

SCENE SET

Looking back at the innovative and influential theatre and performance group, Bath Arts Workshop

By Victoria Forbes Adam

Returning to Bath after 50 years, I find the streets alive with joyful ghosts: a gaudy band of drummers marching on the Paragon. Windmills and a solar trumpet on Walcot burial field. ‘Paramilitaries’ lined up across the weir, and elderly ladies bouncing gently on inflatables. They return as dream-like fragments of a life that seems unimaginable in these harsher times, beset by corruption and poverty and foreshadowed by climate disaster.

But that life did exist in the 1970s, when for a dozen years Bath’s enchanting but then soot-blackened streets were the setting for a spectacular flowering of creativity and social enterprise, a rowdy and irreverent revolution of artists and activists, working with local communities to set up cultural, social and green technology initiatives.

A new book, *Bath Arts Workshop, Counterculture in the 1970s*, written by seven of us involved at the time, tells the story of the Workshop from its birth in 1969, to the end of the next decade. With full colour illustrations and contributions from many who took part, it represents an important part of Bath history.

Founder Phil Shepherd’s letter to the council proposed a centre in which ‘the barriers between arts media are indistinct’ and ‘setting up a theatre company... to provide a valuable contribution to the life of the community’. Surviving on a pittance, our first

activities included an information service and ‘happenings’ in Victoria Park. A couple of years on we were running two experimental theatre companies – Exploded Eye and the Natural Theatre Company – plus music, exhibitions, video and drama workshops and film screenings.

Alongside our art we ran a second hand furniture and jumble shop at 146 Walcot Street (HQ from 1973), a cheap transport and removal service, adventure playgrounds, and mass catering at protest marches as Bath City Civil Aid. Christmas was a sumptuous free feast for 200, among them the old, lonely and homeless. It was never explicitly planned, but we were perceptive to the social problems that existed in some areas. Our response was to provide useful community services that helped fund our arts activities. And one way or another we got to know loads of people. It didn’t feel like work, it was just daily life.

We didn’t worry too much about our mission statement. We were exploring ‘new ways of living and having fun’. Ideas were discussed and decisions made at weekly meetings. We accommodated people’s different views but our collective striving for practical action usually prevailed and humour was the glue that held us together. Anyone was welcome to join in our activities and they did in droves, adults and kids alike.

Climate change activism was core to the Workshop and far ahead of its time. The book relates how a group of builders and architects formed Comtek (community technology). They helped save Georgian buildings from demolition, among them the 18th century Royal Tennis Court in Julian Road. That building



‘Bath’s enchanting but then soot-blackened streets were the setting for a spectacular flowering of creativity and social enterprise’



CLOCKWISE: The crowds line up for the Walcot Festival in 1975; the now closed Hat and Feather pub's float on carnival day; the Bath Arts Workshop Walcot Street shop was a hive of community spirit, Bath activism, and arts creativity.



The Dorchester Café headquarters near Manvers Street



The whole Bath community came together for the Sunshine Festival in 1976

is now the Museum of Bath at Work, where an exhibition on the Workshop ran for much of 2021-22. Comtek members also explored alternative energy technologies, pioneered the reuse of building materials and set up Walcot Reclamation, the UK's first architectural salvage yard.

We all came together for our annual summer festivals – glorious outpourings of creative activity, attracting thousands of visitors. They aimed to provide an alternative to the more conventional Bath Festival. We put on eight to 10 days of virtually free entertainment, open to all comers. Music, experimental theatre and poetry mingled with puppets, tea parties and the weird trappings of the newly-emerging alternative technology, courtesy of Comtek.

These were heady days reflecting an extraordinary moment of experimentation and the exchange of ideas. Anything seemed possible. In 1972 the millionaire Charlie Ware lent us the 60-room Cleveland Hotel in Great Pulteney Street. It brimmed with creativity for a whole week. The following year the beat poet Allen Ginsberg performed to a group of teenagers in a Twerton dome, its silver shell flapping in the breeze, as they fell silent and listened entranced.

