

carnivals and regeneration

Andrew Tallon looks at the economic, social and cultural impacts of urban festivals as exemplified by the illuminated carnivals of the South West of England

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Above

Illuminated carnival float taking part in the 2006 South West of England season

Urban festivals have long been recognised by city authorities as central components of the wider regeneration of urban areas.¹ Examples of high-profile urban festivals in the UK include the Edinburgh Festival and New Year's Eve celebrations across the country. Urban festivals seek to promote the carnivalesque and festive, often in

response to economic and social problems which have emerged over the last 30 or so years. They have frequently emerged as a component of wider 24-hour-city strategies that have been developed since the mid-1990s, and have often been imposed top-down by city authorities, as in the case of the Leeds St Valentine's Fair.²

Carnivals can be seen as a form of urban festival, although, as illustrated below, they are also held in smaller town and rural environments.

Readers will be familiar with some of the world's famous carnivals – notably the Brazilian Rio Carnival (the world's largest) and the Venice water carnival. Within the UK, the famous Notting Hill Carnival, which takes place across the August bank holiday weekend and regularly attracts upwards of 1 million spectators, began in 1959, to celebrate the cultural diversity of the area in response to the race riots of the previous summer. Carnivals have also evolved around celebrations of particular historical events, such as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (for example at Lewes in Sussex). Many towns and cities worldwide, particularly in Europe, Latin America and North America, have large and popular carnival celebrations. Although often developing from religious origins,³ many have now become synonymous with place marketing and urban tourism strategies.

'Carnival' is generally accepted to derive from the Italian *carne levare*, meaning 'to remove meat' and referring to abstinence during Lent. Traditionally, carnival was an annual Christian festival season which occurred immediately before Lent during February or March. Carnival is mostly a Roman Catholic and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Orthodox celebration, and generally Protestant areas do not have carnival celebrations. Carnival typically involved a public celebration or parade combining elements of circus and public street party with participants often dressing up or masquerading during the celebrations.

In the contemporary UK, carnivals continue to take place in a variety of urban and rural settings. In 2002 it was estimated that there were 221 'traditional' carnivals in England.³ These carnivals generate an array of issues relevant to town and country planning. There are a variety of economic, social and cultural impacts on localities in which carnivals are held on an annual basis, as well as numerous implications. Such concerns can be discussed by focusing on the illuminated night-time carnivals that take place in a relatively rural and peripheral part of the UK, the South West of England.

South West of England carnivals

Perhaps some of the less nationally well known, but economically, socially and culturally significant carnival celebrations centre around the counties of Somerset, Devon, Wiltshire and Dorset, collectively referred to as the South West of England carnivals. The tradition of carnival in the South West evolved from religious celebrations generated by the failure of the Catholic plot lead by Guy Fawkes to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605. The instigator of the plot is believed to have been a



Above

The South West region, highlighting the illuminated carnival counties of Somerset, Devon, Wiltshire and Dorset
Thanks to Jamie Roxburgh, School of the Built and Natural Environment, University of the West of England, Bristol

Jesuit priest named Robert Parsons from the village of Nether Stowey, a short distance from Bridgwater in Somerset.

Although Bonfire Night is now a major annual celebration across the whole of the UK, it is highly likely that the reason that the event was originally so keenly celebrated in the South West was that the population was predominantly Protestant.⁴ This contrasts with the majority of carnivals which revolve around Catholic celebrations. From these beginnings over 400 years ago, carnival has evolved and continued to be a significant set of celebrations.

There are currently four circuits of South West illuminated carnivals. For 2007 the circuits of affiliated carnivals comprise the East Devon Circuit (Seaton, Colyton, Axminster, Sidmouth, Newton Poppleford, Exmouth, Honiton, and Ottery St Mary); the South Somerset Federation of Carnivals (Wellington, Ilminster, Chard and Taunton); the Wessex Grand Prix (Sturminster Newton, Trowbridge, Mere, Frome, Shaftesbury, Gillingham, Castle Cary and Ansford, Wincanton, and Warminster); and the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association (Bridgwater, North Petherton, Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Glastonbury, and Weston-super-Mare). There are in addition a couple of independent illuminated carnivals which take place during the season at Crewkerne and Midsomer Norton.

