

Largest-ever party to Twinzerfest

Report by Gae Ratcliffe

WE CAME by air, land and sea to take part in Amersham twin town Bensheim's biggest celebration of the year — the wine festival.

And we came in the largest number ever from Amersham — nearly 150 comprised of the wine society and their families, the Damon Singers and members of the five-year-old Amersham-Bensheim Society, led by chairman Jean Archer and Town Mayor Tony Weedon.

For three days and four nights we were flung into the festivities that take over the town for a week of celebration of yet another fine year for the local vineyards of the famous Hesse wine region.

From morning and into the night the streets were packed with revellers in their thousands singing and dancing, urged on by the pounding of local bands and refreshed by a never-ending flow of the local wine.

Warmth

For the visitors from Amersham the festivities were cemented by the warmth of the friendship of the host families of the Bensheim-Amersham Society — the way towards a united Europe, said founder chairman of the Amersham-Bensheim Society Jean Archer at Friday's welcoming reception.

After an exchange of gifts the Damon Singers led by conductor Peter Tinlin burst into song in the tiny courtyard of one of the oldest hotels in the town.

Saturday morning brought glorious sunshine as the Amersham visitors toured what must be one of the prettiest towns in the land, history and architecture jostling with modern living. The quaintest street corners, edged in cobblestones, enhanced the successfully pedestrianised shopping centre complete with an all-weather, soft-surface play area for children.

And then a visit to the newly-opened Bensheim museum and a reception hosted by Town Mayor for 10 years, the popular Georg Stolle.

From the sublime of the almost monastic cool of the museum there was just time for a visit to a rare flea market in the next town of Heppenheim with

my host Ernst Drayss. There I couldn't resist a pair of old converted oil lamps in blue glass which we hung on to tightly as we found ourselves in the midst of a demonstration in the next street against the dumping of poison gasses by the US Army.

After lunch we were welcomed at the town's annual wine-tasting event. It's a serious business shared by the local dignitaries, clubs and their families.

Each wine is numbered and comes with a commentary from the platform where the Wine Queens are seated.

The wine-tasting is the forerunner to the opening of the wine festival. Only after the hundreds of guests have tried and tested the sample glasses can it begin.

Nearly three hours — and 18 different wines later — the band struck up and the Mayor and Wine Queens led the way to the centre of festivities through the streets to the market place.

It had been transformed into a wine village built by local wine merchants for the occasion. Within minutes of the opening the tables were heaving and the wine flowing.

Outside the 'village' pavements were full as bier kellers spilled out into the street, each with bands and dancing.

On Sunday morning last-minute preparations were in progress for the carnival procession after lunch. Amersham guests enjoyed seats of honour in the centre of town when no fewer than 108 floats were applauded along their way. Among them were 18 music groups and 15 flower floats. More than 1,500 people were involved before spectators estimated at 100,000.

Met family

Afterwards it was time to meet my hosts' family. The terrace of their garden was filled with children from one year to a favourite uncle of 83. The tables were packed high with all manner of the famous German pastries, cakes and rich coffee.

That night, at a party hosted by Bensheim-Amersham chairman Jupp Habermehl, people reminisced on how the friendship between the two

towns started 22 years ago with a football exchange and how, over the years, the friendship spread, harnessed during the last five years by formation of the Amersham-Bensheim society.

Former Town Mayor of Amersham Leslie Mackay praised those from the early days of football exchanges who were responsible for the special way in which they encouraged the friendship between the two towns. His hopes for the future revolved around not just clubs but all sections of the community, he said.

Reflected

"I have met people in Amersham who have heard of twinning," said Councillor Mackay but said, "You have only to visit Bensheim once to love with the town and with its people."

When we left, his words were reflected in the faces of the return party. Chairman of Chesham District Council, Councillor Eric Corns, could speak highly enough of the welcome he and his wife received. "It was our first visit to Bensheim and they couldn't have made us more welcome. We thoroughly enjoyed it." And so say all of us.

Town blaze earlier . . .

Fire broke out just a stone's throw away from Bensheim's specially constructed wine village market square last Thursday — just two days before thousands of revellers poured in for the wine festival.

The blaze tore through a clothes store in the pedestrianised town centre causing £½ million of damage and taking 80 firemen one-and-a-half hours to bring under control.

By that time the fire — thought to have been caused by an electrical fault — had spread to neighbouring shops and houses backing on to the precinct.

For some a weekend of friendship isn't enough. Amersham-born Adrian Holzner fell in love with Bensheim early seven years ago. He couldn't get back quickly enough. He is pictured here at the wine tasting in his adopted town with his fiancée Brigitte Holzner.



Bensheim's Wine Queen Anette Kohler on a throne of grapes during the wine festival carnival.



Bensheim Bürgermeister Georg Stolle hosting a tour of the renovated museum.

Bensheim Council snapped up this boarding school when it closed a year ago to turn it into the town hall, at a cost in the region of £2½ million with a further £800,000 earmarked for a car park and gardens. The fairy-tale architecture will provide a memorable setting for local



One of no fewer than 18 bands marching in the carnival procession.

Bensheim photo record by Gae Ratcliffe



Amersham Wine Society member Alex Borg-Cardona sampling wine number 12 with just six to go . . .



The Damon Singers burst into song at the start of the Bensheim-Amersham friendship weekend.

Chairmen of the English and German twinning associations — Jean Archer from Amersham (left) and Jupp Habermehl from Bensheim — at the welcoming reception. Former Bensheim-Amersham twinning society chairman Frau Keppler translates the words of welcome as gifts are exchanged.



A Germanic chorus by the Bensheim choir at the reception and welcome on Friday evening.