

Sparks Will Fly in Essex – Saffron Walden Museum and Castle, Saturday 21st May

Day two of the Essex County Council Cultural Olympiad celebration began in the grounds of Saffron Walden Museum and Castle on Saturday 19th May.



Marina Mightier arrives at the Castle

St Mary's tower captain Roger Collins and myself had been involved in months of preparations and discussions with Uttlesford District Council representatives and of other local organisations to discuss how the day would unfold.

I have to say the whole process has been a complete joy to be involved in. The Council have been so welcoming and supportive and it has been fantastic to plan tower bells, handbells and mini ring involvement throughout the afternoon, playing a major part in proceedings.



Roger, Ann and Gerard teaching a young visitor how to lap on handbells

As well as our activities, Thaxted Morris Men were there, there were a lot of story telling and performances in marquees, decorating pottery, clay/movie making workshops, tennis workshops, Circus Berzercus and lots of refreshments. My own personal favourite was a crepe stall called 'Planet of the Crapes'!



Circus Berzercus workshop for young and old alike

The procession of Marina Mightier was planned to start from the Council offices at 3.30pm and then head up to the Museum and Castle. The added complication we had was that there was a wedding planned at St Mary's at 3.00pm. We had to advise the organisers and the wedding party as quickly as possible so that the procession route and the wedding party route could work around each other and not ruin a happy couples' special day.



The wedding party – perhaps getting to the reception on foot was the best idea.

With that sensitive topic out of the way, plans forged ahead and we had monthly meetings to discuss the actual timing of performances up in the grounds of the Castle before and after the arrival of Marina. We were asked if a handbell team would like to combine with the Grand Union Orchestra to ring a simple tune. It sounded like a fun idea, and on the day it really was!



The mini ring doing great business throughout the afternoon

So the running order of events was timed so that 8 of the tower bells rang from 1.30-1.35 which we could just about hear while the handbell ringers assembled with the Grand Union Orchestra in the display arena. Then the tower bells singled the start of the handbell and orchestra piece with 4 blows on bell number 9.

Seven of us joined in with the orchestra to ring a piece specially composed by Tony Haynes called 'Monkey Man'. We met up early on to have a quick practice and listen to the piece played by the orchestra, so that helped to settle the performance anxiety.



Handbell ringers assemble to give 'Monkey Man' a go

As the afternoon went on, we gave demonstrations to passers by on the mini ring and handbells, and I understand that a couple of lapsed ringers who live in the town have been discovered, so it just goes to show the value of events like this.

At about 3.40 the tower bells began to ring for the wedding party and continued to do so for approximately 15-20 minutes. This ringing coincided with the start of Marina's procession through the town. So it all seemed to come together nicely.



The Uttlesford glass bead, featuring artwork representing the area's principle heritage. The bead was presented to Marina in an official ceremony.

We were also asked if we could position the mini ring at the entrance to the museum, which we did and we could actually ring some rounds to welcome Marina into the Castle. She seemed to enjoy that. Proceedings finished at about 5.30pm and we rang a few rounds on handbells to officially close the afternoon.



Hmn! Handbells – yummy!

I must say a massive thank you to Roger Collins for being so very helpful in persuading the local ringers to take part and he definitely made my job as PRO a lot easier. Specific thanks must go to the tower bell team comprising Emily Downing, Hugh Maddams, John Mumford, Janice Lambeth, Patrick Draper, Nick Eldred, Sue Butler and Richard Freeman. The handbell team comprised Roger Collins, Fred and Mary Bone, Carol Wilkinson, Ann and Gerard Clinton and I.

Tracey Southgate
Public Relations Officer

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