



East Anglian Fayres

East Anglian Fayres By John Power.

In the wake of the psychedelic era that centred mainly on London, peaking in 1967 and 68, with its associated social upheavals, there was an urge for many to de-camp from urban environments. Self seeking and fathoming the ways of nature do not find endless vistas of brick to be a useful setting for such pastimes. Wales and the South-West of the country become destinations for young evacuees of that nature, often centred around miniature festivals and would-be communal experiments. Best known by far became Glastonbury Fayre after its beginnings in 1971 that then grew year on year. Lesser known to the country as a whole was what was developing up in East Anglia. More acoustic in sound levels it was to begin with than electronically powered festivals, as befitted the rural nature of reviving old country fayres that had tailed off in a century dominated in its first half by two world wars. Such fayres had been a national tradition outside the urbanisation that preceded the Industrial Revolution, often as remnants on sites of old Pagan gatherings that had been taken over by the spread of churches, with watered down harvest festival style absorption of seasonal festivities for farming communities. The first such revival that took place was Barsham Fair in 1972, in the grounds of Roos Hall near Beccles on the Suffolk-Norfolk borderland, a site of Mediaeval festivities witnessed by a hanging tree, for that well know spectator sport of darker times. The second Barsham Fayre, took place the following year, as the first had been so well received. Mediaeval costume was encouraged to suit the historic theme.

By the third fair, in '73, fourth in '74 and fifth in '75, the event had settled into Rectory Paddock at Barsham, as the name rectory suggests, adjacent to the church. As was usual in the takeover plan old pagan sites were taken over for church building as Christianity spread around Britain, at first trying to absorb local custom as well as announce a takeover in belief, so old Celtic and Anglo Saxon sites were used, yet remained places for seasonal gatherings due to traditional memory. Barsham was like this in respect of having ancient earthworks at this site that inspired those of a mystical disposition. Researchers found that these had been sited on junction of ley lines, called after the name given to these paths of earth's magnetic energy named by Hereford antiquarian Alfred Watkins, who observed that they connected places with 'ley' in their name, indicating a meadow for gatherings, when he traced them on modern maps. Organisers at Barsham followed this pattern by renewing an old stone monument site with a maze of less weighty rocks, as part of the festival site. London 'escapee', Bruce Lacey, previously known for his electronic music which he called Sci-Fi Alchemy performed with his wife Jill, found that he unwittingly unleashed the power of the site at the '76 Barsham Fair when he improvised a shamanic ritual there that created an enormous storm in a year that was otherwise known for its severe drought. This proved not just to be coincidence when similar rituals brought changes to the weather at fairs, like the '77 May Fair at Mettingham Castle, and '78 Wild Dream Fair at Bramfield

The revival old horse fairs began in Bungay at Mettingham Castle in '76 also, with a second in '77 as the revival of one that had been dormant since 1934, but was then the traditional May 15th May Fair. This drew the attention of Romany Gypsies and

horse traders, with a fine array of painted traditional wooden caravans. The two main horse fairs that had otherwise survived in England were Barnet Fair in Hertfordshire, [now North London] since a 1588 charter, and the enormous gatherings at Appleby-in-Westmoreland which evolved by use over time rather than being granted by charter. Barnet is now mostly reduced to a large funfair once a year but Appleby thrives still as Europe's largest Romany horse fair too. As familiar fairground rides also began as attractions in Bungay it did invite feuding rivalries between clans. Music was previously of the acoustic folk variety but Hank Wangford, the London doctor, Sam Hutt, who took the stage name from a local village, was one of the medics who had tried to help Syd Barratt from Pink Floyd through his LSD psychosis, brought a Country and Western angle to the sounds on offer. Fire eaters, early geodesic domes, dragon sculptures, 'all the fun of the fair' were now turning up as part of the attractions on offer by Barsham '76, and logistics for ground and site work were becoming a lot of work for too few staff.

