of England), have been a key element of the economic, social and cultural fabric of many rural communities for 419 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 around 50 illuminated floats (locally referred to as carts) plus around 50 masquerading walking entries, taking over two hours to pass any spot on each parade route of around 2 miles. It is estimated that there are around 220 traditional 'English' carnivals still taking place, which can be differentiated from 'African-Caribbean style' carnivals that originated from the immigration of black communities to the UK, exemplified by the Notting Hill carnival. There are currently around 40 illuminated carnivals in the West Country, the most famous being the 'magnificent seven' of the Somerset County 'Guy Fawkes' circuit annually held in November. These parades have important economic, social and cultural benefits for the area, although there remain a number of contemporary threats to the future of these spectacular and unique parades including periodic economic downturns, difficulty in attracting new members, and increased costs and rules and regulations.

Each year it is estimated that the local economy benefits to the tune of around £40 million during the carnival season which lasts from June until December. For example, research has shown that Bridgwater Carnival is worth an estimated £4 million annually to the local economy comprising £2 million during the weekend of the carnival and a further £2 million from carnival related activities throughout the year. Local businesses within the service sector benefit, particularly accommodation providers, retailers, pubs and other leisure facilities. In addition, local specialist creative industry businesses and suppliers benefit from business with carnival clubs and committees. In 2023, an estimated 400,000 people watched the seven county carnivals. Over £100,000 is raised from street collections during the parades (for example, around £102,000 was raised from the seven county carnivals in 2023), which is contributed directly towards the cost of staging the carnivals, with the significant remainder being donated to local charities and voluntary organisations. In excess of £2 million has been raised from these collections alone since 1980. Between 1982 and 2023, £892,584 has been collected at Bridgwater Carnival and shared between chosen local charities and community groups. In addition, clubs and committees fundraise and spend in the local economy generating all-year-round economic impacts. Carnival is undoubtedly an important economic contributor to the West Country economy, which is largely based on tourism, and which should be all the more valued in an uncertain economic context. The Covid-19 pandemic prevented the usual carnival seasons taking place in 2020 and 2021, though carnival has proved resilient and returned to normality for the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

Carnival is also of social and cultural importance to individuals and communities across the illuminated carnival counties. It is estimated that over 10,000 people are actively involved in the art form of carnival, including those in clubs, on committees, and those who act as helpers. 'Carnivalites' (as people involved in carnival are locally called) are committed to carnival 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. People of all ages and social backgrounds are represented in carnival; it is not exclusive to any particular group in society and is entirely inclusive of any individual who wishes to join a club or committee, or who wants to enter into the events. Through carnival activities, those involved learn and develop an array of practical, team working, and social skills and attributes which encompass a wide range of fields such as engineering, electrics, carpentry, painting, costume making, performance arts, public speaking, event organisation, media, administration, and accountancy. An average club member can spend anything up to 1000 hours a year involved in carnival-related activities. Any future decline or loss of individual carnivals or clubs would result in many people of all ages losing their principal social, cultural and leisure time activity in a largely rural community.

Carnival has a rich cultural tradition almost unparalleled within the UK. Stemming from their historic roots among communities themselves, the illuminated carnivals have a tradition of being bottom-up and community-led events, which they remain today. Carnival is a tradition which glues communities together and is organised by, and predominantly for, these communities on an entirely voluntary basis, which is also of increasing interest to visitors from within and beyond the West Country, exemplified by the Jubilation cart entered into the Queen's Jubilee Pageant of 2022. This contrasts with many other carnivals and festivals in the UK which are funded and run by local authorities (sometimes with other public and private sponsorship) or entirely by private enterprises with a profit motive. Usually city centre-based, rather than small town or rural events, these have much more recent origins based on economic regeneration rather than on cultural tradition, creativity and heritage. West Country illuminated carnivals remain entirely authentic and community-oriented annual public events with limited public or private support, however the Heritage Fund and Arts Council England have made significant, appreciated and hard won contributions to carnival over the last decade, particularly for Bridgwater carnival's celebrations. The government's Culture Recovery Fund also supported Bridgwater carnival and clubs post-Covid.

Despite their recognised importance among local communities, the public sector and local businesses, illuminated carnivals continue to face a variety of threats to their future vitality and viability, which have now been ongoing for decades. The economic uncertainty of the 2020s continue to affect carnival clubs, as carnival carts can cost up to around £30,000 to put on the road (with an average of around £10,000) when accounting for 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, event infrastructure and prize money, and these can additionally total between £10,000 and £30,000 annually. There is also the challenge of enthusing the younger generation to participate in carnival in the age of digital technology and other competing interests. Clubs are also losing the older generation over time meaning a shortage of members in many clubs, many of which have subsequently folded, as well as within organising committees. Securing land or sheds for cart building is increasingly problematic, with the

future seemingly being in purpose-built 'carnival parks' for multiple clubs such as those in Bridgwater and Glastonbury; the former has Town Deal finance for redevelopment from late 2024 and the latter carnival park celebrated its 21st anniversary in 2021. The South Somerset Federation is continuing to attempt to secure the development of a carnival park.

In the 2023 season, 42 different carnival carts (compared with 49 pre-pandemic in 2019) appeared in the seven Somerset county processions along with around 40 different walking entries. Although the overall standard today is undoubtedly of greater quality than in past decades, this number compares with 90 carts 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 for their local communities and as a pastime for many of their residents. Additionally, annual carnivals in Yeovil and Crewkerne have finished, with other town carnivals currently under severe financial pressure along with lack of volunteer organisers. However, Wincanton carnival was resurrected in 2015 and there has been a resilience and rebound amongst carnival entrants and committees following the Covid pandemic.

Illuminated carnivals continue to contribute to the rich tapestry of traditional and creative festivals in the West of England, and continue to have highly significant economic, social and cultural impacts for the life of a largely rural area. Carnival has been celebrated and central to many Somerset communities for almost 420 years, and with continued support and appreciation, they can be for the foreseeable future, with an impressive resilience and revival following the pandemic and into the mid-2020s.

To contribute to the future survival and success of West Country Carnivals, the Carnivals in Somerset Promotion Project has, since 2009, aimed to:

- (1) Promote the historical and contemporary importance of the unique West Country illuminated carnivals.
- (2) Disseminate an interactive carnival exhibition so that communities can experience the heritage and culture of West Country illuminated carnivals.
- (3) Create educational and entertaining DVDs to portray and promote the carnival experience.
- (4) Stimulate tourism through West Country illuminated carnivals.
- (5) Develop partnerships with interested groups to ensure the future of West Country illuminated carnivals.

For more information, visit or contact us through: www.cispp.org.uk.

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