



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

SHREWSBURY FOLK FESTIVAL

Every August bank holiday folk's finest gather in the Shropshire town for its highly respected festival

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quintessentially English market town, Shrewsbury is situated in Shropshire on the River Severn, complete with a castle, abbey, cobbled streets galore and an abundance of listed buildings. So in keeping with English tradition, it's no real surprise that every August bank holiday weekend it holds a folk festival. But this is one with a difference and which has made a name for itself for its specially commissioned projects involving various folk luminaries, such as the highly acclaimed Darwin Song Project – an appropriate subject

matter because the world renowned naturalist was born in Shrewsbury, the most famous of Salopians.

The festival hasn't always been in Shrewsbury. It began its life in nearby Bridgnorth in 1997 when Alan Surtees, a former steel stockholder, and his wife Sandra (they met at a folk festival), decided to start their own event. The very first edition had just 700 people in the local school hall and gym, and rapidly outgrew its original home until it moved to Shrewsbury in 2006. After a rocky first year at the Quarry in the centre of town, its current location is at the West Midlands

Agricultural Showground, a 50-odd acre site right on the banks of the River Severn.

Since its modest beginnings, today the number of tickets sold has multiplied tenfold – they cap it at around 7,000 in total, which is a mixture of weekend and day tickets. Festival director Alan Surtees says that around 4,000 people camp – and unlike other festivals where you end up trudging miles across muddy fields with all your gear, at Shrewsbury you're able to pitch your tent right alongside your car, which makes the whole experience for camping softies like myself far more pleasurable.

Surtees reckons around 70% of festival-goers come back each year – and they're an impressively hands-on, participatory lot. "Our audiences want to be entertained," says Surtees, "but there's a high percentage of them that want to be part of the festival and play themselves, and the Tuneworks project has been hugely successful." Tuneworks started organising the music workshops at Shrewsbury in 2007 and they've now expanded out to other festivals too.

There's a dizzyingly eclectic range of workshops on offer every year: from hamboning, Welsh clog dancing, even a drinking song workshop. Of course it just

wouldn't be a proper folk festival without plenty of real ales on tap – they average around 30 different types – "and they all go," says Surtees. "But the great thing about folk is they drink a lot of beer, but, I say this with fingers crossed, we have not had an incident in 15 years... I think they can take their drink without feeling the need to punch somebody!"

The free-flowing beer no doubt helps some of the more rhythmically challenged punters when it comes to the Dance Tent, which is a hugely popular feature at Shrewsbury. At the last edition they held their first 'Silent Ceilidh' masterminded by folk singer and ceilidh DJ Jim Moray. And for those who don't necessarily want to dance themselves, there's always the Village Stage. It's easy to locate – just follow the jingling trail of Morris men heading in that direction. Over the years there's been a huge variety of dance groups, from the most traditional sides such as the Hammersmith Morris Men and Newcastle Kingsmen, rappers and cloggers and this year there was some Punjabi folk dancing, courtesy of Birmingham-based group Nachda Sansaar.

The festival has deservedly gained a great reputation for being very kid-friendly, with lots of new skills for them to try their hand at: from singing and song-writing to circus skills and *taiko* drumming, plus there's Refolkus – like a mini festival within a festival – for youngsters aged from 12 to 25.

The music programme is spread across three main marquees – the largest having a capacity of 2,200 seats plus room for 500 standing for those who fancy some folk moshing. Festival-goers are

encouraged to complete a feedback survey and in doing so are able to have an input on who they would like to see back on the billing the following year, which does inevitably mean that some very familiar names crop up year after year such as Bellowhead, Oysterband and Show of Hands. As it happens, both Steve Knightley and John Jones are patrons and will be performing a one-off set together at next year's festival. "But I think it's equally important to send our audiences on a voyage of discovery," says Surtees, so there's a sizeable amount of Celtic music and artists from across the Atlantic as well, with Abigail Washburn, the Sweetback Sisters and Caroline Herring being firm favourites at the last edition.

Surtees is keen to increase the international presence at the festival: "We spend a lot of time looking for emerging stars from the folk world, both from this country and from across the world." He really wants to push the boat out and take the programming in different directions. Even though they sell out every year, there's no room for complacency, as Surtees concedes: "we just can't rest on our laurels; we've got to continue to discover new ways to make the overall visitor experience more attractive. We bring people the best of what is around in the UK whilst gently introducing them to a little bit of world music. And I think that will continue and we'll probably bring more world music in as we go along." Confirmed so far for next year is the southern Italian group Nidi d'Arac who will kick off proceedings on the Friday night.

Then of course, there are those special

song projects that have become part of Shrewsbury's USP. "It's enhanced our reputation. People are always asking, 'when's the next one?'" The very first one was in 2009 to coincide with Darwin's bicentenary and featured Chris Wood and Karine Polwart among others, followed by the Cecil Sharp Project in 2011. In 2012 however they took a different tack and instead of a song project, they commissioned the Global Dance Project, under the direction of Hannah James, who also performs as a duo with Sam Sweeney and with the trio Lady Maisery. On paper it reads like a scarily mixed assortment – Northumbrian clog dancing, *bhangra*, African, Irish and Caribbean dancing but Surtees was delighted by the result: "it was absolutely brilliant, everything that I wanted it to be."

Another recent initiative has been the live streaming of concerts which this year meant more than 27,000 people across 49 countries watched performances beamed from the main stage via a webcast. On evidence of its loyal following and growing reputation, the festival's broad-minded approach seems to be working. On the one hand they're always looking in different directions for new projects and commissions, but manage to keep one foot firmly rooted in tradition so as to keep their regulars happy. "I think getting the total mix right is key to our continued success," says Surtees. ■

DATES Next year's festival is August 23-26 2013 and tickets are now on sale

ONLINE www.shrewsburyfolkfestival.co.uk



Flags, Morris men and bubbles – key ingredients for a successful folk festival



*** WIN TICKETS TO SHREWSBURY**

We have a pair of adult weekend tickets to the 2013 Shrewsbury Folk Festival (normally £250) to give away. To enter, simply answer the following: In which Shropshire town did the festival first begin in 1997? See p7 for Songlines competition rules and address. Closing date February 8 2013