

**BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM**



The Gremlins Carnival Club "The Ghost Ship"

BRIDGWATER CARNIVAL

The celebration dates back to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The purpose nowadays is to raise money for local charities.

The original Bridgwater celebrations consisted of a large bonfire at the Cornhill. Built out of a large wooden boat, around one hundred tar barrels were added, together with just about anything else available which could be burned. This tradition was stopped in 1925 due to the damage the fire would cause to surface of the tar-macadamed road which was introduced then.

Effigies or "guys" representing the gunpowder plot instigators were added to the fire by local groups of people known as gangs. It would seem it was these gangs who started the trend towards a procession, as they paraded their guys towards the bonfire. As years passed by, the tradition

was continued and the annual celebration became more and more elaborate, involving costumes, and music, until the key feature of the event was a large carnival procession.

The local people who dressed up and took part in the event were known as Masqueraders or Features - terms still used today to describe the parade participants.

There were no parades during the Second World War, but a local carnival enthusiast William Henry Edwin Lockyer also known as "Nosey" walked the carnival route for six years with a group known as The Kilties, to keep the tradition alive.

Squibbing

In addition to the carnival procession, the tradition of "squibbing" still occurs after the procession ends. A squib locally is a firework which is held aloft by a person known as a "squibber" on the end of a long wooden handle called a "cosh". One

hundred squibbers stand in line in Bridgwater town centre making an unusual but impressive sight for visitors who crowd the High Street.



Squibbing on the High Street

Originally the squibs were made specially for the carnival and were known as the Bridgwater Squib, and culminated with a large bang as each squib extinguished. With modern Health and Safety concerns it has become difficult to purchase such squibs, and owing to the rising cost of insurance the present-day squibs have no bang.

Lines of flammable liquid are also run along the ground by the squibbers and lit to add to the spectacle. Visitors often think the whole sight looks a little dangerous, but the event is well organised and nobody has been hurt to date.

Modern times

The Bridgwater carnival was first modernised in 1881 and was originally lit by oil lamps; electric lights were first introduced in 1913.

Bridgwater Carnival now consists of a display of over 40 large vehicles up to 100 feet (30 m) long, festooned with dancers and up to 22,000 light bulbs, that follows a 2.5-mile (4 km) route over two to three hours. 2005 included the Masquerade 2000 entrants from Notting Hill Carnival.

Bridgwater now attracts around 150,000 people from around the West Country, UK and globally. Parking from the M5 is well

signposted and plentiful, and managed by the committee in association with Avon and Somerset Police. Public access grandstands were introduced in the mid-1990s, which have increased in popularity over recent years.

The carnival's purpose is to raise money for local charities from money collection carts in the procession. Between 2003 and 2007, around £115,000 was raised at Bridgwater Carnival.

In 2010, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the Carnival in Somerset Promotion Project £41,000 to promote and conserve carnival heritage. The project aims to raise awareness of the history of the carnivals within schools and the local community.

On the 5th July 2022 a special cart from Bridgwater was paraded through London in the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Pageant.

Calendar changes

The Bridgwater carnival had traditionally been held on Bonfire night, or 5 November. This was then formalised in 1919 after the First World War, as the carnival circuits were formed to be held on the first Thursday of November – Thursday was traditionally early closing day for shops in Bridgwater. From 2012, Bridgwater Carnival is held on the first Saturday in November.

Carnival concerts

The carnival concerts take place in the weeks leading up to the carnival. At these concerts, carnival clubs perform on stage wearing their costumes. After being poorly patronised for a period, the carnival concert has become a highly popular attraction in recent years, with tickets to see the event in Bridgwater Town Hall on the High Street selling out very quickly – partly due to increased publicity, and partly as the popularity of the carnival increases it is an easy access way to see the carnival over

more days



A recent concert

Carnival circuit

The Bridgwater carnival was the first carnival of its type, however other carnival processions within the South West began some years ago. They start in late August and continue until late November. The oldest and largest circuit is the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association Circuit which starts at Bridgwater, with many of the carts appearing in all of the carnivals.

The four circuits are:

East Devon Circuit: Seaton; Colyton; Axminster; Sidmouth; Newton Poppleford; Exmouth; Ottery St Mary; Honiton.

Wessex Grand Prix Circuit: Sturminster Newton; Mere; Frome; Shaftesbury; Gillingham; Castle Cary & Ansford; Trowbridge; Warminster

South Somerset Federation Of Carnival Committees Circuit: Wellington; Ilminster; Chard; Taunton;

Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association: Bridgwater; North Petherton; Burnham-on-Sea; Shepton Mallet; Wells; Glastonbury & Chilkwell; Weston-super-Mare

There is one unofficial carnival in the circuit, the Midsomer Norton carnival. There is also a series of carnivals, including Blandford Forum; Melksham; Salisbury; South Brent; South Petherton; and Topsham.

Carts and floats

Uniquely in the West Country, the

vehicles are called carts, unlike other carnivals where the term carnival float is used. The term cart is still used today to describe the large and elaborate trailers used in the procession. Carts are built by local clubs of individuals funded totally by charitable donations and sponsorship from local businesses.

Carts are always themed, with no restriction on the theme from the organising committee. Regularly chosen themes include:

Popular children's books; favourite children's characters;

Scenes or themes from history; Scenes or themes from around the world; Travel and transport; Popular themes of the day; The future or exploration.

Carts include both music and costumed people to complete their theme. People and items on the cart can either be moving or static in tableau.

Originally farm carts drawn by bedecked horses, today these carts are driven by haulage tractors, and usually also tow a large diesel-driven electricity generator to provide the huge amount of power required to power the carts – up to one megawatt of power, with 10,000 to 30,000 lamps is not uncommon on a modern-day cart. The tractors themselves are often decorated to match the rest of the cart and generator, and in some cases modified so that the driver is positioned low down between the two front wheels. This allows for a higher degree of decoration without obscuring the driver's view. The length of the entire cart is often built to the maximum allowable of 100 feet (30 m).

These floats are interspersed with walking exhibits, either groups or singles, occasional marching bands or majorette troupes, and charity collectors who take donations from the spectators.

Carnival clubs

Carts or floats are built by local clubs, which generate all funds required to build and operate their carts.

Some carts cost in excess of £20,000 to build and are the result of thousands of man-hours work throughout the year. Most clubs are based around local working or social circles, such as pubs and clubs. Many clubs have specialist Juvenile Carnival clubs for the under 16s. All work is carried out in the spare time of the club members on a voluntary basis – often working all night in the final few days to get carts ready.

The Carnival Centre

The Carnival Centre, opened in 2010, is located in the Town Hall on Bridgwater High Street, and is manned by volunteers. It serves as an information point for the Carnival, and souvenirs can be purchased. It also has a display of Carnival memorabilia. The Blake Museum's collection of Carnival artefacts has been loaned to the Centre. The Blake Museum does have a small carnival display, as well as a collection of carnival archives, such as numerous historic programmes.

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Blake Museum is owned by Bridgwater Town Council and managed by volunteers from The Friends of Blake Museum (Registered Charity 1099815)

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/

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