

Bath Arts Workshop and the 1970s Festivals in Bath

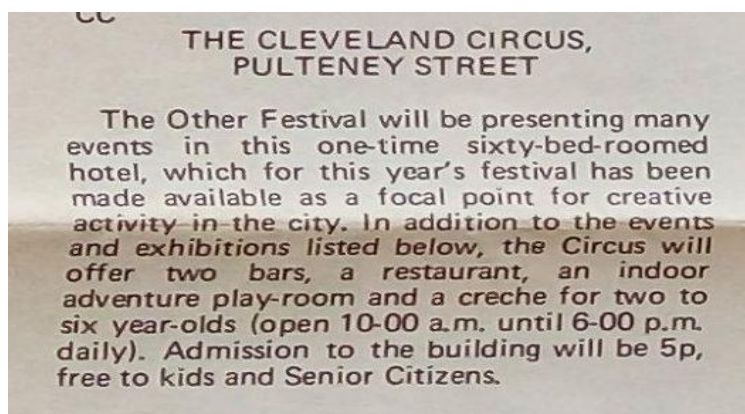
Corinne D'Cruz

For countless people, their first contact with Bath Arts Workshop would have been through the annual festivals we organised in the seventies, either as collaborators, performers, artists, exhibitors, stallholders, passengers on a mystery coach outing, volunteers or simply spectators. The festivals served not only as vehicles for presenting a wide range of thought-provoking performance and art in an accessible framework of irreverent fun with a sense of community jollity, they were also, inadvertently, great P.R. exercises for BAW. In so many ways they were a synthesis of the work that BAW was engaged in throughout the year and encapsulated the ethos behind this – the festivals brought all of this to a much wider audience in a condensed and intensified form of diverse rejoicing. The annual festival came to be at the heart of everything we did; both the well from which inspiration sprang and the river into which all of BAW's tributaries flowed.

But it started modestly. The first one, The Other Festival of 1971 was, as the name suggests, conceived as a counterpart to the mainstream, stuffy and highbrow Bath International Music Festival of the time, running at the same time in May. No programme has as yet resurfaced but it is remembered in one of our brochures as a small beginning of '*poetry readings and a few films*'.

However, by the time of the second Other Festival of 1972 (May 26th – June 4th), also running contemporaneously with the Bath Festival, things were notched up an octave or two. It set the agenda for all our later festivals which aimed at an alternative in every sense of the word: generous sprinklings of 'alternative' theatre, music, sculpture, poetry and multi-media art and creativity alongside a tangible alternative in community events for the people of Bath, young and old, many of whom would never patronise an official Bath Festival concert or event, or indeed be able to afford to. Charlie Ware, the art college lecturer turned philanthropic property speculator (if that's not a contradiction in terms) had just bought the Cleveland Hotel, comprising several conjoined Georgian houses in Great Pulteney Street. He generously lent it to BAW for the festival.

Despite its soot-blackened outer layer Great Pulteney Street, the grand Georgian boulevard linking the town centre via Robert Adam's Pulteney Bridge with the parks, gardens and new amusement centres of 18th century Bathwick, still felt very much like the refined stomping ground of Jane Austen and her friends. But it was soon to be fast-forwarded into the 20th century. The hotel was renamed the Cleveland Circus, a name which has connotations of the obvious as well as perhaps a nod to John Wood the Elder's Royal Circus, a renowned circle of Georgian buildings in Bath which he modelled on the proportions of Stonehenge, believing that Bath had been a former centre of Druid activity. But here's how it was described in the programme:



And there were plenty of 'events and exhibitions listed below' but many were organised after the programme had been printed or happened spontaneously and so were never documented. Artists took over individual hotel rooms with installations; Colin Mansfield's upside down room is well-remembered to this day, while at times the glittering lounge-cum-ballroom became a pulsating rock venue, jam-packed and jumping to the sounds of Hawkwind. The hotel provided a face and a focus, but there were events all over the city, on the streets and in the ornate riverside park, the Parade Gardens, as well as in the newly-acquired BAW HQ, the Organ Factory in Walcot.

A Bath Arts Workshop brochure written in 1972/3 described the 1972 Other Festival as: *'a highly successful, 10 day, 20 hours per day, extravaganza of theatre, music, exhibitions, films, poetry, kids' events, outings, pensioners' parties, jumble sales, street occurrences and publications.'*

For Bath all of this was new and revolutionary and it often provoked scornful criticism from a deeply-ensconced conservative element within the Bath City Council of the seventies. But there is no doubt that the 1972 Other Festival facilitated creativity and cultural crossover, cooperation and collaboration enormously. And it filled a gaping hole in the life of the city. New artistic groupings like Workshop Films, the Artists' Co-op and Exploded Eye were formed, as well as the outrageous kids' theatre group, the Snow Hill Road Show, and an Adventure Playground Association, to name but a few.

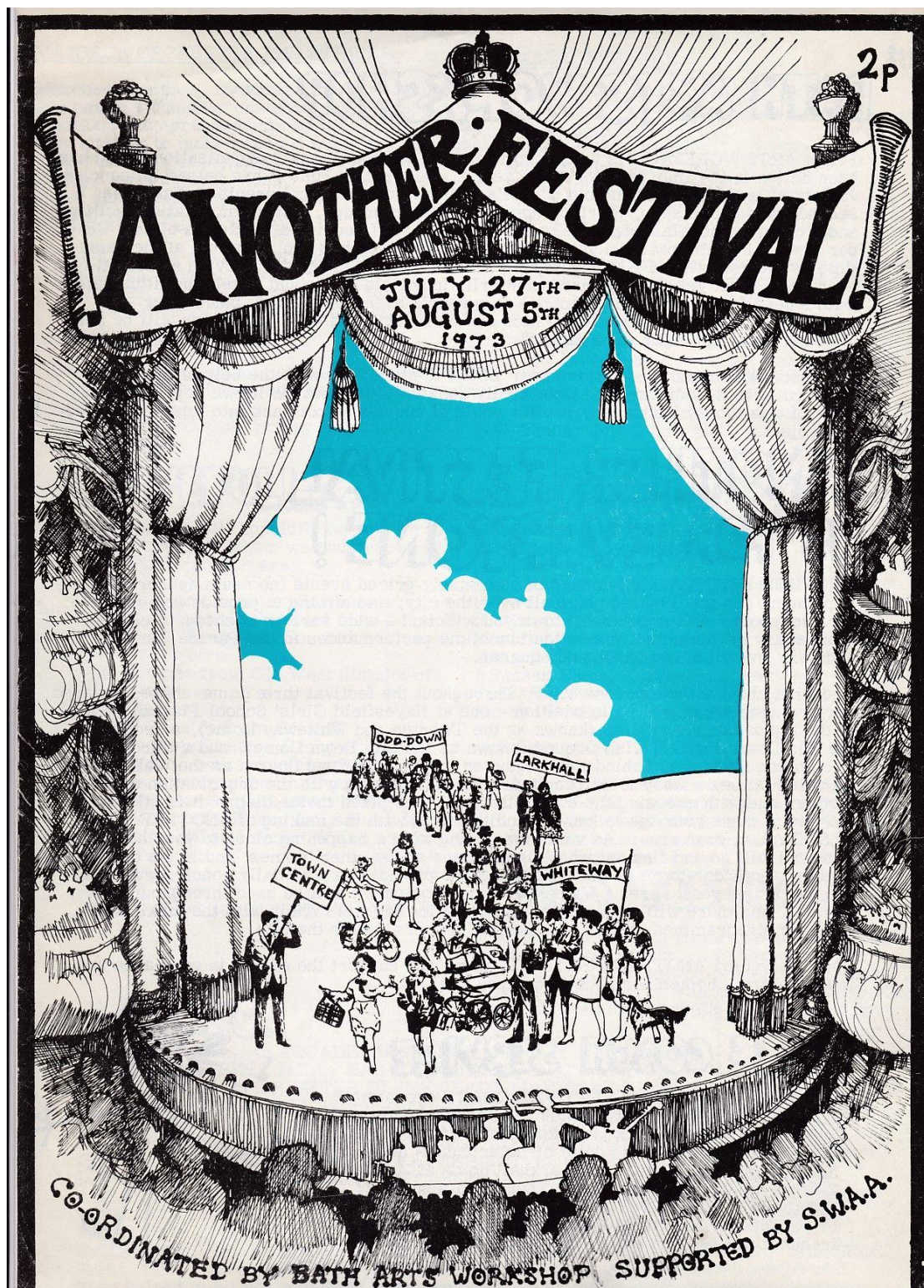
Another Festival, in 1973 (July 27th – August 5th), spread its wings even further. By this time there was a move afoot to break with the early spring Bath Festival dates and commit to providing something for the neglected outlying housing estates in suburban Bath during the school summer holidays. Domes were set up in Twerton, and Larkhall/Walcot to house performances and facilitate whatever else the community wanted. A third site – in Odd Down – was based in the Rugby Club building and field. Local involvement was solicited and encouraged; during the festival there was a free coach shuttle service to connect the sites to each other and to events happening in the town centre.

