



Homegrown Festival

The market town of Bury, just outside Manchester, hosts an annual English folk music festival alongside a gathering of music industry professionals for the English Folk Expo. **Jo Frost** reports on its winning formula

Mention the town Bury to an English person and they might well know it as being the birthplace of Sir Robert Peel, former Conservative prime minister and founder of the British police force (hence the nickname 'bobbies') or perhaps Guy Garvey, lead singer with indie band Elbow and BBC 6Music DJ. If they're foodies, they might be familiar with Bury's popular open-air market and 'world famous' black pudding.

Situated just 14km north of Manchester, Bury was an important Lancastrian mill town during the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s and has a military connection being home to the Lancashire Fusiliers army regiment.

Today it has a population of around 60,000 and attracts an array of different visitors across the year, namely steam train enthusiasts who can be spotted on the famous East Lancashire Railway line. Nowadays Bury attracts a sizeable number of folk fans every October to its Homegrown Festival. There's no shortage of folk festivals happening the length and breadth of the country across the summer, but

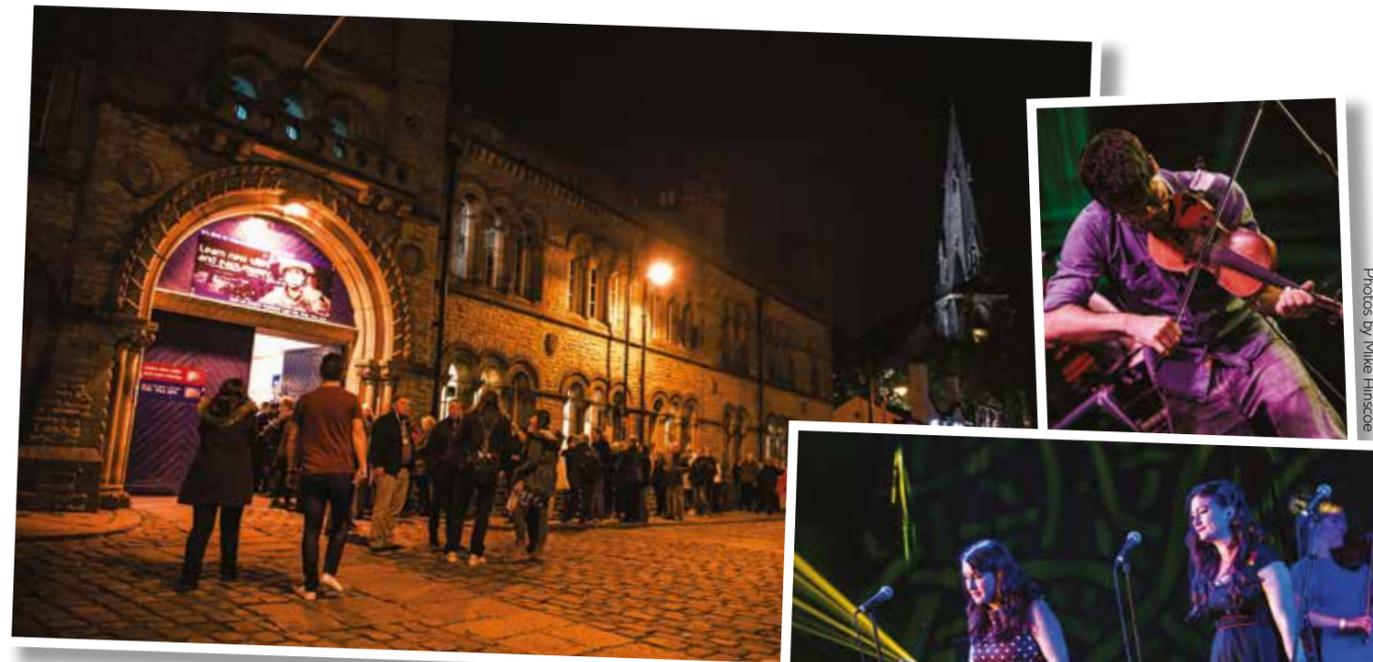
Homegrown's USP is that it takes place in the autumn and its concerts are all indoors, largely within the Met, the town's arts centre located on the main high street. The Met is currently undergoing a major refurbishment, so this year the programme of around 30 acts will take place in the Castle Armoury Drill Hall (home to the aforementioned Lancashire Fusiliers), the Fusiliers Museum and the Elizabethan Suite in the town hall, all a leisurely ten-minute walk from each other.

