

Report on ATOM 2017

1. History and Background

The ATOM Festival of Science and Technology began in 2014. The initiative came out of the Choose Abingdon Partnership as part of its' aim to enhance the vitality and economy of Abingdon on Thames.

The idea of a Festival of Science and Technology was proposed because the town is within an area containing some of the most advanced laboratories and hi-tech businesses in the country and, of course, is close to the University of Oxford.

Many practicing scientists, retired scientists and people interested in science live in the town or this region and it was believed that a festival such as ATOM would be popular – and so it proved.

A committee was formed and a part-time coordinator appointed to manage marketing and administration. A variety of venues were used including the Civic Centre, school theatres and halls, the Museum and the Market Square where a science fair was held.

The first festival proved to be very popular and some well-known names gave presentations. These included Jim Al Khalili, Dame Jocelyn Bell-Burnell (discoverer of pulsars) and Robin Ince.

The second ATOM Festival in 2015 also brought in a number of well known speakers including Heather Cooper, Nigel Henbest and John Mason.

In 2016 ATOM became a part of the Oxfordshire Science Festival (OSF) after a new source of funding was secured and a managing Director and Events Manager were appointed to OSF but, unfortunately this did not prove to be a success.

It was decided that the original ATOM team, with a few changes and additions, would take back the planning and organisation of the Festival for 2017. As a result, ATOM 2017 was by far the most successful ATOM Festival to date with ticket sales and feedback far exceeding expectations.

2. Preparation and Organisation

The preparation for ATOM 2017 started in the Autumn of 2016 and, with the Festival planned for the third week in March 2017, time was tight. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of James White with individual members undertaking substantial roles.

Enthusiasm, determination and commitment were the order of the day and, as a result, ATOM 2017 was, by general consent, a very successful festival.

Three Sub-committees were formed to cover Programme Development, Finance, and Marketing and a part-time coordinator was appointed.

3. Programme

Speakers were sourced from a variety of different places and in a variety of different ways. Most came through personal contacts with committee members.

The topics ranged from cutting edge research (gravity waves, tokamaks, rocket engines) through topics of wide interest (eclipses, driverless cars, Antarctica, dinosaurs, human evolution and stem cells plus a talk by Jim Al Khalili on aliens.

The quality of the presentations were all good and the feedback statistics showed consistently high scores. One comment, often heard, was that the presentations were all well pitched for an interested but not specialist audience.

4. School Programme

The schools programmes were very well received. The children enjoyed the events and, as many said, they had fun. Positive feedback was received not only from the children but also from their teachers and parents. Events for schools and for children generally will be part of future ATOM Festivals involving as many schools as possible..

5. Venues

Five venues were used for the festival - Abingdon School (Amey Theatre and the Yang Science Centre), Larkmead School, Our Lady's Abingdon School (OLA), Coseners House Hotel and John Mason School.

More events took place at Abingdon School than at any other venue. The facilities there are exceptional and the festival enjoyed the full support of the Headmaster, teachers, and the theatre staff. A Family Day in the Yang proved to be very popular and was the first event to be fully booked. This will become a regular feature of ATOM Festivals.

The opening event was held at Our Lady's Abingdon and consisted of a reception and two talks. The theatre / hall proved to be an excellent location for an audience of around 200.

Coseners House Hotel (Garden Room) was a fine location for an audience of around 80 and it was filled to bursting point.

6. Science Fair in the Market Square

The Science Fair on the Saturday was a big success. It attracted lots of people and the variety of interesting stalls were crowded. There were 17 stalls .

During the Saturday, talks went on throughout the day. One in Coseners House and the rest at the Amey. All the talks had good audiences and demonstrated the value of talks on the Saturday so that children, and working parents, can attend them.

A science-based competition for children which involved the participation of local retailers was very popular and was welcomed by the retailers as well as by the children.

The volunteers provided a valuable and essential service during the Science fair and, wearing their smart ATOM T-Shirts they helped to create a very professional look to the whole festival.

7. Finance

Ticket sales exceeded expectations which, together with sponsorship and grants, meant that the festival can continue on a sound financial footing into the future.

8. Ticketing

There were just two ticket prices, one for the Jim Al Khalili event (£7.00) and another for every other talk (£4.00). The prices were affordable and the structure was simple. Children were half price which meant that many children were able to come.

A Festival Pass at £20 enabling the purchaser to attend any or all events proved quite popular and many were purchased as gifts.

9. Social Media

This seemed to work exceptionally well. There was a constant update and refreshing of news and tweets. A significant number of people claimed to have become aware of ATOM through social media. This is an ever increasingly important area to develop further. This year saw an excellent start.

10. Commercial involvement

The Festival is called the ATOM Festival of Science and Technology. This year there was a lot of science but not enough technology. Among the talks there were presentations on rocket engines, driverless cars and tokamaks, but there could have been more technology.

Apart from the talks mentioned, and two or three of the stalls in the Market Square, there was little participation by the commercial sector. With the science parks and high-tec businesses in our neighborhood future ATOM festivals should aim for a much greater presence of the commercial world.

Not only is there much potential interest in what companies are doing in applied science and engineering, but the opportunities for sponsorship are greater here than elsewhere. There are some of the leading players in this region, and ATOM could be the opportunity to showcase them locally.

There are many possibilities that can be explored, ranging from careers and recruitment opportunities, to exhibitions, demonstrations and of course sponsorship.

The technological / science applications field should be a distinguishing and distinctive feature of ATOM.

11. Summary

ATOM 2017 was good. There is no doubt about that. Everyone concerned – committee, volunteers, participants, sponsors, and supporters all helped to make ATOM 2017 a success. Almost all the feedback and comments were positive and the organisers can be justly proud of what they have achieved.

It is the intention that ATOM will continue for many years and become an established, regular, popular and much anticipated event in the calendar of the town.

James White

May 2017