

The QUEXPO Story:

The story of Quexpo goes back, in some respects, to the year of the Queen's Coronation in 1953. It was during that year that the idea of a Village Centre was first mooted. When the idea re-emerged in the late fifties and early sixties, the problem of raising the huge amount of money needed was fully realised. By the end of 1968, there was just £1,000 in the fund. However, it took until the latter end of 1969 before the brainwave was suggested of the 'three-day event' held over the August Bank Holiday in 1970. Approaches had been made to Mr Christopher Powell-Cotton, who was very happy to loan the group some accommodation in Quex Park – an ideal site for such a major undertaking.

A meeting was called in the Methodist Hall, Birchington, to which delegates from all the local organisations and other interested parties were invited. During that meeting, which was very well supported, the delegates were asked for their thoughts on a suitable name for this event. Eventually, a delegate from one of the Drama Societies came up with the name '**QUEXPO**'. During two previous years, there had been a major and very successful international exhibition, staged in Belgium and called 'Expo', which was still occasionally mentioned in the media. So the name 'Quexpo' had a familiar, but also unique ring to it – yet it had a very 'Birchington' flavour.

The first Quexpo was staged over the three days of the Bank Holiday in **1970** and was a huge success. It not only brought in the much-needed revenue to help with the building of the Village Centre, but also gave thousands of people a really enjoyable weekend of fun and entertainment, unknown in this part of the world.

From the very outset, the driving force behind the organisation of such a vast enterprise was Anthony 'Timber' Wood. He not only had the skills needed for such an enterprise; he also had the contacts, the enthusiasm and the good friends who were willing and able to help him achieve this huge project. The inclusion of the steam rally event was a brilliant stroke early on in the planning. This is always a major attraction to young and old alike.

By the time all the finances had been sorted out after the 1972 Quexpo, the Village Centre Fund stood at £10,000 – a vast sum in those days, but still a long way to go to finally paying off the debts. Eventually the Centre was opened in 1974 and from then on, the Quexpo generated funds were usually specifically routed into particular projects that needed an immediate injection of cash. The contributions from Quexpo made the Centre management team's job a lot easier.

Looking through a typical Quexpo programme, you become aware of size of the job that this kind of undertaking entailed. In 1982, for instance, there were 70 Side Stalls, 164 vehicles in the 'Veteran & Vintage Motor Display', 64 Trade Stands, 71 engines in the 'Steam Engines on Show', 46 stalls in the 'Festival of Rural Life', a special exhibition of Street Vehicles of Yesteryear', plus three Arenas in which there were 55 different changes of activities

Quexpo (cont.)

throughout the three days of the weekend. Putting together the programme itself was a major task, from asking people for advertisements, to working out the sequence of the arena productions, and checking the final draft of the whole thing before it went to print.

Once the programme had been agreed on and all the paper work was under control, there came the moment when the various areas had to be staked out and the barriers erected. This was followed by three hectic days of non-stop activities for each of the helpers. The final act was played out during the Tuesday morning after the weekend, when a band of volunteers, often Scouts, Guides and other youth groups walked back and forth across the various sites, collecting and bagging up the rubbish. The fact that almost all the teams who completed these varying tasks were unpaid volunteers makes one realise what a huge force for good the whole enterprise was.

In the programme for 1979, there is an account of the first ten years of Quexpo. After telling the story of how it got its name, it states that the name "has become a byword in Thanet

and more recently in the whole of the south-east of England, as the biggest three-day event of its kind every year."

The article goes on to say, "Before the dust had settled on Quexpo '70, it was decided to repeat the event in 1971. Once again the beautiful grounds of Quex Park were made available to the organisers and armed with a wealth of experience, the organising committee set off with great enthusiasm. It was decided that the successful format of the first year, with the addition of Horse Show and Gymkhana as a Saturday attraction, should be kept, with slight amendments and improvements, and the organisers were rewarded with an increase in attendance of nearly 4,000."

1972 Quexpo was moved to Tivoli Park (due to a change in Quex Park's farming programme for that year), but despite some exceptional items in the programme, there was a considerable drop in attendance. 1973 saw the team back at Quex Park, much to their relief and from then on, until its **final Show of 1985** was completed, every show was staged there under the kindly hosting of Mr Powell-Cotton. By 1978 all previous attendance records were broken with 45,000 people flocking to see the show.

The account I have been quoting from in 1979 concluded by saying, "We must not forget that the hundreds and thousands of people who have enjoyed Quexpo and the tens of thousands of pounds that have been raised for the Village Centre [*and for a vast number of traders and good causes into the bargain*] would not have been possible without the unselfish efforts and countless hours devoted to it by its organising committee."

The article concludes with this vote of final note of thanks.

"Throughout the years we owe a tremendous debt of thanks to the press, the local police and many other organisation, but everybody involved knows that all their work and efforts would have been to no avail if it was not for the generosity, help and co-operation of Mr Christopher Powell-Cotton and the Quex Park Estates Ltd. who, over the years, have made available this most beautiful site for the event."

Throughout all these years of fundraising for the Centre, the one name that constantly recurs is that of '**Timber**' **Wood**. It was so obviously his drive and enthusiasm that held the whole thing together and drove the team forward each year. The dust had not settled on one year's show before Timber and his helpers had already formed their plans for the next one. At a Memorial Service held for Timber in October 2002, Neville Hudson paid tribute to him for his part in this enterprise. The amazing thing was that this was not the only activity in which he was involved. His interests included the Guild of Players, Thanet Arts Council, Scouting, his Sports Club and the Kent Drama Association.

There is a saying that 'the hour always produces the man' – and Timber Wood certainly fits that admirably. Whether 'Quexpo', as we came to know it, would have happened without the presence of Timber and his amazing leadership qualities, plus that vast band of his helpers, is an unanswerable one, but for myself, I think it is very doubtful. It certainly could not have lasted for ten whole years.

Apart from Timber, reading through the names of some of his 'vast band', we find people like Wally and Kay Wanstall, Doug Wilders, Fred Macpherson, and his son Ray, Laurie Brooks, Tim Keenan, Cliff Cole, Neville Hudson, E. Bloore, John Grieg, Dick Rose, Jack Norris, Tony Hart, Ray Darvell, Ron Jewiss, Johnny Hutchings, Wendy McCabe, Bernie Mann, Bill and Pauline Woodland etc, etc. – the line-up is mind blowing!! And a number of these stalwarts are still (in 2003) adding their contribution to village life. We are, indeed, a blessed community! Long may the spirit that gave rise, to and sustained, Quexpo for all those ten years continue to grow and thrive in Birchington.

Jennie Burgess (Parish Archivist)
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