

JUBILEE COMES TO ALRESFORD

by

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During the Autumn of 1976, the Rector resolved that Her Majesty's Silver Jubilee, aeons of wet weather in the future, should not pass altogether unnoticed. Previous patriotic celebrations must have been planned in a New Alresford of fewer inhabitants and shorter grapevines. The first problem would be that of consulting the whole population, including those who carry full diaries or none at all, and those who dare to belong to no local society whatsoever. A random caucus of public spirits assembled, elected committees, and wisely let the matter rest until the more pressing demands of Christmas had been met.

In the dark days of February, invitations to an open meeting not remotely connected with property purchase were rolled off in an estate agent's office. These were distributed by Perins pupils, house-to-house, give or take a cul-de-sac or fringe development. "If everyone turns up we can accommodate them in batches of five hundred in the Church" promised the Rector. But the open meeting might as well have been a shut one. As the rain lashed against the windows, the usual handful bravely considered ideas like open-air pageants and street parties. Perhaps everyone else's leaflet had been read with a shudder, and dropped down the back of the piano. The Jubilee Project Committee went into temporary retreat with a beautiful design for an arbour and no agreement about where to put it. The Entertainments Committee, aware that its ideas for popular amusement had been greeted by a deafening silence, went ahead in faith, hope and charity and organised things anyway.

Of course, the Guides and Brownies would be prepared, living up to their motto, boosting morale at precisely the moment when it seemed that Spring and the Jubilee would never happen. They had collected coloured plastic fertiliser-bags and were cutting them into pennants, and if someone would buy tape and cotton they could make enough bunting to decorate the town centre. The Parish Council set aside the sum of £250 to float the celebrations, and the thought of feeding the town's children on Jubilee Day became less of a prayer for miraculous loaves and fishes, and more of a cash-and-carry order.

The Alresford Pigs Association gave early, solemn thought to how many senior citizens could be motorcaded around the countryside and how many younger citizens could be pulled into the river. The Chamber of Trade had arranged for its hanging baskets to be filled with red, white and blue flowers, and shopkeepers were promising window space to the Art Society's walkabout exhibition. Literary gentlemen had produced a stylish pageant script, and a secular lady blew the dust off her hat on hearing of the Civic service to be held in the Parish Church. The Jubilee Ball was not, emphatically not, being held for Conservatives only, and the Flower Festival would be in St. Gregory's Roman Catholic Church, as, in the Rector's words, 'their light comes from above'. Floral artists yearned for any week other than one in early June, when spring flowers (if any) would be over, and summer not yet burgeoning. Moving the date of the Jubilee was beyond the Committee's powers. Nor was it possible to persuade a French town administration to recognise Alresford as a frankly-inviting English twin (or even to answer letters on the subject, in either language). Plans for a fashion display and a spoof sports day dwindled into oblivion, there being a need to streamline the programme or risk certain nervous systems and telephone links being put out of action.

Meanwhile, the Fire Service was given a shopping list (sand, corrugated iron, breeze blocks, beechwood, in fact just the everyday requirements for roasting an ox in the street). The pageant producer, urgently seeking horses, sheep, medieval dogs and a falcon for starring roles, was offered a hen. The Juniors at Sun Hill were tuning their instruments and raising their voices;

with a tally of four hundred and fifty of them expected for tea in Broad Street on Jubilee Day, owners of trestle tables were discreetly blandished, and enough freezer-space was begged to hold a polar continent of ice cream. The Community Association Committee elected to donate a seat to the town as little was being done about the Jubilee, and heard with surprise that cakes, jellies and sandwiches would be arriving at the Centre on the Tuesday; in the nick of time, a cordial arrangement was made whereby the doors would be unlocked and, yes, the Guides could hold an exhibition in the Meryon Hall until the evening, when it would be needed for whist as usual.

Spring sunshine caught most of the town on the hop, with a royal occasion barely a month away, and not a flag to be had. Left-wing pundits, having taken the pulse of the nation, recorded a total lack of response to the fact that a young woman had grown middle-aged in performing an obsolete function. Historic Winchester, bedecked for a non-event in good time, suffered losses to thieves or republicanism; at this stage, it was hard to know which. Then the Royal Mint published apologies for having failed to anticipate the demand for Jubilee coins, and asked the nation to be patient and let children have priority. Anti-monarchists gnashed their teeth, no doubt, rather than eating their words. It was undeniable that Jubilee fervour was gaining momentum. In Alresford, sales of Union Jack carrier bags from fishmonger and toyshop boomed. Out came the old bunting, genuine cotton, which had seen national rejoicing in the days before nylon and plastic had been invented. One resident put silver cooking-foil on his gate and another did majestic things with milk-bottle tops. At last, if any article featuring red, white and blue could be draped or dangled, it was there on display. There would be a Jubilee. The people wanted it.

