

Heritage Weekend 2017 and the involvement of the Guildford Heritage Forum

Gavin Morgan 10th September 2017



This year, the Guildford Heritage Forum contributed to the well organised and well established Heritage Weekend in Guildford. Our role was simply to "bang the drum" and promote the amazing array of events staged by the Borough, Guildford Society and Guildford Guides and sponsored by Thesis Asset Management and Visit Guildford. We organised a procession up the High Street to advertise the event and a childrens trail to encourage families to explore the various sites open.

I have long been interested in the potential of heritage to bring people together, create a sense of community and benefit the local economy. Heritage weekend ticks all these boxes so I was keen to get involved.

As you will know, every September historic buildings across the country open their doors to the public as part of Heritage Open Day (<http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk>). With over 100 properties to see, Guildford puts on one of the largest events in the country and is usually in the top five. It is one of things our Borough Council does very well and it is a great example of how partnerships with the community can really work.

The event is organised by the Borough, Guildford Guides and the Guildford Society. The Borough funds the impressive free booklet and co-ordinates the event whilst the guides and Guildford Society organise an amazing army of volunteers to open so many properties. I must say, it was a pleasure to work with everyone. They have been doing this for years and have a well-oiled machine but were very encouraging and willing to try my idea for a procession and trail to promote the event in the High Street.



And it worked! But that was due primarily to a great set of people who agreed to take part. I hoped that the bulk of the procession would be made up of Historia Normania, a medieval re-enactment group who come every year. My hope for half a dozen was completely blown away when 26 people turned up having journeyed from as far away as Portsmouth and Bedford. They are a great bunch who not only bring medieval fighting to life but are incredibly knowledgeable and interested in the social life of the period when Guildford Castle was at its height. We are so lucky to have them and I hope the town builds its relations with them.



Next there were actors from Senior Wyche Productions providing fun and colour dressed as Alice in Wonderland characters. Members of the Queen's Regiment re-enactment group at Henley Fort joined us as did the Scouts serving teas up the Guildhall. Margaret Jackson from the museum had created a banner for the procession and we were led by Jez Smith, a musician from the Weald and Downland Museum playing medieval bagpipes.



At 11am the Town Crier rang his bell and we marched onto High Street making as much noise as possible. I introduced us and promoted many of the events going on before we proceeded up the High Street sweeping a fair number of people up to Holy Trinity. Here the Surrey Ukeholics entertained the crowds with a lively repertoire of songs.

In addition to the procession my contribution was a children's trail which went around the main sites and tried to promote all the venues to people. Of course, the procession was just a small part of a

very impressive event put on by volunteers and council employees. The effort that goes into putting up banners, bunting and balloons as well as organising people to attend the various sites across four days is breath-taking. There are also talks, guided walks and activities across the borough.



In between the procession I had a look round the town and two places summed the occasion for me. The Victorian schoolroom in Castle Street was buzzing with parents, grandparents and children playing with a host of replica Victorian toys. Upstairs, in the classroom, children were sitting at desks colouring pictures. The schoolroom provides an interactive experience for old and young without the need for any modern display techniques. Just up the road, Historia Normanis were busy with crowds watching their re-nactments or just talking about medieval life in the tent village they had created.

My instinct had been proved correct. History, when brought alive, can provide unique experiences that will attract people in numbers. But it was also clear that there is a there is a wealth of committed people with experience and enthusiasm who will come forward and help make events like this a success. The Guildford Heritage Forum was set up to bring people like this together to explore ways in which heritage can help make Guildford a great place to live and work. From what I saw on Saturday there is plenty to build upon and I look forward the year ahead.