

## **1975 European Architectural Heritage Year**

While growing up in Debenham in the 1960s and 70s, I was aware of the village's strong community spirit through good times and bad. Many readers will recall as a poignant example the events of June 1975, when we felt the extremes of tragedy and celebration in a matter of weeks. Despite experiencing a kind of bereavement at the start of that month, people pulled together to finalise arrangements for an amazing Midsummer event.

To set the scene I will look back to 25 May 1975, when *The Sunday Times* published a splendid three-page feature headed: *Debenham - Luckiest Village in the Land?* Its Editor, Philip Clarke, explained that the British Tourist Authority (BTA) had selected Debenham to represent the East Anglian region in a national *Festival of Villages*. He wrote:

"Debenham is one of 16 villages in Britain celebrating European Architectural Heritage Year\*. This summer each village is staging a festival ... featuring local customs, traditions, crafts and other events which give a picture of village life."

Sensing Debenham's special unity, Clarke observed that our "visually spectacular" village had "... managed to avoid becoming a fossilised museum piece or a suburban dormitory." This was precisely what the BTA was seeking for each region: an authentic, living, working, example of its traditions and vernacular architecture. I remember feeling rather proud that they had chosen Debenham.

The tragic part of this story was that on Sunday 1 June, 1975 - ironically just a week after the *Sunday Times*' 'Lucky Debenham' feature - a fire destroyed our Community Centre. It was a dreadful day. From at least the 1960s the dream of a new venue had united the village through fund-raising events and voluntary effort. And since its completion in 1972, the Centre had enhanced so many people's lives.

Despite this shocking blow, there was no self-pity. Debenham picked itself up and got on: in just over a fortnight's time, the start of the festival would make it East Anglia's focal point. By this time Debenham's celebration was in the final stages of organisation thanks to the leadership of a strong committee, who had inspired the involvement of just about every organisation in the village. While the loss of the Community Centre left some events without a venue, cancelling them was not considered an option. Alternative venues were found.

Debenham Community Festival opened on Thursday, 19 June 1975. The sun shone on the estimated 8,000 people - including seven coaches of Belgian visitors - who gathered to enjoy the four-day programme. The first event I attended was a fashion show presented by the British Wool Secretariat. On the Friday an exhibition on Debenham's history opened in the church, and that evening I went to a barn dance at Camp Green Farm.

The Festival's highlight - the Street Fayre - was on the Saturday. The church bells rang. There was the procession, dancing, drama, stalls, and the annual egg-throwing competition. Local trades- and craftspeople demonstrated their work. People spilled out of the four packed pubs. In the evening we danced and sang raucously at the Red Lion's music session.

On Sunday seven historic houses were open on an architecture trail around the village. There were sports, a fancy-dress competition, model aircraft and kite-flying, and a 'Round-the-Houses' race. In the evening, locals and visitors alike filled the church for a service of thanksgiving.

Throughout the celebrations the Community Centre remained in people's minds. Perhaps the festival lifted everyone's spirits, inspired that united determination to start fundraising and rebuilding. By 6 February 1977 Debenham had succeeded: the Community Centre reopened ... but that's another story.

\*The Council of Europe designated the year 1975 as European Architectural Heritage Year to raise awareness of "the irreplaceable cultural, social, and economic values" of historic buildings and sites (from an overview by the International Council on Monuments and Sites).

Thank you Sue (Thurlow), Aunty Daphne and Uncle Derek (Gooding) for sharing your collection of news cuttings about the event. The photos were taken by my late father, Arthur Holifield.

*Written by Sue Holifield and published in Debenham Parish Magazine, June issue 2017.*