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Reunion remembers pavilion's rock glory

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There was a time not so long ago when a small North Norfolk village occupied a big place on the map of pop music venues. The Clash, Sex Pistols, glam rock bands and even r'n'b legend Chuck Berry would make the trek out to the coast to play at West Runton Pavilion. A free reunion event is being held this Saturday at Walcott.

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There was a time not so long ago when a small North Norfolk village occupied a big place on the map of pop music venues. The Clash, Sex Pistols, glam rock bands and even r'n'b legend Chuck Berry would make the trek out to the coast to play at West Runton Pavilion.

And such was the popularity of the remote venue that, more than 20 years after its final gig, two people who remember its heyday are working on books that celebrate those glorious days.

One of them, Eddie Clitheroe, worked for years behind the scenes as the stage manager; the other, Julie Fielder, was in the crowd as a young fan eager to see the latest pop groups.

From their differing perspectives, each has been compiling memories and anecdotes concerning the fondly remembered venue, which fell into disuse and was pulled down in the mid-1980s.

And Julie is hoping to get the ball rolling by hosting a free reunion event this Saturday, October 11, to bring together the crowd who regularly turned out for the gigs at West Runton and the Cromer Links Pavilion.

“My dad used to work up there at West Runton Pavilion, working on the doors,” she said.

“I wasn't old enough to go to the Cromer Links, but Dad worked at West Runton and my friend and I were into the glam rock bands.

“Frank Boswell, the owner, said we could stand on a platform and watch! Eventually, we were old enough to go on the dancefloor, and we went to see Showaddywaddy.

“I just liked going there, and there are so many people who I bump into who say, 'Do you remember so and so?' It's so sad that all these memories are dying, so that's why I'm doing it.

“Your teenage years are an important time, and you have a lot of memories.”

Julie has been getting together with old friends and leafing through scrapbooks to rekindle their youth.

Eddie on the other hand has been delving into his own memories of the years he spent making sure everything ran without a hitch, which meant catering to all requirements of the famous names who came to Runton.

“I was there for about nine and half years. First of all, I was offered what they call a 'four in the morning job', locking up when everyone had gone,” he remembers.

“I used to get there at midday and see the bands in, looking after their needs. When you sign a band to play, a week later you get through the post what they call 'a rider', and if they don't find what they want in the dressing room when they get there, they'll just drive off again.”

When Lionel Richie and the Commodores played there, they wanted “a selection of cold meat buffet for 30 people and bottles of champagne, lager for the road crew of 15 to 20 people, a constant supply of tea and coffee for 24 hours, and a three-course meal for the road crew”.

Other stars were less demanding, even if they did take Eddie by surprise by arriving two hours early.

“Chuck Berry was a good chap. He arrived at four in the afternoon and had his daughter with him.

“He came in the hall setting his equipment up, said, 'Where's my dressing room?' and we said, 'It's not ready until six o'clock'.

“He said, 'Have you got any wine?' I said 'Yes, what do you want?' He had two litre bottles of Hirondelle, and I said, 'Do you want some glasses?' He said, 'No, just pull the corks out', which we did, and then he said, 'How far is the ocean?'

I said it was about 300 yards down Water Lane and pointed him north. He went and sat on the beach with his daughter, throwing stones in the water.

“I had a friend of mine down there fishing at three in the afternoon, and he couldn't believe it. Chuck Berry came over and asked if he had caught anything. He thought he was dreaming - he was a Chuck Berry fan but he didn't know he was playing that night!”

His other fond memories include some of a late and much-lamented East Anglian-based DJ.

“John Peel used to come down. He'd ring me up, come for the last half hour of the show and no one knew he was there,” said Eddie.

“He would go and have a word with the band and get back to his car, and no one knew. A lovely chap, he was.”

The EDP and Norwich School of Art and Design marked the venue's history last year with one of our series of Blue Plaques, and at the time the owner Frank Boswell explained what lay behind its success.

He put it down to a number of factors: the venue was unusually large, but out of the London limelight, which meant successful bands could try out new ideas safe in the knowledge that the music press reviewers and record company bosses would not be watching.

This forged a healthy spirit of creativity and West Runton Pavilion became a notorious warm-up gig at the start of a tour or prior to a big London date.

Highlights included Dire Straits, the Stranglers, Def Leppard and the night Jeff Beck turned up unexpectedly (“we didn't know it was him we were booking,” said Frank).

Even T-Rex played West Runton, supported by punk band The Damned. It was March 1977 and the gig turned out to be Marc Bolan's penultimate live performance before he died in a car crash six months later.

“Most of the bands who came down there were big drinkers, and Marc Bolan was the only one I remember who didn't drink,” said Eddie, who lives in Briston.

“He came up for the soundcheck and said, 'Is there anywhere I can have a meal now because I've got to get away later'. I drove him up to the Links Hotel.”

As Eddie tells it, both the performers and audiences at Runton were generally happily inebriated by the time the acts went on stage. He remembers helping Brummie rock'n'roller Raymond Froggatt out of a ditch, and drinking Special Brew with Lemmy from Motorhead.

“It was Bass Charrington's biggest outlet in East Anglia,” he said. “They used to deliver three or four drays a week there, and most pubs would have had one!”

Although the emphasis of both books is on the gigs at West Runton, Julie is also looking to highlight the great times that were had down the road at Cromer's Royal Links Pavilion. It was taken over in 1964 as part of a caravan site purchase, and soon established itself as a top venue for live music.

Stars who performed there included Billy Fury, The Who and later Queen, Thin Lizzy and Slade. It combined an intimate atmosphere with excellent acoustics, making it a favourite for bands and fans alike.

It was in competition with West Runton Pavilion in the mid-seventies, and closed after staging a final notorious gig with The Sex Pistols - one of their last before they embarked on their disastrous tour of the US, which led to Johnny Rotten leaving the band.

As with West Runton, the building itself no longer exists - it burned down in the 1980s - but the memories live on, and will be the source of plenty of conversation at the reunion.

“Hopefully, people will bring along their memorabilia and stories for the books,” said Julie. She added that the DJ would be happy to play old vinyl records of the bands that people brought along.

“I would also like to draw up rock family trees of the local bands,” she added, “so I need to get in touch with people who were in the local bands.

“I'm hoping to list all the bands that ever played there - that's the basic framework, but I need to get people's input.”

The reunion for anyone who remembers West Runton Pavilion and/or the Cromer Links Pavilion is being held in a heated marquee at the Lighthouse Inn, Coast Road, Walcott from 7.30pm.

Contact Julie with your memories of the venues on 01362 684175 or e-mail westruntonpavilion@yahoo.co.uk

Eddie Clitheroe is looking for a publisher for his memories of working behind the scenes at West Runton. If you can help, call him on 01263 860164.

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