

Monday April 13th 2026

Buxton Festival Fringe

The 'Friendly Festival'

Ian Bowns

Clay pigeon shooting may not seem like the most obvious activity to feature in Buxton Festival Fringe – but, believe it or not, it was one of the more unlikely pursuits included in the inaugural programme, back in 1980.

Today's bill of fare may not be quite so eclectic, but there's still plenty of variety and choice on offer – from cutting edge-comedy and experimental theatre to creative children's events and live music. And this year's event is well on course to break all previous records, with 195 shows already booked for 2026 – almost four times as many than were listed when it first began.

Musician, theatre lover and Chair of Transition Buxton Ian Bowns has been Chair of the Trustees of Buxton Festival Fringe for the past 18 months, and presented a comprehensive snapshot of the many ways that Buxton and District u3a members can support 'The Friendly Festival' – as a volunteer, arts critic or audience member.

Buxton Festival Fringe – which this year runs from July 8 to 26 – runs concurrently with Buxton International Festival (BIF) dates intended to complement both Festivals, but also to work in tandem with other UK fringe festivals – including Edinburgh, which it just precedes. Some acts perform at the Fringe to test out and hone their material before venturing north of the border. Like many other festivals, it also has a positive economic spin-off, bringing in an estimated third of a million pounds to support Buxton's business community.

Ian was at pains to stress that the Fringe has an 'open access' policy, with entry fees kept as competitive as possible to encourage performers to enter, and ticket prices usually around £10 per performance, to widen participation and make it affordable to attend. Performance venues range from small bars and Buxton Workingmen's Club to the Pump Room and the Palace Hotel – where this year's Awards ceremony will be held on Sunday July 26.

Bookings for performance slots are taken from December 1 the previous year, with a cost incentive to persuade performers to enter early. Prospective audiences can view each year's offerings from that date onwards on the Festival Fringe website or app, suitable for use on smartphones. The printed programme is issued at the beginning of June, and though it remains popular, the print run has been cut from 20,000 to 12,000 to encourage audiences to opt for the paperless version.

Other promotional tools include floral 'hotspots' around Buxton featuring its signature orange branding; stalls on Buxton Market, on May Day and at other local events; articles in local print media; social media posts and a stall at Manchester Piccadilly railway station to reach an even wider audience. Virtually everyone working on behalf of the Festival Fringe is a volunteer, with the exception of two part-time posts on the Fringe Information Desk next to the Octagon, which operates throughout the event.

Trustees and volunteers meet around once a month, and new blood is always welcome, with a wide range of roles to suit all abilities, from liaising with venues, marketing and social media to assisting with technical, governance and regulatory issues. Would-be critics can get involved by writing Fringe reviews. As well as getting free admission to a performance, reviewers' thoughts are shared in print at the Fringe Desk and also posted on line, so that both performers and audiences can share them. The hunt is also on for an archivist to maintain the Festival Fringe Archive, now held at Derbyshire County Archive and featuring programmes, photographs and recordings stretching back to the 1980s.

Some members questioned the timing of the Festival Fringe, and suggested the possibility of holding it before or after Buxton International Festival, to avoid the dilemma of 'feast or famine' and subsequent indigestion, because so many shows are on offer at the same time. Ian confirmed that this would be considered as part of an impending, and wider, analysis of how the event operates, including ticketing, to promote and broaden both participation and attendance in the future.

- Anyone who would like to peruse the 2026 programme, or would like to find out how they can get directly involved, is invited to visit www.buxtonfringe.org.uk or to contact the volunteer committee by email at info@buxtonfringe.org.uk.