

THE WAVENEY CLARION: ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND

East Anglia in 1970 was a mostly peaceful and placid land. Road and rail links to London were not quick, and few commuters began or ended their journeys beyond Colchester. Norfolk and Suffolk still had large rural areas, some suffering de-population. Derelict farm-houses and associated buildings abounded and could be bought or rented cheaply. National pressure groups such as Friends of the Earth were only just beginning. Politics and decision-making belonged to the traditional party system, with the choice locally being usually Labour or Tory.

All this changed. In common with areas such as S.W. England, Wales, Scotland and the Pennines, East Anglia received a steady trickle of new-comers. Mostly young, mostly well-educated, such people formed part of what became known as the 'counter-culture' or the 'alternative society'. They were leaving cities in search of a simpler life-style, one which emphasised self-reliance and self-sufficiency, personal freedom, greater musical and artistic licence, and the chance to use one's time much as one wished.

Slowly the new-comers came together and also coalesced with like-minded local people. Meetings in pubs produced structures and ideas. In 1971 a group of like-minded souls formed the East Anglian Arts Trust and began to think of possible events. One member had seen a medieval costume fair in California and suggested this as a first venture.

The next year, 1972, the first Barsham Fair was held, technically at Roos Hall, Beccles. To the amazement of the organisers it was an enormous success, not just in terms of numbers and public enthusiasm. Clearly there were many like-minded souls in the area, with the stated need to stay in touch – not least for preparation of another Fair.

This was an era before mobile phones or the internet. It was decided that a monthly newspaper was the best way forward, and the Clarion was launched with a grant of £100. Lead by Sandra Bell's drive and journalism expertise, the paper embodied the 'Dole' ethos of the era, and went on to become an essential element that held the alternative community together. It attracted writers, designers, environmental activists, local readers, and those in search of the latest news on folk, cinema, music and the Fairs. In retrospect, one of its main achievements was to cover lucidly topics then on the fringe but which entered mainstream thinking 20-30 years later.

Main Themes

The Clarion ranged far and wide in its coverage, but certain key themes kept recurring throughout its existence. Among these were:

- The Fairs
- Rural housing
- Energy issues, notably nuclear and its alternatives
- Local rail and bus services
- Alternative theatre
- 'Borderline Science' especially ley lines, standing stones and ghosts
- Broadland and its future
- The relevance of Local History
- Nuclear missiles (not mentioned until Dec.'79, but a dominant theme for 2-3 years after).
- Growing your own food
- Local schools
- Organic agriculture
- The promotion of cycling
- The local music scene
- Real ale
- Local walks
- 'Day in the Life'
- North Sea fishing and its future
- What is the 'Alternative Society' and what should it do?

CONCLUSION

Although the Clarion was usually steered by an inner group of 6-10 people, it was supported by an astonishingly wide group of writers, advertisers, designers, distributors, musicians and readers, all of whom came to think of it as 'their' paper. It kept to high standards of design and content, and featured regularly in descriptions of the alternative press, achieving material fame in the 'Sunday Times' colour magazine. Its life-span paralleled that of the Fairs, a unique period of freedom and creativity within recent East Anglian history.