The main circuit in terms of its history, size of processions, spectators attracted and public profile is the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association. The industrial town of Bridgwater is branded as 'Home of carnival' and is believed to be the location for the largest *illuminated* carnival in the world, and the oldest event of its kind in the UK, being first officially held in 1881.³ It is estimated that

the carnival day attracts around 150,000 people from around the UK and from overseas. It is now held annually on the Friday nearest 5 November, and the other South West carnivals are arranged around this date.

The night-time procession consists of a display of over 150 entries, including around 70 floats of up to 30 metres long, 5 metres high and 3 metres wide festooned with dancers and up to 30,000 light bulbs, in addition to costumed walking individuals and groups of masqueraders. The procession follows a 3-mile route and takes around 3 hours to pass any one point on the route. Following the carnival procession, a unique display of 'squibbing' takes place, consisting of the simultaneous firing of around 150 large fireworks (or squibs) in the High Street.⁴

The rest of this article focuses on the county of Somerset, the centre of the South West of England illuminated carnivals. Somerset is the home of around 60 carnival clubs, comprising groups of volunteers with memberships ranging from 10 to 100. Club members participate in fund-raising for float construction which takes many forms, including stewarding and catering at local events (such as Glastonbury Festival), and arranging music and other events such as bingo nights. In addition, members design and construct the floats, as well as participating in the carnivals. These participants possess and develop a wide range of skills and talents which tend to be drawn from skilled professions such as engineers, electricians, model-makers, carpenters, painters, costume-makers and choreographers. An average club member can spend 1,000 hours a year working on carnival-related activities.

It is estimated that 1,000 people are actively involved in carnival throughout the county, while up to 10,000 are involved indirectly.⁵ Individual floats can cost up to £20,000 to construct and use up to 30,000 light bulbs and 1 megawatt of power from generators which can cost around £5,000 to hire for the season.

Economic, social and cultural impacts

Economic impacts

The academic and planning context for the carnivals relates to issues such as urban and rural change and restructuring; tourism and place promotion issues; the leisure, arts and entertainment economy; the development of the night-time economy; and local community and culture. In post-industrial society, urban areas have assumed a greater role as visitor destinations, encompassing not only those places with an obvious resource base such as global cities and historic towns, but also former industrial conurbations with, on the face of it, relatively

modest appeal. The arts, culture and entertainment industries are employed by municipal authorities, often acting in partnership with private enterprise, as a catalyst for regeneration. Carnivals can attract visitors to urban centres with modest appeal, albeit on an annual basis. Local beneficiaries are concentrated within the service sector and include accommodation businesses, retailers, pubs and other leisure facilities, and so on.

The policy context for carnivals is framed at several levels. At national level the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has responsibility for culture and entertainment. At regional level, the South West Regional Development Agency and the Government Office for the South West see culture as an integral part of their plans, of which carnival should be an element. Analysis of recent reports and websites reveals that, despite their regional importance, the series of carnivals and their economic (and related) impacts are completely overlooked by regional level bodies and by reports such as the *State of the South West*⁶ – which is a significant lacuna.

Culture South West, one of eight regional cultural consortia in England created by the DCMS in 1999, does appear to appreciate the role of carnival, in cultural terms at least: its 2001 regional cultural strategy document provides the context for the local cultural strategies developed by local authorities. But it is at county and district levels that carnival is given an increased profile and is a central component of the entertainment, cultural and creative economies.

In a rural peripheral region that is increasingly dependent on service sector economies such as tourism, and now relying to a much lesser extent on agriculture and manufacturing industry, culture is central to place promotion strategies. Culture is worth around £1 billion to the South West regional economy.⁷ The expansion of tourism and the related cultural economy has to some extent helped to offset the decline in the traditional industries of the region, such as farming, fishing and mining.⁷ In addition, recent decades have witnessed the decline of market towns attempting to compete with modern forms of retailing and larger centres (for example Shepton Mallet); seaside resorts struggling to survive in the age of mass tourism to overseas destinations and cultural tourism (Weston-super-Mare and Burnham-on-Sea); and towns formerly dominated by manufacturing industry but now experiencing continued closures and decline (Bridgwater).

