

About this project

Dear Beltane is a project born out of a yearning for the sharing of stories and memories that is so much part of the Beltane Fire Festival. While we can't share these stories in person, taking time to sit down and write them out offers a different kind of connection. Writing a physical letter in today's world, dominated by electronic communication, makes it a physical manifestation of care, and to find one in your letterbox or by your door breaks up the monotony of days spent in lockdown. With this project we hope to restore a sense of physicality, community and history, to celebrate the places that are important to us, and each other.

Now the results of it are displayed in two ways: A digital exhibition to scroll and explore, and a physical map embroidered with all the spots marked by participants, to be kept in the BFS archives.

Coming Together

Weekend Away - the megaphone - three times = tradition - fire - walkthroughs - Beltonia - not a cult - liminal! - the choice - hedge - Surprise!!! - the hill - sacred zippo - Bower - the dance - the club - withies - Charge! - after-after - #NotAtAGOMeeting - Friends
Rob Thorburn BFS 2001-2021

My memory is on top of Calton Hill

I came to Scotland for the first time in December and everything was so mesmerizing but the trip to Calton Hill with my boyfriend was truly(sic) magical, it was at dusk we could see the lights from the botanics and the sea, experiencing all the amazing new things I saw in those two weeks can't beat the memory of standing there looking over a sea of lights while holding the hand of someone I love so much, realizing yes this is the place I'm moving to.

Lumi Mak

In 1996 I attended the Beltane Fire Festival. I was new to Edinburgh, new to Beltane. The festival found me on a night when I was homesick and feeling sorry for myself. It left me content and connected. In the intervening years I have been observing the pagan feasts, discovering my connection to our earth, our seasons and 'our' people. I'm a trained celebrant and often help people reconnect to their lost loved ones in ritual and story.

Blessed Beltane!

Indra

Dear Beltane,

The first time I ever went up Calton Hill was after dark, for Beltane 2014, and it permanently disoriented me. Whether in light or darkness, I have never quite managed to orient myself on that one of Edinburgh's hills, despite a generally quite good sense of direction. I cherish that disorientation.

I'm not really a concert person, but I think I experienced that night what people love about them - the shifting animal of the crowd, the fluid boundary between performance and genuine experience (not, of course, to say that performance isn't genuine experience). I lost myself there in a way I almost ever have, and I think about that all the time.

Love, Alex

1) Torchbearers on the way to the Hill from our getting ready space on the South Side, taking a shortcut through Waverley Station....

Child: (Screams!)

Parent: What!

Child: Mum! Death eaters!

Parent: Don't be silly, Death eaters don't...

[Child pulls Parent's arm, turning her round to see procession of cloaked and painted torchies]

Parent: (Screams!)

2) On the Acropolis

Groups of three or four torchbearers in the dark gaps between the pillars. The wind at our backs, the rustle and hub-bub of the crowd below us in front, almost invisible behind the sea of camera flashes. The neidfire bearers pass along the step beneath us, lighting one torch in each group so that we can light each other. As they return to the central gap, the processional drummers step out and form up in front of the right hand torchies. Suddenly, it gets a lot brighter and there's a disturbance amongst the neighbouring torchbearers. I can feel my back getting increasibly hot and see small golden sparks blowing through the smoke, fading to red and disappearing. It was only the fire sculptures behind us. Panic over, we relax and prepare to follow the drums.

3) And they're off!

[actually a walkthrough memory]

Following the processional, almost at the double, we interleave with the stewards and fall in beside the Whites as we leave the D. Suddenly, overcome by the sheer joy of the walkthrough on such a

glorious afternoon, I break character and say (a little louder than I intended) "And as they come up to the first turn, it's May Queen in the lead, May Queen followed by Green Man. May Queen, Green Man, Blue Man coming up the outside...." I'm not sure if the facepaint quite cracked, but I got A Look from the White to my left.

4) Autopilot [A NON-memory]

It's possible, though, to over practice. One year I remember stepping off the Acropolis and falling into place in the procession - and then nothing at all until entering the Bower.

5) Bower bits (not all the same year)

Standing under a tree by the Bower, not realising that there were audience members above me until I heard the stewards coax them down.

Again by the Bower, a hand appears in front of my face from behind and pops a chocolate-coated strawberry into my mouth. It was delicious, so sweet and so cold.