1974 was blighted by torrential rain, but it didn't matter. We were fortunate to live at a time when glossy perfection wasn't an option. We embraced do-it-yourself solutions and they were often more satisfying in the end. Shaun Smith, now of Radio Bath, recalls, "The Last Festival was for me as a Bathonian the best this city has produced. It included

THOSE WHO WERE THERE

"I found myself humping wardrobes for King Kong removals and lugging disco and PA equipment as well as developing the 'arts' work we were developing. No wonder the head honcho of SW Arts remarked that he sometimes searched in vain for the art in the Arts Workshop."

Performer, artist, designer and core Bath Arts Workshop (BAW) member Ralph Oswick

"We all loved the BAW. I remember getting lots of jumble from the shop. Gordon was amazing on the piano. The kindness and open door of the Workshop and you guys' accepting attitude of us kinds from broken homes. It was a bit of a refuge to a lot of people... We were lucky kids."

Mary Gouldbourne who was one of many local children who would visit the BAW

"In 1973 I entered the Workshop office and was immediately put to service. Each day was different, either helping with equipment, dressing up as a clown, walking in some mad parade, or jumping onstage as one of Rocky Ricketts' crazed fans. I stayed in a disused dairy being used to exhibit the kinetic sculptures of Charles Byrd."

Friend of BAW and visiting performer Paul Goddard

"I had a very hot shower with solar-heated water. And watched members of the Natural Theatre Company dressed as scientists in white lab coats fussing around a display of solar drying – two tea towels pegged to a washing line!"

Actor, writer and eco-activist, and one-time artisan shoemaker Rob Llewellyn



The Normals take performances to the streets of Bath

Bath's own Rocky
and the Jets

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MUSIC MAESTROS

Between 1972 and 1976, the Bath Art Workshop organised festivals played host to many artists and performers including the late Poly Styrene of X-Ray Specs, Steve Winwood, Shakin' Stevens & the Sunsets, Portsmouth Sinfonia, Hawkwind, Pete Brown from Cream, the Pink Fairies, and Bath's own Rocky Ricketts & the Jet Pilots of Jive, featuring the fabulous Rockettes.

The Sunshine Festival Wind
Generator pictured in 1976The Sunshine Festival
Procession in 1976

“Beat poet Allen Ginsberg performed to a group of teenagers in a Twerton dome”

ALL parts of the city and was inclusive of all Bath residents. Sadly the weather showed its ugly head and there was a heavy storm...The creative minds got together and the last day was held at the old dairy...I can't remember who came up with this idea but I hope she/he/they became a great success.

Later festivals were more intimate affairs, though still on a huge scale, based mainly in the Walcot burial field and building on our connections in the area. In 1978 local community artists took over, declaring Walcot Independence in 79, with a national anthem and coups d'état at midnight. Comtek's scaffolding skills were essential as ever. They built the staging, and one year, a beautiful elevated walkway across the burial field, perfect for viewing the eco-gadgetry on display.

So what of our own theatre which was after all a core element of the original plan? The answer is that artistry, theatricality and humour suffused all that we did. A mystery coach tour for people in need of a holiday was held up by highway men on horseback, and encountered poets in hedgerows. ‘The Smart Party of Great Britain’, led by Sir Ralph Oswick, arrived in a limo seconds before the Duke of Gloucester, at the snobby re-opening of the Theatre Royal. We headlined in the Chronicle and made our point. There was method in our madness, but our theatrical ‘politics’ were usually very funny and somehow everyone felt involved. The Naturals have since performed all over the world and are still going strong.

Ultimately our book refutes the convenient idea that 1970s counterculture ended in hedonism and despair, capturing instead how much was achieved in those years. Its legacy lingers on via the talents and energies of organisations like Bath Fringe, and those of hundreds of others. They ensure that activities to protect the planet and foster community creativity live on in the beautiful city of Bath. ■



Bath Arts Workshop: Counterculture in the 1970s by Brian Popay, Corinne D'Cruz, Jennie Potter-Barrie, Penny Dale, Phil Shepherd, Thornton Kay and Victoria Forbes Adam, published by Tangent Books, rrp £25. Available from www.tangentbooks.co.uk and all good local indie bookshops

For more: www.bathartsworkshop.org