The economic impact of festivals such as carnivals depends upon their scale and duration.⁸ For the South West of England illuminated carnivals, there is something of a local economic dimension throughout the year, as clubs organise fund-raising activities and events which make money in

themselves as well as drawing visitors to the area. The most significant economic impacts are during the carnival season itself in early November, when tourists and residents visit the towns and view the carnivals. Income is generated for tourism and related activities locally, and for carnival charities and voluntary organisations. It is estimated by Somerset County Council that around £2 million extra is spent in Somerset during the seven-carnival circuit.

The free-to-view Somerset county carnivals boast a total street collection (voluntary contributions during the processions) alone of over £2 million for the period 1980-2006. In 1980, the combined total for the seven events stood at just over £20,000, and this had increased to almost £120,000 for the 2006

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season. The street collection at Bridgwater carnival totalled almost £31,000 in 2006 (a record for any individual South West carnival).⁹ Money raised first goes to staging the carnivals, and the remainder is distributed among selected local charities and organisations.

In comparison, £36 million was spent at the 2002 Notting Hill Carnival.⁸ Estimates of the economic impact of Edinburgh's Hogmanay Festival have been put at over £10 million.¹⁰ Although not as high profile, the South West carnivals are of significant impact as the entire season runs from the end of August until mid-November and each carnival attracts from around 10,000 to 150,000 visitors. The main mid-Somerset circuit of carnival lasts 11 days and the seven carnivals attract combined audiences of some 0.5 million spectators.

Social and cultural impacts and significance

The social and communal life of many places in Somerset revolves around carnival activity such as fund-raising, float-building, meetings, social events and post-carnival presentations. Such voluntary active participation is a vibrant component of society.⁵ Somerset County Council's cultural strategy identifies carnival as being of social as well as economic potential.⁵ Involvement can be

considered 'inclusive' in that people of any social class background, ethnic group, gender or sexuality can be – and are – represented in carnival circles. However, membership of carnival clubs tends to be slanted towards working class groups based around skilled trades, and there is an under-representation of ethnic minorities, to an extent reflecting the composition of the local population.

Carnival is a tradition which still glues communities together and lives on '*not because anybody has insisted that they are educational, or that they will bring tourists in, or because there is funding available, but simply because people enjoy taking part and celebrating their particular traditions*'.⁷

The cultural importance of carnival (interlinked with the economic and social dimensions) in the South West is illustrated by recent strategies at regional and county levels. Culture South West aims '*to provide strong strategic leadership to people interested in the region's cultural development and work with partners to celebrate, champion and increase cultural opportunities across the South West*'.⁷ Its cultural strategy is in fact named after a local carnival 'celebrity' (Gerrard 'Chunky' Dunster) and emphasises the importance of carnival in relation to local culture and community. It argues that carnival should be further supported in Somerset as a community-based cultural event.

Somerset's subsequent cultural strategy⁵ argues that cultural activity such as carnival has a great potential for stimulating community regeneration. Communities continue to celebrate events such as carnival in traditional ways, and carnival '*bonds a lot of people together in a big community effort*'.⁵ Somerset's cultural strategy recognises that carnival clubs are important in allowing local people to express themselves and contribute to the vitality and coherence of the community, and they rely on volunteers for their success and often draw particular strength from the support of newcomers.⁵ Carnival is a powerful collective force in many communities and touches people from all walks of life.⁵

The 'commodification' of local culture and festivals is a feature of contemporary society and tourism.¹¹ As this happens, the meanings of such events inevitably change – as has occurred with many urban festivals in post-industrial times. However, they can remain true to their historic character, and their roots can be strongly acknowledged, as demonstrated by the experience of the South West of England illuminated carnivals. In contrast to the recent top-down, city authority initiatives and support for festivals as part of wider marketing or regeneration efforts,^{2,12} the South West's illuminated carnivals represent a more inclusive, traditional form of street festival, which developed and continues to evolve in a bottom-up fashion.