So the group of friends who had been the main movers and shakers that initiated the reborn origins of the fairs became EAAT: the East Anglian Arts Trust. In '77, roughly the same people became Albion Fayres. As the idea of Fairs began to spread Norfolk and Norwich Arts started to help with fairs at Lyng. International water aid charity Green Deserts helped with Rougham Fairs in Suffolk, and in North Essex a commune, Stour Valley Collective, at Old Hall in East Bergholt, organised fairs for that area. EAAT continued with Green Fayres, and Follye Fairs in Hevingham were independently organised.

So what kind of ambiance could you expect to encounter at a fayre? Well, obviously a lot was going to vary from event to event. But if you arrived early there would still be groundwork going on, water pipes and electrical cables being laid out; car park and camping areas being designated and signed; toilet trenches being dug; construction of structures for events being built; often sculptures; stallholders setting up for other arts and crafts, clothes and food: often wholefood and vegetarian stalls, being set up with hand made and painted fascades. As the fayres developed many traditional fairground and circus attractions crept in, including a big top, often in demand, along with jugglers, clowns, men on stilts, mime artists and mini theatres, dancers, especially the ever popular Can Can dancers, fortune tellers, face painters, games for children, increasingly music stages, lorries, or tents, and of course a beer tent. Many punters would come in costume, and were thus let in half price, when admission in itself was not exorbitant, but just to cover expenses.

Fireworks usually ended the events and campfires kept the nights alive....too long for many neighbours! Good causes like Green energy or Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament all had stalls. Legalise marijuana was not a public issue as it was illegal, individuals just demonstrated their opinion on laws that had begun in the U.S. to marginalize blacks and hipsters, by voting with their feet, as it were. There were aromas that drifted around that were not just incense, especially around the campfires, and always 'travelling salesmen' who wandering around quietly to offer magic mushrooms and brownies with added ingredients, surreptitiously.

Then of course it all had to be cleared up and dismantled, included heaps of litter by volunteers. Most punters managed to escape such responsibility, ignorant of organiser's cares about public liability insurance, finance issues, and returning the sites to pleasant pasture.

Geodesic domes, after the model of Buckminster Fuller, started to make appearances among constructions: at the Eye Show of '77 at first, but a huge dome and attached stage was first erected at Downham Market in North Norfolk in '78 and many places after. A monthly fairs newspaper, the Waveney Clarion, emerged to keep those involved informed. It featured a cartoon mascot character, Coypu, who gave his name to the Coypu Fair of '77. Coypus were large rat-like beasts raised for their fur, but had escaped into the wilds of East Anglia and, not being natives to the

country, did much to disrupt the previous balance of nature, a bit like counter-culture fair-goers!.

The first of the fairs under the Albion Fayres banner took place at Oaksmere, Blundeston between Yarmouth and Lowestoft, then Downham Market in '78. The Wildman Fair also took place at Bramfield that year and was where Bruce and Jill Lacey further developed shamanistic skills from their eccentric asymmetrical teepee. The Mistletoe Fair in honour of the Druids sacred berry was at Thornton Magna. Rougham Tree Fair took the holy Hindu tree reverence and Celtic tree cycle further when trees on the site were given artistic ritual makeovers, and this fair also featured a wood framed pyramid stage to rival Glastonbury Fair's most permanent feature, as well as a fine crop of teepees. At Eye, at the Dragon Hill, another very important ley line centre, a huge landscape size, playable harp was constructed, and Tai Chi performances were given.....all part of that bumper year for fairs.

In '79 it was another Albion Fair at Oaksmere; the Fantasy Fair at Lyng, with Viking battle re-enactors, who were often useful for site security; the Fire Fair at East Bergholt in North Essex and another Tree Fair at Rougham with enactments of rituals that marked the Celtic tree calendar identified by poet Robert Graves in his 'White Goddess' study [there are other versions of the sequence], as organisers took stock of the fairs that '78 had produced.

