

The Village Pump Folk Festival

Having written about other festivals in the past, and seen how different they can be, here are some impressions of my recent weekend just outside Westbury, Wilts.

The Village Pump, born from Trowbridge, is a great little festival, put together and run by volunteers in the White Horse country park. It feels really nice and welcoming. The stewards and security staff strive to keep people 'safe and happy, with a light touch' and it works.

Mostly this is a music festival. There are three tented stages and, like the three bears, one is large, one middling and one smaller. They are all 'just right' for purpose. The largest, 'Village Pump Stage', has the big names, this year including The Peatbog Faeries, Steve Knightley, Eliza Carthy and the Wayward Band, Vin Garbutt, Brass Monkey, Home Service and Seth Lakeman. Since it was a lovely sunny weekend, the sides of the marquee were open and many people sat on their camping chairs or on the well mown grass all around. If it had been wet, it would have been harder, especially in the evening when the marquee was full of standing and dancing people, with a just a few rows of tiered seating at the back and a ramped viewing platform for a few wheelchairs.

The middle sized 'White Horse Stage' was more for developing acts but also some surprises, eg 'Beer at teatime' had Phil unexpectedly joined by Steve and Miranda for the one performance this season of Show of Hands. People were again on camp chairs or grass, but anyone standing was at the back. The smallest – though still quite sizeable – 'Club Stage' hosted 'open mic' sessions every day as well as concerts with good acts. Each of these stages is a 'proper' stage with good lighting and sound, though the sound did tend to be just louder than it needed to be.

Yet more, there was an open marquee hosting a continual session, with a couple leading and encouraging participation from about noon through to late evening, often joined by performers between their gigs. Since this tent was centrally located, it was great to see people pausing on their way elsewhere to listen or join in. Workshops, such as Tai Chi and Yoga, were offered here during the morning, though a popular Drumming workshop spread out over the grass. Several Morris teams put on displays on a boarded area in the arena, near the Golf Club bar (with more sessions) and its large hall used for discussions, concerts, ceilidhs – and a great panto-style performance by the Merv Grist Players.

Accommodation is available in or around Westbury but most people camp. The whole site is pretty level with the camping areas large enough for everyone, be they in tents or caravans, but far enough from the main arenas to be quiet. A local milkman visited the camping areas daily, offering papers and groceries, too, while it was a level walk to the arenas to find the various international food outlets, bars, CDs, trade and charity stalls, even an osteopath.

The Village Pump is a very family-friendly festival, running over the last weekend of July, so is a great start to the school holidays as well as a great venue for families, often three generations, enjoying picnics and the entertainment together. There is also a dedicated Children's Marquee running all day next to the permanent play area. The only thing we didn't find was a dedicated hub or activities for the teens, but hopefully this can be addressed.

In short, set on the grassy golf course, in sight of the White Horse (easily reached by car), I love this festival. It is not far from our area just up the A350 from Salisbury. Maybe see you there next year?

Dennis Wheeler