The future for carnival and planning issues

Each carnival season in the South West seems to bring new or renewed threats. These tend to be related to issues associated with the costs facing the organising committees staging the carnivals (including insurance) and crowd safety and control. Over the years there has been very little in the way of troublesome behaviour, and arrests are usually in low double figures for each event, and are often associated with drunken behaviour or public nuisance. The problems are certainly fewer (and are at lower levels) than those typically associated with the night-time economy and similar events elsewhere in the country. There have been few significant problem incidents, despite the scale and seeming danger involved with staging the carnivals. Such issues have negatively affected other cultural festivals which have sometimes become victims of their own success, as in the case of Edinburgh's Hogmanay festival.¹⁰

Other key issues are connected with adapting for the future. These include the marketing of the events; developing stronger links with local and regional authorities; and continuing to involve communities in arts and culture:

- **Marketing:** There is an inherent tension in expanding the volume of spectators without damaging the local and traditional flavour of the carnivals. The contemporary carnivals have not lost links to, and an understanding of, their origins and history, and therefore cannot be regarded as examples of a post-industrial inauthentic tourist experience. Indeed, the newest carnival on the Somerset county circuit is Weston-super-Mare's, which began in 1969. There are related issues surrounding the visitor capacity on one day of the year within what are relatively small towns.
- **Stronger links:** Stronger links with local and particularly regional authorities should be developed to ensure that the carnivals' economic, social and cultural importance and contribution are fully recognised in the region and incorporated within future strategies and policies.
- **Involving communities:** Communities should continue to be involved in carnivals, arts and culture – particularly disadvantaged groups located in rural and declining industrial centres in the area. Involving younger groups in what is essentially voluntary work throughout the year is increasingly a challenge for carnival clubs.

All these issues should be the focus for deeper research on traditional urban (and rural) festivals, focusing not solely on their economic impacts, but on their role in local communities, culture and politics. Such research could offer lessons to other historic or fledgling festivals and carnivals across the UK,³ especially relating to their role in the region, their economic contribution, their social importance

to local communities, and their past and ongoing cultural importance. After more than 400 years of history, the South West of England's illuminated carnivals continue to contribute to the rich tapestry of traditional (and somewhat peculiar and off-beat) regional cultural events in England.

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Notes

- 1 See for example C.M. Law: 'Regenerating the city centre through leisure and tourism'. *Built Environment*, 2000, Vol. 26, 117-29; N. Ravenscroft, J. Reeves and M. Rowley: 'Leisure, property and the viability of town centres'. *Environment & Planning A*, 2000, Vol. 32, 1359-74; and A.R. Tallon, R.D.F. Bromley, B. Reynolds and C.J. Thomas: 'Developing leisure and cultural attractions in the regional city centre: a policy perspective'. *Environment & Planning C: Government and Policy*, 2006, Vol. 24, 351-70
- 2 T. Harcup: 'Re-imagining a post-industrial city: the Leeds St Valentine's Fair as a civic spectacle'. *City*, 2000, Vol. 4, 215-31
- 3 S. Hewer: *National Carnival Policy Consultation and Mapping Exercise: Traditional English Carnival – An Overview*. 2002. w: www.carnivalnet.org.uk/publications/docs/English_CarnivalsMap.doc
- 4 R. Evans and P. Nicholls: *Somerset Carnivals: A Celebration of Four Hundred Years*. Halsgrove, 2005
- 5 *Celebrating Somerset's Culture – Something to Declare: A Cultural Strategy for the County of Somerset*. Somerset County Council, 2002
- 6 *State of the South West 2007*. South West Observatory, 2007
- 7 *In Search of Chunky Dunsters... A Cultural Strategy for the South West*. Culture South West, 2001
- 8 G. Evans and P. Shaw: *The Contribution of Culture to Regeneration in the UK: A Review of the Evidence*. DCMS, 2004
- 9 *SCGFCA Street Collections 1980 to 2006*. Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival Association, Bridgwater, 2007
- 10 G. Hughes: 'Urban revitalization: the use of festive time strategies'. *Leisure Studies*, 1999, Vol. 18, 119-35
- 11 See G. Shaw and A.M. Williams: *Tourism and Tourism Spaces*. Sage, 2004
- 12 B. Garcia: 'Urban regeneration, arts programming and major events: Glasgow 1990, Sydney 2000 and Barcelona 2004'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2004, Vol. 10, 103-18