The Committee, acknowledging the certainty of expenses and a glimmering possibility of receipts, got round to appointing a Treasurer. The programme was produced in sufficient numbers to be both sold and given away. There would be a fair in Broad Street, and stall-holders would contribute a 'proportion' of their takings to the Jubilee fund. The Committee tossed percentages at each other and left an unresolved assortment on the table so that stall-holders could take their pick. Tickets for the Ox-roast and the Jubilee concert were foisted on to town-centre shopkeepers whose memory of the great occasion may be dominated by the worry of keeping takings in separate little bags, and which owed what to the till? Insurance premiums were paid in case the Tug-Of-War should prove too warlike or the ox inedible. The bills were going to be enormous. Suppose it rained and nobody bothered to come to anything?

At the end of May, the pageant cast presented itself in breath-taking haute couture garments made from sheets and curtains and sacking and scraps. At the back of the bookshop, relatively soundproof, the commentary had been recorded by BBC professionals unperturbed by having instructions bellowed at them through a fanlight. In freezing wind, medieval townsfolk practised a charge from the George Yard into Broad Street to greet their Bishop while the firemen sat in the trees trailing miles of the Brownies' bunting. It was tough stuff, crackling and fluttering in the bone-aching cold, renewing the determination to be festive. There was no reason given why it could not be continued heavenwards over the rooftops to the church tower, but the will was there, the Jubilee had come to Alresford, it could aim for the sky and it might hit the top of a tree.

By June, hundreds of people were involved, lending, giving, working for nothing, having ideas. Even the weather began to co-operate. A poster of events was prominently displayed with an eye-catching kink, because in the paste-up process a window got in the way. The street party for children aged five to eleven was threatened by tears from those who were too young, and who needed to be sidetracked to an impromptu picnic with Punch and Judy arranged especially for them. The telephone never stopped ringing. "D'you know how to dye sheets in a front-loader?" "Would it be better if George the Third arrived from Mill Hill rather than the Globe Inn? "Who's fetching the watercress on Tuesday evening?" "How many Jubilee Girls do you want for the Senior Citizens' Tea?"

Guests arrived for the concert at Sun Hill to find these girls, in white shirts and blue denims and red silky sashes worn diagonally, selling programmes on the steps. There was to be no escape. The girls would be everywhere, decorative and functional, ensuring that nobody could plead ignorance of the events in store. It was still marginally possible to opt out of the Jubilee, but not after the Juniors had led the singing of 'Land of Hope and Glory' twice, and the audience had risen to its feet for the chorus, hardly a female member of it not wearing red, white and blue, and the setting sun had streamed through high windows over small Britons in national or Elizabethan costume. Busbied sentries strutted the aisles, Queen's Beasts and flags of all nations surrounded the singers and instrumentalists, as Christopher Robin went to Buckingham Palace again. How the New Statesman writers would have writhed.

Perins sent its pupils off for the half-term holiday with disco-sounds echoing in their ears, then prepared to welcome revellers at the Jubilee Ball. The ox-roast kitchen arose from Broad Street's parking spaces, toddlers trooped to the War Memorial garden clutching their dazzlingly patriotic teddy bears, the Parish Council marched to the Weir House field wearing crash helmets and life-jackets, and singing 'We shall not be moved'. In the ensuing Tug-of-War everyone cheated and got wet and wondered about the identity of the blonde with knobbly knees and sunglasses, and a few went on to complete the evening at the Fire Station doing a conga down the pole. Sunday morning saw the Parish Church packed to capacity and 'The Observer' describing the carry-on in New Alresford to the English-speaking world. A few elderly housebound folks were already waiting with their gloves on, praying that their drivers would not forget to pick them up for the Jubilee Joyride. When, after a tour of the lanes and villages, they were delivered to the John Pearson Hall for tea, a shy dignity prevailed until a visitor from overseas, who had merely looked in, began to play the piano. The Jubilee Girls appeared with trays arranged by Meals-on-Wheels ladies, and were engulfed in tides of memory. Warm sounds of what may have been the best gossip since the Coronation dwindled, the last wheelchair was eased through the doors, just as oboes and choristers were easing into the church, to give rise to musical sounds of high quality at which not even the 'New Statesman' could have sneered. And again, the people turned up to share the celebration.

A committee member, who had won a doll at the Guides coffee morning, and a bottle of wine at the Jubilee Ball, began to wonder if this kind of luck could possibly hold. Monday dawned grey, and in the afternoon, sponsored cyclists with infants or umbrellas strapped to their backs, pedalled round twenty-five kilometres of soaking lanes, and raised £57.48p for the Jubilee Project. The Watercress Line ran special trains, and passengers happily queued to ride to Ropley and back, viewing the drenched countryside through windows stippled with condensation. With undampened goodwill, the pageant performers rehearsed it twice, the second time properly, and the treasurer's wife got stoned. (The Bishop's pages, fast-bowling ecclesiastical bounty into the crowd, forgot the money-bags were full of pebbles). From a balcony shared with ornamental tubs sprouting Union Jacks, the commentary was played more or less in accordance with what was happening in the street below. There were only a few unknown factors apart from the fear that nobody would come to watch. (After all, it felt as though half the population was in the pageant; was there anyone left to be an audience?). Would the boy playing the artist of the 'George' inn sign be able to transform an angel into a saint with one stroke of a brush? Would the King's trumpeters know when to blow? The infants' float 'The Queen of Hearts' and the flock of ewes with their offspring had not been rehearsed, but lamblike innocence is engaging even if it sets off in the wrong direction at the wrong moment. The cast dispersed to watch the Queen being inflammatory on television in the only way permitted to her.

