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On the sprawling
Wintershall Estate,
the local community
and some scene-
stealing farmyard
animals come
together to breathe
riotous new life
into the ancient
Christian story

A N O T S O
S I L E N T
N I G H T



Twilight falls on the Wintershall Estate and a star is twinkling overhead. Mary and Joseph walk towards it, while the Angel Gabriel watches them from behind a tree. So, too, does a congregation of spectators, who are following the couple across ancient woodland and pasture. In this corner of Surrey, anyone can go “away in the manger” by joining an immersive, open-air nativity that has been performed here for more than 35 years.

Swaddled in winter coats, the audience have set out with the couple and their donkey as they travel to Bethlehem to register for the census. Along the way, they wait with shepherds, march with Roman soldiers and, finally, enter a barn to witness the Christmas miracle. Guided by a narrator, the re-enactment can be deeply meaningful for the audience. It's also a labour of love for the local cast of volunteers.

ORIGIN STORY

The Wintershall Nativity debuted in 1989, the brainchild of the estate's owners, Ann and Peter Hutley, when the couple were in their sixties. It's still a family affair: daughter Charlotte de Klee took over as producer from her father in 2014, while her sister Henrietta Fiddian-Green oversees animal talent. The cast now numbers more than 100, and the production

benefits from professional sound and lighting, a West End director, a choir and an army of volunteers managing everything from costumes to parking. They've come a long way since the first performance when, Charlotte recalls, there were more people in the cast than the audience.

“At first, only Mum and Dad's friends came,” she says. Soon, however, word spread. “One year, Mum said to me at the gate, ‘I don't know any of these people!’” Now, more than 5,000 spectators descend on Wintershall each season. Its success has led to further Wintershall productions, including *The Passion of Jesus*, performed every Easter in Trafalgar Square.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

While the audience comes from near and far, the cast are usually local and span all ages from babies to people in their nineties. Often, they have played different roles at different stages of their lives, the production offering continuity and connection, much like the story of the Nativity itself. This ▶

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE Held on Wintershall Estate in Surrey, the nativity experience invites more than 5,000 people of all ages each year to follow Mary, Joseph and their donkey on the road to Bethlehem

“In a world of bad news, this is a good news story”



OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE After the promenade, a traditional nativity play is held in Holly Barn Theatre, where the audience can see the story come to life, with Roman soldiers, shepherds and travellers. Children are encouraged to get close up to the animals, including Sam the donkey



THIS PAGE All of the animals rehearse, like the cast, so that they get used to the environment before the performance. In the barn the story is accompanied by music, songs and carolling

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season's Mary, played by Carrie Bexley, and Joseph, played by Harry Babbington, have known each other since childhood. It's Carrie's third year as the expectant mother, but over the years, both actors have taken on myriad parts. "You get the bug. I don't know anyone who's done it just once," says Harry, whose mother works in the Wintershall office.

The youngest cast member is, of course, baby Jesus. Numerous Hutley family members have taken on this pivotal role. "Our son Ivan was baby Jesus in 1990, while my sister-in-law was Mary and my husband was Joseph," says Charlotte. In their later years, Peter and Ann played Simeon and Anna, who recognise Jesus in the temple; in 2021, they held their first great-grandchild in the scene.

ANIMALS ACTING UP

Few theatrical productions flout the "never work with children or animals" adage as confidently as the Wintershall Nativity. After all, a crying baby, along with misbehaving donkeys and sheep, only add to the realism of the play. Farmer Henrietta is in charge of wrangling the animal cast, many of the creatures reprising their roles every year. Sam, the donkey that carries a pregnant Mary, is one of the show's rising stars. But Herod's steed is no longer played by George, the horse that upstaged Herod's big entrance with rather messy comic timing. "I had to scoot in with a dustpan to clear up before Angel Gabriel stepped on set," laughs Henrietta.

The sheep can be demanding, too: "You'll get feisty Herdwick lambs who think, 'We've done this a few times.

I wonder what it's like over here' and walk into the children's pit. It's chaotic," continues Henrietta. To maintain order, she has two tricks up her sleeve: her sheepdog Kit and carrots. But the audience never seems to mind. It's the symphony of weather, children, animals and acts of God that make this Nativity so enjoyable.

THE GOOD NEWS

Come rain or shine, the performance is always a hit. "It can be snowing as we move round the site, but as soon as the show starts, I forget about everything else," says Carrie. Harry agrees: "Everyone knows the story so well, so even when the donkey doesn't want to move or it's pelting down with rain, they get on with it." There is, however, a lot of ad-libbing. "I feel sorry sometimes for the sound and lighting guys who are waiting on a cue," he laughs.

The Wintershall Nativity resonates with families of all faiths and none, and is frequently attended by school parties. For participants as well as audience members, the retelling plays a profound part in their spiritual life. "It's helped to deepen my faith," says Carrie. "People get very emotional watching the Nativity, perhaps because in a world of bad news, this is a good news story," says Charlotte. "It's just about two poor people who were refugees and having a baby. It's a story for everyone. It's the essential stuff of humanity."

THE WINTERSHALL NATIVITY runs from 12-16 December. For tickets, head to wintershall.org.uk/nativity-journey-2024.

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