



Genevieve Christie, the director of First Light Festival in Lowestoft

Picture: SARAH LUCY BROWN

The director of First Light Festival explains how the 24-hour event came about - and why she's excited for its long-awaited return this summer. By Danielle Lett

GENEVIEVE CHRISTIE:

A spark of light on the east coast

Summer is just on the horizon - and it's certainly shaping up to be a good one.

Restrictions have lifted, and a number of festivals are back after one or two years of forced hiatus. Amongst them is First Light, which is hoping to put the region firmly in the spotlight.

The festival takes place is a celebration across a single day - running for 24 hours from midday, Saturday June 18 until midday, Sunday June 19, bringing revellers together to enjoy the midsummer sun setting and rising over the beach at Britain's most easterly town.

This multi-arts event hit the East Anglian festival scene in 2019 - to much success - but unfortunately had to cancel its 2020 and 2021 editions.

In 2022, festival director Genevieve Christie promises it will be back with a bang - bigger and better than ever.

But what inspired her to create a festival centring around the summer solstice here in East Anglia?

"It essentially came out of wider regeneration plans for Lowestoft, and really shine a light on all that's great about the town - particularly its seafront," she explains.

"At the time, there were beginnings of a seafront vision, and we wanted to create a festival that would animate the space and make people aware of how beautiful this fantastic stretch of coastline truly is."

In addition, she wanted to draw focus to Lowestoft's title as the most easterly point in the UK.

"Everyone knows about Land's End and John O'Groats - but not so much about Lowestoft. It's a well-kept secret, and that was another reason we wanted to arrange the festival.

"That's when my colleague Wayne Hemingway and I came up with the idea of this non-stop, 24-hour festival which would have dawn at the heart of it. The idea is to keep going and celebrate the midsummer dawn on the closest weekend to the summer solstice."

Camping on the beach. Music, dance, and visual arts every corner you turn. And scores of people all coming together to witness the solstice sun. It sounds like bliss.

Genevieve, Wayne, and their team soon got to work to help bring their vision to life, collaborating closely with local businesses and artists to bring everything together.

"We had a look to see what was going on in Lowestoft and we quickly realised there's some fantastic young and established musicians, and a growing community of artists. All of these things started to help us think about the event's content.

"We wanted people from Lowestoft to attend of course, but we also wanted it to have a national profile too - with big

quality names."

The inaugural festival took place on the weekend of June 22 and 23 and featured a variety of names including Talvin Singh, The Fontanas, Gilles Peterson, Simon Mayo, and Danny Boyle.

Unsurprisingly, the 2019 event was a roaring success - 30,000 people turned up.

"It was incredible, and I think people revelled in the location as well as the concept."

Paying homage to festival predecessors such as Burning Man, First Light also had its very own fiery moment of unity - one of the highlights for Genevieve.

"We commissioned local artist Tobias Ford to create a wonderful, 18ft high sculpture called Pakefield Man. To mark the turn of night, we set fire to it, and it was wonderful. People were incredibly excited.

"Another highlight for me is when it hits dawn. At our last festival, we had Talvin Singh playing his tabla - it was very spiritual to be by the sea, seeing the sun come up as we had a communal feast and celebrated a real sense of peace."

As well as bringing people together, the festival also generated up to £900,000 for town's economy.

"All of the accommodation was sold out, parking revenue was extremely high at around three times its usual rate, and all of the shops sold out of food. It made a huge impact and really boosted Lowestoft's confidence."

The coastal resort was riding on a high - and it was a no-brainer that a 2020 edition had to happen.

Genevieve got planning the follow-up festival straight away, and was even working to a two-year plan and looking at securing funding for subsequent editions.

"We had such positive feedback - and 99% of people said they wanted it to happen again."

But in March 2020, everything abruptly ground to a halt as the world was plunged into lockdown, and Genevieve and her team had to make a very difficult decision.

"We actually decided to cancel that year's festival in March, pretty much straight away. The writing was on the wall, and I think a lot of festivals that were only a few months away had to decide quickly what they were going to do. And to us, it was clear it wouldn't have been able to go ahead."

Describing the decision as 'crushing and disappointing', Genevieve focused her efforts towards a virtual event that would instead celebrate that year's winter solstice, to help keep people's interest - featuring many of the acts who would have taken part in the summer 2020 edition.

"And we were fortunate that

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when 2021 came around, we were able to keep working with the local community, and we created Longest Days of Summer - a smaller, scaled-down event that took place on the beach. It was beautiful and appropriate for the conditions we had to work with last June."

Not one to lose her nerve or optimism, Genevieve kept her cool and when she got the greenlight to host a 2022 festival - all engines were go.

"We're really excited, and thrilled to be planning it again. It'll be fantastic to have the town come together again, welcoming people from across the region and further afield."

And to make even things better, East Suffolk Council granted the festival a fund of £200,000 to help ensure an exciting programme of acts and events when it makes its long-awaited return later this year.

But what can people expect this June?

"I think this year, we want the festival to be about connection, rejoicing, and coming together to celebrate our beautiful surroundings. And it's a free access festival - it's for everybody and that's what we're all about," she says.

"We've got a great line-up of performers, including stellar jazz musician Andy Sheppard who will be performing on our Sunlight Stage, Manchester group Secret Night Gang, and drum and bass DJ LTJ Bukem. We've also got folk music, and fantastic singers opening the festival on the Saturday."

In addition, there will be an outdoor film screening accompanied by live improvised music, supper feasts on the beach, and a number of new zones including a sustainability zone which will feature talks and activities for attendees to get involved with.

"There's also a new youth music stage called New Dawn, where we'll be inviting young acts to come and play on it," adds Genevieve.

In terms of accommodation, customers can camp on the beach, or opt to stay in the new campervan area.

"First Light is also going to be taking on a new building - the East Point Pavilion. Based on the seafront, we're going to be launching an opening event there on the Saturday. It's going to be the gateway to the beach, and become an exciting venue for food and drinks, with DJs there all weekend. It's going to be great fun."

With just a few months to go, excitement is slowly building again within the town - and Genevieve cannot wait to show off the coastal resort in all of this glory.

"Lowestoft has this fantastic community spirit. That, combined with its long, sandy beach, and growing arts scene, makes it a great place to hold such a unique festival."

To find out more about First Light Festival, visit firstlightlowestoft.com

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It'll be fantastic to have the town come together again
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2019's First Light Festival as revellers partied into the night
Picture: MICK HOWES



LEFT:
Genevieve Christie,
the director of First
Light Festival in
Lowestoft

Picture:
SARAH LUCY
BROWN

RIGHT:
Jazz musician
Andy Sheppard
and DJ LTJ Bukem
are scheduled to
appear at 2022's
edition of the
festival

Pictures:
ANDY SHEPPARD/
LTJ BUKEM



The inaugural First
Light Festival in 2019
Picture: KATE ELLIS



Partying on the beach as the
sun comes up. First Light
Festival in Lowestoft celebrates
the arrival of summer with a
24-hour arts extravaganza
Picture: MARIA PURISIC