

# THE PAST COMES TO LIFE: THE BURY ST EDMUNDS PAGEANT OF 1907



Above: The martyrdom of St Edmund as depicted on the pageant pennant. Reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.

## A grand representation of this town's history

A great celebration of the history of Bury St Edmunds was organised in 1907. The centrepiece of the festivities was a historical pageant written and directed by Louis Napoleon Parker. A full eighth of the town's population were performers. Local people also made costumes, props, and helped with organising the

event, which was staged in the Abbey Gardens in front of a huge, custom-built grandstand. The streets were bright with bunting and, inspired by all this local enthusiasm, visitors came from far and wide.

## “The shrine where liberty had birth”

The pageant told the town's history over seven episodes, many of which had a theme of resistance against oppression. The tale began with rebellion against the Romans, featuring Boadicea, the warrior queen, who made a dramatic entrance on a horse-drawn chariot. King Edmund was later shown as a brave defender of English liberty against marauding Danes, dying violently at their hands, his body pierced by arrows. And in the fifth episode, English barons met at Edmund's shrine in 1214. Provoked by the corrupt rule of King John,

the barons challenged John with “a surer weapon against tyranny than any sword”: **Magna Carta**. The pageant ended on a happier note by depicting “merrie old England” and the triumphal visit to Bury of Queen Elizabeth I in 1578.

Right: Boadicea, the warrior queen of the Icenic tribe.

Reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, EE500/34/17a.

Below: The grandstand under construction.

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## A little town with a great history

Forty thousand people flocked to Bury St Edmunds to see history come to life before their very eyes. Although the past depicted in the pageant was of special significance locally, it was also highly relevant within our national story. The *Observer* newspaper declared that the town had produced a “triumph of pageantry” and the *Bury Free Press* said it was “one of the grandest spectacles of modern times”. A profit

of £1,000 (nearly £100,000 today) was made and this money helped build a much-needed sanatorium as tuberculosis was then widespread in the town. The excitement of the event lived long in people's memories and, as we'll see, Bury St Edmunds would stage more pageants.

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# HOW IT ALL STARTED: PARKER AND PAGEANTS

## The inventor

Born in France to an English mother and well-to-do American father, Louis Napoleon Parker (1852–1944) had a musical education and became a teacher at Sherborne School in Dorset. He later changed career, becoming well-known as a playwright. In 1905 he was invited back to Sherborne to organise a celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of the town's abbey and school. For this, Parker created his first historical

pageant and the event was a huge success. By 1909, Parker had organised nine pageants (including Bury St Edmunds), altogether involving 13,000 performers and half a million spectators. Parker's celebrity and the success of pageants encouraged others across the UK to try their hand. Soon pageants became all the rage.



Above: Pageant master Louis Napoleon Parker hard at work.



Above: Audience and performers at the Sherborne Pageant of 1905.

Reproduced by kind permission of Dorset History Centre, D.2259/6.

Left: "A Bad Case of Pageantitis".

Reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, EE500/34/17b.

## A serious case of pageantitis

The press described an outbreak of "pageant fever". Wherever they took place, pageants created a holiday atmosphere: streets were decorated, souvenirs sold and special transport provided. Alongside those staged to celebrate the history of local places, pageants also became popular with organisations that wanted to tell their own histories, or a different version of the past. The Suffragettes, the Boys' Brigade and even the Communist Party caught "pageantitis"! All these pageants involved large casts of enthusiastic volunteers, colourful costumes and thrilling spectacles, and were usually held outdoors. Although kings, queens and local heroes still featured, by the 1930s pageants had evolved to take more interest in ordinary people's lives in the past.

## The decline of pageants?

After the Second World War, occasions such as the Festival of Britain (1951), the Queen's Coronation (1953) and the Silver Jubilee (1977) encouraged many communities to put on pageants. But the rise of TV and blockbuster films meant pageants had to adopt more exciting stage techniques to provide value-for-money entertainment. Technological advances meant dialogue and music could be pre-recorded (long before *Top of the Pops*, pageant actors mimed their lines!). So, even outdoors, large audiences could now hear all the action – though in despair at the British weather, some organisers began to opt for indoor venues. Though their heyday was drawing to a close by the swinging sixties, pageants have far from disappeared. Across the UK, many still take place to mark special occasions



– think of the 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, which was a 21st-century take on historical pageantry. But it all began with Mr Parker's love for history in the little town of Sherborne.

