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Light My Fire

Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival - Fortean Traveller Piece – Rob Gandy

It was snowing on the top of Saddleworth Moor as we began the descent down the A62 Manchester to Huddersfield road into the village of Marsden, where it was more of a cold, sleety rain. Yet despite the inclement weather we knew that we were in for a warm reception, because we were going to see the Imbolc Fire Festival that is held there every two years on the first Saturday in February. My wife and I had planned ahead, booking into a local pub, knowing full well that the festival has attracted crowds of around 3,000 in the past.

The Celtic festival of Imbolc takes place on 1st February, and marks St Brigid's Day and the end of winter. However, its Marsden incarnation is a modern initiative which began as a community celebration in 1993, and it was an annual festival until 2014, when it switched to being a biannual event. This was because the small band of organisers found that it was becoming too much to organise it and raise all the money needed every year (approximately £7,000). Everything is done by volunteers, except the fireworks, where a pyrotechnic company provides the display¹. It takes place almost whatever the weather, so there was little fear of cancellation.

The Festival began around 7.00pm with a torch-lit procession from Marsden railway station. The crowds gathered outside the Railway Inn beforehand, with a sprinkling wearing pagan attire, and were entertained by musical bands, giants and other amusements. The procession was led by 'druids', giants and fire performers wearing a variety of masks, and looking quite menacing. The crowd followed behind over the railway bridge and along Reddisher Road towards the Standedge (pronounced *Stannidge*) Tunnel and Visitor Centre. Many carried lanterns in the shapes of suns, moons, fish and animals, such as a fox; presumably most had been made by locals in the run-up to the festival at the lantern-making workshops held for participants. It was a real family affair with lots of children, adults and old fogies like us. It would have been pitch black if it hadn't been for the torches and lanterns, so everyone was careful about where they stepped, particularly to avoid the many huge puddles that pock-marked the lane. Mind you, what the passengers on the trains that passed alongside us on the other side of the wall must have thought was happening can only be guessed!

The last yards to the entrance to the Visitor Centre were marked by lanterns on either side of the road, and the Centre itself could be seen right down below. A sharp turn and steep hill took everyone down to what is the car park, where the fire performers had gathered upon the embankment on the other side of the wall. All were in black, hooded attire with white masks. The area was marked out with metal containers which were alight with flames, which were used to replenish the torches and other related paraphernalia. When all the crowd had gathered, the performers began their choreographed displays with their torches, with (presumably) the most experienced and skilled wielding long fiery whips which emitted sparks as they hit the ground and whirled in the air. All of the time there was a background of rhythmic drumming, which helped build up a terrific atmosphere.

Eventually the display came to an end, to much applause, and the crowd's anticipation went up a few notches. This was the main focus of the event, and entering stage left to a chorus of boos was a giant, illuminated Jack Frost, accompanied by several of his minions wearing animal masks and

carrying spears. Bright, white firework effects symbolised that Winter was in control. But wait! What did we see? Entering stage right we saw the giant Green Man, with a huge lantern head, who was set to fight Jack Frost to the death. He too had armed supporters, and they had headdresses with Sun designs. The inevitable confrontation saw a pitched battle between Jack Frost and the Green Man, and their respective followers, with the two giants wrestling and grappling with one another like heavyweight boxers. Who would win? **Spoiler alert!** The Green Man always wins! And so Winter (in the form of Jack Frost) was banished and the Spring (in the form of the Green Man) took control. This was reinforced by the introduction of a large Sun figure surrounded by spectacular fireworks. In the background was a fire sculpture of a spring cuckoo, chosen because of its relevance to Spring and to thank the Cuckoo's Nest community charity shop in Marsden, which had helped to fund the festival¹. There followed a top-notch firework display that suitably "Wowed" the crowd, sending the majority of us happily home; re-tracing our steps along the three-quarters of a mile route, and then dispersing across the village. The celebrations continued at the Centre for the performers, pagans and those hardy types who didn't have kids to put to bed, trains to catch or a glass or two waiting; these featured bands and dance groups. Yes, a good night was had by all, and everyone noted in their diaries that the Fire Festival would next return in 2020.

Marsden Village

The topography of the Pennines means that Marsden is not the easiest of places to get to, but it is well worth a visit, sitting between high moors on either side. Most people will have seen these moors, and caught a glimpse of Marsden below, because they were the site of Royston Vasey's local shop in *The League of Gentlemen*². The main visitor attraction is the Standedge Tunnel and Visitor Centre, where the Standedge Tunnels are four parallel tunnels beneath the Pennines; three are railway tunnels and the other is a canal tunnel. The latter is on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal and is the longest, deepest and highest canal tunnel in Britain; it is 5,500 yards (5,000m) long, 636 feet (194m) underground at its deepest point, and 643 feet (196m) above sea level³.

Marsden also hosts other significant events, with its Cuckoo Festival in April and a Jazz Festival in October⁴. The story goes that long ago the people of the village were aware that when the cuckoo arrived, so did the Spring and sunshine. Therefore they tried to keep Spring forever, by building a tower around the cuckoo; but just as the last stones were about to be laid, the cuckoo flew away. If only they had managed to build the tower one layer higher!⁴

On the Saturday, just after we had arrived, the older local man nursing a cigarette outside the back door of our pub told us that the weather was never ever any good for Imbolc, but that it would be fine the next day. And it transpired that the Sunday was bright and sunny. Perhaps this was because the Fire Festival had worked its magic and banished Jack Frost and welcomed in the Green Man of Spring. I'd like to think so.

1,165 words

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