

## News



John McCusker, Michael McGoldrick and John Doyle

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Maddy Pryor



Seckou Keita



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Friday afternoon at the Cambridge Folk Festival

WARREN GUNN

# Why folk fest

## OUR FIRST VISIT TO CHERRY HINTON HALL EVENT WAS A TRIUMPH

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THE music gods looked favourably upon the 50th Cambridge Folk Festival this weekend, with music lovers and performers alike treated to near perfect weather across all four days.

While many of the 11,000 visitors crossing the hallowed threshold at Cherry Hinton Hall came prepared for a soaking, clear skies and glorious sunshine ensured wellies and waterproofs remained largely unpacked.

This boded well for me as, on a recommendation from a friend, I'd chosen Cambridge Folk Festival to be my five-year-old daughter Ellie's first festival experience. With its manageable size and strong reputation as a family-friendly event, I'd been reassured it would be the perfect event for Ellie to earn her festival spurs at.

Initial impressions were good when we arrived at Coldhams Common campsite, a neat, quiet and orderly camping ground where we could park the car right next to our tent. This was a god-send as it meant I could access Ellie's many necessities (including four teddy bears), charge my phone overnight, and make an emergency extraction with minimal fuss if she decided she wanted to go home. The fact that we had smart showers, pristine toilets and running water all within 50 metres topped things off nicely.

In addition, Coldhams was also home to a handful of hot food outlets, a big top kids' activity marquee, a storytelling venue and several health and wellbeing tents. Ellie loved the 'make a musical instrument' craft sessions in the big top, although the singing and fiddle-playing workshops were just as popular. Sitting with an ice cream watching Irish and Scottish music groups play casually outside the big top in the sunshine was a treat we both enjoyed.

The main festival site at Cherry Hinton Hall was a ten-minute shuttle bus ride away. Towering totem poles, oversized wicker animal sculptures and a large, beautifully bucolic WELCOME signs reminded us that this is a very environmentally friendly event. As something of a festival veteran, I can normally tell within a few moments of arriving



whether an event is going to be a raucous affair (like Reading), a laid-back offering (à la Kendal Calling) or a mix of the two (Glastonbury). With families and people aged 35+ making up the bulk of the attendance, the vibe here was, I'm happy to say, supremely chilled. There was no 'edge' floating in the ether at Cambridge Folk Festival, only the delightful sound of fleeting fiddles, stomping feet and finger-plucked acoustic guitars.

As big fans of acoustic guitar music, it's fair to say Ellie and I were both in our element, music-wise. We sat on the floor and chilled to earnest up-and-comers in the snug Den, and enjoyed rousing renditions of traditional folk classics in the intimate Club Tent. Lively Stage Two was the place to go for a good craic, or whenever we fancied getting down, as there always seemed to be a Ceilidh dance on at some point or another. The arena's main stage, Stage One, was where we caught some of the festival's bigger acts, and also where we pitched up our camping chairs to chill, chat to people and soak up the general vibe in the evenings.

We were pleasantly surprised to discover that folk music (in its many modern guises) wasn't the only genre to be found here. We heard blues, roots and Americana coming out of various venues, and even got to watch a bit of ballet, courtesy of the Sisters of Elva Hill (Ellie adored the dancing). My own personal highlight was listening to José González do a cover of Massive Attack's Teardrop on Stage 1, just as the sun started to dip on Friday night – it was sensational.

The festival's modest size ensured nowhere on site was much more than a ten or 15-minute walk away. At the northernmost end of the site we found the Duck Pond, a lovely relaxed green area with a scenic river that was perfect for paddling in

and - for many parents, I noted - catching a snooze by! The southernmost point is where we arguably spent most of our time as this is where the children's area was located. Boasting two large paddling pools, a permanent play park and more kids' activities than you could shake a tassled tamborine at, this kid-sized utopia drew kids in like moths to a flame the whole weekend. Honestly, the sheer wealth of organised and casual play options made available here, combined with the enviable enthusiasm of the play workers who kept things ticking over, really was very impressive indeed.

Ellie loved splashing around in the paddling pools as the mercury ascended in the afternoons, while her commitment to trying every single activity / piece of apparatus, both indoors and out, was something to behold.

However, it was her first foray into performing that will perhaps live longest in both our minds, delivering a poem to a whooping crowd as part of the hugely enjoyable Folk Idol competition that runs each afternoon in the Kids Area venue. Earning a certificate and a carrot (?) for her trouble, she bounded over to me with the kind of smile she normally keeps in reserve for Christmas. "Next year I'm going to sing!", she said, beaming with pride and confidence.

Yep, as far as family festival experiences go, this was a doozy. Ellie clearly enjoyed the whole thing and was even a little sad when the time came to pack up the tent and leave. As the first festival I've attended as a parent, I can honestly say that it ticked all the right boxes for me too. Friendly, safe and hugely agreeable, it's a perfect place for kids and parents alike to earn their family festival spurs.

Until next year, Cherry Hinton. Thanks for the memories!