We didn't have the money or the inclination to send a career administrator out on expenses headhunting the latest developments in contemporary theatre and art, but we did have the Natural Theatre Company which would oft-times act as a recruiting sergeant for the festival. The company toured on the same circuit as nearly all of the small band of emerging 'alternative/experimental/performance' artists of the day, and many of these became firm friends.

So in one way or another, word was beginning to filter through the '70s performance and multi-media grapevine that the BAW festival was a place you were made to feel welcome; where you could try things out amongst sympathetic others striving for a new way forward; where despite the conservative reputation of the city you could nonetheless be fairly certain of enthusiastic and receptive audiences, and where you would have the opportunity to catch up on what your contemporaries were doing as well as collaborate with them.

A growing number of artists, musicians and performers were willing to come for food and board but very little or no financial remuneration. And many of them could just about afford to do so on account of the crisp new cheques they were receiving from Coutts & Co, the Arts Council of Great Britain's bank. The work was beginning to gain recognition.

1973 was notable for countless memorable events: ad hoc appearances by Alan Ginsberg, both at a city centre venue and at the Twerton estate dome, as well as performances from many of our 'regulars' including Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron (Landscapes and Living Spaces) and Ted Milton (Mr. Pugh's Puppets) – while Lumiere and Son, the Phantom Captain and John Bull Puncture Repair Kit made their first visits. And of course BAW's own theatre troupe, the Natural Theatre Company, was in evidence at every festival. Several of these groups were featured in a documentary on performance art shot during Another Festival by students from the National Film School with Arts Council funding; one of the film makers was Roger Deakins, now a renowned cinematographer who later worked with the Coen brothers.



Front cover of Another Festival programme

And all this arty stuff was happening alongside community events like the following, listed in the programme that year: old people's coach outings, kids' outings to the seaside, bingo evenings, tea parties, coffee mornings, ceilidhs, kids' magicians, adventure playgrounds, dog shows, painting classes, barbecues, Fancy Dress competitions, Funny Football matches, Salvation Army open-air church services, country walks, film shows, Keep Fit classes, Funny Sports Days, jumble sales, model plane exhibitions, kids' talent contests, girls' football matches, Old Tyme Music Hall, chess, bridge, draughts and poker evenings, baby mornings and old folks' evenings.

Cue Charlie Ware to centre stage again – this time he'd bought the Bath Theatre Royal and promptly lent it out to the festival. It was used as a music venue for headliners like the Pink Fairies, Chilli Willi, Keith Christmas, Shakin' Stevens and the Sunsets, Charlie and the Wide Boys, Mike Westbrook's Solid Gold Cadillac, Pete Brown, Brinsley Schwartz, Bees Make Honey... not forgetting of course, BAW's own (spoof) rock n' rollers, Rocky Ricketts, the Jet Pilots of Jive and the fabulous Rockettes. And for good measure the festival also hosted Indian classical music, reggae and traditional folk artists.

Not only was the festival attracting visiting artists from all over Britain – audience members were beginning to travel from outside Bath. The programme had been printed by our friends at De Lantaren in Rotterdam, an arts and community centre in a rundown part of Rotterdam where the Natural Theatre Company and members of BAW had just done a one-month residency, working in the theatre and the community. But the similarity to BAW ended where finances and facilities were concerned; De Lantaren was lavishly funded and amazingly housed and equipped – so the programme took on a more professional appearance thanks to their print facilities. And some national media were beginning to take notice of the programme.

All of this was done on a minuscule budget: a brochure from 1972 lists BAW's grant aid for that year as £5,200 from the Arts Council and South West Arts, £1,430 from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the princely sum of £50 from Bath City Council, with self-generated income roughly matching the total grant income. And this to fund the entire programme of annual activities, not just the festival. Without the hundreds of hours of volunteer help, business support and the fact that workshop staff were only taking a pittance as a wage, if at all, around £8 when there was enough money, none of this would have been possible.

Nonetheless, there were those in the city who didn't think we deserved tax payers' money and exclaimed, *'They should do it in their spare time!'* When I look back now at my diary entries for much of the decade I can hardly believe we had any spare time.

And so to 1974 and The Last Festival (August 23rd – September 3rd). Well, definitely *not* the last festival and neither was it ever intended to be. But a tongue in cheek title echoing the gloom and despair of the times – the Arab Israeli conflict/Yom Kippur war with its ensuing oil crises, miners' strikes, 3-day weeks, power cuts, failing infrastructure and economic policies, how long could we survive as a civilised species?

So let's have a last fling before it's too late...



Front of Last Festival programme/poster

We borrowed the Welfare State's big top and with their help erected it in each of the outlying estates for 3 days, then struck it and moved on to the next. Although there were still events in the city centre, the idea was to increase community engagement by homing in on one suburban area at a time – for those 3 days it would be at the heart of the festival rather than just another venue within it. There were grand processions from one site to the next.

We were thoroughly thwarted by the weather. It rained down in torrents and gusts, 9 days out of 10. The Twerton site in particular became a dismal quagmire with vehicles getting stuck in the mud. A couple of BBC people from Bristol arrived unannounced as the site was being cleared up, lost control on the mud and went over a bank. Unhurt, luckily.

The hoped for local audiences didn't turn out in great number; they were probably sensibly huddled round the black and white telly, watching Z-Cars with a packet of crisps containing a twist of salt. But late one night the young vandals did; they managed to overturn the toilets before they could be stopped.

We had booked veteran entertainers like Tommy Trinder and Sandy Powell thinking this would draw out the older folk. This wasn't the case: the only people who would brave the terrible weather were us and the kids. Unfortunately, according to a local press reporter, Tommy Trinder made some rather negative comments about BAW's organisational capabilities, probably somewhat miffed at his low attendance. He later made a press statement to retract this but the damage had been done. Sandy Powell on the other hand was a real trouper. Despite his 74 years he picked himself up and carried on with the show after slipping off the side of the stage!

