

In this latest podcast, we hear from Neil Smith, a member of Calne Lions who tells us all about the refurbishment of their Santa Sleigh. Following months of dedication and hard work it has been very worthwhile to see the reaction of the public when the new Santa Sleigh took to the streets of Calne.

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer.

Welcome to the latest episode of the popular Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Samantha Boffin and I'd like to thank you for tuning in.

If you haven't listened before, our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer.

This month on the podcast, we hear from Neil Smith, a member of Calne Lions who tells us about the refurbishing, or should I say re-building of their Santa Sleigh. Following months of dedication and hard work all has been very worthwhile to see the reaction of the public when the new Santa Sleigh took to the streets of Calne.

But first, I have a favour to ask. We'd like your help in getting the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Tell your family, tell your friends - and if you're a Lions member, why not let other members of your club know about the podcast - and how easy it is to listen. All you need to do is either go on the website www.lionsclubs.co where you will see a link to the podcast, or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

You can listen on-demand or subscribe so that you never miss an episode. We publish a new programme on the second Wednesday of each month, and we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can.

Today we're talking to Neil Smith from Calne Lions. Thank you so much for coming on the LION podcast, Neil, particularly as it's such a busy time of year for you. So Neil, how long have Calne Lions had a Santa sleigh for? And also, how often is it used over the festive period?

Some of my fellow club members know this because I'm quite new to the club. We built our first one in 1989-1990, and we use it throughout December each year.

So literally from the first of December onwards.

Yes, we help out with the town's light switch on, which is usually the last Saturday in November. So we lead the light parade through town for that. And then it's every day in December leading up to Christmas.

Oh, wow, so you're a really big part of the festivities. Yeah, that's incredible. So in this particular year, you've done a huge refurbishment project with your sleigh, haven't you? Can you tell us why you did that?

The original sleigh was built in 1989-1990. It was based on, the base of an old caravan that the club used to use to sell refreshments and the caravan part was falling to bits. So they repurposed it to build our sleigh. But seen as though it was 30 years old, it had come to the end of its life, shall we say? And believe it or the trailer became unroadworthy, so we had to recreate it.

It looks incredible. I mean, it's just, it's got everything. It's even got a snow machine.

We've added some snow machines this year, which the kids absolutely love when we're going round.

Wow. And that's the first time you've done that.

We've had them in the past, but they're not quite been as good. This year they're really powerful and can throw snow all over the place.

Yeah. So exciting. Makes the pictures look amazing. And there's music as well with it.

Yes, yes. We've got a big stereo in it with a couple of disco speakers that pack the music out. So much so that sometimes we get told it's too loud.

Oh, yeah.

Could you tell us who was involved in the renovation or rebuild, as it was quite a lot of people, wasn't it?

Yeah, yeah. There were three or four mainly, but a lot of the club were involved. And we also got a lot of support from the local shops and businesses who donated goods and services to us as and when they could. So yeah, it was a big team effort.

Wow. And the local community, people helped with the electrics and things like that.

Yes. Locally, the electrician came in and helped with the wiring of the electrics. There's a portacabin business in town, who have supported us for a very long time. They used to store our old sleigh many years ago. And they build their own portacabins and they donated materials to us to allow us to build the box that the sleigh sits on and that box holds the amp for the stereo and the generator. A local building hardware company provided a lot of wood and stuff like that as well.

Yeah because that means it's very elaborate lovely sleigh. Yeah, I know we've mentioned the snow machine and there is also light boxes on it as well.

Yeah we've got a lot of lights on it. We've got brake lights that go around the sleigh itself, we've got disco lights that are attached to the canopy so it makes it look like it's a huge great big disco going down the street. We've got reindeer on the front that have rope lights on them as well and we've got adverts on the front and back of the sleigh to give details of a text to donate service. So people can use that as a way to donate to us.

Yeah, we do still collect the majority of our money in buckets. But we go round with card readers as well. So if people want to use their phone or cards to donate, they can do it that way. We've got a text to donate system running. We even had someone the other day contact us and said, We missed you the other day, we'd like to donate some money. Can we do a bank transfer, yah?

Amazing. That's fantastic. Well, so with all of this going on, what's the reaction to this new sleigh from everyone?

It's been really positive this year. The kids absolutely love it, they come out and running up and down the pavements following us, getting over excited like kids do at this time of year, which is brilliant to see as a volunteer walking the street. It's brilliant to see their faces. But we also get a lot of support from the older generation as well. I've been out in the past and spoken to old ladies who have thanked us for coming along because it's the only human interaction they've had for the week. So even that little bit of interaction and joy makes a big difference to the older generation as well.