Bad weather years - Torches are really useful for warming performers whose costumes are mostly paint

6) The Fire [Depending on when we stand down, we'd not always make it to the Fire, but it was always special when we did]

As we made our way from Acropolis to Bower for Beltane 2010, with the Moon just past full, we could hear comments from the crowd to our sides or behind us - not just the usual telling / re-invention of the Beltane story, but something far stranger. Something about a penguin on the Hill? Surely not. And then, when we finally got to the Fire, there it was. An enormous penguin. Or more precisely, someone in a penguin onesie....

11th April, 2021.

Listening to: Stuart MaConie's Show on BBC6 Music.

Reading: 33 1/3's column on In An Aeroplane Over The Sea by Neutral Milk Hotel, authored by Kim Cooper.

Hello Dear Beltane!

I have to be honest, choosing a single memory was at time tricky, but I got there eventually :)

For me, the Beltane Fire Festival of 2015 was every bit of a transformative journey. Even though I was on my third festival overall, I started out still feeling relatively new to it all. By the last fortnight of prep though, I felt well and truly home. Came April 30th, things just fell into place with ease. Two months of prep with Photo Point had paid off beautifully. In the 6 years that have followed, I feel like I've prospered more than well here in BFS!

Bleu Hope

Anticipation

In our last practise as Whites in 2019, we rehearsed our procession one last time, from beginning to end without stopping or speaking. The hill was thick with fog, with only a few other people on it. They would have seen us performing a silent, precise ritual around the hill: 19 people in white jumpers or shirts, moving in unison, without music or audience, stopping to encircle & honour empty patches of grass. Only we knew what we were celebrating, and we did it with grace, love, and certainty. It was one of the most lovely things I have done.

Daniel

It was a cold & rainy afternoon. The Bower had been set up, we had used the old tent with its heavy wooden poles & eccentric marking system. We, as Bower, were staying on the hill until the event began. As we huddled together in the tent we shared cups of hot lady grey tea made over a tiny camping stove (safely). We sang songs & held that space together despite the elements.

A.D.F.

As the wheel turns, so do we grow & learn. So we can begin again.

I remember coming up the hill with other Stewards, excitement rising, the hill opening up before us. We paused for a moment to catch our breath, when a wink of white caught my eye. I had only just learned to recognise hawthorn, herald of summer and symbol of May, and here were the first blossoms of the season, joining us in welcoming everyone to the hill, to the celebration about to begin, and to summer.

Lu

The Acropolis

Anyone who has been in Court - Callhorn, Green, White, Queen, Blue, Pros, Nightwatch, Neidfire - knows the incredibly intense feeling of coming over the 'Acropolis' as the sun goes down at the very beginning of the ritual. I relive that moment every year I am present and I hear one of Beltane's iconic drum pieces - Acropolis 7s.

Rob Thorburn

Dear Beltane,

As the sun began to set on Beltane night, we came to a stop behind the Acropolis, awaiting the lighting of the Neidfire. I stood with my sisters and brothers; white-clad warriors there to protect and share the joy of a new spring with our Queen. I had felt my sense of self slowly drifting to sleep on the procession across Holyrood Green, through the town, and up the hill, to this point, in a still and tense limbo, in the shadow of the Folly's columns. I had felt my White - this stoic warrior that had always felt a little bit like a pretence, - come closer and closer, until that moment.

It took so long for things on the other side from us to happen. We stood there, four handmaidens, around the May Queen, and I felt like iron, like stone, like an immovable object, devoted to my Goddess, but there was still a part of me that felt as I always had - uncertain, afraid, elated, bubbling over with anticipation, and terrified that my body would fail me, collapse underneath me, fall off that high stone monument, and whatever else I could picture.

And I said to myself, in a scared voice: "My legs hurt... what if I fall?"

And a voice answered back: "Then we will use my legs."

And it was like that last part of me that was fragile, and afraid, fell asleep. And my White held me, safe in the back of my mind, while she strode forth, and protected, and fought, and fell in love, and gave me a Spring to wake up in.

Standing, ready, on the night

Rising moon + stars a-light

Suddenly, just to my right -

A little bit of gorse.

Calling to me like a song

Breaking off a twig felt wrong

Focused mind but heart that longed -

For a little bit of gorse.

Solemn task was rightly seized

But the kindly wind, on gentle breeze

Send a wondrous gift to me -

A little sprig of gorse.

I can't explain why my soul thrilled
In ivy crown, a place it filled
And so we journeyed round the hill -
 Me and my sprig of gorse.

It stayed with me, I have it still
At every glance, I feel the hill
A night I loved and always will
 With fire and stones
 And hearts and bones...
 And a little spring of gorse.

