

Seasonal spirit goes a long way to aid soldiers

Organisers tell how the Early Early Christmas Fair helps the soldiers who risk so much but ask so little.

THE ANNUAL Early Early Christmas Fair, in aid of ABF – The Soldiers’ Charity, takes place, as always, in the grounds of Tedworth House in Tidworth on Wednesday, September 28. But at one stage it looked as if it would not. Tedworth House has undergone a major transformation since transferring from army stewardship to Help for Heroes, to enable it to become a flagship rehabilitation centre for wounded soldiers. Staging the fair there could have disrupted its important work.

But everyone’s willingness to compromise has meant the fair will be held there for years to come. Organiser Caroline Cary said: “I would like to thank our key sponsors and

supporters, who have been fantastic and helped us in this transition: General Dynamics, Aspire Defence, *Wiltshire Life*, Wellington College, Wellington Academy, Blue Apple Catering and Tesco in Tidworth, without whom we would not be able to hold the event this year, as well as Bryn and Emma Parry, of Help for Heroes, Ian McFarlane, project manager for Tedworth House, and Colonel Paddy Tabor, garrison commander.”

The Early Early Christmas Fair will take place in large marquees in the grounds with more than 90 stalls, many of them new. Items will range from trinkets to cashmere, foods to stocking fillers; gifts not on the high street and something for all ages and pockets. There will be refreshments, free parking, a raffle, a tombola and a preview on the evening of Tuesday, September 27, for which you can buy tickets.

The fair began as a low-key event in the late 1980s, aimed at giving an outlet to local people to sell their wares to an invited public; stall holders were mainly army spouses. A few years later, Sarah Rutherford-Jones hosted a house sale for fellow wives, where there was an Army

Benevolent Fund collecting tin for voluntary contributions. Following the fair’s success, she did it again on a larger scale with the help of Michela Levey. Tedworth House looked just the venue and so the Early Early Christmas Fair was born, proudly opening its doors for the first time in October 1994. At the end of the event £1,200 was handed over to Brigadier Arthur Gooch, ABF’s regional organiser.

When Sarah and her husband were posted overseas shortly afterwards, another Sarah – Arthur’s wife – ran it along much the same lines for the next three years. When he retired in 1998 his successor Brigadier David Shaw, seeing the fair’s potential as a major regional fundraising event, recruited Colonel Tony Moorby to take overall responsibility and to provide the essential link with the MoD, the army and the garrison. He was supported by Susanne Hollis as fair secretary, who has been one of the unsung heroes of the last 15 years. In charity fundraising the volunteer is

Below: Tedworth House where the fair is held, the volunteers who help out and the treats on offer

all-important allowing costs to be kept to a minimum. The role of event organiser is also absolutely key: without someone who can select and organise an array of stallholders and bring fresh ideas, fairs such as this would fail.

Sarah Gooch, and her successors Leslie Findlay, Francesca Pearson and, for the last seven years, Caroline Cary have all brought a unique vision and have incredible drive in taking the fair forward on an upward path.

Part of its success is the preview evening. It raises considerable cash but also allows husbands to come along. Its inception was a masterstroke as it enabled 400 people to attend, more than half of whom would not have been able to come the next day. Those who return for the public day have been able to do a full ‘reconnaissance’ and give full rein to the credit card, getting their Christmas shopping out of the way, leaving time for personal retail therapy, coffee, cakes and lunch.

There is nothing simple about improving marketing to raise the income and profile of a charity. ABF – The Soldiers’ Charity exists to help soldiers, former soldiers and their families who are in need. That need is wide and varied and sadly never diminishes. Rather, with the increase in operational deployments, it expands into every area imaginable.

This is what makes ABF – The Soldiers’ Charity so special: it is a ‘generalist’ and if there is ever anything that lies outside its trust deeds, it will either find a way to help or give a signpost to where such help can be given.

Invitations now reach 60,000 people and *Wiltshire Life*, *Drumbeat* and the *Salisbury Journal* are valued media partners and friends. The fair is now doing much more than just raising money: it is a vivid example of a



Above: In the line of duty; Below: Colonel Tony Moorby and Caroline Cary, organisers of the fair

in transition, but we will be doing both events alongside each other again in 2012.”

“We wish Colonel Tony Moorby good luck in his retirement and thank him for all his hard work on behalf of the charity and welcome his successor, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Miller, as our new Wiltshire regional director.”

community event that brings ABF – The Soldiers’ Charity, the army, the garrison and the civilian population together; a charitable cause to which all can relate and a shopping experience that is more or less unique.

Caroline Cary said: “Last year we ran the fair and The Soldiers’ Charity Ball, which raised more than £90,000. It was not a practical proposition this year as Tedworth House was

• *The Early Early Christmas Fair is on September 28, 9.30am to 4pm. To make a donation or for more details telephone 01980 672337 or email west@soldierscharity.org.*

