

NewsFeature

How James White of
ATOM Society and
fellow members
created festival

Civic
PRIDE



From just germ of an idea to growing into mighty ATOM event

THE ATOM Festival of Science and Technology has become an established and popular part of the Abingdon cultural scene; first held in 2014 and taking place every March.

It started life as an initiative of the Choose Abingdon Partnership, a body set up in 2008 to boost the appeal of the town.

One of the ideas was to develop Abingdon as a 'Festival Town' and, at the end of his term as chairman of the partnership, James White undertook to create a science festival.

With the proximity of Oxford, the Culham Science Centre and the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, science was the obvious choice. Abingdon was seen as the epicentre and the heart of UK science. James consulted people in all these locations and found wide support for the idea.

A steering committee was established, consisting of enthusiastic volunteers, and the name ATOM was chosen. Sponsorship was secured from a number of sources, many of whom have continued to support ATOM.

ATOM has always been aimed at the public, but gives a strong emphasis to events for young people. It helps build science capital and partners with schools to engage young people, encouraging them to develop a passion for science and to understand its potential to change the world.

The festival aims to deliver diverse, imaginative and family-friendly events, allowing our community and visitors to discover the world-class science and technology that is right on our doorstep.

The festival lasts for a week and consists of talks, workshops, exhibitions, a science market in the Square and a Family Science Day. Many well-known speakers have given presentations, including Jim Al Khalili, Jocelyn Bell-Burnell (discoverer of pulsars), Chris Lintott (BBC Sky at Night), Marcus Du Sautoy, Heather Cooper, Eleanor Schofield (Mary Rose) and our local author and broadcaster Professor Frank Close.

The headline speaker this year is Dr Hannah Fry, the BBC science presenter.

The ATOM Festival Committee are much indebted to the venues where events take place, from schools to hotels, civic rooms and pubs.

A spin-off from the first festival was the ATOM Society. This meets monthly and organises talks on scientific topics. Members also provide volunteers for the festival, as ushers, parking attendants and guides.

James, who stepped down from the chairmanship of the festival last year, is now its honorary president and is still chairman of the ATOM Society. Mark Thornton was acting chair of the festival.

The outlook for ATOM looks bright, with programmes and awareness widening and it is definitely here to stay.

The 2019 ATOM Festival is March 16-24. See atomfestival.org.uk for details.