



Making the *Impossible* Possible

Simon Stabler talks to a familiar face on the 1940s scene

The singer Fiona Harrison is a name that many of you will know from the 1940s events that she performs at. However, had her career gone down a different path, you may well have been wearing one of her creations as opposed to hearing her sing.

"I studied to be a fashion designer," explains Fiona, "I went to art college, then I got my first job as a hat designer at Bemona in Luton. But that job wasn't really where my heart was so I left that job, bummed about a bit, did a little bit of this and a little bit of that and I worked for John Lewis for a while as a window dresser. But to cut a very long story short, I ran away and became a redcoat."

Having danced since the age of three, acted since she was nine and taken singing lessons from 16, Fiona's audition at the Butlin's Metropole Hotel, Blackpool turned out to be the launch pad for her career as an entertainer.

"We were literally thrown in at the

deep end where we were introduced as potential redcoats, and we had to do ballroom dancing, which I could more or less fudge it through. We watched the cabaret and saw how it was all done; we were in the lighting box because you had to do sound and lighting, I learned a lot about that as a redcoat and how to do lighting plans and that sort of thing.

"We were then taken to the variety bar and we had to do karaoke, I'd never really seen karaoke before and I was going through this incredible book of all these pop songs and I didn't really know any of them, I knew musical theatre but I managed to pick up two that I could do – I Could Have Danced All Night and If They Could See Me Now.

"We then had to put on our own show and had to do a dance audition as well and at the end, they told us if we'd been successful or not. And they weren't too sure about me because the problem I have, because I'm very well spoken, tends to put people off and that's a shame really.

But I was prepared to give it a go and I did and I did very well and I stayed as a redcoat for about 18 months and I treated it a little like going to drama school and I would look at the cabaret artists when they came in and at how they worked and how the professional world worked."

Fiona got on very well with her fellow redcoats, although they did have a nickname for her.

"They used to joke that I was born on Planet Operetta, which I was, and I grew up listening to operetta and musical comedy which perhaps musically now is a little out of fashion but it's like anything, good music is good music and things have their renaissance and in time this will be revised. I know it will because it's good music. The first redcoat show I did, I sang I Could Have Danced All Night and The Laughing Song from Die Fledermaus and my flatmate at the time, Sammie, who was in the lighting box heard the line 'My dear Marquis' and asked 'Why is she singing about a tent?'"

Fiona's departure from Butlin's in 1992 was short-lived as she was brought back as a professional artist almost straight away. She also did a couple of summer seasons in Blackpool, performed in Japan and entertained aboard a cruise ship. "Whenever I mention that I did a cruise, everyone asks if I went to the Mediterranean or the Caribbean. Then they laugh when I tell them that it was on Lake Windermere."

This season Fiona will be performing her 1940s act at Pickering and Hughenden but with her repertoire stretching from the 1880s to the 1970s ("It's really Abba because everyone likes Abba, along with Jersey Boys and Grease") she can also be found at Pickering 1960s weekend, Milton Keynes Museum's Victorian event and the First World War centenary commemorations at Newark Air Museum. But I wondered how Fiona got into the 1940s in the first place?

"We used to have different theme weekends [at Butlin's]. We had country and western, 60s and then we had a 40s weekend and that was when I found my niche, up to that point I knew nothing about the 40s really other than what I'd touched on at school. There was a lady who was singing that weekend who had a very similar voice (soprano) to myself and I took a piece of paper and wrote down every song she sang because I wanted somewhere to begin. Then I went to Woolworth's and bought a CD that I used to play in the car. The lady said that she was going to be playing in the Channel Islands for the 50th [anniversary of VE Day] and I thought: 'I hope one day that I can do that' and do you know, 10 years later, I did it."



Pictured with the Antiques Roadshow's John Bly at the Woburn Oyster Festival.

"I'm very lucky, I've been out to Normandy for the D-Day commemorations, I've been going out there since 2004, I'm very well known in Normandy now and I'm very pleased to be out there and I know a lot of the veterans personally."

Over the years, Fiona has met many people associated with the 1940s scene from promoters and re-enactors to fellow performers. And there is one performer in particular that she has a lot of time for.

"I've always admired people with talent and I admire Lola Lamour because she has a great sense of style, she knows what's right for her and she works hard at her craft. When I was at a very low ebb, she was very kind to me."


I wondered what Fiona's favourite moment on the 1940s scene has been?

"When I first played Chatham it was wonderful, it was a really good event to do, a great sense of community spirit. I remember it being able to pull something

out of the bag when all the chips are down and knowing you can pull it off, make the magic happen."

"One year at Chatham, I came down with a very bad cold. I had an hour's show to do, I was the finale act, but I still went on stage and although I had no voice, I could still entertain people and I did enjoy that moment because I don't suppose anyone will remember that."

Whatever the weather, Fiona refuses to let her audience down.

"When I was at Arromanches last year, it was raining, it was torrential rain, you get on the stage and there's no electricity and you've got to get the electricity from the lamppost and you've got to pull it across the car park and you've got to wrap it around the gun and trail it under Jeeps and get it on the stage and then out of nothing, you create a wonderful show. I think that's when I get a great sense of achievement, to make the impossible possible." 

Opposite: Often travelling abroad for shows, the furthest Fiona has been so far is to Japan. Below: Fiona, pictured right, has been entertaining from an early age. Below right: At Butlin's in 1992 with her fellow redcoats Big Dave, Julie and Stewart.



For more on Fiona Harrison, including videos and news updates, go to www.fionaharrison.biz