The later sites at Odd Down and Walcot had their share of wind and rain, but couldn't top the abysmal atmosphere at Twerton.

The Walcot site saw the birth of Comtek 74. According to a brochure written shortly afterwards, this exhibition of alternative technology involved 100 groups from all over Britain. It was the first time there had been such a large gathering focused on, and exhibiting, alternative technology and sustainable energy. This was to become an

important element of future festivals and Comtek went on to be highly influential in its field. Mass Moving, the radical Belgian grouping of artists and engineers producing large scale work with an environmental theme, pulled off a covert guerrilla operation and installed a car encased in concrete in the middle of the Southgate shopping precinct before anyone could stop them!

Another success of the festival was the development of a festival club in borrowed premises where food could also be served. In fact it was too successful after a few nights, so much so that there was no room left for bona fide members turning up after a hard day's graft. So the door had to be controlled more strictly, with entry only for cardholders: workers, exhibitors, performers, collaborators, volunteers etc. The club would become integral to all future festivals and was invaluable as a place where performers and others could get together and exchange ideas and comments – what might now be called 'networking'. For many, Bath was **the** place to be at festival time.



THE LAST RESORT
Central Club, Lower Borough Walls.
10pm-2am. 26 August to 31st August.
Licensed bar·Food·Music·Laughs

Official Membership No

157

Resident band-Johnny Rondo Combo
10p Nightly

Last night the 'Last Resort' club opened for the first time. This is a club which is open only to Festival performers and staff to enable them to get to know each other and to relax after a heavy day at the Festival. There is also a bar which is open until 1.35. The club was fairly well attended and there was a very good band to keep everyone amused. Auntie Margaret has agreed to allow her staff to produce a late evening meal at the club. Last night, because they could not stock up on August Bank Holiday, they contented themselves with a simple curry, but they promise more sumptuous delights in the nights to come.

Starters: Fruit Juice, melon, late Marguarite, Lentil, onion soup.

Main Course: Stuffed cabbage, cauliflours, carrots potatoes.

Egg salad, Cheese Salad, Filchard Salad

Afters: Fruit salad and fresh cream, pancakes

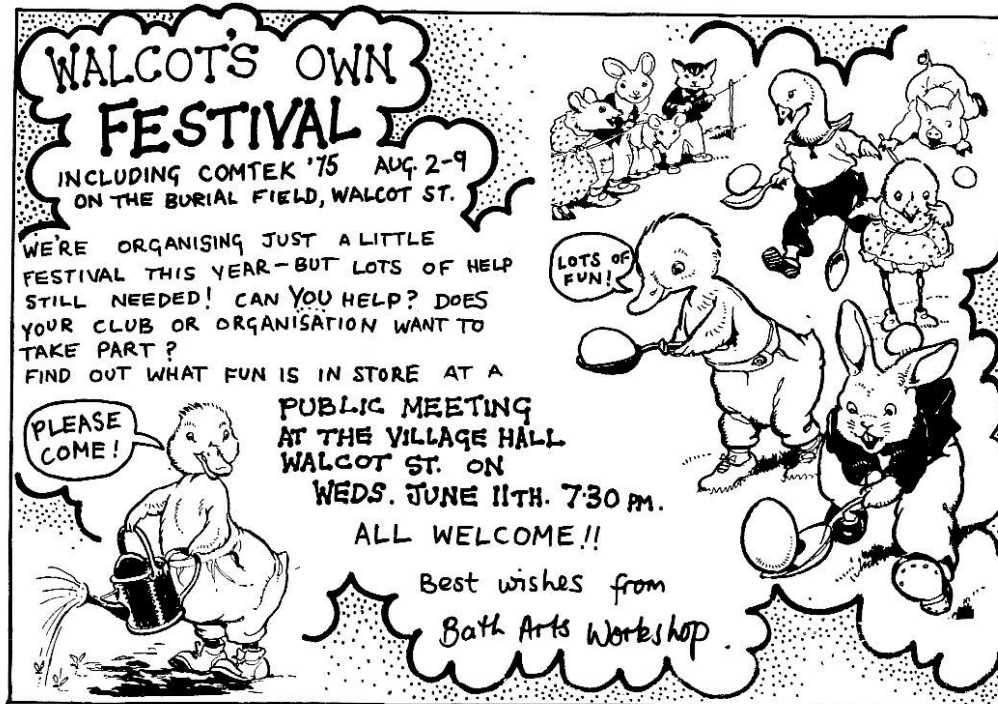
After Afters: Tea, coffee

Prices vary from expensive to very expensive.

Festival Club membership card with below an excerpt from the Last Post daily festival newsletter and infosheet

By 1975 Bath Arts Workshop had further consolidated its base in Walcot Street and developed a strong relationship with the local community, so we stuck to what we

knew best and organised the Walcot Festival/Comtek 75 (August 2nd – 9th) on Walcot Burial Field behind our shop and office at 146, Walcot Street. The burial field had been cleared in 1924 to create an open space for public use, though some gravestones were relocated to surround the mortuary chapel at the top of the site. The chapel had subsequently been deconsecrated and refurbished as far as possible with limited resources. It had taken on a new lease of life as the Walcot Village Hall, administrated by BAW and the local community. For the first time it was used as a major indoor festival venue for performances, workshops and exhibitions.



