

Comment.

WESTERN

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We must not forget today's soldiers and their bravery

The tragedy of Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid's death in Afghanistan was made all the more poignant by the fact he was killed saving lives on the last day of his tour.

By any definition, this man was a hero. He had saved untold lives during his five-month tour of Afghanistan, by defusing 64 explosive devices, and had found 11 bomb-making centres.

He showed phenomenal reserves of bravery risking his life every day making these weapons safe so the people of Afghanistan could enjoy a better future.

Staff Sgt Schmid, 30, who was serving with the Royal Logistic Corps Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment in Helmand province, was due to arrive home in Hampshire this weekend for a joyous reunion with his wife Christina and five-year-old stepson.

However, this brave soldier was killed last Saturday while trying to defuse one last bomb before he came back to Britain.

Instead of being greeted with hugs and kisses from his loving family, we witnessed one of the most poignant parades yet of a brave soldier's casket through Wootton Bassett.

The town showed its respects in the dignified manner, which has become all-too-familiar as the death toll from Afghanistan has mounted over the past few months.

Political debate as to the rights and wrongs of Britain's presence in Afghanistan has escalated in recent days.

On Sunday we will remember the bravery of the past, but we must never lose sight of the sacrifices of those like Staff Sgt Schmid, who risk their lives fighting today.

Jail is not meant to be nice place

Nobody wants to live next door to the neighbours from hell – but it is something of an occupational hazard when you are jailed for burglary.

Quite who burglars Glyn Mundin and Jason Harper expected to share a cell block with at Leyhill prison is unclear.

But escaping because they didn't like sex offenders or the conditions is no excuse.

Prison is a punishment and their extended sentence will give both time to ponder it was their own crimes that landed them at their current address.

Thought for the day

The upright hates a lying word, but the wicked slanders and defames.

PROVERBS 13.5

Carnival spectaculars are part of the fabric

Illuminated carnivals in Somerset and the adjoining counties of Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon have been at the heart of the economic, social and cultural fabric of many communities for over 400 years.

Dating from the celebrations following the failure of the infamous Gunpowder Plot of 1605, carnival has evolved from ad hoc street celebrations and bonfires to the spectacular organised parades witnessed today which typically consist of more than 50 illuminated floats plus around 50 masquerading walking entries.

It is estimated that there are around 220 traditional "English" carnivals still taking place and we are lucky enough to have 30 illuminated carnivals in the West Country, the most famous being the 'Magnificent Seven' of the Guy Fawkes circuit in Somerset in early November.

These parades have important economic, social and cultural benefits for the local population, although several threats to the future of these spectacular parades are of increasing concern.

Each year it is estimated that the local economy benefits to the tune of up to £40 million during the carnival season, which lasts from late August until mid-November.

Local businesses within the service sector benefit, particularly accommodation suppliers, retailers, pubs and other leisure facilities.

More than £120,000 is raised from street collections and is donated to local charities and voluntary organisations.

Well in excess of £2 million has been raised since 1980 alone. In addition, carnival clubs fundraise and spend in the local economy the whole year around.

Carnival is also a way of life for many people and communities across the West Country.

It is estimated that more than 10,000 people are actively involved in carnival, including those in clubs, on committees and those who act as helpers. 'Carnivalites', as people involved in carnival are locally called, are committed all year round, taking part in fund-raising activities, building of the carnival entries, running and attending social and awards events, and stewarding and participating in local events such as Glastonbury Festival.

Through these activities, people of all ages and social backgrounds learn and develop an array of practical, team working, and social skills and attributes.

These encompass a wide range of fields such as engineering, electrics, carpentry, painting, costume making, performance arts, public speaking, administration, and accountancy.

An average club member can spend anything up to 1,000 hours a year involved in carnival-related activities.

Carnival also has a rich cultural tradition. Due to their historic



Lighting the way: Pentathlon of North Petherton 'Get the Party Started' at last year's Bridgwater Carnival

As Bridgwater prepares to host the West's biggest annual carnival tonight, university lecturer **Dr Andrew Tallon** describes how the festivals of light have become a vital part of local heritage – and what is being done to ensure their future

roots in communities themselves, the illuminated carnivals remain bottom-up community-led events. Carnival is a tradition which glues communities together and is organised by and predominantly for these communities.

This is in contrast to the majority of other carnivals and festivals in the UK which are funded and run by local authorities with other generous public and private sponsorship. Usually city centre-based events, these have much more recent origins based on economic regeneration rather than cultural tradition.

Despite their recognised importance among communities, the public sector and businesses, the illuminated West Country carnivals face a variety of threats to their future vitality and viability.

Main problems include the current economic recession which is affecting carnival clubs as floats can cost up to £20,000 to put on the road when considering construction materials, fuel, tractor and generator hire, costume and make-up costs, and insurance and health and safety

costs. Carnival organising committees face similar outgoings, which include insurance, licences, barriers, road signs and prize money, and can total between £10,000 and £30,000.

Illuminated Somerset carnivals receive very little in the way of private sponsorship and almost no financial support from public sector bodies. Committees and clubs also face the added burden of ever-increasing levels of bureaucracy associated with health and safety, various licences, and compliance measures before they can enter the carnivals.

In addition, there are problems with enthusing the younger generation to get involved in carnival in the age of the internet and other competing interests.

In 2009, around 55 carnival floats will be appearing in the Somerset processions along with about 50 walking entries. Although the standard today is undoubtedly of greater quality than in past decades, 90 floats entered in the early 1990s. Some smaller towns and villages have lost many or all of their carnival clubs which had acted as a focal point of their local

communities and as a pastime for many of their residents.

However, carnival as a West Country tradition has survived threats from officialdom since way back in the mid-19th century, and has come through the several recessions. Locally, a newly-formed community group (Carnivals in Somerset Promotion Project) is aiming to secure National Lottery and/or Arts Council funding to promote and encourage involvement in the Somerset illuminated carnivals.

The West Country carnivals certainly continue to thrive and contribute to the rich tapestry of traditional and offbeat festivals in the region. Carnival has been celebrated and regarded as central to many of our communities for over 400 years, and with continued support, they will be so for the foreseeable future.

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