In '80 the Ariel Fair took place at Herringfleet Heights, west of Blunderston; the Sun Fayre at Lyng, with eccentric muso Lol Coxhill; the Moon Fair at East Bergholt; another Rougham Tree Fair; and the Follye Fair at Heveningham. 1981 brought another bumper crop of fairs, with another Albion Fayre at Oaksmere; a Green, Eco Fayre at Blythburgh; a Fairy Fair at Lyng, with huge headed fairy character actors amidst the throng; a Rainbow Fayre at East Bergholt; an Albi Fair, another Follye Fayre; and the Harvest Fayre at Rougham, which included seasonal ploughing, and a musical interlude from Robin Williamson of the Incredible String Band.

The summer of '82 was also another packed one. The Green Fair on Outney Common, Bungay, showed some further seasonal agricultural ritual with the burning of straw men, and the circus Big Top was well in evidence, as it often was. The Albion Kids Fayre was at Oaksmere; another costumed Fairie Fair took place at Lyng, with another stone spiral maze and Morris dancers; there was an Earth Fayre at East Bergholt; a Fire and Water Fair at Bayfield, near Holt. Another Tree Fair at Rougham was joined by more teepees from Tipi Village in Wales, thanks to Sid Rawle, and saw Bruce Lacey honouring the Earth Goddess in a ritual construction of his shamanic devising; while the The Follye Fair was at Heveningham; the pure Energy Fair was at Westleton; and the Castle Fair at New Buckenham rounded the year off.

Music was, off course, a major component of activities, be it local talent, acoustic, as it was to begin with, or increasingly louder rock and moving towards festival commercialism. Many established fair-goers found this intrusive and moving away from the early spirit of events. It wasn't always greeted well by neighbours of the sites either, nor was the haphazard parking that often occurred in narrow lanes around sites, instead of on the sites. Once 'New Age' Travellers heard of the events and started arriving that also brought new problems, as they had no fixed base which meant they could hang around and outlive their welcome. Used as they were to Free Festivals they also became a threat to stallholders who sometimes found themselves robbed to fund hard drug habits. Viking re-enactors or local bikers sometimes acted as a deterrent if they were on site, but generally it lead to less people being willing to organise events.

So in '83 there were only two fairs: one at Thornham Magna and another Castle Fair at New Buckenham. But the book 'The Sun in the East', first to chronicle the development of the fairs was published. '84 saw two fairs, a Green Deserts water aid

fair, by Thorpe Woodlands, including a giant Wicker Man that was built during the weekend and set fire to on the Sunday evening, reviving Celtic tradition, but no policemen or animals were inside it as in the cult musical film set on a Scottish island. The other Fair of that year was near Thetford Forest. '85 saw the Wool Fair at Stowmarket in June and the last major event was back where they started at Roos Hall in Barsham, with a Great Desert Fair which included camel racing.

Of course there have been revival fairs like the Harlequin Fayre between Swaffam and Kings Lynn in 2015 and Strumpstraw Tree Festival in 2018, on a fairly ad hoc basis. I can't promise that my list of fairs is exhaustive. And we mustn't forget the Strawberry Fayre on a water plain known as Midsummer Common in Cambridge which is the nearest to being an inner city event, but one that has been celebrated since '74, and continues despite tighter regulation by the local council year on year, due to 'New Age' travellers and interference by local gangs. It has grown to virtually the size of a music festival, but keeps stallholders and other attractions too.

As the years have rolled away the organisers have grown older too, and younger punters have different ideas. Punks, who originally grew as a reaction to anything perceived as old soon found their way into what could have been a culture clash, as they began to realise they were a younger generation of colourful freaks, and fitted in quite well. The last fayre I went to not only had a music tent where Nik Turner from Hawkwind played with some of his Inner City Unit, to please the oldies, but also had a field next to the main event with a full scale Rave going on, like a chic under a mother bird's wing. In East Anglia at large the idea had spread so well that any sports field or school field easily came to be commandeered for events akin, if smaller, to the fayres, of sizes more like village fates. In those 14 years when the fairs flourished music festivals have mushroomed generally: Glastonbury being the most noticeable example, and Latitude at Henham Hall in Suffolk a closer one, despite the need for increased security measures to go with their expansion. Some of the problems encountered at the fayres made their mark and were taken on board as lessons. Newer tendencies like rock festivals and raves have evolved as the number of fayres subsided and all have learned from each other.