



A Nation of Festival Goers

One of the oldest known festivals in the UK is harvest festival. A pagan event predating Christianity, it is traditionally celebrated on the Sunday nearest to the harvest moon. Unlike the US and Canada, here in the UK it is not a national holiday, but as summer draws to a close and autumn mists begin, thanks is given for an abundance of food for winter.

One colourful event for this festival is the Pearly Kings and Queens Harvest Festival Parade. A 140-year-old tradition, starting out at the Guildhall Yard and finishing at St Mary-le-Bow Church, the Kings and Queens dressed in their traditional black and pearl costumes stage traditional entertainment en route while raising money for charity. This year the event is on 29 September.

Keeping with the theme of century old traditions is the Swan Upping, held on the Thames every year in July since 1509. The Queen still owns all the swans in England. The Queen's Swan Marker, with his team of Swan Uppers, counts the number of mute swans. The event plays an important role in the swans' conservation. Many local schools are encouraged to participate in the counting and children are given the opportunity to get close to the birds. Alongside this, the Queen's Swan Marker gives a limited number of talks in schools. This year, the census will take place on 17 July at Sunbury Lock and will finish at Abingdon Bridge four days later. The Swan Uppers are easy to spot; they are the men in scarlet uniforms.

Moving a little further south, the

coastal town of Hastings hosts a true British May Day celebration called the Jack in the Green Festival. Jack is a man covered in a giant garland, who is paraded through the streets before being slain to release the spirit of spring. The celebrations run for four days, and music and dance events are held during the weekend. The wild costume parade (reputedly the most bizarre in Britain) begins at 9.45 on May Bank Holiday from the old wooden fishermen's huts in Rock-A-Nore Road and finishes on the West Hill.

The list of music festivals held in the UK grows ever longer as each year passes. One of the newer events is the Wilderness Festival. With music, food, learning and literature among the lakes, forest and parkland of the



Cornbury Estate in Oxfordshire, in the words of the event organisers: “Come to the wilderness to meet the world.” This year the event takes place on 3–6 August.

The largest greenfield festival in the world is Glastonbury. Hosted down at Worthy Farm since 1970 the first festival revellers were treated to free milk. Now the event has grown to host more than 170,000 partygoers and nothing stops them from having a good time. It’s the one event where wellington boots are the most important fashion accessory because there is an awful lot of mud. In fact, they are ubiquitous at Glastonbury. Shirley Bassey flew into the festival dressed in a sequined fuchsia pink dress and with her initials DSB encrusted in diamonds written on her wellington boots! D for Dame in case you’re wondering. The festival takes place from 22–25 June this year. The headlining acts are Radiohead, Foo Fighters and Kris Kristofferson.

The Fringe festival is another genre that has grown and grown. The UK hosts the largest of these in Edinburgh, and this year marks its 70th anniversary. The event will be held from 4–28 August. With 50,266 performances of 3,269 shows in 294 venues there are literally thousands of reasons to visit the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Every year thousands of performers take to the stage to present shows for every taste. The events include theatre, comedy, dance, circus, cabaret, children’s shows, musicals, opera, music, spoken word and exhibitions. This really is the festival with a fringe on top!

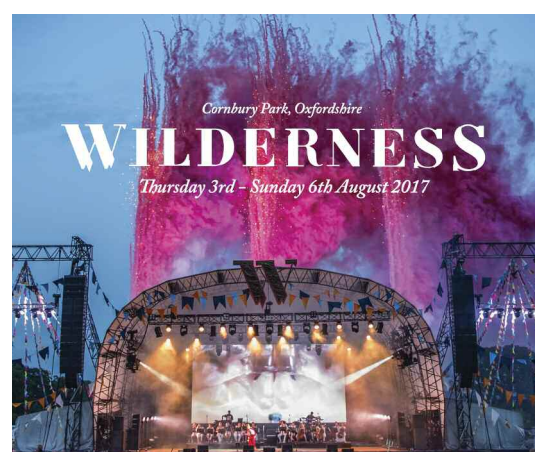
For those of you who can’t make the trip up to Scotland do not worry. England has a raft of Fringe festivals including Brighton (5 May–4 June), Hastings (over three weekends in September), Bath (29 May–14 June), and Stroud (25–27 August), to name just a few.

For people thinking that the English are not so adventurous with their food there is the

Bath Chilli and Chocolate festival. Held at the University of Bath (15–16 July), this involves science talks, growing tips, a curry cook off, a chilli con carne cook off, children’s entertainment, a lemon and doughnut eating competition for kids, live bands, hot wings challenges, gin bar, festival bar, cocktail bar, chilli and chocolate traders, and street food chilli eating competitions.

To finish on a truly magical note there is a very special festival down in the New Forest, the Fairy Festival (12–13 August). There will be plenty of fairy wings fluttering in the summer breeze here. Events include drumming workshops, hula hoop workshops, stilt walking, and enchanting fairies and dragons, making this a festival for fairies and elves of all ages.

With such a diverse collection of festivals the only thing to do now is decide which ones to head out to. Just don’t let the English summer rain on your parade.



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