Above: Danny Boyle's Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, London 2012.

Danny Boyle's Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, London 2012. © Maykal, flickr, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/maykal/7662696650/>

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# THE BURY ST EDMUNDS PAGEANT OF 1959

## The pageant comes to town once more

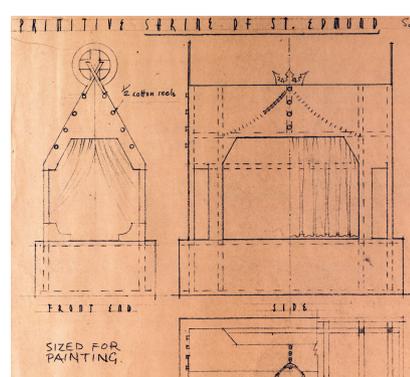
Fifty-two years after the first Bury St Edmunds pageant, the 750th anniversary of Magna Carta inspired the town's Mayor to suggest having another. As in 1907, the large cast and small army of organisers were all local people. Once again, it took place in front of a specially built grandstand within the Abbey Gardens. Christopher Ede – Britain's leading pageant-master in the post-war period – was commissioned to ensure that this 1959 pageant reprise would match the success of its predecessor.



**Left Above: A scene from the pageant.**  
From Olga Ironside Wood, *Edmund of Anglia* (Bury St Edmunds, 1970); reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.



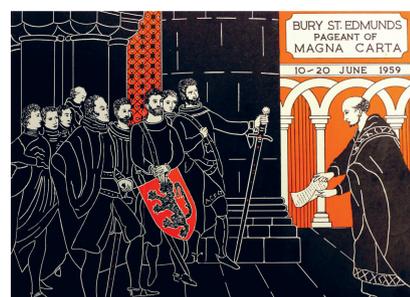
**Left Below: A scene from the pageant.**  
Reproduced by kind permission of Margaret Charlesworth.



## Modernising the pageant

The pageant again showed the glories of Bury St Edmunds' past, but with a more modern twist. King Edmund's death and the meeting of the barons remained at the heart of the story, but important changes were also made. Up-to-date production techniques like amplified sound and floodlighting were used. Performers mimed their dialogue while voice artists spoke into microphones offstage. In a new script by Richard Tydeman, history was told with an altogether lighter touch and some scenes even aimed to raise a laugh from the audience – King John became as much pantomime villain as cruel tyrant! Local history was still important, but one scene, set in 1636, showed how Bury's history had

international significance. This told the tale of John Winthrop, a Suffolk man who travelled to America and became the first governor of Massachusetts. Winthrop described the founding laws of Massachusetts as "the Magna Carta of the Colony". Britain's dependence on the USA had been significant during both world wars, but in the pageant the roots of this alliance were revealed, making connections between past and present very clear:



**Left Above: A diagram of a prop (St Edmund's shrine).**  
Reproduced by permission of Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, EE500/46/44.

**Left Below: A leaflet advertising the pageant.**  
Reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.

## Another triumph for Bury St Edmunds

In 1959, the audience engaged with history through what was, by then, a traditional type of entertainment. But by applying modern techniques, the organisers showed that pageants could still fascinate people. The *Bury Free Press* declared the show to be a "magnificent triumph for players and producer", and "a wonderful piece of civic enterprise". A healthy profit of £2,158 (£45,000 today) was made. But initial success turned to controversy when there was local disagreement about how to spend the money. The compromise reached was to use the money to create a memorial garden. Renovated in 2013, you can still visit this today.



**Above: The Memorial Garden paid for by the proceeds of the pageant.**  
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# MAGNA CARTA

## “Shrine of a king, cradle of the law”

In the pageants of 1907 and 1959, Magna Carta loomed large, with its history ever more significant for the identity of Bury St Edmunds. The story told in 1907 was simple: King John was a corrupt ruler who behaved abominably on his visit to the abbey. Yet when gathered at St Edmund's sacred shrine, instead

of opting for violent rebellion, the barons asserted the rights of the people by other means. This account of the Magna Carta tale emphasised the important role that Bury St Edmunds had played in the national story and acted to strengthen civic pride.



Above: Pageant cartoon of Sir Robert Fitzwalter, leader of the barons.

Reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds, EE500/34/17b.

Left: Robert Fitzwalter in the 1907 pageant.

Reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.

