

Article in *The Sunday Times, Home*, 11th June 2017 - with our mill pool on the cover

Welcome to the Worldwide Whitchurch Weekend

13 British communities share that name, and now residents are getting together. *Home* joins the party

In the market town of Whitchurch, Shropshire, plates are heaped with sandwiches, sausage rolls, mountains of local Belton cheese, crisps, scones and all manner of cakes. Janet Howarth, district commissioner for Girlguiding, and her team of lady helpers have been busy all afternoon, laying out a “bring and share supper” in the civic centre. I can’t help noticing that there is no sign of a Scout with a butter knife and a tea towel, but no matter.

At 6pm, the mayor gives a speech to welcome visitors, wobbly toddlers in tutus from Maggie Mays Academy of Dance perform to a rapt audience and there’s a concert by Whitchurch Community Choir. The second Worldwide Whitchurch Weekend — a three-day event celebrating villages and towns called Whitchurch — has begun.

The WWW is a biennial event conceived by Paul Driver, an ambitious and restless member of the sports and social club committee in Whitchurch, Hampshire. In 2012, he was contacted by a businessman interested in sponsoring the local football team, and they agreed to meet in the social club’s car park. Time ticked by and neither could see the other, so Driver called: “Where are you?” “I’m in the car park.” “Well, I’m in the car park too.”

You’ve probably guessed the punchline: “It turned out that while we were sitting in a car park in Whitchurch in Hampshire, they were in a car park in Whitchurch in Cardiff, more than 100 miles away.”

Driver, 54, who worked in financial security and intelligence, dealing with cyber threats and fraud, before taking redundancy this year, became curious about the other villages, and began to wonder whether there was a way of celebrating all things Whitchurch. “I was down the pub, chatting to a couple of friends about how often we get phone calls from people wanting Whitchurch in another



part of the country. We knew there were a few, but we had no idea how many, and they said, ‘Why don’t you do something?’ And I thought, ‘Sod it. I will.’”

Driver pulled together a committee of eight dedicated volunteers, all people with the “project-management skills to make it work”, and they spent about a year and a half planning the first Worldwide Whitchurch Weekend.

What all these communities have or had in common is a white, or “hwit”, Saxon church, most of them originally wooden and painted white, predominantly in the old kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. The committee scoured the internet to find the other Whitchurches, then split the list of 14 villages and towns between them. They sent a message to Whitchurch-Stouffville, in Canada (population 45,335), and visited the rest to try to get them on board.

In some cases, no residents could be found. “The smallest, Whitchurch-by-St-David’s, in Pembrokeshire, consists of three houses,” Driver says. “And I think two of those are holiday lets.” This Whitchurch is not to be confused with Whitchurch-by-Cardigan, also called Eglwyswen, on the north slopes of the Preseli Mountains (population 200).

Some communities were just too busy. Whitchurch Canonorum (population 684), which Alfred the Great left to his youngest son, Athelweard, in 899, is still predominantly a farming community. “They said, ‘Sorry, during the summer months, we haven’t got time.’”

A camping and caravan site was created specially for the first WWW, staged in Hampshire in 2015. People came from the south coast of Wales; from Whitchurch Hill, a village in the Chiltern Hills, Oxfordshire; and from nearby Whitchurch-on-Thames, a picturesque village about five miles northwest of Reading. Warwickshire came, Herefordshire didn’t. Cardiff came, Devon didn’t. The mayor and mayoress of Whitchurch, Shropshire, came, Bristol and Somerset didn’t, but there were representatives from Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. And Canada sent a flag and a video saying: “Have a great day, we wish we could be there.”

Virtually every local club, from the Scouts to the history society, was involved in putting on the event, “a celebration of all the things we love about our Whitchurch”. Among the events were a vintage car rally, a bake-off, ferret races, birds of prey, sports tournaments, including an inter-Whitchurch tug-of-war, and live music in every pub. On the Saturday night, a midsummer ball went on until two in the morning. The organising committee was able to pay back a £500 loan from the council with interest, and raised another £3,000 for local charities.

Zoe Dean, assistant town clerk in the Shropshire Whitchurch, has tried her best to contact her counterparts, but admits the response this year has been disappointing. “Local councillors come and go, so we’re rarely speaking to the same people.” And this year’s responders? “Hmm, just Hampshire, really.” Driver hopes that by the time the Worldwide Weekend is held in Cardiff in 2019, the increased momentum will result in a really good turnout.

At 10am last Saturday morning, the super-keen, 30-strong Whitchurch Hampshire contingent pitched up in specially printed T-shirts for the all-ages rounders tournament in Jubilee Park, a glossy sheet of rolling green punctuated by a handful of bemused dog walkers. Fay McMaster, Nantwich Primary Academy’s netball and rounders coach, mustered a group of 12-year-old girls who tried and failed to beat Hampshire (average age 55). “Experience over youth!” Driver puffed.

Then it was on to St Alkmund’s, site of the original “white church”, for a tour of the 100ft tower, with views across the border into Wales. Recently, a Roman jug handle was dug up here, along with

some medieval bones. “I can show you if you like,” heritage volunteer Pauline Stoke ventured brightly. And off she went to fetch a plastic bag containing half a human skull and a chunk of tibia.

By 1pm, people were streaming into the park with deckchairs and cool boxes for an afternoon of live music. Others headed towards the Whitchurch arm of the Llangollen Canal for free barge rides. On Sunday, community church service was followed by a gated walk and, for those who were up to it, a run led by Whitchurch Whippets. Then everyone congregated in the civic centre for bacon butties, thank-yous and farewells.

“We had a number of aims,” says the town clerk, Nicola Young. “One was to engage as many people as possible. We wanted to bring the community together and raise the profile of Whitchurches everywhere — and we’ve definitely done that.

“Lots of people have said they’d be interested in going to Cardiff next year. Apart from anything else, it’s a summer weekend of free entertainment in a lovely part of the country.”

Report by Caroline Scott