Behind the *carnival scenes*

Months of secret planning, skilled craftsmanship and fundraising go into creating Somerset's spectacular carnival carts. Lime Kiln Carnival Club president **DAVID CLEAVELEY** takes us behind the scenes

WORDS: Catherine Welton
PHOTOS: Timeless Images



Lime Kiln Carnival Club's third place 'Dia de los Muertos' cart


DIA DE LOS
ARTS CENTRE
30 Years
Lime Kiln
43
43

Somerset's annual carnivals are famous for being a riot of colour, music and light. Expect fireworks, fairgrounds, street food and jaw-dropping processions of imaginatively themed carnival carts, all competing to be crowned winner of the Somerset County Guy Fawkes Carnival circuit.

This accolade is so fiercely contested, that each carnival club works tirelessly throughout the year in a bid to produce the most show-stopping design and performance. It's a world shrouded in secrecy. In fact, you could say, the first rule of Carnival Club is – no one talks about Carnival Club.

So, when David Cleaveley, president of Lime Kiln Carnival Club, agreed to an interview I couldn't wait to find out what he had to say.

'What makes the Lime Kiln Carnival club unique is that since it was formed in 1946 it has had the same headquarters, the Lime Kiln Inn, and the same club name for 81 years. The Lime Kiln is also the only club to have appeared in every Somerset Carnival Association carnival since 1946. We are very proud of our history and tradition.'

David himself has been involved in the club for 50 years. Last year, their Mexican Day of the Dead-themed cart won third place, their highest position in decades. In the previous two years, they took fourth and fifth. 'We're on a bit of a roll!' he says, modestly.

INSPIRATION

Themes for the carts must be decided a year in advance, and submitted to the carnival committee, who ensure that no two clubs are doing anything too similar. Hence the secrecy.

As David explains, the whole process begins months or even years before that. 'Within the club, we usually have a pool of



Marketeers Carnival Club's The Magic Garden cart in 2025



Gremlins Carnival Club are top contenders for one of the big prizes





Ramblers Carnival Club has won three out of the last four carnivals

‘The Lime Kiln Carnival Club is the only club to have appeared in every Somerset Carnival Association carnival since 1946’

ideas to choose from. Perhaps someone’s heard a nice piece of music, or been to see a show. Years ago, someone came up with *Starlight Express* but we couldn’t work out how to do it, so we had to wait a few years until we could pull it off. Usually someone has the germ of an idea, shares it with a few other people and they elaborate on it.’

‘We debate all the potential themes, and then we vote. If we’ve got a few themes to choose from, we’ll pick our favourite two and send them away to do some more work on them, and then vote again. If you put an idea in and it’s chosen, you’ll hear people say “that was my year”.’

The pressure is on to make a decision as the later a club leaves submitting its entry, the more risk it could be turned down. ‘If someone else has put in a similar idea, the second one to submit it gets rejected.’

THE BUILD

Once a design has been accepted, work begins to turn it into a reality, a mammoth task that falls to the cart team. The cart dimensions are dictated by the practicalities of navigating the town’s streets – namely the width of the road, overhead power cables and corners. ‘They have to work out how to get that theme onto a cart that’s a maximum of 11 feet wide, 16 feet six inches high, and 100 feet long,’ says David. The light and sound systems play a big role in the overall spectacle. ‘Last year we put 12,000 traditional lightbulbs on the cart, then we also had spotlights on the performers, and butterflies made of LED lights – I think there were four or five different types of lighting. We run a nightclub-size sound system, with amplifiers and speakers spread over the whole cart, as the sound has to be as good at the back as at the front.’

To achieve this feat of engineering, the team meets several times a week, for most of the year, and comprises a range of skills. ‘You could be an engineer, an electrician, a model maker, a painter, one of our tech people working on screens and LED lighting – or like me and make the tea!’ >

‘It’s the atmosphere around the cart that makes the difference and that’s the X factor that none of us know until we go over the start line’

FUNDRAISING

Given the ambition and scale of each year’s spectacle, there’s also a huge emphasis on fundraising, as well as reusing and repurposing as much as possible.

‘Last year we spent in the region of £45-50,000,’ reveals David. ‘We’re totally funded by whatever we raise, and we also recycle as much as we can. When the Mexican Day of the Dead went back in the shed, all the wood on the outside was taken off. All the mechanics underneath – the motors, the chains, the sprockets, electrics, sound equipment – all came off to be reused.’

THE MAGIC INGREDIENT

But the cart itself is only part of the magic, and David explains that how the crowd responds on the night is the secret ingredient. ‘It’s the atmosphere around the cart that makes the difference and that’s the X factor that none of us know until we go over the start line.’ David points out that’s where the performers on the cart come into the equation. ‘When you’re on the carnival cart, you’ve got to try and entertain the crowd, you have to portray a role, you need to act and make eye contact with the crowd. If they’re smiling, laughing and clapping, the judges notice that.’

HOPING AND BUILDING

The club has high hopes for this year’s theme, but David is under no illusion about what they’re up against. ‘Bridgwater is fierce competition. If you look at the results, carnivals are now often won by just a few points. There can only be one winner every year, and we have a lot of respect for all the clubs. A lot of us have known each other for decades, if someone brings out a really good cart, you’re not critical, you’re chuffed for them.’

I ask him who he thinks will take the crown this year. ‘Ramblers have won three out of the last four. Gremlins won the year before last. Marketeers won five years ago. So, I would expect the winner to come from one of those three.’

But when it comes to Lime Kiln’s chances, he is, of course, giving little away, saying simply: ‘We’re building and hoping.’



Lime Kiln Carnival Club’s Dia de los Muertos in 2025



The performers bring the magic to the carts. Dia de los Muertos by Lime Kiln 2025

SOMERSET COUNTY GUY FAWKES CARNIVALS 2026

BRIDGWATER CARNIVAL: Saturday, November 7, 6pm

BURNHAM-ON-SEA CARNIVAL: Monday, November 9, 7.30pm

WESTON-SUPER-MARE CARNIVAL: Friday, November 13, 7pm

NORTH PETHERTON CARNIVAL: Saturday, November 14, 7pm

MIDSOMER NORTON CARNIVAL: Monday, November 16 7.30pm

SHEPTON MALLET CARNIVAL: Wednesday, November 18, 7.30pm

WELLS CARNIVAL: Friday, November 20, 7pm

GLASTONBURY CARNIVAL: Saturday, November 21, 6.45pm