## “Where English common law began”

The history presented in 1959 was designed to be more attractive to a modern audience. But alongside increased colour and comedy, the lasting importance of Magna Carta was given still more prominence. King John's visit and the meeting of the barons were again performed but the celebration of the “Birth of Freedom” by ordinary townspeople was also included in the show. The pageant even linked Magna Carta to the history of what was now the world's most powerful nation – the USA. In one episode, 17th-century colonial settlers looked to the ancient Charter to help carve out democracy in their new land, and playing the parts of settlers were one hundred real-life American citizens! A further dramatic episode was a ballet featuring dancers in the allegorical

roles of Injustice, Oppression and Freedom. Here a scroll of Magna Carta was brandished by a white-clad Freedom in order to banish the black-clad Injustice and Oppression. At the dance's culmination, Freedom distributed the charter to dancers representing a host of other countries. This scene powerfully underlined Magna Carta's reputation as one of the strongest historical roots of the rule of law in modern democracies across the globe.



Above: Advertisement from the pageant programme.

Reproduced by permission of St Edmundsbury Heritage Service and Greene King.

Left: The ballet.

Reproduced by kind permission of Linda Wicks.

## “The rock on which to build the freedom of the world”

Established in 1957, the Magna Carta Trust supported Bury St Edmunds in holding the pageant. The Trust promoted the Charter as “the source of the constitutional liberties of all English-speaking peoples and a common bond of peace between them”. The pageant powerfully delivered this message and reminded the many Commonwealth representatives who attended the performance that St Edmundsbury was the Charter's birthplace. Promotion of Magna Carta continues with the 800th anniversary in 2015, for which the Trust have organised a series of country-wide events.



Above: The Magna Carta Memorial at Runnymede. Magna Carta Memorial, Runnymede, 2014. © Andrew Bowden, flickr, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bods/15046993305/>.

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# PAGEANTS AND PROTEST



## “An absorbing spectacle”

Edmund of Anglia was a pageant-play, staged 19 times in the Abbey Gardens in 1970. This was a different kind of pageant, based as it was on the short life of one famous figure. But in its organisation it shared much with its predecessors, although it had a much smaller cast. Some of the 312 actors took on more than one role, and an Irish wolfhound and an Alsatian played supporting parts too! As before, most of the work was voluntary. Local schoolboys made weaponry and other props, and townswomen met weekly to fashion hundreds of costumes. Once again, pageant fever came to Bury St Edmunds!

Right: Edmund (right) about to be crowned king; an image from the pageant programme.

From Olga Ironside Wood, *Edmund of Anglia* (Bury St Edmunds, 1970); reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.

## “All the stuff of drama”

While the play was being planned, photos and stories appeared in local newspapers recalling the great pageants of 1907 and 1959. This publicity reinforced the idea that the town had a special pageant heritage. Olga Ironside Wood, who wrote and directed in 1970 (and had previously designed costumes for the 1959 pageant) commented that for this new performance, “The story almost wrote itself. It has everything ... war, peace, violence, suspense, betrayal, tragedy, idealism, strong human interest and glitter and spectacle”. The action opened with an ageing



King Offa of Anglia choosing Edmund as heir to his throne. The final scene, inevitably, depicted the gruesome martyrdom of tragic Edmund as he refused to give up his Christian faith.

