

## Stonehaven Hogmanay 2013

Stonehaven is a peaceful town on the Scottish east coast 15 miles south of Aberdeen. Due to its pretty town centre, a picturesque harbour, a historic open air pool and Dunnottar Castle, an ancient fortress in a spectacular cliff top setting, it is a popular destination for visitors to Scotland. Holidaymakers appreciate Stonehaven's small town flair and its variety of shops and coffeeshops – a bit of normality without the all too obvious tourism hype.

Once a year, however, at Hogmanay, crowds flock to the Old Town at the harbour to see how Stonehaven welcomes the New Year. At midnight, at the last stroke of the bell, a unique procession starts to move down the High Street – the “Fireball Ceremony”. What this exactly is can best be explained by someone who has lived here all his life and who is also a member of the Stonehaven Fireball Association: “It consists of mainly local people of all ages swinging flaming wire cages around their heads. Each cage is filled with combustible material (each swinger has their own recipe) and has a wire handle two or three feet long, this keeps the flames well away from the swinger, but spectators can be vulnerable! The event starts at midnight, lasts twenty-five minutes and is watched by thousands. The idea behind the ceremony is to burn off the bad spirits left from the old year so that the spirits of the New Year can come in clean and fresh. [...] If you get the chance to watch the Fireball Ceremony then we hope that you enjoy it. We (the swingers) certainly do! The buzz that most of us feel when we walk down the High Street for the first time after the bell has rung is amazing! There is no need for any additional stimulants! (We will all be sober – it’s a rule we stick to!) There are no ghosts in front or behind us (that we are aware of!) but we feel the history that is there when we walk the path that others have walked every Hogmanay.” (Martin Sim, 2013)

The natural enemy of all fire ceremonies is rain and in Scotland rain never seems to be far away. The relentless downpour that lashes down on Stonehaven since midmorning of this 31<sup>st</sup> December is, therefore, reason for concern. Elsewhere in Stonehaven the weather is also watched with unease. Since last year the Fireball Ceremony is accompanied by another Hogmanay event. The

former Open Air In The Square event in the town centre has evolved from a teenager street party into a full-scale open air concert. Last Hogmanay the Red Hot Chilli Pipers got the crowd into dancing mood. This year the Simple Minds, the legendary rockband from Glasgow, will see in the new year – at the same time as the Fireball Ceremony will take place. It would be a disaster if this eagerly anticipated event was literally washed away by the rain – too much passion and voluntary work has gone into the planning and realisation of this project.

Michelle Ward, one of the organisers, told me about the ups and downs of putting the event together. “It has been a wonderful opportunity for bringing the community together,” she says. “The support in the town was amazing. Everyone worked together to make it happen.”

I ask her how the ticket sales went.

“Extremely well. More than 5000 tickets have been sold. There has been a strong demand from abroad, from Germany and from the United States.”

There had been reports in the local press that the police had had safety concerns. Curiously I enquire: “Had this been a problem?”

Michelle thinks about this for a moment. “Basically police were concerned about the concert taking place at the same time as the Fireballs and about how the crowds would move between these two events. But in cooperation with the event management we have worked hard to address all possible issues and in the end we got the go-ahead.”

“I can imagine that the project hung in the balance at times. How did Simple Minds react?”

Michelle beams. “They were just fantastic. They supported us throughout and even promoted the event on TV!”

my husband and i realise just How well this promotion has worked my husband when we make our way to the town centre late at night. The whole of Stonehaven is choc-a-bloc with cars parked in every possible space. Throngs of visitors head either to the Old Town or to the Market Square for the concert. At least it's dry. Due to the proverbially unpredictable Scottish climate the rain has moved away in time.

We have seen the Fireballs twice in recent years. Therefore we have decided to give them a miss

this time and to see the rock stars instead. My Scottish husband has equipped himself with a small whisky bottle. In Scotland people traditionally drink to the new year with a “dram”, preferably with friends or family. Too late we remember that it is not allowed to take your own drinks into the arena. Without further ado we hide the bottle in a dark corner behind Ken's garden wall; it should be alright, we know Ken from various activities in the town.

The market square is packed with people. At the opposite end of the arena a huge stage and a big screen have been set up. The stage is still empty. Rock music from a tape entertains the crowd. My husband, now without whisky, is looking for the bar. We spot a long, long queue that has built up in front of a bar tent. A lucky one, who has managed to obtain drinks, hurries past us carrying two big plastic mugs full of beer. Immediately he is stopped by my husband. How long has he been in the queue, my husband enquires and gets a devastating reply: “An hour, mate, no joke!”

There is a roar of applause. Beams of white light sweep across the stage. The DJ takes the microphone and with a wide gesture announces the top act of the show. Then he leaves the stage to Simple Minds. Frontman Jim Kerr welcomes the crowd and the band starts playing. Booming beat makes the audience bob up and down. I look at the stage, then at the screen and at the houses that surround the square. Almost all windows in the upper floors are lit. The inhabitants have made themselves comfortable at their windows and enjoy the view as if watching the performance from a box seat.

The band turns the volume down. Jim Kerr steps forward. “Great to be here tonight!” he shouts prompting enthusiastic cheers. “In Edinburgh they are packing up!” More cheers. “In Glasgow they are asleep by now!” Jubilant hoots. “Tonight Stonehaven is the capital of rock music!!” Riotous applause.

Shortly before midnight the rock stars leave the stage. A young piper takes their place. The DJ counts down the last seconds until twelve o' clock. The bells strike and the piper plays “Auld Lang Syne”. Those who know the song sing along.

The band returns to the stage. After a “Happy New Year!” from Jim Kerr the Simple Minds play

another one of their hits.

On the slopes above the harbour fireworks rise into the air. Clouds of sparks burst in the dark, clear sky and, for a few minutes, outshine the lightshow on the stage. The mood in the arena is happy and relaxed. Due to the competence of the event management things go smoothly. Through the fireworks and the amplified rock music I hear a familiar voice. "Happy New Year!" Michelle stands in front of us, all smiles. We congratulate her on this success. It is half past twelve and the Simple Minds are playing their last song. The sound makes conversation difficult, so we wave Michelle good-bye and leave to pick up our whisky bottle.

On our way Garry, our neighbour and a fireball swinger, comes hurrying towards us, his kilt swinging with every step. Full of enthusiasm he tells us about the Fireball Ceremony. "It was brilliant!" he reports. Rubbing his right shoulder he adds: "I feel knackered now!" We give a summary of the concert. Garry smiles broadly. "Stonehaven is great, there is nothing better!" We can only agree. And then we happen to bump into Ken. We wish him a happy new year and explain the thing with the whisky bottle. He chuckles. "I had a neighbour who also used to hide his booze in my garden." And with a wink in his eye he adds: "But his wife always found out."

We find our whisky safe and sound in its stash and take it with us to a house party to share it with others.

Days later Stonehaven still revels in its success and there are first rumours to which well-known band this peaceful little town might play host next Hogmanay.