Polly

First Beltane

Sitting behind the acropolis, waiting for the smell of, and a small wisp of ember catching.
Watching a tiny flicker become a decided *glow* and then pass back, torch to torch until you
become one of the bearers of the festival's fire.
One step over the acropolis, then another and in a blink you're done and both overwhelmed
and list in a sea of celebration, joy and belonging.
Nate

Dear Beltane,
Oh, how I miss standing in my wee hi-vis vest at the front of the Acropolis. That sweet spot
at the head of the D, on the far side of a sacred space, and yet in the very heart of it all.
Hark now!
The snare begins its lonely roll and time... draws out... one and then another joins in until
full power is reached. Soon, they will head out together into the dark.

My fondest memory of Beltane is actually my first! Attending as a teenager with a few
friends, I had no idea what to expect as we gathered in the large crowd. Then suddenly there
was this silence before a horn was blown, fire appeared on the Acropolis as if from nowhere,
and drums filled the air! I was hooked within the 1st minute!

It was cold, but I couldn't feel it, only see it, in our breath. We had flashing grins of white
against the dark, against the dark paint, against the growing excitement. I'd watched the
drums for a couple of years, awestruck. Idolised them, let's be honest. Auditioning is still a
moment that I use in job interviews as a time when I felt the fear and did it anyway. My brain
regularly had me feeling I shouldn't be there, but my group taught + encouraged + pushed, +
now I was walking over the Acropolis, greeted by a hundred camera flashes, and an

anticipation I could taste. And then I looked down & my hands were drumming, drumming, drumming...

Unsæli

I remember Beltane night, 2019. The Unsæli already having tested our May Queen and happy that she did not turn right, we ran to the Dell, to try the same thing for the Green Man. I remember the feeling of joy at racing into the front of the procession and dancing away with the Green Man - and the pride as he saw his time with us was done and returned to his sacred journey.

Stew

Fire Arch

Dear Beltane,

If I had to pick a spot to encapsulate my personal Beltane story... it would be Fire Arch.

When I first stumbled upon Beltane 2015 as a witness, I didn't know what to expect. Squinting at a map I got from the entrance, I realized my group wouldn't make it to the Acropolis in time. So instead we tried to get ahead to intercept the procession at the Fire Arch. After hearing but not seeing the Acropolis drumming and the lighting of the Neid Fires, we waited for the procession. Somehow, we ended up front row right after the May Queen and Whites passed through the Arch, keening with all their hearts. I suddenly felt like I was alone witnessing this outpouring of grief and emotion instead of in a crowd. The rest of that amazing night passed in a blur because I was so affected by it.

I joined Beltane the next year and joined Fire Arch as a fire-spinner. We made a small, tight group of spinners and I got to try so many brand new skills – fire, acro, character work. My memorable moment of that festival was making a pyramid under the arch as it lit up – only to realise when the pyrotechnics went off that we were getting showered with ash and yet had to stay stoic! That was the final year of the “old” Fire Arch Design, as it lasted just about until the procession made it through then warped so much from use that it couldn't be safely reassembled! That year the Arch only stayed up because of the hopes and dreams and hard sweat of Tech.

The year after, in 2017, I felt ready and called to join the Whites. Now I was one of those powerful, beautiful beings that keened out as they passed through the Arch. I hadn't realised the full significance as a witness but now I learned about holding the grief of a community and showing it by keening for those who couldn't express it themselves. The next year I was one of the White GOs, at the head of the procession keening once more. This time I shrieked with all of my soul, tears were welling up in my eyes. I felt like I was being gutted but I also felt the incredible space that we were creating and holding for those in the area. It's truly a magical spot. No matter what I do in Beltane or how many other special places there are... for me, Fire Arch is truly the place where I feel closest to the Beltane Festival.

With love from Hannah x

This fire arch was decommissioned because of its hazardous construction methodology, as well as its habit of not always successfully containing spent debris (cold ash and residue). Oh and it was made of wood. A wooden fire arch.

Beltane tech are our experienced heroes in red boiler suits. They continually assess risk and ensure the safety of our performers and members of the public. As a result of tech presence No one was injured by the incident mentioned. It did look amazing though.

Hi from Spain!

My 6 friends and I were at BFF in 2019 and we wore small cat ears because we all love nature, animals and cats in particular and decided to wear on that night those little cat ears as hair-band, as a tribute to these magical animals on a magical night.

Maite, Nina, Pepa, Antuna, Isabel and Nelly

Most of my favourite memories from past Beltanes have come from the moment before the festival begins. You can feel the energy, excitement and electricity in the air. But there is also a sense of calm.