Yes, absolutely, it will make so much more of the festive season I mean, I remember as a little girl, you know, Santa's sleigh coming, locally. And it was such a high point, it was really the part where Christmas really began for me. So it's a really nostalgic part of Christmas.

I can remember it fondly from when I was a child as well. And to be fair, those memories of why I got involved with helping the Lions Club in here where I live now. But also, I ultimately became a member because of that. So yes, those memories from a childhood, last a long time.

Yes, they absolutely do. Yeah. So how do the people know if you're coming to their particular area or their particular road.

Well, in the run up to December, we do a week long countdown. To let the local community know that we're on our way. And then on our website and our Facebook page, we've created a list, which gives the order in which we go around the town. This year, we've actually nicknamed it Santa's nice list. We can't necessarily say, we're going to visit this street on this day, but we give an order in which we visit the areas of town. And then each morning on Facebook, we'll announce which streets we're doing that night. So it gives us the flexibility that way of being able to handle the bad weather. Like we've got snow today. So I don't know whether we'll be going out tonight yet. And it allows our driver and volunteers nights off every now and then if we decide that we're making good progress, and we could do with it night off. And yeah, we got two punctures the other night, so had to call it off at late notice. So things like that. Yes. It means without publicising an exact date that we're going to do a particular street. It gives us that flexibility to cope with situations like that.

Yes. And presumably some areas. Is it very hilly, where you are? I mean, are there some areas that the sleigh actually literally can't get to?

There's one or two places, but most of the town is very accessible. And we go around the local villages as well. And most of that is fine.

How exciting. So you go out as far as the villages, that's really nice. Wow.

So what ways can members of the public donate to Santa sleigh this year? There are a number of different ways I think, aren't there?

We go around with buckets each evening so that they can drop coins into those. But we also have a number of online mechanisms as well, we have text to donate to which they can do on their mobile phone. We've got card readers with us, so they can use their bank cards we will also accept bank transfers, and we've got an online payment portal, so they can do it that way as well.

So there's lots and lots of ways to donate. Yes. So what's the money used for the donations that you collect from Santa sleigh?

Well, one year we actually, not just with Santa, but throughout the year, we raised £16,000 to purchase a blood bike for the local area, which is a worthwhile charity that is staffed by volunteers, that transport blood and medical supplies around to hospitals. So we bought one of those for the area. Most of the money goes to local good causes. We donate to the local food bank. And we actually have a pet food bank here as well called Paws for Pets. So we've donated there as well. There's another community organisation in the town called Calne Community Christmas, they do Christmas hampers for the elderly and vulnerable in society. So we donate there. We've given money to a kids cancer charity. It's not just charities. There's a local young lady who is learning to be a ballet dancer. She's requires uniforms, so we've donated. We've donated to a number of the local nursing homes and old age pensioner homes, so that they could put on parties for the Jubilee. Gosh. And we've also donated to international causes as well. So we went out at the start of the Ukraine conflict. And we collected about £2,000 pound from the local community. And we actually promised to double that. And in the end, we donated £5,600 pounds to that. So there's a lot of good things that the money goes towards.

So the Santa sleigh, you know, money raising part of your year, funds things all year, and is also it's boosting, presumably the other fundraising you do throughout the year. Is that right then?

Yes, It's our main fundraising effort. And we use that money all through the year as well wow. That's amazing. So this is a really big part of the year for you guys. Yes, it is. Well, on that note then I need to let you get back out there and work out whether the roads are in fact clear enough for you to go out on your sleigh today.

I'm the Grinch that doesn't want snow just before Christmas.

Yes, exactly. Thank you so much, Neil. Thank you.

If you would like to view the photos of the magnificent Calne Lions Santa Sleigh, please take a moment to look at their Facebook page calnelions.org

It's time now for a short break, we'll be back after this ...

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'tis the season for busy lions.

Many lions clubs organise Christmas parties for young people and those young at heart. Whilst others collect and distribute hampers, help those that are homeless and families in need.

Christmas is a year-round activity for Lions clubs, as we have just heard. From keeping Santa's fleet of sleighs in tip top condition to collecting toys for children who otherwise would not receive any gifts, Lions members are always thinking ahead.

Well that's all we have time for on this month's podcast. Don't forget you can also listen to past editions of the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast any time via www.lionsclubs.co or on Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

Thanks once again to our special Christmas guest Neil Smith from Calne Lions, for talking to us about their magical Santa Sleigh.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Peaceful New Year. Take care and goodbye.

Thank you for listening to Step Forward and Volunteer. If you would like to get involved in local community volunteering visit www.lionsclubs.co to learn more.