

The legendary 'Friars' is reborn!



Stiff Little Fingers



Pretty Things



David Stopps

Outsiders find it hard to believe when we tell them that Aylesbury has been a major landmark on the British rock and pop music scene, playing host to such famous and diverse acts as David Bowie, Queen, Genesis, The Jam, The Ramones, Iggy Pop, Roxy Music, U2, The Police and Blondie.

The reason was "Friars", a music club founded in 1969 by Aylesbury's David Stopps (who has also managed the highly successful Howard Jones through his 25 year career). David's mission was to bring the very best rock and pop music, through both established and newer bands, to our town on a regular basis, and for 15 years he did just that. His contacts and ability to bring top acts here were nothing short of legendary, and Aylesbury became the UK's best known venue outside London for music fans.

For some years Friars concerts were held at the old Borough Assembly Hall, moving to the Civic Centre when it opened in 1975. So it was fitting that 40 years on from its beginnings, on June 1 2009, the first Friars gig for 25 years was held at the "Civic", featuring 3 of the acts that were on the bill back in 1969 and are still touring to this day! The Groundhogs, the Edgar Broughton Band and the Pretty Things had the crowd of over 1000 people rocking all night long. Many in the audience found themselves meeting old friends they hadn't seen since previous Friars events at least 25 years ago!!

The Pretty Things summed up June 1st with these words: "The Friars show was the high spot of our year so far. In an era of sanitised, corporate, portion-controlled music, made on computers and impersonally sold on the internet, to be back in Friars re-affirmed why we still do this and still love it. A lot of joy, a feeling of genuine support and a total commitment to the music, not the profits".

David Stopps was also delighted with how successful June 1st was, and has now set up the next Friars gig

on 23 October, revisiting the late-1970s punk era, with Stiff Little Fingers headlining.

Town Councillor Mike Smith, who as a teenager lived in Essex, remembers travelling here to see bands like Stiff Little Fingers. "Virtually every music fan in the country had heard of Aylesbury, and Friars was quite simply a great place to hear music. Some provincial venues were a bit wary of booking punk or new wave bands, but Friars always managed to maintain its friendly, sociable atmosphere without diluting the energy and rebelliousness that is the essence of rock music".

David Stopps puts that unique atmosphere down to the fans feeling it was "their" club. "Unlike most venues where you have just two elements, the band and the audience, at Friars there was a third element, that unique Friars magic and vibe that always made it an event rather than just a concert. We managed to avoid any major trouble at our gigs, partly by our good relationship with the local police and the artists' management, but also because our fans kept a clear message in mind – any drugs or violence will mean we are going to lose our club, and nobody wanted that".

ATC: Which were the best bands / gigs you remember at Friars?

DS: All 3 appearances by David Bowie, The Kinks, Genesis, The Clash, The Ramones. And the Pretty Things on June 1st this year were amazing, as were the Edgar Broughton Band.

ATC: Did any "big-name" artists, coming to a smaller venue like Aylesbury, throw their egos around and cause you headaches?

DS: Oh yes, I remember sitting in the Bell Hotel all afternoon persuading Freddie Mercury to carry on with the Queen gig in 1974 – he was threatening to go home as the stage was too small! And Gary Numan almost refused to do his show in 1979 after a group

of bikers in Market Square had called him a rather unpleasant name!

ATC: *Are you planning more Friars gigs after SLF in October?*

DS: I hope so, we're talking to bands and it would be great to have a couple more at the Civic. June 1st might have turned out to be just a one-off reunion, but it was so great we just have to carry on. The new Waterside theatre will be a different kind of venue, but I hope it will be the right kind of place to carry on the Friars tradition.

ATC: *What was the secret of being able to spot up-and-coming bands and get them here just before they became such huge stars that the chance was gone?*

DS: We were music fans too and to an extent had that fans' instinct for who was about to make it big, an example is U2 who were an established band with a decent following when we booked them in 1980, but very quickly afterwards went on to mega-stardom. And we had a band called Dire Straits here in 1978 - only as a support act though - I remember we paid them £25!