Pre-festival handout to publicise public meeting

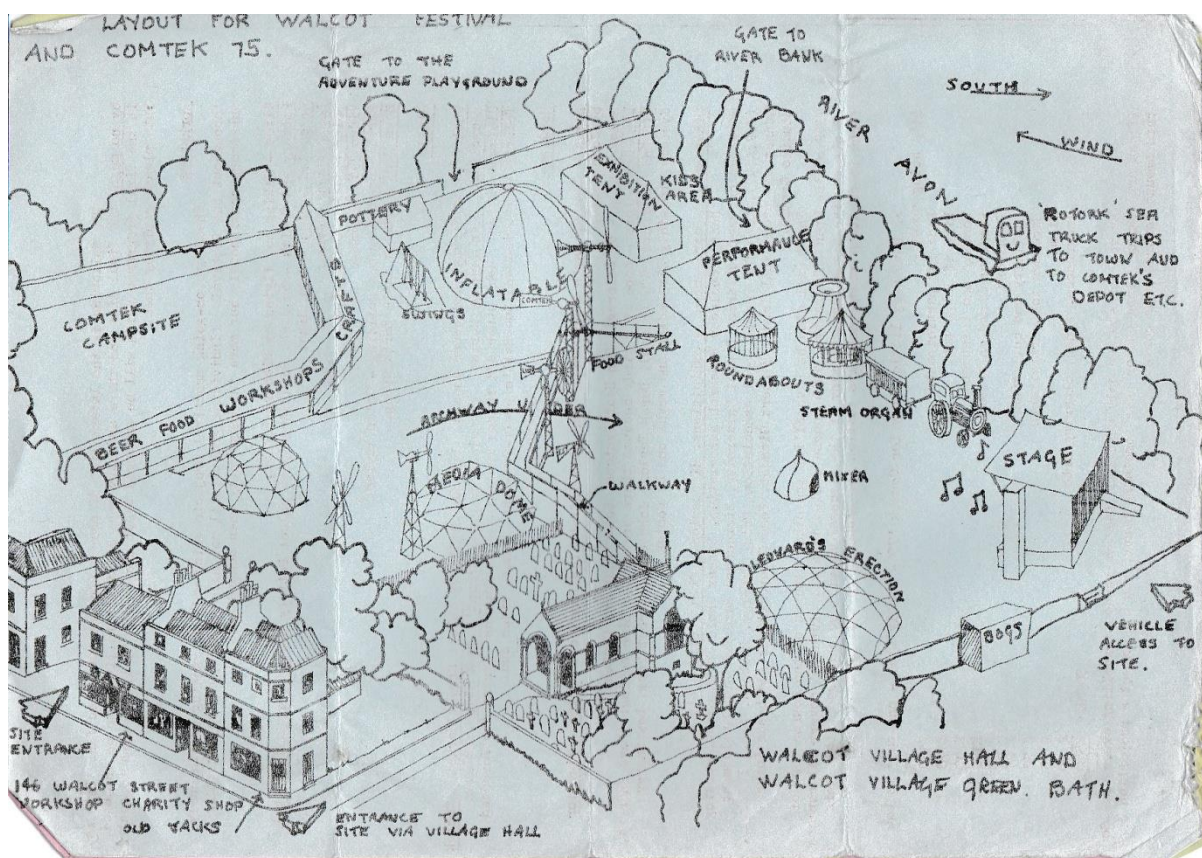


Walcot Village Hall photo Glyn Davies

The festival was once again an eclectic and cheeky mix of music, theatre, alternative technology and community events with a grand opening procession led by the 'Mendip Lady' a beautiful vintage steam engine which was locally owned by a Mr Eddie Haygreen. On arrival at the site it was attached to a steam organ which played now and again throughout the festival. And Nigel Leach procured the loan of a Rotork Sea Truck, captaining it to bring visitors from the city centre to the festival site by way of the River Avon which flowed past the bottom of the Walcot Burial Field.

Comtek 75 was an even larger gathering with a big campsite and various stalls on the festival site. There were workshops, talks and hands-on demonstrations of alternative technology. Mass Moving came again, this time with an enormous solar-powered trumpet. When the sun heated up and vaporised the internal water system it would let forth an earth-shattering bellow.

Again, all done on a minute budget, this time around £4000.



Festival site plan

In 1976 the festival reached a zenith with the Walcot Sunshine Festival (August 14th – 21st), as did the sun itself. Despite having tempted fate with the title and in complete contrast to the miserable weather of the 1974 festival, the Sunshine Festival obligingly lived up to its name. Again centred on the Walcot Burial Field with the traditional forays of street theatre surprising passers-by in the city centre and elsewhere. Eight glorious days of uninterrupted solar indulgence, a festival field scorched brown and a worrying outbreak of festival tummy almost akin to Delhi belly. Someone set up a stall offering a herbal remedy, although many still put their trust in the local pharmacist down the road. He had an excellent festival too, judging by the number of medicine bottles we cleared up every night.



Sunshine festival opening procession with left: Lesley Flanagan and daughter Lindsey and below: Isle of Dogs Drum Majorettes



Amongst all the community activities I had programmed more than thirty theatre companies but many more just turned up wanting to be part of the action. One day Gerry Pilgrim of Hesitate & Demonstrate arrived out of the blue. The perfectly poised English lady, she headed off to the Abbey Churchyard and set up a card table on which she laid her curiosities for inspection. In later years she was accompanied by Janet Goddard; they performed their signature piece on the Burial Field. Two meticulously-attired ladies in black stalked each other silently, finally coming face to face in an elegant version of a clown custard pie showdown, although their cream cakes were more reminiscent of a genteel tea party.'



Hesitate and Demonstrate

I think the artists all appreciated the special atmosphere those festivals engendered, one which enabled, nay, encouraged artists to push the outside of the envelope. And Lumiere and Son did just that. Strange and unexplained, their "Special Forces" comprised a line-up of identically dressed and drilled performers, all black and white and paramilitary. From their encampment on the festival site they would spill forth in military precision on spontaneous and unannounced forays all over the city, spreading an atmosphere of menace instantly picked up on by audiences who might well have known something about police harassment. Booted and boiler-suited they were real hard core; they didn't baulk at anything – one night staging an after-dark guerrilla operation to raid the overflowing Hat and Feather pub.

Then one twilit evening they stepped into the River Avon and lined up stock-still and ankle deep in water on the V-shaped edge of Pulteney Weir. It was a shockingly powerful live image which captivated the imagination but defied explanation, not to mention the police. The local constabulary, too hesitant to enter the water, had to wait till the performers were confident they had satisfied their milling public before they were able to reprimand them. Again unannounced and alas unrecorded but still very much alive in the memories of those who were there.



Lumiere and Son's Special Forces poised to raid the Hat and Feather

Another theatrical highlight that year also took place on, in and around the River Avon. John Bull Puncture Repair Kit came for the second outing in Bath of their spoof film crew, the Northern School of Film Realists. Completely poker-faced throughout they would set up their bizarre equipment, including a camera tripod made from two crutches and an artificial leg, and then proceed to film various hilarious sequences for the upcoming release of a film called 'The Trial'. Actually the film was always called 'The Trial' but the group would capitalise on the individual venue and invent a narrative for whatever offered itself as a backdrop. Peter Slim was the suave

superstar plagued by James Bond-type assassination attempts always perpetrated by the long-suffering stuntman, Tutty. In the Bath scenario there was a definite influence from Spielberg's *Jaws* in the air, or indeed the water! Always brilliantly inventive with plenty of pyrotechnics thrown in, it was at once an immediately recognisable situation with a surreal and anarchically humorous edge.

Below: John Bull Puncture Repair Kit's 'Film Crew': the star Peter Slim bicycles into shot for sequences filmed at Pulteney Weir, pulled by the stuntman and followed by his trusty Alsatian. The audience watched from above the opposite river bank as well as directly behind the film crew. Later Peter commandeered a rowing boat while the stuntman strapped on some shark fins and jumped in the river for the attempted assassination of Peter sequence.



Photo Dave Dyas

Even more performers, even more events, even more crazy juxtapositions. I could hardly keep track of the extra performers from far away who turned up, uninvited and at the last minute, hoping to be able to perform. We found a slot for most of them in between the Caribbean curries and steel bands of our West Indian community neighbours, the giant inflatables for kids, the dance workshops and outdoor yoga classes, the Magic Lantern shows, the adventure playground with a specially built pool, the puppet shows for kids and a very rude one for adults, the ground-breaking performers' visits to old people's homes and hospitals, the authentic open-air wrestling ring one group erected on the site to house their performance and, and, and... and of course Comtek 76.

As Rob Llewellyn has recently recalled, 'I remember having a very hot shower with solar heated water and also members of the Bath Arts Workshop, dressed as scientists in white lab coats who had a display of 'solar drying.' Two tea towels pegged to a washing line.' This was in fact members of the Natural Theatre Company, and gives a neat example of how we didn't just poke fun at the establishment; we could laugh at ourselves too!

So a jolly good time was had by all, well, not quite all. The final evening was a musical extravaganza and top of the bill was our own Rocky Ricketts with the Jet Pilots of Jive and the Rockettes. Accompanied by their seedy manager, Vince Pube, a man not renowned for his subtlety and discretion. He inadvertently let slip the frightful 'f' word in a closing comment over the PA – and all hell was let loose. A complaint to the Council from someone living in the Paragon up the hill led to a huge question mark hanging over the future of the festival. The outrage was so severe that it was impervious to any sense of humour, our stock weapon on these occasions. Two of us were asked to submit BAW's plans for the 1977 festival, and here I will let the newspaper reports of the time take up the story:

The co-ordinators, Corinne D'Cruz and Ralph Oswick, wasted no time in providing the information, outlining the likely programmes.

