

Follow the star to Wintershall

A full-blown production of the Nativity takes place every year in the Surrey Hills. Rupert Uloth witnessed last year's delightful telling of the Christmas story

Photographs by Jack Lawson



‘An absorbing and delightful reminder of what Christmas is really all about’

THERE were titters as the lamb began to bleat—it was drowning out Joseph's pleas for a place at the inn. The diminutive bundle of ovine wool continued its insistent interventions for most of the evening. If the organisers had adhered to the thespian maxim of never work with animals or children, the annual Wintershall performance of the Nativity would be a much duller affair. The youngest of the 100-strong cast, playing baby Jesus, is necessarily barely a few months old and, as well as multiple sheep, there are donkeys and cows and the three wise men arrive on horseback.

The Wintershall Nativity, which was started in 1989 by estate owner Peter Hutley with

a few family and friends using a torch to act as the star, has evolved into a professional affair (there is now proper stage lighting and more than 5,500 people come to watch 10 performances) while retaining its home-spun atmosphere.

It tells the story of the birth of Jesus, but instead of a few nursery-school children with towels on their heads, it's a full-blown production with grown-ups. Indeed, the website warns that children under five may find the Herod scene upsetting.

Last year, the cast included a doctor, a criminal lawyer, a carpenter and an accountant who were transformed for the evening into shepherds, kings and innkeepers.

The Wintershall Nativity has a 100-strong cast including sheep, cows and horses

Mr Hutley, who is now 90, and his wife still take the parts of Simeon and Anna, who have the baby brought to them at the temple (*top centre*), but his daughter Charlotte de Klee has taken over as producer.

The action begins outside an old barn at the top of a hill on their estate near Guildford in Surrey, where the ancient manor house, dating from the 13th century, is mentioned in Domesday. We watch the enormous 'star' beckoning as Mary and Joseph approach from nearly half a mile away with their new baby and the Angel

Gabriel makes a magnificent sight high up in a tree across the field. We are then invited in to watch the rest of the performance. There are singers (this year from the Royal Opera House) and a specially written script with a narrator.

It's a wonderful evening's entertainment and makes a refreshing break from the frenzied commercialisation of Christmas. This year, Mrs de Klee has laid on an extra matinee performance for schools. 'The Nativity story is just as important today as it was 2,000 years ago,' she explains. 'It seems that some teachers don't get the relevance of it today, but the refugee crisis is not a new story.'

Another of Mr Hutley's four children, Henrietta Fiddian-Green, is in charge of the animals. Her sculptor husband, Nic, has played several parts over the years and all four of her children have taken the role of Jesus, including Samuel, who happened to have been born on Christmas Day. Her children are all now in their late teens or early twenties, but 'are proud of the fact that they played that role'.

Mrs Fiddian-Green says that, in spite of her responsibilities for the production, it always retains its magical quality. 'Have we remembered to bring water for the animals? Is the electric fence working to keep the stock in? I think of these things,

but when I'm in that barn and I see the faces of the people watching, the joy of it makes me want to cry. I'm always amazed that I feel like that after all this time.'

The vociferous lamb was still audible as we filed past the smiling cast members and out into the darkness. As well as enjoying a really good theatrical performance, we had witnessed an absorbing and delightful reminder of what Christmas is really all about.

The Wintershall Nativity runs from December 14 to 18. Tickets cost £17.50 (or £8.50 for children). To book, visit www.wintershall-estate.com or telephone 01793 418299