

‘We all simply love living here’

Axminster, the town that provides carpets to Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle is hosting big names these days, and it has plenty to offer.

As the gateway to the stunning East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Axminster is surrounded by picturesque countryside, rolling hills, and beautiful coastline. However, it is a town that many people might not

know exists. Inevitably there are those that would like to keep things that way, but after a chat with local residents and a look at some of the events that have been put on and that are coming up in the Axminster Guildhall, it’s fair to say that Axminster is not a town that is shying away from keeping itself and its visitors entertained.



Axminster Railway Station

The town has a rich history and a close-knit community and is renowned for its traditional craft of Axminster Carpets, which have been produced since the 18th century and can still be seen in historic buildings and homes. It also has a welcoming and friendly atmosphere, with a range of amenities, restaurants, and cafes.

A recent addition is the excellent ‘What’s In Axminster’ website (www.whatsinaxminster.co.uk) a community project that ‘aims to capture Axminster’s spirit and charm for the benefit of its locals and those who want to visit.’



Gail Porter coming to Axminster Guildhall in September

‘This year acts include John Lydon, Gail Porter, Shaun Ryder and Aled Jones.’

Talking to Leigh Conley, the new manager at Axminster Guildhall, it’s hard not to feel the sense of enthusiasm he has for his job. Involved with the Axminster Drama Group, Leigh always found it sad that the doors to the Guildhall were often closed. When the opportunity came to apply for the job as manager, his first request was that he wanted the doors to ‘always be open’. ‘Always’ might be a bit of a tough call but the current programme of events, along with community initiatives, classes and gatherings has brought a new lease of life to the hall, and to town and surrounding area. In this issue we feature an interview with the legendary punk rocker John Lydon aka Johnny Rotten, who is coming to talk at the Guildhall in May. At 68 years old Johnny has a wealth of interesting stories and up close he seems to be much more than the character painted by the media in the late seventies.

Attracting big names to the Guildhall was always part of the plan for Leigh. He cites the first as



St Mary’s Church, Axminster

comedian Omid Djalili followed by Status Quo's Francis Rossi. This year, acts include John Lydon, Gail Porter, Shaun Ryder and Aled Jones, as well as a wealth of tribute acts, wrestling, talks, drag shows and even a beer festival in October.

'The town has a real sense of community and a willingness to support local businesses. Our customers treat us as friends. It's just that sort of town.'

Leigh put together his five year plan for the Guildhall when he started at the end of 2021 and has managed to complete that plan in two years. 'When I started' he says 'we had about two to three acts a year plus the Am Dram shows. This year we have about sixty to seventy.' Plans are also afoot for a cinema and the adaptation of a room upstairs for smaller theatre projects.

Formerly in retail and more recently working locally as a teaching assistant, Leigh says that the success of the Guildhall to date must give credit to the volunteers who have worked alongside him. He also speaks highly of Axminster itself, describing it as a 'really great town.' He highlight how everyone that works in the town and volunteers around the town 'just want it to be as great as it can be.'

Leighs comments echo those of Jenny Frances who recently wrote to highlight some of the many exciting things going on in the town. 'Light Up Axminster' for example, she says, was 'initially created to fund the town's Christmas lights.' She describes it as 'another incredible initiative' that has gone on to offer numerous town events, including the 8-day festival "The Cherry Fayre" as well as countless health and wellbeing initiatives. 'All of this is thanks to the community of Axminster and the strength formed when the town comes together.'

Jenny quotes Simon Holmes, owner of Archway Books who said: 'We love running a business in Axminster. While the town faces the same economic challenges as most of its size, it's been a good place for us over the last four years. During that time we have invested in moving to a prime location and it is certainly paying off in terms of growth.'

Another comment from a local businessperson which Jenny felt summed the town up perfectly was: "The town has a real sense of community and a willingness to support local businesses. Our customers treat us as friends. It's just that sort of town.'

The overriding impression that Jenny received when talking to locals about the town was summed up in one simple sentence: 'We all simply love living here.'

To keep in touch with all that Axminster has to offer visit: www.whatsinaxminster.co.uk.



Scott Rowe

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