



Jersey's spectacular annual Battle of Flowers parade, which started in 1902, is one of the largest floral carnivals in Europe

Flower power

As the Battle of Flowers celebrates its 120th anniversary this summer, Martha MacDonald traces the event's quirky past

HERE are several aspects about living in a place like Jersey that you don't realise are unusual until you leave the island. Startling discoveries include finding out that many of your British friends didn't grow up mostly at the beach as you did, that £1 notes aren't legal tender beyond Jersey's shores and that an annual parade where teams compete to make the most ambitious flower-decked float is, in fact, not a universal experience. What a shock to the system.

For Jersey residents, the parade, called the Battle of Flowers, is a normal summer staple: the island's different parishes (there are 12 in Jersey) and other community groups join forces to make huge, motorised floats covered in brightly coloured, dried and fresh flowers, which are

then paraded along the seafront promenade. Every float has its own theme and is brought to life with music, dancers and other costumed characters, who greet the crowd as the floats trundle down the Avenue.

Except that the more one thinks about the Battle of Flowers, the less 'normal' it seems. It is, in fact, an utterly bizarre tradition dating from 120 years ago. Who would have thought that a one-off parade to honour the newly crowned Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in 1902 would blossom into one of the largest floral carnivals in Europe and a beloved piece of Jersey's heritage and culture?

Neither a pandemic, nor two World Wars—let alone the odd mishap and spot of inclement weather—have proven a match for Jersey's special concoction of community spirit and flower power and



Jersey's 120-year-old Battle of Flowers parade is a riot of colour, featuring music, dancing and floats of all shapes and sizes



the event is now deeply entrenched in the island's identity. Almost every family seems to have at least one Battle of Flowers tale, whether it's pulling an all-nighter to get your parish's entry finished on time or a story about young children who earned a coveted spot on the float only to miss out on their 15 minutes of fame because they fell asleep during the parade. It's this paradox between the awesome spectacle of the floats and the rough and readiness of things that never go quite to plan that's a big part of the Battle's charm. Predictably, over 120 years, the event

has undergone several changes—not least the 'Battle' element of it, which originally involved everyone pulling flowers off the floats and playfully chucking them at one another, but had to be re-thought in 1960, when some people swapped 'petal' for 'metal' and pulled welded steel from the floats to throw instead. In place of the traditional 'flower fight', it was decided that petals would be dropped on the crowd from a helicopter overhead.

Over time, the parade has also attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. Since the Battle's post-war revival in 1951, famous

faces such as Petula Clark and Christopher Biggins have been invited to participate, but in 1912, the floral festivities were graced by a rather more impromptu celebrity appearance. Finding himself at a loose end when on tour to Jersey's Opera House with Fred Karno's Company, who should turn up to that year's Battle of Flowers, but Charlie Chaplin himself. A contemporary extract from the local paper reports that the silent movie star's cameo caused 'much amusement and some vexation to the organisers'.

Local-history books are fit to bursting with delightfully wacky stories, many of which revolve around the rather risky entertainment acts that have performed at the event over the years. Aussie, the boxing kangaroo, made an appearance in 1932; in 1939, Tony Deering and his Motoring Maniacs drove at speed through flaming hoops, causing the *Jersey Evening Post* to remark that 'it was only by the mercy of providence that no one was killed'; but nothing compares with Roy Fransen, who, in the 1950s, set himself on fire and leapt off a 70ft tower in a 'dive of death' into a small pool of water that was also on fire.

This year's Battle of Flowers, taking place in St Helier on August 11, will likely be a more sedate affair than the Battles of yesteryear. But its return after a two-year Covid-induced hiatus is in itself another triumphant moment in the parade's incredible history. ↗