

Report on the first Binsted Arts Festival

Emma Tristram

Plans for the Festival began in August 2015. So unsure were the Committee about the Festival concept that they called Binsted's first Festival by the more unassuming title, Binsted Arts Weekend. Over that weekend (10-12 June 2016) the Weekend became a Festival, with a majority of the events fully booked. It was small, local, celebratory, and great fun.

Binsted is certainly haunted by its artistic and literary past, even if not by the ghosts which are often mentioned as having been seen here. The biographer Valerie Grove, author of *The Life and Loves of Laurie Lee*, came to Binsted on July 10 to speak about Lee in the Festival's first evening event, 'Writers and Binsted's Past'. The evening included a talk by Luke Jennings, author of the family and angling memoir *Blood Knots*, who spoke about 'Growing up in Binsted'.



Valerie summed up the charm of this tiny village and its setting, between the hidden Binsted valley and the mass of untouched Binsted Woods:

'Binsted is a wonderful, mystical place, 'a little gem held in the past' as one of your competition poems put it, vitally important in the life story of Laurie Lee, many of whose poems were inspired here, and an extraordinary example of a parish unblemished by the modern world, with woodlands and wildflower meadows and the exquisite little Norman church, whose timeless quietness and beauty must surely be left undisturbed in the 21st century.'

An important part of the Festival was the link with Walberton, the neighbouring larger village. Forge Gallery in Walberton re-opened to show an exhibition on the theme 'A Way through the Woods', which was also the theme for the Poetry Competition.



Local artists with work for sale (Priscilla Ritchie, Mark Weston, and Tim Slatter) showed in the exhibition, and it also included four paintings of more historic interest, by members of the artistic dynasty stemming from that great Binsted personality, Lorna Wishart. Her daughter Yasmin David, and grandson Francis Wishart, were represented, as well as Lorna herself, with her 'mystical' portrait of herself and Binsted.

The first event in the festival was a pottery workshop at Forge Gallery, led by Mike Copley.



The art theme continued on the Saturday with the guided walk 'The Art and Literature of Binsted Woods'. The walk began in Binsted Churchyard, by the well-tended grave of the artist Michael Wishart, with a reading from his memoir *High Diver*.



I led 40 people on a walk from the Church to the southern part of Binsted Woods, through Binsted Park (the mediaeval-style 'pocket park' within the woods made by the Read family of Binsted House), and on to Binsted Lane East and the Madonna Pond, then in a round route back to the church.



A printed booklet for each person contained art of or about Binsted by Michael Wishart, Laurie Lee, Ralph Ellis, Lorna Wishart, Yasmin David, Francis Wishart, Paul Sivell, and W.S.Rogers – a little known local artist many of whose 1940s drawing of Binsted are in the Record Office. Readings included excerpts from Michael Wishart’s memoir, poems from the poetry competition, Laurie Lee’s diaries, and the fishing and family memoir *Blood Knots* by Luke Jennings, shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson prize in 2010. He had read his account of losing an enormous carp at the Madonna Pond in his talk in Binsted church on the Friday. We read more of it at the Pond itself.



The other events on the Saturday continued the poetry theme, with Janet Pressley’s talk ‘Poets and the Sussex Landscape’ in the afternoon (below), and the Poetry Evening and Prize-giving in the evening, with readings from the prize-winning poets and runners-up, and more of her own poems from the judge, Maggie Sawkins (overleaf, in the interval of the Prize-giving).





Sunday morning was the Art Workshop at Stable Cottage led by Matilda Tristram. Each participant made a 'mini-book', out of paper they had coloured themselves with ink, then drawn on as they moved about the surroundings (below and overleaf).





The festival finished with a much enjoyed appearance by the folk group 'Cotillion', Alan Wheeler with Annie, Bonnie and Linda, who performed their anthology show 'The Last Trip Home', about the working horse and ox.



Many appreciative comments came our way after the Festival.

- Rose Bray, the poet whose poem 'Raising the Bowman' won the £100 Sims Williams poetry first prize, said: 'You all worked so hard to make it a memorable weekend and a successful one. It was lovely to have the poetry evening in the old church which added to the atmosphere.'
- Isabel Thurston, a Committee Member and an Art Workshop participant, said: 'Proud to have been helping out at this lovely event celebrating Binsted and surroundings in lots of creative ways.'
- Patricia Hope Scanlan, who lent the pictures by members of the Wishart family to the Exhibition, said: 'Congratulations on a great weekend of Arts for and about Binsted.'

Sue McGowan, a member of the Binsted Arts committee, wrote the following impressions of the first Binsted Arts Festival for the Walberton Parish News.

A personal reflection on Binsted Arts Weekend, 10 - 12 June 2016

'It's Friday morning 10 June; after months of planning we're here, decorating St Mary's, Binsted's tiny medieval church, in excited anticipation of the first Binsted Arts Weekend. Armfuls of foxgloves, red campion and moon daisies fill the church. While we're busy, so is potter Mike Copley, leading the Weekend's first workshop inspired by Binsted's medieval pottery. The Forge Gallery is also the venue for the Weekend's exhibition of art with the theme of woodland and countryside.

Early evening and the little church is full. We are squeezed into every corner to hear author Luke Jennings' memories of growing up in Binsted, and biographer and journalist Valerie Groves' reflections on Laurie Lee's romance with Binsted. As the evening light fades, bathing the church in a dusky glow, we are not disappointed.

Saturday 11 June, a day steeped in the past and the literature of Binsted and Sussex. The morning walk, led by Emma and Mike Tristram, takes us through woods, medieval fields and across The Park, an early 1800s attempt to gentrify the land around the old Manor House with a ha-ha and grand oaks. Readings by the Madonna pond and in the woods bring Binsted's history to life.

We return to the little church in the afternoon and are wrapped in the musical harmony of a local folk group, setting the mood for a beautifully illustrated talk by Janet Pressley tracing five centuries of poetry about Sussex landscape

More folk music in the evening as we wait eagerly for the results of the first Binsted Arts Poetry Competition, introduced by poet and judge Maggie Sawkins. Poetry and wine flow luxuriantly and a warm, still evening ends a very special day in the life of this very special

village. And there's still Sunday to come!

It's Sunday morning, 12 June, and the Weekend's second workshop, led by artist and writer Matilda Tristram, is taking place around the kitchen table and in the garden at Stable Cottage, using mixed media to capture Binsted's magic. Everyone enjoys the fun and freedom of creating their own booklet.

The afternoon concert with traditional folk music and readings by Cotillion fills the church with music and lovely voices. A blissful moment in time, listening by the open church door, music harmonising with the peaceful bucolic view beyond.'

Binsted and the road scheme

Binsted is threatened by another scheme for a new Arundel Bypass – these have occurred regularly since 1987. It is a worse threat this time than any before, as it bisects the village and its beautiful countryside. We deliberately played down this aspect during the Festival, since we felt it important that Binsted was enjoyed by and for itself, without making it a campaigning event.

A number of people coming to the weekend were aware of the possibility of Binsted being destroyed by the bypass and were keen to express their view after experiencing the kind of place it is and learning about its cultural past and present.

Valerie Grove, celebrity biographer, who gave one of the talks, added 'It is utterly appalling to think of Binsted being despoiled in this way.'

'It was a hugely enjoyable and successful festival,' one Art Workshop participant, Diana Mitchener, said. 'I totally understand why Binsted should remain untouched - it is a very special place.'