For a weekend they have put forward: Saturday—procession around the town centre; fete on burial ground; brass band (Hedge-mead Park); plays (Village Hall); street theatre; possibly one amplified, not too loud, family type group, such as The Wurzells or Temperance Seven (burial ground), no amplified music after 9 pm, events and stalls until 10 pm.

Sunday—sports day, brass band, children's events (no pop groups), close 10 pm.

If finances permit, the week's programme has been submitted like this: "Similar to 1976, eg parade and fete August 13; theatre groups and quiet events all week, nothing after 11 pm; sports day August 14; fete with one loud, awful pop group, swearing and drugs, from 7 pm until 9 pm, followed by a stage show or fireworks display, August 20; all events finish by 11.30 pm."



BATH Arts Workshop's plans for a jubilee pop festival were squashed by the city's recreation committee last night.

But the organisers will be allowed to extend their festivities to include the "quiet events" in the second week's programme. There will definitely be no late-night pop festival.

Members voted five to two in favour of permitting the Walcot Jubilee Festival on the weekend August 13-14, subject to conditions.

They want the proposed band concert in Hedge-mead Park transferred to Walcot burial ground and the Workshop to agree to indemnify the council against all costs, claims and damages.

The organisers must comply with conditions laid down by the director of

leisure and tourist services, Mr Ray Barratt, and ensure that there are no objections from Walcot Church.

Members took exception to the letter from the festival co-ordinators proposing to hold a fete featuring "one loud, awful pop group, swearing and drugs."

Coun Les Ridd was concerned about the residents, stressing, "They can put up

with their amplified music—but not with their amplified swearing.

"It is the bad language and behaviour which the normal, average citizens just don't like."

'Irresponsible'

Coun Charles Stebbins said the committee should reject the programme as such a festival could only bring discredit to the city.

But Coun Mrs Helen Cross thought members should try to be fair to both residents and the Workshop. She suggested a compromise of one evening of music instead of a whole week.

Coun Nick Agg-Manning deplored the reference to swearing and drugs, which he did not think should be taken seriously.

Calling for a ban on amplified music, he pointed out, "We all know that amplified music never stays quiet."

Mr Barratt agreed the organisers had been "completely irresponsible" to mention drugs in connection with a serious request to the council.

Last year's festival, however, included some events which the public found interesting and entertaining.

ings at the Pump Room? As a resident of Abbey Churchyard, I have my sleep disturbed for weeks on end during the year by loud, tuneless music emanating from second-rate dance bands entertaining intoxicated hordes at this or that "rendezvous" or "Roman orgy." And as for swearing, the language that can be heard shouted across the Churchyard at 1 am or 2 am is enough to make a trooper blush!

Bath Arts Workshop has made an immeasurable contribution to the social and cultural life of this city. Its activists are dedicated, hard working, selfless individuals who do a great deal for the elderly, poor and dispossessed.

Rather than condemn them for the one time in the year when they let their hair down, the members of the council could well seek to emulate them in their commitment to the community.

A. C. FOX
Secretary, Bath
Young Liberals

Hear, hear

IT is sad that the city's recreation committee applies such blatant double standards in its attitude to entertainment.

The pop concerts organised by the Bath Arts Workshop as part of its annual Walcot festival are immensely enjoyed, not just by young people in Bath but from miles around, and a large number of local residents also get great pleasure from these events. There will a'ways be complaints from those disturbed by the noise, but these people do not have the right to deny others enjoyment.

If, however, the council is going to adopt this attitude, it must be consistent. What about the ceaseless junket-

Ya boo

WHAT a shame it is that our city councillors seem to be lacking in one of the most human of qualities — a sense of humour! Did they honestly believe that we were seriously proposing to supplement pop music with free drugs?

Perhaps we were being irresponsible in one respect — we credited the council with a little more common-sense than to take such an obvious joke so seriously, especially when the application was to be discussed in the first week of April. Remember April Fool's Day?

CORINNE D'CRUZ,
PAUL LAWRENCE,
BRIAN POPAY, B.A.,
RALPH OSWICK, B.A.,
LOUISE WHITE,
JOHN POTTER.

Bath Arts Workshop.

So there were detractors but there were in the end far more supporters amongst those with a sense of humour. Many of us may have wanted to change the socio-political landscape but some of those who supported us just enjoyed the fun and appreciated the community work we did.

Oh, and the fact that it was work, enormous amounts of it: months spent planning the programme, printing it and booking the artists, finding the money to do it, getting the necessary permissions and licences from the venues, council and police, getting bar licences from the local magistrate, organising accommodation and food for the artists as well as people to cook and serve it, finding a festival club venue, preparing the site and other city venues, organising the coach outings, tea parties and picnics, the stalls and stallholders, building stages, domes and erecting performance and food tents, hiring and setting up the toilets, lights and sound equipment, finding volunteers to assist artists and crew the venues, planning security, first aid and fire precautions (this admittedly not such a headache as adhering to some of today's extreme health and safety measures)...the list was endless and we couldn't have done it without the help and support of hundreds of volunteers as well as local businesses and organisations.

In 1976 nearly every shop in Walcot Street strung a jaunty Walcot Festival letter chain in its window and courtesy of John Potter, potted (no pun intended) sunshine yellow marigolds outside the front door. Alas, they weren't destined to survive the heat and drought!



Shop in Walcot Street decorated for the festival

But despite all the hard slog before during and after it was still the highlight of the year and something which was looked forward to avidly. It was such a social event - were there countless old friends and acquaintances among the regular performers and artists. And as, over the years, various members of BAW had left to do other things in other places, nonetheless many of them returned to help out at the festival. And there

were always new friends to be made too, so one aspect of it for us and many others was a hugely inclusive, social and sociable gathering of broadly like-minded individuals, albeit with some wits capitalising on the situation to spread quite a lot of cheeky gossip and in jokes! But it was never malicious.

Though in 1977 we were up against it in more ways than one; the budget for 1976 had come in the form of £4000 from the Arts Council and £600 from Bath City Council plus whatever we could raise ourselves from programme sales and doortakes. This was never very much as prices, when they were charged, were always kept as low as possible to allow access to as many as possible. It didn't look like we'd have anything like that sum for '77, and the opposition from within Bath City Council didn't help, hence we were already tending towards a smaller event of one or two days in August. Before that happened I left to tour Australia for 4 months, lecturing on the work of BAW; while I was away Ralph became suddenly and seriously ill and was hospitalised with osteomyelitis of the leg. So we were two down out of an already decreased core group at 146, Walcot Street. The Walcot Jubilee Carnival of 1977 was a jolly one-day event on August 13th, with a budget of £1300.



Festival procession: Jules Baker's wrestlers follow the band



Walcot Jubilee Carnival mural on the side wall of 146, Walcot St.

In 1978 we had continuing cashflow problems; the Arts Council was withholding our grant until we submitted properly audited accounts but we didn't have the money to pay an accountant.

If truth be told, our accounts had on and off been in a state of disarray for years. Not because of any illicit dealings; simply because there always seemed to be things more pressing to deal with than receipts and painstaking double entry book keeping. Over the years several people had attempted to sort out the mess and fill in the missing receipts and gradually the situation did improve. On this occasion we closed down for several weeks to save money on wages till the grant came through. We had already determined that we could no longer fund a big festival every year on such meagre resources and stretched personnel, added to which the Natural Theatre Company's reputation was growing, both at home and abroad, so this became more of a focus than previously.