My favourite was Beltane 2019 as a beastie. We watched the sunset then headed over to our starting point and got into a cuddle puddle where we lie covered in cloaks. We were lying there for a long time that year and I was so cosy and warm and calm that I actually fell asleep for about 10-15 minutes only waking up when fire cans were lit by tech (after neid fire) and the call horn sounded. I fell asleep as myself + woke up a Beastie.

Hannah

Water

My 2018 Beltane was with the Kelpies. We crafted and brought Rannoch our Kelpie to life, developed our water language and dance. On Beltane we searched the hill in anger and despair for Rannochs lost bridle, witnesses young and old delighting at Rannoch's proud form weaving through them in our search. When the May Queen visited Rannoch and gifted us with a new bridle, life, freedom, we all lit up with joy and dance.

Charlie

NO

Respect. Revere. Ridicule.

There's something about the NO that has always sat well with me, a "belonging outside belonging". You are part of the Festival, part of the crowd, and also, NO. Well... maybe? It's the stacked layers of artifice and clownery that reveal something real and sincere.

Before first drums, it's welcoming everyone into the twilight of the hill, inviting them to come and play with us.

For the acropolis sequence, we revert to (mostly) quiet spectators. During the rest of it, we seek out the lulls on the hill and fill them with whimsy, playing with everyone who will have us.

... and finally it's retiring into a cuddle puddle on a comfy slope while the final battles are in full swing - watching, having a snack, or engaging in a ritually-significant nap. The sort where you wake up and it's summer.

Niki

Beasties

Dear Beltane,

My memory is a short one, all about 'Pleasure', which as we all know is from the bass.

It was 2018, after hanging up my Event Coordinator hard hat, I'd become a Beastie. After a rocky personal start, where I'd switched instruments due to a lack of confidence in my own 'shaking' abilities. I'd been given the honour of starting off, alone, the quintessential Beastie tune, 'Pleasure'. An honour indeed.

It's one of those internal images you'll never let go of. Lindsey making eye contact with me, counting me in, the strike of my beaters and the shaking of my red toosh. Slowly, I turned to play and grin with the rest of my red family, laughing as red friends did silly things to the canon beside us. All the while, trying not to think about the fact my boss was standing in the crowd, cheering along with the rest.

Love,

Georgia

Bonfire

Dear Beltane,

My first Beltane - 2015 - and I was Event Coordinator. The bonfire had been lit, and I could sit down, at least for a short while. No one had died (big tick) except for the Green Man (who was supposed to), so all was well. A member of Tech, an old Blue, came up to me and said remember to take a moment and look around. Take five minutes, and enjoy it all. Sit and take in the thing you helped make.

Wise words, and advice I have passed on.

This is a beautiful thing that we make happen.

Sara Thomas

"Beltane as Red" The Euphoria of PAN

Being read as Red... Beltane 2019 was the most affirmed and supported I have ever felt by strangers, and most at home, euphoric in my own body. Was it the bodypaint? The acro? The fire? Sure, but one with nature was the people - sharing power, purpose, love.

This is bonfire central, but on initiation 8 weeks before, I did not know that. In the wet cold darkness then I felt the first bonds of strong companions, mutual care, belonging and welcome as one here at the top of this ancient hill our group was ritually bound, The start of our journey where we learned to trust, to fly, to hold strong.

On Beltane night we gathered once again in the dark this time at the blazing fire, for reprieve and reflection - just our red clad bodies in ceremony and respect for the Goddess drawing strength, calm, release from this fire we are all part of.

Yessssaa! To the fierce Reds and Beasties who welcomed me to the fold, and blessed be the GO's and Whites who drew out my hidden natures. I shall continue to carry this Beltane flame wherever I go.

Bower

In 2018, Eva, me, and the Bowerlings spent two mad days bedecking the Bower with leafy boughs, wildflowers, lights, sculptures, & rigging, before rushing to put on costumes and then bring the space to life & joy.

At the end of the night, I sat weary near the foot of the May Queen's throne, having made her and everyone else in the festival welcome under the trees. We watched the many painted figures begin to dance tenderly, lit by lanterns & flames & the full moon. I felt so so proud of having built & cared for a space where such a beautiful moment could happen: A brief leafy & twinkling haven for the community I adore.

Daniel

After

Memories of Cher & I washing our faces in the dew walking back down the hill with Pete & Nick. Pete no longer with us but we remember him on the hill at Beltane

Thank you

We hope you enjoyed this collection - we've been amazed by the number and breadth of responses that we received, and are so grateful to all the participants for sharing their stories. If you're interested in learning more about Beltane Fire Festival, please visit our website at <https://beltane.org/>.