



Dinton Bonfire Boys

Boys on a mission to light up the skies

Last year, they blew up the Houses of Parliament and this year, they are sending a rocket to Mars.

The Dinton Bonfire Boys plan to set the night ablaze in spectacular style this year when an anticipated 2000 people pack into the grounds of Philipps House, temporarily quadrupling Dinton's population, for the village's annual firework display. Around £3000 will go up in smoke as more than 1,000 fireworks explode over the Nadder valley in multi-coloured bursts and ear-splitting bangs and whizzes.

Atop the enormous bonfire, the guy made by the children from Dinton Primary School will burn to cinders, emitting a bloodcurdling scream as it goes, courtesy of a "screamer" planted in its shirt. There will be gasps, oohs and aahs, and finally whoops of delight as the 16ft rocket lifts off in a shower of glittering sparks and heads towards the heavens. Actually, it won't get much higher than it can be lifted by the cherry picker to which it's attached - the Bonfire Boys might be experts in pyrotechnics but their command of rocket science is not quite so advanced. But the effect will have been achieved - just as they thrilled crowds last year by igniting Big Ben at ten to eight, precisely the hour showing on its clockface. Both the rocket and Big Ben are set pieces - static displays picked out in small fireworks called lances - so that their outlines are clearly visible. They come in all shapes and sizes. Previous years have featured Damon Hill in his racing car, a huge Union Jack and the Millennium Dome. When children from Chernobyl visited, the display spelled out Welcome in Russian. Last year's tanks, which fired shells at each other drawing cheers from youngsters whenever a direct hit was scored, will be back this year. They are all the handiwork of John Crouch, who, at 83, is the oldest Bonfire Boy of them all. Christened Ashton, he has been known as John since the years immediately following the Second World War when he was working for Wiltshire's agricultural committee. "We had German POWs doing work on the drains before they were repatriated," he explains. "They were a fine bunch of lads and I knew all of them by name and they wanted to know what to call me. "I was known as Son or Sonny - it's what my parents called me - but these Germans couldn't pronounce it properly. "It came out as Johnny and that stuck."

In later years, John was working as a sawman for builders' merchants, Domoney Woodwork, when his son Richard recruited him as a Bonfire Boy. "I'd been a long distance lorry driver, but Domoney's gave me a lot more free time to make things - and a lot more timber," he points out. He has been creating elaborate set pieces from strips of timber for close to three decades, ever since Richard revived the Bonfire Boys tradition with Michael Glover in 1980. In fact, his work has reached a wider audience through fireworks company, Flameburst Effects.

In 2000, John was commissioned to supply the word PEACE in giant letters to form the backdrop to Bill Clinton's historic peace-making mission in Belfast, and proudly shows off the newspaper clipping of his handiwork behind a grinning Blair and Clinton.

The Bonfire Boys are a Dinton institution. A grainy black and white picture from 1912 points to the existence of the Boys, thought to be the oldest known bonfire society in Wiltshire, back in 1890.

An assortment of Edwardian gents, some blacked up and others in clown costumes, pose in front of a banner depicting the capture of Guy Fawkes with the date 1890 in the corner. According to village tradition, Dinton brass band and the banner would head a torchlit procession which made its way from the local hostelry to Philipps House at one end of the village, and thence to Hurdcott House some way off at the other before returning to Dinton for the bonfire. "They'd get themselves totally plastered and cause all sorts of trouble," grins Michael.

On one such trip, one of the clowns, Bill Pomoroy, ran ahead of the procession and climbed a tree near the Baverstock junction, using the oncoming lanterns to help his ascent. With the procession passed and the light gone, Pomoroy found himself stranded, unable to see his way down and had to be rescued by a search party when his absence was finally noted.

There have been lulls in Bonfire Boys' activities - wars have intervened and sometimes the "boys" have simply grown up and moved on. Certainly, little is recorded between 1930 and 1945, but the discovery of the old banner in a barn at Fitz Farm in 1946 sparked renewed enthusiasm and, that year, bonfire celebrations were once again reinstated in Dinton.

That was also the year another well known Bonfire Boy, Fred Coombes, disguised himself as a GI bride and called on both his mother-in-law and his employers, taking them all in.

By the 1970s, Bonfire Night was a modest village hall operation involving fireworks, soup and a roll.

"Fireworks are difficult to make pay and they weren't in a position to put on an event that lost money, so they decided to pack up" explains Michael. Richard Crouch thought it was too good to stop and got together with Michael, who had worked for firework specialists Pains Wessex and had experience installing large fireworks displays. "That old photo was in the village archives and we decided we would be the Bonfire Boys again, so we resurrected the name and tried to raise a few bob for charity," he says.

That first display barely covered costs - far too many people lined the pavement getting their display for free to make it cost effective - but gradually, like Topsy, the event has grown ever bigger and better. The turning point came in 1990 as the new Bonfire Boys celebrated the centenary of the old by obtaining permission from the National Trust to move the event to Philipps House. It was, in any case, one of the houses which had traditionally been visited by the processions in the old days and offered a much larger site, which could accommodate as many as 2000. With the procession reinstated, and a much larger gate, the future of the event was secured.

Lottery funding paid for the preservation of the original banner (which was rescued, this time by Michael, after it was dumped under the village hall) and it now hangs in the village hall. In 1999, a new banner was commissioned.

Themes for displays are decided in September and requests for set pieces passed on to John who sets to work in the workshop at the bottom of his garden near St Mary's Church. All the displays are designed, set up and fired by the Bonfire Boys in-house team and on the night a raft of volunteers pitch in to help as stewards and car park attendants.

In the early years the fire was built of faggots donated by local farmers, but today's bonfire, constructed two weeks before the event, is a mountain of around 350 wooden pallettes.

So far, some £18,000 has been raised for good causes, many of them in the village.

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