

This is one of an occasional series about folk festivals, and I have chosen one of my favourites, the **Chippenham Folk Festival**.

This festival takes place over the bank holiday weekend at the end of May each year, starting on the Friday and running through to the Monday evening. It's all within easily walkable distances and there is excellent coverage of three areas of interest: dance, song and display.

I first started going to Chippenham as a member of Hampshire Garland, displaying our dances in the streets, in the Arena and in the Grand Procession on bank holiday Monday, but I soon realised that there was a great social dance scene with workshops, dances and ceilidhs plus song sessions and concerts.

The festival happens in the centre of Chippenham and the local people come in force because it's one of those festivals where there is plenty going on in the streets and the park which is free of charge. The main high street is closed to traffic during the day so that the display sides which include Morris of all kinds, Clog, Appalachian, Belly Dancing, Rapper etc can perform. There is a park at the bottom of the High Street, with the river running through it, and here they set up a proper stage with tiers of seats for spectators. The various display sides and some of the bands and singers are invited to perform on the stage throughout the day and it is free for spectators. Also in the park are numerous stalls and tents selling food and drink, musical instruments. In addition there is a huge Crafts Marquee, mostly with stalls selling various items, but usually there are some people making objects as well.

You do need a ticket to take part in the rest of the festival though. Dance workshops and dances are held in several venues such as the town hall, the leisure centre and other central halls and music happens in the pubs, at the Cause Centre and in concert form in the Leisure Centre.

During the weekend Stroph and I will probably go to an evening dance on the Friday, some social dance workshops morning and afternoon on the Saturday, which might be Playford, Contra, Irish Set, general English etc, perhaps a concertina workshop and a belly dancing workshop (guess who goes to which!) and at lunchtime we almost always go to the Essential Sing, a pub singaround which attracts some great singers and where the chorus songs really do raise the rafters. In the evening we might go to one of three or four dances or to the main concert which showcases some of the best talent at the festival, or just to one of the more 'folk club' type of sessions. On Sunday there is usually an early evening Contra Dance in the Leisure Centre, which is high energy, almost non-stop and great fun – we always go to that. Every night there is a loud, busy and energetic ceilidh in the Sports Hall which attracts all ages, but it is especially nice to see lots of young people, children, teenagers and lots of people in their twenties and thirties.

There are also children's events during the weekend and all sorts of other activities in which to get involved. During the day of the opening Friday of the festival, there are sessions teaching the local school children and some of the folk from our area support this.

There is also a unique Stick and Bucket Morris Dance competition. This comes from a passing reference to Morris dancing in one of Terry Pratchett's

books (and Terry has even in the past been persuaded to come and judge the event). The dances are not serious, in fact usually hilarious. Wickham Morris are particularly keen competitors and, indeed, have won the 'Golden Bucket' several times. The only rule is that you have to have at least one stick and bucket involved; apart from that anything goes, including much cross dressing - including one winning side sporting bucket shaped handbags and (lip)sticks!

Another unique event is the 'Aqueilidh', in which attempts are made to dance in the swimming pool. Not the least of the problems is setting up a band and caller who can be heard over the noise of the pool but still able to keep themselves and their equipment dry, but it is very popular with lots of folk enjoying the challenge of manoeuvring through the water.

Many people stay on the campsites, one of which is for caravans and motorhomes, and is right next to the leisure centre and arena area. The site for tents is on the other side of the main street, but is also pretty close to everything. Others stay in Chippenham's hotels or B&B's, many of which are right in the centre of town amidst all the action.

On the bank holiday Monday the entire High Street is lined with market stalls selling clothes, jewellery, shoes, crafts and just about anything else you can think of. There is a super atmosphere in the streets on the Monday, with all the townspeople coming out to watch the Procession and the displays in the Arena Chippenham Town Morris Men, sometimes take great delight in leading the parade and then nipping back to join the end and go round again!

So, Chippenham Folk Festival is a great place to be over the late May Bank Holiday weekend whether you want to dance or sing or just relax and be entertained, and you don't even have to pay if the latter is what you want. Many people from our area attend and it is rare not to spot someone you know every day.

You can find more details online at www.chippfolk.co.uk, where I noticed that Craig:Morgan:Robson, Tanglefoot and Cloudstreet are among this year's artistes and Barrie Bullimore, Geoff Elwell and Sheila Mainwaring are amongst the callers with music from, for example, the English Contra Dance Band and Weston Country Dance Band.

Lin Rayner