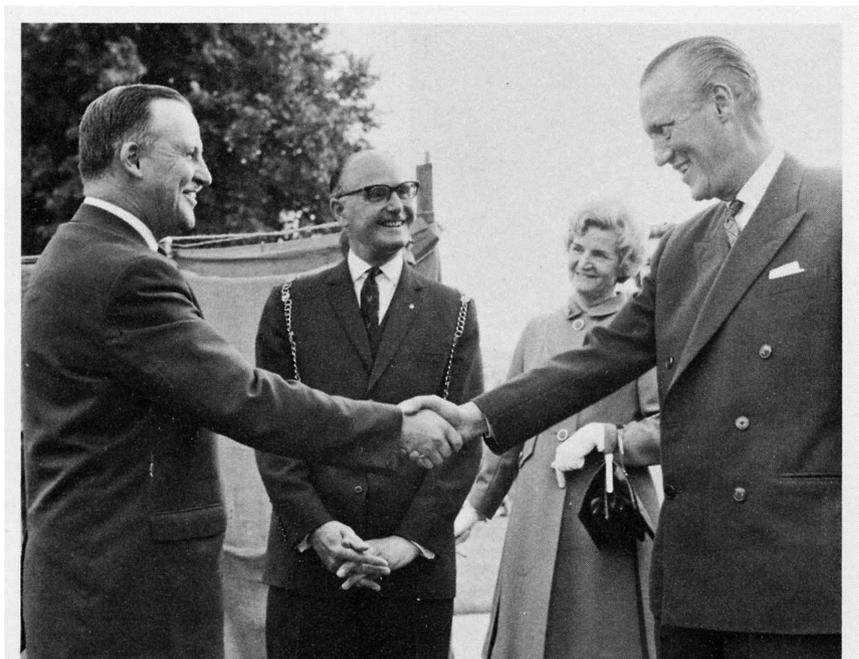


Above: Photographs taken during the performance.

Reproduced by kind permission of Margaret Charlesworth.

## The Edmund legend for modern times

Pageants had continually modernised and a feature in 1970 was that its story was presented as having relevance to “life today”. Edmund was compared with contemporary figures closely associated with democratic freedoms, like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Despite such updating, it attracted a mountain of criticism from all sides – from open dissent among Council members to an organised protest by young townspeople. Many argued the pageant wasted public money that might be better spent addressing the town’s social problems. Although it attracted 14,000 spectators and support from the press, the pageant failed financially and was the last of the town’s major pageants. But like all such community events, it left a legacy. Over time, pageants and the people who made them have become a part of Bury St Edmunds’ heritage.



His Highness, Prince Georg of Denmark, is welcomed by Alderman John Knight to a performance of the play

Above: Prince Georg of Denmark (right) meeting Alderman John Knight on his visit to Bury St Edmunds to see the pageant.

From Olga Ironside Wood, *Edmund of Anglia* (Bury St Edmunds, 1970); reproduced by kind permission of the St Edmundsbury Heritage Service.



Left: The pageant logo, taken from the programme.

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# THE REDRESS OF THE PAST

## Costume drama on a grand scale

*The Redress of the Past* is a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. A collaboration between King's College London, the UCL Institute of Education and the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, it examines the regular bouts of "pageant fever" that took place in 20th-century Britain. Communities across England, Scotland and Wales staged theatrical re-enactments of events from local and national history with thousands of men, women and children (and animals!) involved as performers, organisers and spectators. This was costume drama on a grand scale. Over the course of the 20th century many hundreds of events were mounted by communities and institutions, from small churches and village communities to market towns such as Bury St Edmunds and large

cities like Liverpool and Manchester. Drawing on oral, photographic and written evidence, the project examines the role of heritage in leisure activities, revealing the stories that communities and institutions told about themselves.

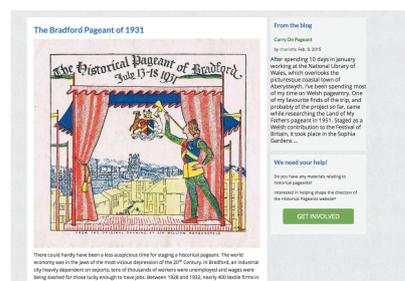
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## "A drama in which the place is the hero"

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about historical pageants, such as exhibitions, participation days, plays and public talks. As the research progresses, we'll be adding online exhibitions of pageant-related memorabilia, with photos and explanations, and personal recollections of witnesses and performers. The website will include details of hundreds of pageants. You'll also be able to contribute your own memories, images and videos.



Above: A page from the project website

## Get involved with remembering



Two pageant enthusiasts examine the diary of H.G. Godfrey Payton, one of the people involved in organising the Warwick Pageant of 1906

Have you participated in a pageant? Was a relative or friend involved in a pageant? Do you have any photographs, postcards, or other pageant memorabilia? Perhaps you'd even like to write a short article for the website about a pageant you've been involved in or know about? If so, the project team would like to hear from you! You can contact us by email at [historicalpageants@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:historicalpageants@kcl.ac.uk) or visit our website and click on "Get Involved". If you are involved with

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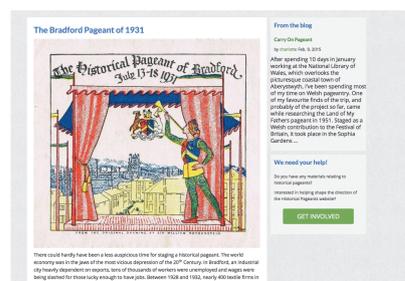
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