After the bonfires, most of the nation slept and awakened again to the hardly credible fact that despite inflation, we have not lost our touch. On Jubilee morning, millions watched television

and marvelled. Even in New Alresford, residents were allowed time off to sit peacefully at home feeling nationalistic, as the Entertainments Committee had liaised with Buckingham Palace to avoid a clash of attractions. It was a quiet morning. The ox-roasters and low-level bunting hangers were out early of course; the ox was turning on its spit by seven thirty a.m. and the added bunting was hitting or missing a horsebox, an ambulance aerial and a family saloon which unexpectedly went through with bicycles on its roof-rack. Calculations were made concerning a tall white horse carrying a tall bishop wearing a tall mitre, and the bunting was raised a bit. The loaves-and-fishes miracle was happening over at the Community Centre, where representatives of every women's' group in the town were delivering cakes and sandwiches for the children's tea; the headmaster of Perins with a team of volunteers was baking bread rolls in the school kitchen. Chairs and tables and market stalls were being unloaded in Broad Street. A blacksmith started work in the Old Forge. The Crown Jewels appeared in a shop window, and most of the others boasted works of art sufficient to charm the onlooker without bringing in the heavy mob. The flowers in St. Gregory's were refreshed for the final day of their exhibition, and a lady of meek and sober demeanour with a thousand urgent tasks awaiting her was trapped for half an hour in a small room at the top of the Community Centre and had to hack her way out. A quiet morning.

At half-past three, hundreds of elaborate hats, rainbow-hued and glittering, converged on Broad Street, and each had a child underneath it. 'They won't want their tea at that time', the Committee had been warned, but then little was predictable about Jubilee Day, and the food was pushed across the A31 on supermarket trolleys to the long, long ranks of trestle tables . . . and made to vanish. The children ate with commendable concentration for an hour, and had their photographs taken and their hats admired, while the crowd in the street grew and grew and grew. Anything left over was rammed into an ice-cream cornet or a bread roll and sold to hungry spectators, actors in the pageant battled their way through the throng and lost each other, and seeing the multitude, the Rector grasped the hand-mike to a quadrophonic public address system. His voice fell off the walls of toyshop and hairdressing salon pleading for a space down the middle of the street, and like the Red Sea the crowd parted, leaving a strip of dry land for the Bishop's procession to pass through, and closed in again to swamp the rest of the cast like Egyptian charioteers.

"You ought to be hearing church bells", announced the producer, having wrested the hand-mike away, "They are ringing, But the wind's in the wrong direction". A sophisticated cue structure was blown to Portsmouth, where, who knows, the triumphant clangour may have added joy to someone else's pageant. Trestle tables were still being thrust into vans and children into anoraks as the performance began in a fine drizzle. Planned for a few hundred onlookers grouped in a horseshoe shape around the main acting area outside the library, there was little chance for the several thousand who packed the street from end to end to catch more than a glimpse. W.I. members dressed as lavender sellers and policemen dressed as policemen did their best to keep exits and entrances open. But everyone was in high good humour and the glimpses were glorious. The front-loader dyeing operation had been successful and posed the question why no religious order had gone in for apple-green habits. Two Parish Councillors revealed considerable miming ability. Everyone thrilled to the street faster than any quadrophonic voice. The hen had a day to remember.

Nor was it yet over. After a cool lull during which the roasting ox attained its final perfection of flavour, families and neighbourhood groups returned to stand affectionately in the the equestrian episodes, particularly the gallop from Agincourt, which cleared a space down street together chomping hot beef and bread and watercress. The dentist in Broad Street had been making painless extractions of fifty pence a ticket all day. Most lapels and many less conventional places carried bright contact stickers declaring "Alresford Celebrates Her Majesty's Jubilee". There

was one more item in the programme, but its success depended on a general mood of goodwill and spontaneity. You can lead a crowd to Broad Street but you can't make it dance. The evening had been warm and golden, and as daylight faded, so did any remaining inhibitions. There were live performers on the balcony now, filling the air with a beat the children found irresistible. A few started a blissful jig with their grandparents. Half a dozen quite respectable adults joined in. The police saw how affairs were tending and arranged their little yellow cones across the road. A hundred people were dancing, two hundred, five hundred. It became impossible to estimate. A few came down from the Community Centre after whist as usual and found the ox all gone, and were able to be cheerful about it. The dancing went on. Small children were carried home yawning. The 'Horse and Groom' ran dry. Still the people of New Alresford danced in Broad Street and a visitor murmured 'There's nothing like this happening in Basingstoke'.

It was all very simple, really.