



## **Charlbury Beer Festival – History and success story**

How did Charlbury Beer Festival become the largest and most successful one-day beer festival in the UK? One thing is for certain. I never imagined it would be so successful on that cold November night in 1997 when I assembled the first group of men to start discussing it.

I was Chair of the Charlbury School Association and had a problem that needed a major rethink and solution. One major event each year raised a significant portion of the annual total raised – the annual fireworks display at Charlbury Cricket Club. With the tragic accident and death of a primary school headmaster the previous year in Buckinghamshire, there was just no way the fireworks display could continue in its current form.

Most schools had already taken the decision to cancel their events and we would be no different. No fundraising can risk the death of someone just wanting to do the right thing for parents and pupils. With a major hole left in the fundraising calendar, I had to come up with another very different major event that the staff and parents could buy into. With the support of the headteacher (Mr. Martin Kirk), I proposed a beer festival to the committee and made a plan to persuade a minimum of 12 dads to help me. I wrote to all parents and requested a meeting to discuss volunteers. Amazingly I got exactly the number of willing dads I needed!

Then my problems started. I asked this question at the first meeting; ‘Anyone know anything about running a beer festival?’ Blank faces all around! It was clear I had loads of expertise in consumption, but not of provision! However, a little more digging uncovered skills in catering, advertising, brewing and accountancy. Everyone was assigned tasks and we set about a winter of research and investigation.

I attended the magistrates court to get the licence and we researched cooling systems (specialist stuff for real ale), glasses, ale choices, volume choices and catering options. Tom Page at the Rose & Crown gave us the best advice that has stayed true ever since. Estimate how many adults will come and allow them an average of 2.5 pints each. We all agreed on 16 casks of real ale for the first festival (1152 pints). Then came my hardest presentation ever; the meeting with the Memorial Hall committee to secure the venue.

Their concerns were very fair and spillage was the main one. We agreed to use 11oz glasses so that no glasses were full, and spillage would be mopped up as soon as it occurred. In hindsight, this worked well, but we gave away 10% of the beer free as we could not fill the glasses to the (government approved) line!

The 1998 festival was a phenomenal success. No beer left, no food left, but a continual drizzle most of the day. A big pat on the back for everyone at the end and just the clean up left.

We also now understood the financial model that could be refined in later years if there were to be some. £1400 profit in year one grew to £2400 in year 2 and £4200 in year 3 as we grew the festival and increased the amount of beer on offer. I could mention the lengthy committee discussions on the colour of festival t-shirts but you can probably imagine those.



However, with success comes issues. Six or seven years later with most of us involved and none of us left with children at the school, we found ourselves in a quandary. We were raising significant funds and the Charlbury School Association had reduced its own fundraising efforts dramatically (as we were gifting the school money each year, far in excess of anything previously raised).

I proposed going it alone as our own charity and potentially allowing other groups in the town to benefit from funds raised. Charlbury Community Projects was launched and I thank all those committee members who lent the festival the working capital to fund that first year as a separate entity.

More success ensued and the number of barrels being secured each year was growing and their size was also. The number of 18 gallon barrels was reaching the weight limit of the stage and the number of people coming to the event was nearing the fire limit on the hall. Then came the next big issue.

A split committee considered two options – remain at the Memorial Hall and limit entry or expand outside and grow the event even more. The main problem was that we did not understand the financial model of moving to an outdoor venue. With much diplomacy and persuasion, the committee agreed to go outdoors and we asked the cricket club to loan us their junior pitch for one day in July.

And so Charlbury Beer Festival had taken just 10 years or so to expand from 1152 pints of real ale and one small barbecue to 5040 pints of real ale, 800 pints of cider, litres and litres of Pimms and Wine, three/four food outlets and live music most of the day from bands who just want to play at such a phenomenal, family-friendly event.

Will it continue? I hope so. Simon Towers said this at the last committee meeting in May 1998: 'We would never have got this far without a vision.' I had a vision, but I never imagined the success we would get. Thanks to all those committee members who have come, gone, stayed and made the event what it is – the best one day beer festival in the UK!

*Dave Sangwine*