

Bishop Auckland Discovery Centre Volunteers Customs and Traditions of Bishop Auckland Project

Project background

The Discovery Centre Volunteer group felt that there was a lot of history about Bishop Auckland that was not recorded or displayed anywhere within the town. It also became apparent through time that many of the Centre's visitors had interesting stories and recollections about the town and some of its unusual customs. Some of the volunteers began to collect some of these stories and idea was formed to create a project around this and record the town's customs and traditions before they were lost through time. An application was sent in to The Local Heritage Initiative for 95% of the project costs, with the group itself making up the rest of the costs through fundraising activities.

Project description

This project aimed to promote the history and culture of the area by interpreting traditional stories, folklore and songs about the area. This was to be done by carrying out research into the subject and then interpreting the research through a booklet, an exhibition, storytelling and art workshops and drama workshops. Workshops and events were to be recorded by a professional photographer.

Community support for project

Bishop Auckland King James Women's Institute
The Evergreens (over 50's women's group)
Grosvenor Artists Collective
Durham County Council, Arts, Libraries and Museums Dept
Local schools

Exhibition

The information from the research completed by the group and by the oral historian, was too much to put into an exhibition. An edited version was put together to form the interpretation panels, which were designed and produced by professional printers. In total sixteen panels were produced each 900 x 600mm, in full colour. (The final draft can be seen in appendix 1)

The exhibition in the Centre ran for six weeks, and then toured round local libraries, including Spennymoor, Newton Aycliffe and Barnard Castle. Whilst in The Discovery Centre there were 538 visitors to the exhibition. (Appendix 2)

The exhibition is now on permanent display within the Centre

Workshops

The storytelling and art sessions were held together, and the drama workshops as separate sessions. All workshops took place within the Centre while the exhibition was on display, and were based on the information produced from the project, including stories of the Pollard's Boar, making Midsummer Cushions, and singing local songs. (See appendix 3)

The workshops were divided into those open to the public and those open just to school groups. In total eight schools took part in the workshops as well as the Evergreens group. In total 286 pupils took part, as well as 13 older age women. (Evergreens).

A professional photographer was employed to document the workshops. These images were used for publicity and for the booklet.

A youth theatre group were also involved in the project, devising performances for the launch event of the exhibition. (Appendix 4)

Booklet

The volunteers decided that they would like to finance the further printing of 400 more copies of the booklet to sell in the Centre, on top of the 300 copies that were to be given away as part of the project.

The group also decided that because the workshops were being documented, and due to time restrictions, to delay the production of the booklet. The idea being that the booklet would act as a record of the research and as the culmination of the project as a whole. The booklet also includes traditional recipes researched by the group.

A launch was held for the booklet in the Centre, with a limited amount given away to visitors on this day only. MP Derek Foster officially launched the booklet on behalf of the group, and an art workshop was available to visitors throughout the day.

Copies of the booklet have been distributed to everyone involved in the project, local libraries to add to their records, local schools, County Durham Records Office, community groups and local history groups. (Copies of booklet included, appendix 5)

Publicity

The publicity for the project consisted of press releases, (appendix 6), posters (appendix 7), and leaflets (appendix 8). Two posters and a leaflet advertising the exhibition and booklet launch were designed and printed professionally.

Photography

A professional photographer was employed to record a selection of the workshops as well as the launch events. A selection of these photographs were printed to A4 and made by the group into a one-off photographic record of the project, which visitors to the Centre can look through. The photography was also used in the booklet and as part of the publicity for the project.

Youth Theatre Performances at launch event



Introduction

This booklet is the culmination of 'The Customs and Traditions of Bishop Auckland' project, run by Bishop Auckland Discovery Centre Volunteers, funded by The Local Heritage Initiative and supported by Groundwork West Durham.

The aim of the project was to research and interpret the culture and history of Bishop Auckland, focusing on traditional stories, folklore, customs and traditions about the area.

As a volunteer run, exhibition and events space, The Discovery Centre is a valuable asset to the local people as well as visitors to the area. It was through providing a programme of exhibitions that the group decided there was a definite lack of information about Bishop Auckland's particular cultural history. It also became apparent that the Centre's visitors had memories and recollections, which, if they were not recorded in some way, could be lost through time.

The idea to research and record the areas social history became a reality through applying for and being awarded a grant by The Local Heritage Initiative. LHI has been devised by the Countryside Agency, a national grant scheme that helps local groups to investigate, explain, and care for their local landscape, landmarks, traditions and culture.

As part of this project was a lot of time spent researching material, by both an oral historian and the volunteers themselves. An exhibition was produced, which has formed a permanent exhibition within the Discovery Centre. Storytelling and art sessions as well as drama workshops were developed using the information from the research. Local schools, community groups and visitors to the Centre participated in these activities, which were not only fun, but have also carried on some of the valuable customs and traditions of Bishop Auckland.