Things might have worked out differently had our application to rent Ladymead House in 1977 been successful. When the disabled ladies who were housed there were moved to another home in Bristol we realised the building would make a wonderful multi-purpose venue for us and other community groups and artists, capable of accommodating a theatre and cafe with a large courtyard garden backing on to the River Avon. Just a few paces down Walcot Street with plenty of room to expand – but it was not to be.

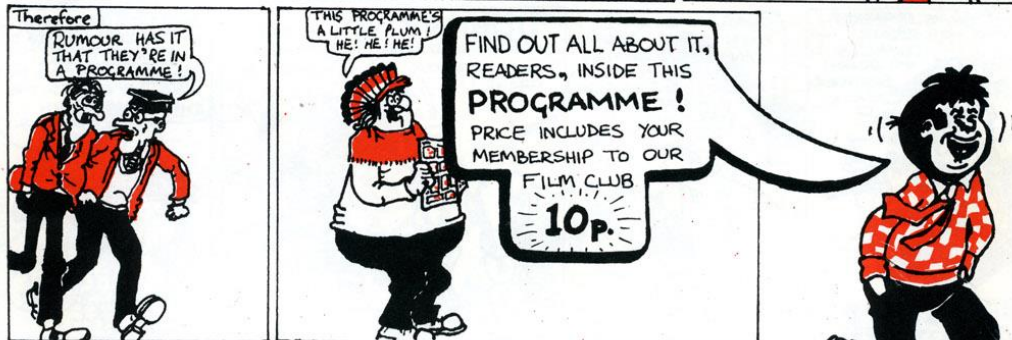
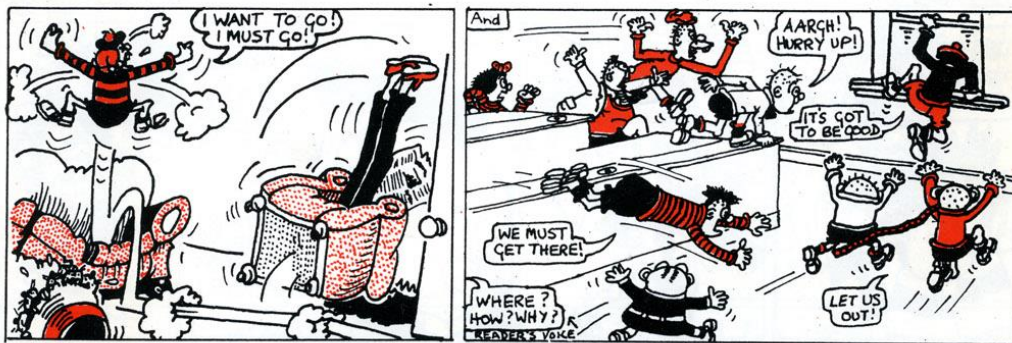
A new festival committee of local people and artists/performers was set up. Three members of BAW sat on the committee to lend help and expertise if needed. We

threw open all our resources and infrastructure but were only able to sign over about £1500 of our community arts grant – nowhere near enough for much more than one day, but it was a start. The Walcot Beano was born and along with it the weekly Saturday night fundraising Beano Clubs in the Walcot Village Hall.

THE WALCOT BEANO

AUGUST 25 to 28 1978

THE BURIAL FIELD



Enough money was raised for a four-day festival. The Walcot Beano Festival did much to revitalise the format after the 'back burner' event of 1977. Although in hindsight the programme tells a story of a festival slightly shrunken in means and programme compared to 1976, there was a new vigour and optimism in the air. A fortified sense of community in Walcot and a can-do attitude. And not only visiting performers, but local highlights like 'Phil Grimm's Progress' which used the very landscape of Walcot as a backdrop for a guided tour which seemed to involve the whole community in a truly ensemble piece.

Mick Banks had come up with the idea. Mick had founded John Bull Puncture Repair Kit with Al Beach in 1969 but when the company reached the end of its natural lifespan he teamed up with me, working with BAW and the Natural Theatre Company for a while. Later he and I both left BAW and the NTC to form British Events, in the '80s relocating the company to Germany to escape the artistic privations of Thatcher's Britain.

Mick describes the piece:

'At a time when the Ikea catalogue is more widely read than either the Koran or the Bible it comes as a surprise to discover that the phrase 'pilgrim's progress' lies somehow in the DNA of much of the English-speaking world. Even amongst those who may know nothing of John Bunyon or his book other than that it tells the story of a journey. The story begins in the City of Destruction (Earth) and ends at the gates of the Celestial City (Heaven). It was first published in 1678 and has been continuously in print ever since. It takes the form of an allegory famous for the opening line "As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world...I dreamed a dream."

My idea to use it as the basis for a theatrical guided tour came from two very different sources.

The NTC's exquisite, jewel-like, 18th century costumed Georgians interacting in a contemporary urban environment with all the surreal paradoxes consequent to that. And, secondly, but of no lesser importance, a newspaper photograph taken at the annual cycle of medieval mystery plays outside York Minster. The photo shows two centurions standing at the foot of the cross, one wearing a 'job well done' grin. Both informed the idea in equal measure.

By 1978 BAW was practised at staging ambitious outdoor events with a theatrical bias, many of them using the mystery coach tour format. But my idea stretched that expertise to the edge of its envelope on the home territory of Bath. It was to be Somerset's Oberammergau.

Cast Notes

Mick Banks as Phil Grimm. Startlingly tall with a slight stoop. Ideal for carrying the sins of the world on his back. The costume: elegant, tailored, funereal with a slight flair. Topped off with a natty cloak of Puritan grey. And a hat of Gandalfian proportions. Equipped for any eventuality.

Ralph Oswick as Narrator. A neatly-presented vicar, the Reverend Thomas Cook, megaphone in hand. Guiding, shepherding, keeping things moving. Making religion relevant again. One eye on Heaven, the other on his watch.

Corinne D'Cruz as Companion. Jumpered and jodphured individualist with her own agenda. A pragmatist, attempting to hitchhike to the Celestial City the logical way. Via the London Road and the A38.

Brian Popay as Mister Worldly Wise. A Georgian hedonist sporting a wig that, if left unchecked, could fill an entire room.

Finding the route was key. The graveyard outside the Village Hall was the obvious assembly point, but where to go next? Every shop premise from there to the junction with the London Road, including 146, was under our spell, except for the newsagent's three doors up. After that it was snakes and ladders. Hedgemoor Park was an obvious heaven but, to get there, the tour must cross a busy main road and work around the hillside. Thomas Street was on the line of march. Perfect for Bunyon's Hill of Difficulty. But it was on the road to nowhere. And middle class Fairfield was well outside BAW's zone of influence.

Somehow or other by a combination of luck and ingenuity it all fell into place. And on the Day of Judgement - August 28th 1978 at 3pm - we set out.

From the onset the show's appeal lay in its agility at crossing time zones. A 20th century vicar introducing a 17th century pilgrim who is then accosted by an 18th century Georgian fop, Mister Worldly Wise, who believes he has found heaven here on earth. Cue the first vignette. A curtain falls to reveal a frenzied crowd of semi-naked wantons in the shop window of 146. (Everyone wanted to be a wanton. Even those with no previous acting experience took to it instantly!).

