

Whittlesey Straw Bear Festival, Jan 2019

Sometimes the best laid plans are those that are conceived after a few too many sherbets in the village local. That's certainly how this little weekend's escape came about; an unplanned pub session on Halloween saw us chatting to a local about all things Pagan. Keith was explaining to anyone who would listen about the end of harvest festival Samhain, and a local farmer went on to tell us that if we liked that sort of thing then we should check out Whittlesey Straw Bear Festival. A few days later and after a Google and

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Instagram reccy, we were booking a campsite and blocking the January weekend out of our new diary.



Whittlesey Straw Bear Festival has been happening longer than records exist. It begins on the Tuesday following Plough Monday (the 1st Monday after Twelfth Night), when it became customary to dress one of the confraternity of the plough in straw and call him a Straw Bear. The Bear then is led around the town to entertain in a clumsy and frantic manner whilst the townsfolk provide great spreads of beer, beef and tobacco. The straw for the bear was carefully selected and the whole point of the exercise was to hope for good fertility and a good harvest in the year

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ahead.



We originally booked to stay at nearby Northey Lodge campsite due to its close proximity to Whittlesey- an easy walk apparently. However, on arrival on Friday we had one of the most bizarre arrival and check in procedures that we've ever encountered, leaving us both rather creeped out to be perfectly honest, and so as the site itself was an absolute dump and the electrics were hanging off with loose wires on show, the shower covered in plastic and the next door caravan sporting a large "no valuables left inside" we made a sharp exit and went elsewhere.

Thankfully The Camping and Motorhome

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Club have a Club Site, Ferry Meadows Peterborough fairly close by and they could accommodate us for the weekend. Phew.



Friday night was spent downing a few beers and a homemade turkey balti whilst mulling over our day; it had started with us playing a gig and accompanying the State Secretary for Health in a dance with a resident at a celebration lunch and finished with this bizarre encounter at Northey Lodge.

Saturday arrived and it was time to figure out how we would get to Whittlesey. There was a bus stop nearby to the Campsite which we could have used along with a connecting bus in Peterborough, and also a train service

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from Peterborough but to get to the station was around a 4 mile walk. We needed up grabbing a local cab for just £14 each way for ease, speed and laziness. Once in Whittlesey we soon found the heart of the festival, on Market Street, and it wasn't long until the Straw Bear had been located for a selfie! ☐

☒ There were loads of different Morris dancing teams, all with their own individual style and costume. Some had black face paint, others had multicoloured.



We found a souvenir programme and found the history of the Morris dancers really interesting. We also learnt that this is the biggest Morris dancing event in the UK and teams

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come from across the country to participate.

We followed the Straw Bear and his team of minders and musicians along the high street towards the Ivy Leaf where he was to have his lunch.



We made use of the hour and half gap to enjoy Morris Dancing displays outside the Wetherspoons, and of course sampling a few beers whilst we did. We particularly enjoyed the Straw Bear Ale. it was amazing to see some of the teams using really traditional instruments- we saw two hurdy-gurdy's which was amazing!



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After his lunch, the Straw Bear came back along the high street and weaved round the small streets and alleys, stopping at each pub for a dance with whichever Morris dancing team was already dancing in the car park or beer garden.



I don't know if it were a coincidence or not, but as time ticked on and more pubs were visited, the Bear's dancing became more and more lively. □



He's being fed something in a tankard □

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By 3pm, we'd found ourselves right in the heart of the Parade, humming along the tune of the March thoroughly captivated into the spirit of the event. It seemed like the entire town, young and older were out enjoying themselves- it's obviously a real tradition here.



By 3.30 the finale had taken place, the Straw Bear had been joined by another and also a smaller bear and a mass dance along with the Morris dancers took place to mark the end of the day.

It had been a really unique experience for us "outsiders" but we were made to feel welcome and we really enjoyed ourselves. What

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really surprised us was how many younger people were part of the Morris Dancers- it's obviously still a very popular pastime.

Back at the campsite we settled in for the night and enjoyed a homemade carbonara and a bottle of wine. Ferry Meadows campsite is lovely and we will definitely return with our bikes next time as there are loads of off road paths.

Sunday dawned a beautiful winters morning, however it was chilly! It dropped to -4 last night as whilst we were snug as a bug in bed, the doors and windows had frozen up so we had to spend a few extra minutes in bed whilst we defrosted with the heater and kettle on. What a shame!

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We decided to make the most of the beautiful day and do a walk so after a hearty breakfast, we waved goodbye to the site and drove 5 miles to nearby Elton.



Our 7.5 mile walk took in some really beautiful scenery along the Nene Way. The weather couldn't have been any better - I just love this crisp winter sunshine on a frosty ground.



Half way into the walk we stumbled across the birthplace of Richard III and also the place where Mary Queen of Scots got beheaded in the small quaint village of Fotheringhay. The motte and bailey is really well preserved and although the castle remains are

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no longer there the views from the motte are spectacular. The church at Fotheringhay is also really interesting as it has a octagonal tower.



Fotheringhay Bridge was the earliest bridge over the Nene. This stone one dates from 1722 and replaced an original timber bridge.



We stopped for lunch at the Falcon Inn and made a note of the **Certified Location** **Campsite** right next to the Motte and Bailey- right on the river banks it looked a definite

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for us to return to someday.

What a varied but lovely weekend. Have a great week,

Until next time

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