Local school children during art workshop.



Some of the Discovery Centre volunteers with traditional foods.

NEW YEAR

Giving New Year's gifts and wishing a happy New Year is a very old custom and was much practised by the Romans. In the early 19th century, before dawn on New Year's Day, large gangs of children (known as 'Guisers') would visit every house in the town to collect New Year's gifts, saying 'Happy New Year, a Happy New Year, please will you give us a New Year's gift'. The children would regroup in the Market Place and call on the residence of Dr Canney who would give them halfpence's and the shop of Mr Peter Fair, who would give books and pictures. Fights would ensue to get a good position to receive a gift.

First Footing is a custom, which still survives. The First Foot or first person that enters the house on New Year's Day is thought by some to influence the luck of the householder for the coming year. It is considered unlucky for a female to be the first foot and the man (preferably dark haired and tall) should bring a roundy (piece of coal), salt or bread and spirits. In return he would be given a drink, sometimes ginger wine, some Christmas cake and a silver coin. In some homes the First Footer would be the first person to cut the Christmas cake. People would be out and about on New Year's Eve visiting or first footing.

Breakfast on New Year's Day would be rice cake or spice cake, cheese and ginger wine. Children would go visiting neighbours before noon on New Year's Day to receive gifts of an apple or orange. Delivery men e.g. coal-men, dustmen would be offered homemade ginger wine and a bit of stotty cake when they first called after New Year's Day. Another curious notion in connection with New Year's Day is, never to allow anyone to take a light out of the house on that day, or death to some member of the household is sure to occur before the year is out. The fire should burn in the grate from one year to the next; it is unlucky to allow the fire to go out. You should have money in your pocket and food in the cupboard to see in the New Year.

Parents used to say that whatever you do on New Year's Day you do for the rest of the year, so no quarrelling or else! Old debts had to be cleared before New Year's Day. It is also considered unlucky to take anything out of the house on that morning until something has been brought in. An old rhyme goes:

*Take out, then take in, bad luck will begin;
Take in, then take out, good luck comes about.*



"First foot" Pencil Sketch by Rev. E.B Lynn 1987, showing a family at New Year.

MAY DAY

The most popular pastimes of our forefathers were the May Day games – the bringing in and raising the Maypole on the village green on the first day in May the Morris dancing, Maid Marian, Friar Tuck amongst others. Young people got out of bed just after midnight on May 1st and walked to the nearest wood, accompanied by music and the blowing of horns, where they broke down branches from the trees and decorated them with ribbons and flowers. Then they took the branches home as dawn broke and used them to decorate the doors and windows of their homes.



May Day rally in Newgate street, Bishop Auckland May, 1952.

Kings and Queens also celebrated May Day. The celebrations were banned by order in 1644 but were again permitted after the Restoration. A remnant of these old customs existed in Bishop Auckland in the mid-19th century. The mailbags were conveyed on horseback from Bishop Auckland to Rushyford to meet the coaches passing through going north and south. It was the custom to decorate the postboys and their horses on May 1st with ribbons and flowers, the principal shopkeepers in each town as well as the people at whose houses on the road they usually called, each giving a ribbon or rosette. Before reaching Auckland on their return journey their appearance was somewhat grand. In later years a parade featuring the DLI band was a feature on May Day

CHAPEL ANNIVERSARIES

For chapel Anniversaries girls dressed prettily in new dresses if they could and some had either straw hats or bonnets. The Anniversary was a time to show off new clothes. Everyone had to stand up, or go into the pulpit or onto a stage and say his or her 'piece' - something that you had been learning by heart for some time. It could be a poem, or verses from the bible or a song but always with a religious theme. Anniversaries were usually in the summer. A lot more people went to a place of worship then. Some children would attend both church and chapel so they could sing in the choir at morning and evening service and go to the chapel in the afternoon because they wanted to be in the Anniversary.

HIRINGS, MARKETS AND FAIRS

Hirings for servants took place on the two Thursdays before 13 May and on the two before 13 November. On these occasions the Market Place was filled with shows, stalls and holiday attractions. This tradition was discontinued in 1910 when employment exchanges were opened. Ancient fairs were held on Ascension Day, Corpus Christi and the Thursday before 10 October.

In 1825 fairs were established on the last Thursday but one in March and October for the sale of horses, cattle and sheep while ancient fairs fell into disuse.

Markets are traditionally held in Bishop Auckland on Thursdays and Saturdays and was the biggest in the area; 'a tidal wave of people coming down Bondgate (from the direction of the bus station) twice a week'. The market would go on until 8 or 9 pm with the stalls being illuminated by big flare lamps.

Stallholders would give goods away at the end because they wanted to go home empty-handed. Market days would always be peppered with a smattering of drunken escapades, particularly as the pubs could stay open all day.



Bishop Auckland market place through the ages.

