



Steyning Festival 2018

26th May – 9th June

PRESS RELEASE

Faces behind the Festival

The Steyning Festival, which opens on Saturday 26 May, is said to be the biggest of its kind organized and run entirely by volunteers. But who are they and what makes them give their time and effort? 17 of the almost 70 volunteers gathered recently for a team photo.

The Chair of the Festival and very much the lynchpin is Christine Aubrey, a retired psychologist with an understanding of what makes people tick. 'I just didn't duck quickly enough,' she says, 'when they were looking for someone to take on the role. It's very hard work but the results are worth it.'

The Steyning Festival started in 2007 and since 2010 has been held every other year. One of those involved from the beginning is Sara Bowers. 'With my husband, Rob, we opened The Steyning Bookshop in a crumbling old house in the High Street 34 years ago.' Her involvement with that and the local business community kept her busy enough but then she was asked to take on something new. 'I felt slightly less than enthusiastic at the prospect, but with the driving force of a wonderfully dynamic Steyning arts enthusiast called Ann Poupard and some other very lively and creative Steyning people, a wonderful new tradition was born.'

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But it wasn't long before tragedy struck. 'Ann had a deep love of the theatre and the festival immediately reflected this with theatre trails, dance workshops, experimental theatre and performance art filling the fortnight. Along with an art trail, music performances and literature events, which welcomed such names as Louis de Bernieres, Patrick Garland and CJ Sansom, we had something wonderful emerging. We were devastated in the Festival's third year when Ann died suddenly of meningitis.' Others stepped into the breach and the Festival went on.

In charge now of the theatre trails which bear her name is Jeremy Tomlinson, 'I was recruited to the festival committee by the wonderful Christine Aubrey when I retired to Steyning in 2012. Most of my career was spent teaching English and Drama at Lancing College, where I was also a housemaster and on senior management.' One of Christine's sons was in his house and her husband, Tom, was a colleague for many years. Their friendship, like so many friendships, is one of the engines which drives the Festival. 'I was actively involved in the Theatre Trails and other events in 2014 and 2016 and in 2016 directed *Bedroom Farce* at the Grammar School.'

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One of the newer members of the team is Hayley Cookson, who looks after the big music events and the innovative dance and rap *A Breakin' Convention*. She has had more than 20 years' experience in the music industry, has toured with the likes of Public Enemy and James Brown, and organized music festivals both here and in Croatia. She has seen the festival grow and her praise for it comes easily, 'It's a huge credit to Christine and the team that the Steypning Festival has become a very credible arts festival.' What pleases her particularly is the friendly feel. 'Steypning is a very creative place. Through the festival I've met and worked alongside people, who I probably wouldn't have mixed with otherwise. It's very intergenerational which is a great thing. When we had Craig Charles perform at the last festival there were whole generations of families on the dance floor, which is such a good thing for the community. The buzz around the town the next day was amazing.' People were so touched, says Hayley, that the next day the Cooksons had cards and letters through their door. 'That is what we do it for.'

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Those who volunteer give a great deal and create a welcoming and stimulating atmosphere, but they also receive great enjoyment from what they do and that makes the Festival infectious and special. Steypning is clearly a small town that punches well above its weight.

'I have made a great many new friends through the Festival,' says Caroline Meeson, 'and that, together with shared experiences and working as a team I find very attractive indeed.' Caroline taught for 32 years at Steypning Grammar School, part of it as Head of Art, and that creative skill led her eventually to the Festival where she confesses to being 'hooked'. She is responsible this year for the colourful Community Parade which is one of the opening events on the first Saturday.

Another creative person and a volunteer from the very first Festival is Mel Wood, who has played a variety of roles in her time but is responsible for marketing. She also produces the local community magazine, *Your Steypning*. 'Working with and meeting the most amazing dedicated and diverse people in Steypning is the best part about volunteering for the Festival. I have made some really good friends, who are not necessarily my generation.' People in their time play many parts, 'I am a pattern maker by trade,' says Mel, 'a skill I have not yet had to call upon for the Festival but you never know!'

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A festival of the size and complexity of this one is a massive logistical exercise, both in the planning stage and in the delivery. With over 140 events it requires considerable administrative support, and that comes in the form of Marylyn Rankin and Sue Linfield. Both bring impressive experience to their tasks. 'I set up my own Virtual PA company,' says Marylyn, 'and give secretarial and administrative assistance to companies and individuals'. Sue lives in Worthing, but she knows Steypning well from her many years of working for Wilton Park at Wiston House. 'In my working life I worked as an administrator organising the logistics of international conferences. I attended a lot of Steypning Festival events in 2016 and enjoyed every one thoroughly. It was very evident to me that there was a huge amount of work involved in bringing the Festival in and thought I would volunteer my time this year. I love Steypning and its community feel.'

