

## *Luton Irish Forum*

# St Patrick's Festival [12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> March] 2010

## **Review**

Luton Irish Forum brought wonderful displays of Irish culture to Luton again this March as part of their 11<sup>th</sup> annual St Patrick's Festival. The Festival is a week long celebration of Irish culture and heritage which gives all of Luton's communities the opportunity to experience Irish music, song, dance and drama.

As has become tradition, the Festival began with a Gaelic (Irish) Mass featuring Luton Irish Forum's Choir at St Josephs Church. St Josephs Parish Centre provided the venue for the launch night dance with Northampton based trio Hair of the Dog who had something for everyone.

On Saturday night the Festival moved into Luton Library Theatre where The Balla Drama Group from County Mayo, Ireland performed the much acclaimed 'A Wake in the West' a comedy drama by Michael Joe Ginnelly. This evening of laughter, which was sponsored by Bushwood, told the story of Tom Healy, who not content with drinking himself to death makes a last request to be buried in the drink (at sea). The performance had the audience in tears of laughter.

St Patrick's Parade Day commenced with the annual church service at Our Lady Help of Christians. Members of the Irish community, marching bands and a whole host of other colourful entries took to the streets of Luton Town Centre on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> as part of our St Patrick's Festival Parade. This year, parade entry prizes were awarded for best individual to the Cavan Association's entry 'The Turf Man' and to the best group 'Sambucca' percussion band.

The theme for this year's pageant was Finnegans Wake, one of the "Top 100 English-language novels of the twentieth century". Finnegans Wake is a work of comic fiction by Irish author James Joyce in 1939, and Joyce's final work about hod-carrier Tim Finnegan, born "with a love for the liquor", falls from a ladder and is thought to be dead. The mourners at his wake become rowdy, and spill whiskey over Finnegan's corpse, causing him to come back to life and join in the celebrations.

The Emerald Pipe Band played during the presentation of Shamrock to dignitaries. Local and visiting dignitaries included: Councillor Mohammed Riaz - Mayor of Luton, Councillor Patricia Russell - Mayor of Dunstable, Councillor Lynda Walmsley - Mayor of Houghton Regis, Lord Bill McKenzie, Councillor Michael Dolling, Liam Peakin - Irish Embassy, Kelvin Hopkins MP and Adrian Slavin - GAA Hertfordshire County Board.

There followed an afternoon of entertainment on the main stage at St George's Square featuring a top class 8 piece band La Bamba from County Roscommon, Ireland, together with Irish Set Dancers from St Albans.

Also, on Sunday, there was a craft and Irish produce market at St George's Square and traditional music and dance at Smith's Square, The Mall [Arndale] from 11.30am to 3.30pm.

Tuesday evening saw the Festival back in the Library Theatre for an extravagant variety concert featuring The Duffy Brothers, local traditional musicians, Irish dancers and International Harpist and Singer Paula Smith.

There was a further opportunity to experience Irish culture and celebrate St Patrick's Day on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> when the traditional stage returned to Smiths Square in The Mall [Arndale] with a fabulous display of music and dance from 11am to 3pm. Festival regulars Logic, Gor Jus Wrex and Legrave Comhaltas entertained shoppers with a selection of traditional tunes, whilst 13 year old Festival newcomer Ciara Byrne captivated her audience on both days. Irish Dance schools drew hundreds of shoppers viewing stage side and from the balconies to marvel at the talent and vibrant costumes.

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Finally this years festival wrapped up with a unique treat on Friday 19th, Luton Irish Forum have been working with Biso Afrika to bring the local community an opportunity to experience both Irish and African culture in a one of a kind Afro-Irish cultural night. The event was hosted by Lenny T (BBC Three Counties Radio). The evening included interactive workshops on music, dance and story telling followed by an opportunity to enjoy performance by bands from both cultures including Banish Misfortune Ceilidh Band, and African Kasai Massai led by percussionist, singer and dancer Nickens Nkoso. This unique and extremely enjoyable evening was attended by 100 people of all ages and communities.

The Festival was an outstanding success, and is now one of the biggest and most inclusive community events in the East of England, attracting several thousand people to Luton Town centre.

Festival supporters include Luton Borough Council, Luton Cultural Services Trust, Bedfordshire Police, The Mall [Arndale], local County Associations, Parish Centres, Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann and the GAA.

The Forum has been very fortunate and grateful for the support of the highly committed team of stewards assisting us since our first parade in 2000. This year we were supported many new stewards, testing the learning from our recent Skills for Stewarding training. Thanks are also due to our sponsors who continue to support us regardless of the current financial climate and to the hardworking volunteers and St Patrick's Festival Committee who give their free time to make this event special for Luton.