

Head teacher hooks Peter Pan panto trip

Pupils at James Gillespie's Primary School are heading to the Christmas Panto – oh no they're not!

Disappointed children and parents have been told The Pantomime Adventures of Peter Pan may as well as be on the fictional island of Neverland after head teacher Ben Horsburgh hooked the traditional Christmas treat.

It is a long-standing custom and a high point in the school calendar that P1 and P2 pupils at the Edinburgh school go to the Dominion Cinema to watch a Christmas film while older children go to the Panto at the King's Theatre.

But renovation work at The King's means the panto is being staged at the Festival Theatre in Nicolson Street, and according to Mr Horsburgh that's an adventure too far for his pupils. And the school has confirmed the trip to the Dominion has also been cancelled.

The headteacher told parents that the Festival Theatre was too far away for pupils to be able to walk safely in the dark to and from the venue and even though the Parent Council offered to pay £1,500 for coach travel the head felt that such a short trip could not be justified.

In a newsletter to parents in mid November Mr Horsburgh said: "The King's Theatre continues to be unavailable due to refurbishment works and so we will not be attending the pantomime this year."

Mr Horsburgh added: "I am working with our Parent Council and

Fun and Funds team to plan a range of enjoyable and educational learning experiences in the run up to the festive period. More information to follow soon.”

But some parents are unhappy with the turn of events with one saying: “Apparently the decision was taken months ago but the parent council, with its fundraising group has been asking for months what was happening and could not arrange a meeting with the headteacher to discuss it. I think school is slightly divided between people who haven’t noticed and people who have older children who realised it was a really big deal in the school calendar.

“The head teacher has also cancelled the Dominion Cinema trip this year without any consultation or explanation beyond ‘it does not offer a live experience that the kids can’t get elsewhere’. I think these cinema trips are a long standing tradition for some of the local schools – the pantos certainly are. The kids who missed all this fun during the Covid years are now missing out on some traditional, good natured and fun local entertainment this year for no good reason whatsoever.”

It is also claimed that other fun activities have been scaled back or cancelled at James Gillespie’s.

The same parent continued: “Last year he cancelled Halloween on a Friday (when Halloween was on the Monday), and again put it in the weekly newsletter that nobody would be dressing up, and when children were already expecting their usual classroom party.”

The school did run Halloween discos for all classes and published news about this in one of the school newsletters – but there was a distinct change from before when the headteacher said in the newsletter: “We do not dress up for Halloween during class time and so those wishing to dress up should attend these out of hours events.”

One parent we spoke to said: “There is a certain amount of

upset and disquiet and a lot of disappointment in the parent community about the lack of school trips and perceived fun outings. It goes along with the lack of costumes at Halloween.”

Another parent told The Edinburgh Reporter that in and of itself the trip to the pantomime is not of massive importance but it is of concern that it could be part of a broader issue. The parent said: “I was quite surprised by this at first and I am not totally devastated by it, but what I have noticed is that there seems to be a culture of things like this being cancelled.

“The headteacher cancelled the Harvest Festival which used to be run in the playground, and some of the kids had spent all year making things for their stall. The Halloween thing did not bother me so much, but I do know there is a long tradition in Scotland and it is really nice to have cultural reference points for all the people from all over the world who have come to the school. The panto trip is exciting for these wee kids. And the excuse that it would be dark does not seem a good way to set them up for life – they all walk home anyway. The headteacher is quite new and we have never experienced a cancellation of these joyful things before.”

James Gillespie’s Primary School Head Teacher Ben Horsburgh said: “Our trips to the panto will continue when the show returns to the King’s Theatre which is just down the road from the school. The logistics involved in planning a trip to the Festival Theatre meant it just wasn’t possible this year and this was discussed with the school’s Parent Council.

“Christmas is a really important time for us in the school calendar and we have lots of great fun festive events taking place including ‘The Wee Reindeer games’, Christmas Jumper Day raising money for Save the Children, a Christmas Fair, nativity performances and year group Christmas parties.”

Another parent said it had been a school tradition for quite some time. "It seems there is no good reason why a new head would come in and drop it without consulting the parent body directly. It seems very unfortunate that children will not have this cultural experience."

A former parent confirmed that the King's Panto was indeed something which children at James Gillespie's used to enjoy going to annually in years gone by and said: "I went to JGPS as a child and always without fail went to the panto every year. This was meant to be our kids' first year to the panto (after the Covid lockdowns) and it's ruined by the head teacher. I'm really really annoyed by this, it seems it's for all events e.g Children in Need, World Book Day, Halloween etc they aren't allowed to dress up , express themselves and have fun."

Other festive events on the school calendar include:

- On 30 November there will be a concert performance.
- On 2 December there will be a Festive Fair organised by the Parent Council
- On 6 and 7 December there will be performances of the P1 nativity play.
- School Christmas Lunch will take place on Thursday 14 December.
- On 20 December there will be an outing to Usher Hall for P7 children who will attend a concert.
- Last week children were asked to bring in new unwrapped Christmas gifts to be donated to Cash for Kids Mission Christmas to ensure that every child has a gift under their Christmas tree.
- "The Wee Reindeer Games" will take place during the week of 11 December and will be planned and delivered in partnership with the Fun and Funds team. Children will mix across year stages and take part in a fun, festive and educational activity of their choosing over two

afternoons towards the end of term.