Further along the road we pause outside the Hat & Feather for a contemporary lesson on abstinence. Geoff, the landlord, throws out the faithful Companion who is looking for Truth in the pub; having tried hitchhiking, she agrees to join Phil Grimm if she can take her bike. Reverend Cook parts the traffic and we ascend to the safety of the High Pavement. A cherub flies across the London Road with directions for the tour guide. (In an SAS-style covert operation the previous evening, a wire was installed from Nasher's kitchen window over the A4 to a lamppost opposite. It may still be there).

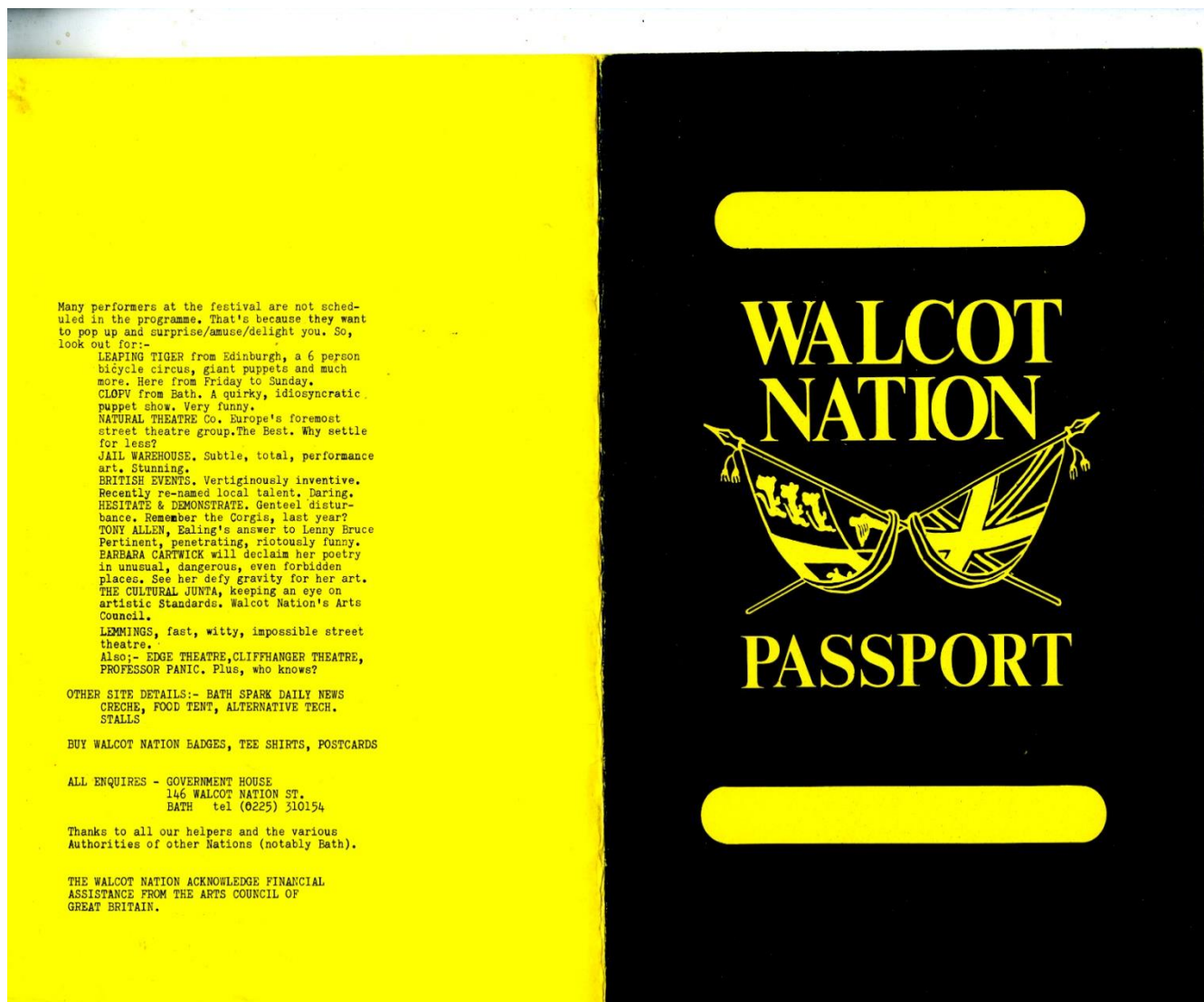
We turn the corner into Thomas Street and begin to ascend Bunyon's Hill of Difficulty. We are not alone. The popular Bathonian housewife Mary Mingeworthy joins us with a month's worth of shopping. Halfway up a bungee snaps and the trolley careers backwards down the hill with her as an unwilling passenger.

A third of the way in and it was clear we had an item on our hands. The piece began to develop gravitas. Passers-by, innocently walking their dogs, suddenly found themselves swept along by an ardent band of believers on the road to salvation. We ran out of road at the top of Thomas Street so we cheekily re-routed the tour through Lesley Flanagan's house. By the time we emerged into Lower Hedgemoor Road even the sight of Phil Shepherd brandishing a chainsaw was not going to prevent us entering Paradise. But before we did so, and in a nod to the topicality of the original book, Jenny Potter and her two children are being evicted from their council house. (Bunyon wrote the novel from his prison cell in Bedford County Gaol, convicted of subversion.)

Guided by the solicitous Sister Louise, we step into the Promised Land, where we meet Rick Knapp as God. A face to face interview with the deity over a steaming cup of ambrosia and a selfie. With Paul Lawrence as the Angel Gabriel, tasked with refreshments and referrals. "No autographs, please!"

There would be successful performances in London, Dublin and a special British Events & Friends waterborne version commissioned by Birmingham Arts Lab. The nuns who joined the tour in Dublin were neither offended nor intimidated. Rather they saw the piece as yet another interpretation of a timeless and inalienable truth. And so, in the end, it was God who had the last laugh.'

The festival of 1979 was a stroke of genius and a fitting tribute to the last year in that extraordinary decade. A similar committee and the same four-day structure, focused on the Walcot Burial Field and the Walcot Village Hall with a few outlying venues – Walcot declared its independence and staged the Walcot Nation Festival with a passport for a programme:



Walcot Nation passport and programme July 19th – 22nd 1979

Even the local paper colluded with an insightful report on the political situation:

"The emergence of Walcot as the world's newest nation adds a new dimension to international power politics (writes Our Political Correspondent). Until recently few had heard of the little colony, isolated between the arid steppes of Larkhall and the forbidding mountains of Lansdown.

It was a French survey team, making trial drillings in the south of the country, who discovered the huge vein of humour now known to underlie the whole area. In a world undergoing a levity crisis, with Britain facing laughter rationing and headstrong Americans shooting each other at the pumps for low-grade amusement, the news came as a bombshell.

So that is the background to the forthcoming Independence Celebrations. The four-day gala will be punctuated by gunfire as the new nation's proliferating political factions slug it out for control..."

Bath and Wilts Evening Chronicle, July 17th 1979

On the first day the Governor of Walcot (Jamie Matthews) handed the reins of power to a pair of South American dictators - His Excellency Carlos Brucellosis IV and his charming wife, Her Excellency Donna Maria Juanita Evita Corleone (myself and Mick Banks). We opened the festival with a flypast featuring (model) airplanes and pyrotechnics, then led the crowd in a rousing version of the Walcot National Anthem, specially composed by Chas Ambler with lyrics written by Ric Jerrom and John Wood.



