

Festival Interceltique, Lorient, Brittany

A special report on the Festival Interceltique, Lorient, Brittany by Rhodri Pugh

The 37th Festival Interceltique of Lorient, this year attracted more than 800,000 visitors and 4,500 singers, musicians, jazz and rock groups, pipers and drummers, artists sculptors, dancers and writers - writes Rhodri Pugh.

The festival, from 3rd to the 12th August is the continent's largest celebration of Celtic culture, where lovers of all things Celtic assemble from all over the world. In addition to representations from the eight acknowledged Celtic countries: Brittany, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, Galicia and Asturias, Celtic delegations from Acadia in Canada, and Australia are now taking an active part in the festival. These countries see the festival as being of far more importance than just a cultural jamboree and are only too aware of the networking possibilities for both cultural exchange, and just as significantly, economic cooperation. Each year a different nation is honoured and 2007 was the Year of Scotland. Next year is the Year of Wales.

Linda Fabiani, MSP for Central Scotland and Scottish Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture was the guest of honour at this year's event, and, in recognition of the importance of the potential cultural and economic benefits to the country, the Scottish Executive supported the Scottish delegation to the tune of £286,000. Fabiani was only too aware of the importance of her country's participation in the event, and the massive publicity Scotland gained in France and elsewhere in Europe, as festival-goers come not just from Brittany and France, but, in increasing numbers also from Holland, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy. Said Fabiani "I am thrilled to support the Year of Scotland at Lorient. The festival is enormously important for showcasing a modern, outward-looking Scotland. As a result Scotland is all over the French media." She might have added European media, for the huge four-and-a-half hour Grand Parade of the Celtic Nations is seen on television networks right across the continent. Except, of course, in Wales. Significantly perhaps, Cambria's special correspondent at the festival was the sole representative of the Welsh press, a fact which did not go unremarked by the festival organisers.

VisitScotland's Paris-based marketing manager Liz Young said "The majority of those attending Lorient are French and the event gets a lot of television coverage, so hopefully we will be able to get our message across to a very wide audience."

Stressing the importance of the economic aspects of the Interceltic Festival, VisitScotland's Chief Executive Philip Riddle added "This is a great opportunity to demonstrate Scotland's fantastic cultural heritage to hundreds of thousands of potential visitors in one of our key international markets and complements our existing European marketing and PR campaigns. French visitors spend more than £40 million in Scotland annually."

The huge Scottish pavilion in the centre of the town featured the best of the country's cuisine and produce, music and fashion, in addition to stressing its golfing heritage. Dancers, pipers and folk musicians appeared regularly during the festival in the pavilion's special performance area. It was impossible to avoid Scotland's iconic saltire which decorated almost every street in town - hardly surprising when the Scots had supplied more than five miles of saltire bunting to hammer the message home!

Scotland's enthusiastic sponsorship of the Lorient festival follows moves by Alex Salmond, the First Minister, in the direction of a council of devolved administrations - which can be seen as a significant effort to reposition political power away from Westminster towards the other Celtic nations.

Speaking at an economic forum as the special guest of the festival, Wales's Professor Brian Morgan of the Welsh Whisky Company - producers of the iconic Penderyn brand - spoke passionately about the importance of wealth-creation and economic regeneration in Celtic countries. Professor Morgan will play a key role in representing Welsh business in Lorient next year, and sees the event as an ideal opportunity for Welsh businesses to network and expand their export drives.

Links between Wales and Brittany were strengthened in January 2004 when a special agreement between the governments of Wales and Brittany was signed by Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan and Breton President Jean-Yves Le Drian. A "Memorandum of Understanding" was agreed which set out parameters for encouraging co-operation between the two countries over a wide range of areas including business, tourism and education. At the time First Minister Rhodri Morgan declared "I hope that through this Memorandum of Understanding, we will continue to work closely together in the future." Replying, the Breton President said "We will have many opportunities to work together in the future. All this rests on our common culture and creativity. We are also happy that Jean-Pierre Pichard and David Petersen have been reunited to think about future inter-celtic festivals. We are the lands of our fathers, as our anthem says. (Brittany has the same national anthem as Wales, entitled "Bro Goz Ma Zadou"; editor) Ours are ancient lands and, despite all the hiccups of history, we have been able to preserve our languages and commonalities. We have often walked side by side, sometimes not seeing each other, but never forgetting each other. I hope that a new era of our being reunited is beginning, in which our lands will have a future."

Despite this auspicious beginning, Cambria's correspondent understood from a number of sources that in some quarters the Welsh response to the initiative was perceived as being somewhat less than enthusiastic, and it was to be hoped that the sentiments of 2004 might become the deeds of 2008 with a greater degree of cultural exchange and economic co-operation.

The last "Year of Wales" at Lorient was 2002 when a significant delegation led by the then minister Jenny

Randerson AM visited the festival. Now that Wales has a government, some elements of which have an understanding for the 'bigger picture' of Wales in Europe and a natural affinity to our sister nations on the Atlantic Rim, let's hope we can look forward to greater co-operation with our closest cousins the Bretons and see an enthusiasm for the 'Year of Wales' at Lorient in 2008, if not greater, then certainly on a par with that of Scotland this year.

A fuller version of this article with pictures appears in the September-October issue of Cambria