The festival's artistic director and the person instrumental in putting Bury on the musical map is David Agnew. Belfast born, now adopted Lancastrian, Agnew has worked at the Met since 2001. His dad ran the Belfast Festival at Queen's, a multi-venue festival that took place every November, "so I've always grew up delivering programmes," he says, while mentioning that he also programmes the nearby Ramsbottom and Big Whistle Festivals.

The idea behind Homegrown was to create 'a multi-venue urban folk festival.' "It came out of our wish to develop audiences for new

artists in Bury. And there was a timely conversation about the need for English folk music to have a vehicle to showcase as well." The showcase element is EFX – the English Folk Expo – and the brainchild of Terry O'Brien of Playpen Management. She started having ideas about creating an expo event back in 2008-9, having witnessed the success of the Scottish folk expo, Showcase Scotland, which runs in conjunction with Celtic Connections in Glasgow. Now approaching its 17th year, Showcase Scotland ranks as the best example of an expo event anywhere in the world, so it was the ideal model for EFX.

"I'd been to a lot of events around the world where really big stars in those particular territories were playing to us in hotel or function rooms with no real sense of who they were or what their audience felt about them," explains O'Brien. "So it felt important that the showcases actually happened in front of a public audience who had paid to come in and wanted to be there and that the promoters we brought in saw them in that situation."



Agnew was approached and discussions put in place to create a festival that would work as a home for the expo event. In 2013, EFX's first year, there were 95 delegates and that number will increase to 150 this year. "The format hasn't changed very much from the first year," says O'Brien, "but we are tweaking things a little bit as we go along." Following the success of last year's international partnership with Denmark, there will be three Flemish bands (WÖR, Trio Dhoore and Surpluz) performing, with Flanders being this year's international partner.

Having music industry folk present means that Homegrown and EFX appeal to artists who are looking to develop their careers. "Part of the attraction is that because of the importance of the weekend for them in terms of business, artists come and they hang around," says Agnew. "The agents and managers hang around for the weekend too and it becomes a kind of creative hot pot and artists actually have time to chat about what they want to do and to develop new ideas." One resulting project has been the creation of Jim Moray and Sam Carter's False Lights band, "born out of a weekend at Homegrown and EFX two years ago."

The challenge is coming up with a programme that appeals to both industry folk and the general public, so finding a balance between the big-name acts – this year it's the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain and Steeleye Span – alongside the up-and-coming acts, such as The Rheingans Sisters and The Teacups.

"It's about trying to diversify the programme and to bring new audiences in. Those audiences that are coming to see those more mainstream artists are actually seeing the likes of Megan Henwood and The Changing Room as part of that same bill. And hopefully opening

The indoor, urban festival showcases some of English folk's best, including (clockwise from main image) False Lights, Seth Lakeman and The Unthinks

the doors of English folk music to more audiences who haven't really experienced that traditional side before as well," explains Agnew.

Besides the Met, the largest concert space in the town is the Drill Hall (pictured above). "It's an incredible space," says Agnew, "but it has its challenges as well. It's actually used as a working drill hall, but because of the importance of this event, they grant us use of the venue over the weekend." There's no hiding the fact that it's a functioning military hall, as there are signs on display in the entrance about the 'security threat level' and the makeshift bar at the back of the hall ("it's mainly used for badminton," the barman tells me).

But it's certainly an impressive space to walk into and artists including Seth Lakeman, Fisherman's Friends, Show of Hands, Kate Rusby, as well as Lady Maisery and The Hut



People have all performed there. "The artists that you see on that stage might not always play to that size room," Agnew says, "but the influence of EFX is that we've got bookers and programmers from around the world in there looking at that stage, comparing it to their big festival stages, which is where we want to position English folk and acoustic music."

With an increasing number of overseas delegates, O'Brien ensures that they get a good dose of English culture, and not just an immersion into English folk music. So there have been excursions on the East Lancashire Railway, trips along the Manchester canal and local ale tastings in neighbouring Ramsbottom, while listening to the likes of Josienne Clarke and Ben Walker. "EFX does a brilliant job to make sure that there's a wider cultural programme," says Agnew. "It's not just sitting in a dark room watching music, but having that whole cultural experience and being able to go and see the steam trains, go and drink the local beer and hear folk music in a different setting." ♦

+ DATES Homegrown Festival and the English Folk Expo run from October 13-15
+ ONLINE www.themet.biz/homegrown, www.englishfolkexpo.com