



# THE KINGDOM OF IRONFEST

One of the Blue Mountains' most famous festivals is set for another year of fantastical sights. Celebrating its 21st birthday – Ironfest is returning to Lithgow this April. Find out more about this captivating local event.

BY MARIAN MCGUINNESS

**“Y**ou plug `em, we plant `em,” spruik a couple of 19th-century gravediggers wheeling a coffin around the Lithgow showground. This is not your average day out in Lithgow. Descending the Blue Mountains escarpment, past its soaring sandstone cliffs and primordial forest of towering eucalypts, I feel as if I’m entering a magical valley where reality is remote and time has warped.

For one April weekend each year, Lithgow, known as the birthplace of the Australian steel industry with its historic moniker of blast furnaces, breweries and brickworks, transforms into the captivating Kingdom of Ironfest. Over the past two decades this event that celebrates our relationship with metals has evolved

into an extraordinary fantasy festival that attracts tens of thousands of enthusiasts.

Without the first foray into metallurgy 4000 years ago, when the Bronze Age axe replaced the Stone Age axe, none of our technological world, from simple tools to computers and space exploration, would exist.

During the Mesozoic Era, around 250 million years ago, where prehistoric rivers eroded the landscape around Lithgow into the bizarre rock pagodas we call the Gardens of Stone, one important element was found; ironstone. Hence, Ironfest’s homage to all things metal.

2020 marks Ironfest’s 21st birthday and what a bash it will be. Past Ironfest themes have included: Wild West, Steampunk, Time Travel, The Holy Grail and

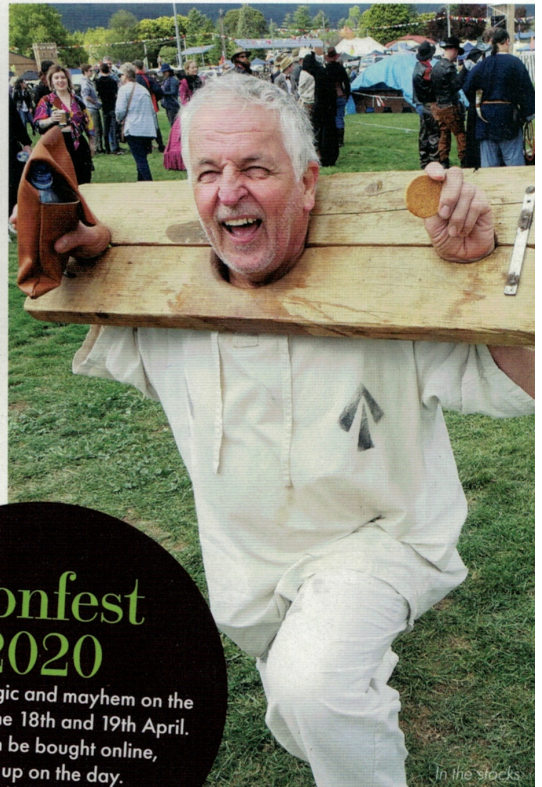




A meeting of characters



Steampunk couple



In the stocks

## Ironfest 2020

Share the magic and mayhem on the weekend of the 18th and 19th April. Tickets can be bought online, or line up on the day. <https://ironfest.net>



Duelling Knights



Viking blacksmiths

Fantasy Snow Queen – Cosplay character, Linda Fielding

Once Upon a Time. This year, it's going for Gothic. While many take the historical re-enactments and characterisations seriously, others take it as a chance to channel their inner superhero.

As I enter the showground beneath the fire-breathing dragon, I'm immersed in a melange of clans, creatures, mythology and machines. I don't know where to look first: *Game of Thrones*, *Mad Max*, *Star Wars*, Steampunk. While I'm standing gobsmacked in the surrounds of medieval tents and flying pennants, I'm serenaded by the dulcet notes of a Celtic harp. Perched on a wooden wagon is Blue Mountains harpist, Martyn Cook. "For you my lovely," he says as he strokes the strings that wend into the 18th-century Irish air, *Blind Mary*.

The Artisans' Guild showcases bountiful crafters: glass blowers, leather workers and shoemakers. Carrying on the tradition of the thousands of Lithgow blacksmiths at the turn of the 20th century, a group of leather-clad Vikings hammer hot steel while pumping giant bellows.

There's a mini-knights' tournament going on and it's drawing a crowd as a young boy thrusts the sword of his puppet-sized knight towards his armour-suited opponent. The fun thing is that his opponent is wearing chainmail made from ring-pull tabs. Anything goes here. It's all about imagination.

Two elegant Victorian-era women cycle past on their hand-crafted, giant-wheeled bicycles. Chugging behind them is a 1900s steam-traction engine that lets

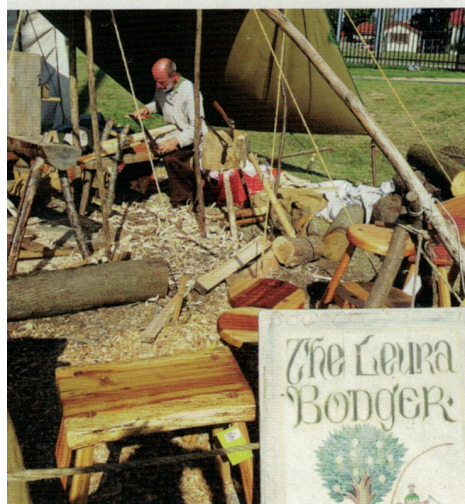




1900s traction engine



Carriage for a queen



The Leura Bodger



Renaissance boy with owl



Victorian era cyclists

off steam and poop-poops wayfarers to move aside.

In an open tent near a leather-gloved lad who is demonstrating the art of falconry, a fair damsel hand-cranks a tune on a hurdy-gurdy. "This instrument was popular during the Renaissance," she tells us, "because it protected women's modesty. Raising your arms while playing another stringed instrument sent men into a state of lustful frenzy."

A crowd gathers around Roy Davi, The Leura Bodger, as he hews greenwood into furniture using ancient tools and techniques, and I buy a crafted spurtle to stir my winter porridge.

There's plenty for the children in Kids' Kingdom. There's no time for electronic devices as imaginations are fully engaged. There are archery and faux sword fighting lessons, a mermaid in a glass tank, a storytelling tent, a petting zoo and face painting.

The Airship Sirius Camp is Steampunk's core. I play a game called Ocean's Edge where I try to balance



Steampunk Goths



Hurdy Gurdy damsel

as many wooden tall ships on a pivoted disc before they all fall off the edge of the world.

There are a plethora of stalls selling all things Steampunk, military attire, ancient armoury, Celtic jewellery, leather goods and vintage clothes.

Take time to sit and chill while listening to the many bands. Watch the street theatre, take in the Burlesque Bandwagon and constant parade of Cosplay characters. Men brandishing pikes, march; Confederate soldiers and Roman Centurions follow, while the droids - Daleks, R2D2 and BB-8, whirr along. Lithgow's Paul Aiken has created a hit with his giant animatronic dragon.

After stocking up from the food stalls, take to the grandstand overlooking the Tourney Ground. It's time for the big kids to come out and play.

Join the crowd in cheering for your champion during the St George's Day Jousting Tournament and cover your ears to the booms of the armoured tanks as they vie to win the Battle of Lithgow. Ironfest truly is a festival for the imagination. \*