

VENUES WE LOVE

Mosh pit, rock palace, civic hall or folk club – at some point, in our gig-going lives, if we're lucky, we stumble upon the perfect stage setting and, wholly enamoured, we never forget. *Noel Hodgson* sings the praises of Etal Village Hall.



Etal hamlet lies in the heart of North Northumberland. It's a quiet, rural area steeped in border history, with the estate-built village situated on a bank of the River Till, presenting a quaint and delightful air of charm and peacefulness. The ruined mediaeval castle, thatched pub, post office/tea room, manor house, church, and cricket field are attractive features, drawing the gaze of visiting tourists. Well-kept and preserved by the Ford & Etal Estate, one might suspect it of being a place suited to estate workers, retirees and fugitives from the choke of urban life.

What remains hidden and unseen to most visitors is that of a community vibrantly served by a weekly programme of social activities, held chiefly in the Village Hall. Opened in 1925 as a Reading Room it evolved into a focus for various gatherings and, after extensive refurbishment in 2005 including a catering kitchen and toilets, opportunity rose to offer additional events and functions. Local residents and enthusiastic committee members, Helen Moffit and Steve Taylor, spurred by their love of folk and acoustic music decided, there and then, to promote live concerts, granting established and upcoming artists an additional platform to display their talents.

And what talents! After the first 2007 gig by Whitaker, Waller & Harcourt, the half-dozen shows each year since have included, amongst a distinguished list of entertainers, The Doonans, Vin Garbutt, Boo Hewerdine, Megson, Gilmore & Roberts, O'Hooley & Tidow, Clive Gregson with Liz Simcock, Will Pound and Dan Walsh, all of whom have graced the stage and felt the force of a welcoming, heartfelt appreciation of their talents.

What is clearly evident, and pleasing, is the generation of young musicians drawn to the folk and singer-songwriter genres. On a personal basis, Helen and Steve admit that they select and invite acts to come to Etal that they have enjoyed for themselves, at festivals or elsewhere. It is noteworthy that their appreciation extends not only towards the seasoned professionals but also to the promising, ascending heirs to the tradition. As well as the occasional, relatively less-established musicians that have appeared as the main act – Jonny Kearney & Lucy Farrell springing to mind, many of the 'warm-up' slots are a fine testament to that development.

Led by popular hosts Helen and Steve, and with a devoted band of local helpers, there is a passionate glow amongst the audiences that brightens the ability of every performer. Inspired by the warmth, interest and encouragement of such a friendly, intimate and family-like atmosphere, it's no wonder Etal is a venue that artists openly wish to return to. As a result of this desire, plus the endeavour of Helen and Steve to maintain the potential and quality of musical acts, a genuine love of live performance in the backwoods of Northumberland is guaranteed. Such a sharing is remarkable; indeed, not something to be overlooked.

Noel Hodgson