Another special feature of Friars was its place in the hearts of not just music fans, but musicians too. Top artists often came back to play Friars even when some might think they had grown "too big" and could sell out stadiums worldwide. It was not at all surprising to be standing in a Friars crowd or at the bar next to other famous musicians, everyone there to share a genuine love and respect for the diversity of music that Friars made itself a world leader of. David remembers Rick Wakeman, Robert Plant, Billy Idol and Feargal Sharkey as regulars, as well as numerous producers and record company managers.

Pete Trewavas, bassist of Marillion, remembers his first Friars gig, seeing Darryl Way's "Wolf" in 1973. He told us "Aylesbury had a great music scene in local pubs and clubs, but everyone wanted to make it to Friars, because we knew that important record company people went there and there'd be a real chance of getting noticed. Seeing a local guy we all knew really well (John Otway) go from Friars to getting a single in the charts made me realise being a professional musician could be more than a pipe dream"

Pete played Friars with Marillion and with his previous band, Orthon, and remembers the great atmosphere and audiences. "Friars was always about the quality of the music, not how you looked or whether your band fitted the latest trend or fad. Friars fans respected good music of all genres, there was no pigeonholing of styles - for example, many in the audience for Queen would also have been there for Stackridge and for Eddie and the Hot Rods".

Once again Aylesbury is a significant place on the musical map. We have the Hobble on the Cobbles,

our free all-day summer music festival, now in the 4th successful year of its revival and attracting thousands of fans to the town centre annually. Aylesbury Town Council is proud to support the "Hobble" financially.

The Town Council also gave a grant towards the relaunch of "The New Roxette", Aylesbury's very own monthly music magazine, showcasing new local talent as well as memories of the town's distinguished place in musical history. The Roxette is available free from the Town Council, the King's Head, the Civic Centre and Aylesbury Music in Temple Street.

With many thanks to The New Roxette and Bucks TV for their help in compiling this article. Interview conducted by Cllr Mike Smith.

Further information: www.aylesburyfriars.co.uk
www.thenewroxette.co.uk
www.aylesburyshowcase.co.uk
www.buckstv.co.uk/buckstv/music/friars

PRETTY THINGS QUOTE:

"The Friars show on Monday night was the high spot of our year so far. In an era of sanitised, corporate, portion-controlled music, made on computers and impersonally sold on the internet, to be back in Friars re-affirmed why we still do this and still love it.

During its time in operation, Friars (in Aylesbury) was one of the most important and influential places to play in Europe. The club, its attitude and management style, created a generation of music fans who looked to the club for direction and followed its taste and house style to the very end. A committed venue run by loving, informed and joyful enthusiasts is a huge benefit to any region. It affects and informs young people and creates real loyalty and love for music and artists, that lasts a lifetime. We regularly play the 100 Club in London - now London's oldest established rock venue and the feeling in the room is exactly the same. A lot of joy, a feeling of genuine support and a total commitment to the music, not the profits.

Friars was, and remains, the class of the field, and the people who came to the show on Monday were returning to the club, rather than coming to see us, 'The Broughton's' or 'Tony'. They trust the club to deliver and they are connected to the music they love, that Friars has built for all of the dedicated club members.

For our part, as a strange, ragamuffin bag of odd, assorted characters, who still do this for the pure love of music - we salute you. Without Friars, and the other style-makers we all used to love, there would be no Pretty Things... and no British rock music.

We played the O2 a few hours before our set at Friars. Guess which show left us smiling hard enough to generate lockjaw!

David, Mike, all of you... bring it on. People NEED direction to learn to love music as we all did. You seem to be gifted at providing it. Anytime you want The Pretty Things, just whistle - we'll be listening.

Best gig of the year for us. Thanks to you all....."

XX The Pretty Things