Sarah Hooper, spends more time in London than she does as one of the newest residents of Steypning. She is selling advertising space, but she brings a considerable interest in the arts to her task. 'I have done painting and mixed media, photography, pottery and sculpture, and I play, or used to play, piano, clarinet and flute (I think that's all!) – and for a period of time I worked as a freelance textile designer. My work was sold in New York, London, Florence, Paris - but I have no experience of organising Festivals!'

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Sue Whelan has lived in Steypning since 1981. 'I attended a few events at the earlier Steypning Festivals, but it wasn't until 2012 after I retired that I became involved and helped on Front of House. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and met lots of new people. In 2014, I was co-ordinator for fifteen events, which included the broadcast of Radio 4's *Any Questions?* with Jonathan Dimbleby, held at Steypning Grammar School to mark the school's 400th anniversary.' In 2016 she took over the raffle, a role she repeats this time with the aim of selling 2,000 tickets.

Crissy Smith, who is a rally-driving part-time estate agent, describes herself as a lively Granny. 'I knew Ann, who was the inspiration behind the Festival, and it is amazing how from little acorns big oaks grow. The Steypning Festival has gone from strength to strength over the years.' She has twice taken part in the Monte Carlo Rally. She crashed on both occasions but would love to do it all again. Her role in the Festival is more sedate. 'I am involved with the lovely catering team, which will be my first proper foray into being a helper rather than a participator. I love baking but make things very sticky.'

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The caterers are a tight-knit team within a team. Cynny Buckett is in charge. 'In 2016, I was asked to be catering manager for the Festival which became a huge leap in the dark when ambitious plans evolved to have an all-day cafe in the Big Top with the support of the local Co-op store. Those two weeks were amongst the best and worst of my life. There were many moments of chaos - no power, no water, no gas, no food, flat car battery - and that was just in the first two hours of the fortnight!'

Vanessa Timms, another member of the catering team adds, 'Last time the decision to have the Big Top was taken quite late in the day and Cynny did a sterling job but it was difficult. Lots of lessons have been learnt and we are a merry band of six to share the load. We've drawn up a rota of half day sessions to serve sandwiches, coffee, tea and cake in the pop-up cafe in the subsidiary tent which will also serve as the Bar in the evening. We have coerced our friends and families to make cakes and to help serve. We've had excellent support from local suppliers, which encourages us, and I can't wait for the excitement to begin.' All should be well this time out because the Big Top is an established feature and has its own water and power supply.

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But the last word belongs to Sara, in charge of the many literary events, 'for author groupies like myself and my staff, there is the thrill of the opportunity to meet Frank Gardner, Barbara Trapido, Martin Bell, Peter James, Sophie Hannah, Vince Cable, Prue Leith and many others – how lucky we are!'

She recalls some of the incidents that have marked the Festival down the years, 'I've had enormous fun each time putting together the literature events, with some great memories – watching Julia and Malcolm Donaldson's first Steypning show, hearing a frail but razor sharp PD James talk inspiringly for 40 minutes without a note in sight, chasing book dealers away from CJ Sansom, trying to get lunch for a children's author who only ate strawberries, Christine suddenly realising that she might be providing double bed accommodation for an author and the wrong partner, one of our bookshop staff telling a slightly nonplussed author that his books were great to read when breastfeeding – the list goes on.'

The Steypning Festival 2018 will create new memories and forge firm friendships. Booking opens on 20 April. Tickets available from the Steypning Bookshop or online: www.steyningfestival.co.uk

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NOTE TO EDITORS

For further information please contact: Nigel Hartley media@steypningfestival.co.uk 01903 810085

- 1 photograph accompanies this press release: part of the Steypning Festival team of volunteers

Back Row L to R

Jeremy Tomlinson, Lesley Alexander, Phil Alexander, Cynny Buckett, Nigel Hartley

Middle Row L to R (short row - only 4 people)

Caroline Meeson, Sue Linfield, Sarah Hooper, Marylyn Rankin

Front Row L-R

Hayley Cookson, Mel Wood, Sara Bowers, Christine Aubrey, Lydia Sanger, Crissy Smith,
Vanessa Timms, Sue Whelan

Press release number: 3 issued 17 April, 2018