The Governor of Walcot introduces the first leaders of the newly independent nation

But there were further coups. New leaders appointed themselves each day, and were readily accepted by the citizens of Walcot. Brian Popay as General Knitting Patton stormed up Walcot Street in a camouflaged military truck and took control of radio and TV stations, only to be replaced the next day by Pavel Douglas and Jacqui Popay. Shah and Shahbanu-like figures, they arrived by high speed train at Bath Spa station with an enormous retinue of family, servants and bodyguards, to be greeted with pomp and ceremony by the Frome Town Band and newly-liberated TV reporters. The final day was the preserve of Ralph Oswick and Barbara Vaughn, far-eastern esoteric escapees from a Ravi Shankar concert, complete with goat.

No gun was ever fired in anger, only in mirth and the interests of theatrical effect. And no festival did more to strengthen the idea of Walcot as a community which could shape its own future, a sentiment which has echoed down the years to this day.

Thanks to Paul Nachman of Workshop Films and the BBC's Open Door Community Film Unit, there is surviving film footage of this festival. In 1980 BAW was able to write and produce a film about its work with the help of a professional BBC crew. The

programme began with a 'partly political broadcast on behalf of the Walcot Nation'; the Prime Minister of Walcot outlined the events leading up to Walcot's declaration of independence and then showed footage of the first 'independence day'...

When it was broadcast in March 1980 it provoked a degree of unreasoned fury from a conservative city councillor, who claimed at a council meeting that the programme made fun of Bath City Council. But according to the newspaper another councillor retorted, "*It was a first class programme which did nothing to denigrate Bath. It was a little bit of fun which no-one should take exception to.*"

Some things you can change in small steps, others not, but there is no doubt that in the long run, humour is one of the most effective tools available to homo sapiens.

Corinne D'Cruz

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N.B. An exciting, lavishly-illustrated book, charting the adventures of Bath Arts Workshop, Comtek and the counter culture of Bath, 1969-79 is coming soon. To be published later this year – look out for it!

Addendum

Some of the artists and groups who appeared or exhibited at BAW's festivals and events in the 1970s

Abrakadabra
Acidica Lights
Ace Inflatables
Adrian Hedley
Ajax Disco
Alan Ginsberg
Alberto Y Lost Trios Paranoias
Albion Country Band
Alfred Stockham
Alistair Anderson
Al Matthews & Krakatoa
Andy's Punch & Judy Show/Bath Puppet Theatre
Anna Teasedale
Annie Beardsley
Arran Pilot
The Avon Poets
Axles Castle

Bath Drama Club
Bath Gay Awareness Disco
Bath People's Orchestra and Opera Group
Bathampton Morris Men
Bees Make Honey
Blue Gnome
Bob Stewart
Bread and Cheese

Brian Doe
Brian Patten
Brinsley Schwartz
Bristol Musicians Co-op
British Events Theatre Company
Brog Puppets
Bronco

Calne Silver Band
Captain Headlam
Cardiac
The Celebrated Ratcliffe Stout Band
Charles Byrd
Charlie and the Wide Boys
Chas Ambler
Chilli Willi and the Red Hot Peppers
Chris Allen
The City of Bristol Pipe Band
Clap Theatre
Clancy
Colin Wood
Common Stock
Controlled Attack Theatre Company
Clapperclaw
Cliffhanger
Clopv
Covent Garden Community Theatre
Crystal Theatre
Curfew
Cycles Dance Company
The Cymarons
Cunning Stunts

DaDart – Ray Richards
Dave Calder
Dave Holland
David Inshaw
Dennis Gould
Dramarama
Dusty Lane

Earl Sheridan & the Houseshakers Roadshow
Eddie Lomax
Edgar Broughton
Edge Theatre
El Flambo
The Elysian Wind Quintet
Exploded Eye
The Extra Hot Mango Chutney Band

The Fabulous Poodles
Fandango
Family Penguin
Fine Artistes – Colin Barron, Bernard Evans & Jim Parker
The Folk Family from Brunswick
Forkbeard Fantasy

Flashlight Theatre Company
Fred Wedlock
The Frome Town Band
Fungus folk rock from Holland

The Gabrieli Brass Ensemble
GASP Theatre
The Georgian City Stompers
Gerry Fitzgerald
Gerry Wright
G. T. Moore & the Reggae Guitars
Global Village Trucking Company
Gong
Gordon Robbins
Groundwell Farm

Heather Brown
Henry Cow
Hesitate and Demonstrate
Howard Hodgkin
Hugh Rippon
Hull Truck

Ian Hinchcliffe
Incubus
Isotope
The Isle of Dogs Drum Majorettes
Ismael Sheikh

Jail Warehouse – Laura Gilbert and Derek Wilson
Jann Haworth
The Jess Roden Band
Jim Moyes Magic Carpet
Joe Tilson
John Bull Puncture Repair Kit
John Clare
John Eaves
John Hoyland
John Pashley
John Shane
John Wood
Johnny G
Johnny Rondo Quartet/Trio/Duo/Combo
Jules Baker's Giants

Kachina
Karl Jaeger
Keith Christmas
Kevin Ayers + 747
Kevin Henderson's Country Band
Magic Muscle
Mary Mingeworthy
Mike Cooper and Machine Gun
Mike Westbrook's Solid Gold Cadillac/All Star Brass Band – featuring Phil Minton, Kate Barnard, Paul Rutherford, Lol Coxhill

Landscapes and Living Spaces – Roland Miller and Shirley Cameron

Leaping Tiger

The Lemmings

Linda Dye

Lol Coxhill

Lou Glandfield

Lovely Barnies

Lumiere and Son

Madam Zoro Astor's Magic Lantern Show

The Magic of Kovari

The Magic 'O' Show

Majorca Orchestra

Manesh Chandra

Manhara Patel

Manifest

Mass Moving

Michael Simpson

Microcosm

Mike Cooper

Monad Theatre

Mr Pugh's Puppets

Mr Saffrey's Hot Air Balloons

Myriad Events Inflatables

Musical Vomit

The Natural Theatre Company

Pagan

The Palm Court Orchestra

The Panthers

Paul Hansard's Puppets

The People Show

Pete and Chris Coe

Pete Brown

Peter Blake

The Phantom Captain

Pharisee

The Pink Fairies

The Portsmouth Sinfonia

Private Property

Professor Crump

Puppet Tree

Rag Doll

The Real Live Poetry Group

Reg Meuross & Martin Raphael

Richard Smith

Ritual Theatre

The Riverside Jazz Band

The Road Poets

Rob Con

Robinson Crusoe Theatre

Rocky Ricketts, the Jet Pilots of Jive and the Fabulous Rockettes

Ron Geesin

Ronnie Lane and Slim Chance
Rough Theatre
The Ruins

Salt
The Salvation Army Band
Samsara
Sandy Powell
Shakin' Stevens and the Sunsets
Sheffield Meatwhistle
Shirley & Dolly Collins
The Short Wave Band
Something Musical/ Foot' s Barn Theatre
Sonny Hayes Magic Fantasy
Smith
The Snow Hill Roadshow
Starry Eyed and Laughing
Staverton Bridge
Stinky Winkles
Strider Dance Troupe
Stuart Amor Band
The Sunshine Sisters

Theatrescope
Theatre Slapstique
Tony Allen
Tony Crera
Tony Durant the Amazing Birdman
Tom Costello
Tommy Trinder
Thunderwing Disco
Two Counties Folk

Under the Sun

Vampire

The Welfare State
Wellyboots
Westwind
William Plomer/Patrick Garland – Kilvert's Diaries
William Scott
Willy Barrett
The Witney Blanket Dancers
Word & Action