

Beltane Fire Festival

✖ The name comes from the old Irish for 'bright fire' and Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society has celebrated it every year on April 30th since the mid 1980s, on top of Calton Hill.

I would suggest having a look at the website (<http://www.beltane.org/>) before attending, as it clears up one or two things that might otherwise confuse.

Proceedings begin when the May Queen and the Green Man lead a procession of spirits (enthusiastic volunteers in a glorious array of face and body paint) to the top of the hill. The vast majority of spectators miss this, as they are gathered around the National Monument waiting for something to happen.

For these audience members, the event kicks off when the torchbearers, dressed in black robes, solemnly light their torches one by one. One audience member was heard to compare them to the cloaked ghouls who carried out the night-time execution of Aslan in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* – but this inferred a sinister side not intended by the performers! The role of the torchbearers is to separate the boundary between ordinary space and the magical procession of spirits.

After the torches are lit, the May Queen and her entourage appear from somewhere behind the National Monument against a backdrop of flaming symbols and constant drumming. This prompts someone in the crowd to comment that the dramatic setting is what makes it, adding:- "It wouldn't look nearly as impressive in a car park."

Undoubtedly true, although in a car park the crowd might not be continually distracted by the pervasive scent of chips and cheese from a nearby fast food van. This, combined with cameras and mobile phones constantly held aloft like lighters

at a rock gig, long periods waiting around for something to happen, and punters bearing 2 litre bottles of cider, lent the evening a modern day music festival ambience.

With the added bonus of various things being on fire.