STEAMPUNKS
at the SEASIDE
Blend Edwardian elegance with the science fiction of HG Wells and Jules Verne and you enter the world of steampunk. To discover more we donned our goggles and tailcoat to join the League of Bournemouth Steampunks for afternoon tea at the Russell-Cotes Museum.

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Anyone wandering into the Russell-Cotes Museum in Bournemouth the other Sunday afternoon could quite easily have imagined that they had somehow slipped into a parallel time zone.

Taking tea in the cafe was a group of exotic creatures whose clothing and demeanour spelled out a catalogue of delightful contradictions: a mixture of elegant Victoriana and Edwardian explorer laced with a liberal a dash of sci-fi and a modicum of burlesque. Top hats, tailcoats and gorgeous gowns are accessorised with brass, leather and faux weaponry. With maybe a bit of PVC here, a flash of suspender belt there and a plethora of muskets, canes, goggles, fob watches and flying helmets. For the League of Bournemouth Steampunks it is just another day out and a chance to show off their finery.

As they sit and sip their Lapsang Souchong, little fingers cocked in genteel contemplation of their perfect turn-of-the last century surroundings, they lament the mess the world is in today. But, above all, this is an opportunity to see and be seen. Theirs is a re-imagine a world where the great pioneers of steam and early technology have triumphed. Steampunks adore classic science fiction writers like Jules Verne and H G Wells and they absolutely love dressing up. There are no specific rules about what to wear, though there are some favourite signifiers. When it comes to the costumes the steampunk message is in the mix.

“It's about the aesthetics. Victorian style, design and technology,” explains Bournemouth League founder-member David Wilson. “We take the best bits and mix it with modern sensibilities and practicalities. It is basically a rejection of what is bad about today.”

Steampunks have been around for a long time. The term was first coined some 25 years ago, while the League itself is a nod to Alan Moore's groundbreaking science fiction graphic novel series The League of Extraordinary Gentleman which first saw life in 1999.

The cult of steampunk however has spread rapidly in recent years. Its influence has lately been seen in the Martin Scorsese movie Hugo and even on international fashion catwalks.

David, an engineer from Poole, says he discovered he was a steampunk by accident.

“I've always enjoyed Victoriana and the works of Wells and Verne and, of course, I admire the old engineering skills and the
ethos of making things that last a lifetime,” he tells me.

He isn’t alone. About four years ago David was researching Victorian technology and found the online steampunk forum Brass Goggles.

“It was fascinating. It connected with everything I am interested in. Even the clothes I was wearing - collarless shirt, brown jeans and waistcoat. I suddenly realised that I actually was a steampunk but just hadn’t realised it!”

But what exactly is steampunk? David is clear about what it means to him: “It’s a social scene with only one rule: to be nice to each other. It isn’t driven by the media and it’s not driven by pop culture. As a sub-genre it is very much a child of the internet.”

Perhaps most interesting is the fact that it appears to be endlessly adaptable. “Everyone has their own take on it,” he says. “Not everyone dresses up. You have costume-makers of course but you also have the kind of people who will strip down a modern computer and re-case it in brass and mahogany. Our tastes are eclectic.”

Looking around at the assembled throng it is clear that many are middle-aged. For, contrary to popular opinion, steampunk has precious little to do with youth culture.

Jane Wallace, one of the Bournemouth League’s administrators, agrees. “Unlike other sub-cultures it seems to attract people of all ages. Our youngest steampunk is probably five or six and we’ve been to an event where a gentleman in his eighties turned up as Sherlock Holmes. It really is all-embracing.”

Jane herself is 54 and spends her days...
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working as a secretary in the NHS. Being a steampunk offers the chance to explore the full creative potential of her alter-ego Rogue D’Ridge A Belle. “It is not about being rebellious,” she says. “It’s about having fun. We don’t take ourselves too seriously. Personally I love the clothes: top hats and goggles, corsets for the ladies... and sometimes for the men too, if they so wish,” she smiles.

“It’s a vision of an alternative future which you can take as far as you like. I think it’s a very approachable look, but then I was a New Romantic back in the Eighties so I’ve always been drawn to frilly shirts.”

Jane believes that one of the main attractions of steampunk is its rejection of aggression and bad manners. “It’s ideal for people seeking something a little more gentle and creative. It’s about being elegant and having good values.”

Bournemouth musician Paul Tucker, 46, also has a steampunk name but admits that Luap Rekcut is not perhaps the most original moniker he could have dreamt up. He and his wife Lisa McQuillan, are another couple who feel that steampunk offers them a perfect alternative lifestyle. Long-time fans of Victorian and Edwardian art, architecture and fashion, they say that the steampunk style is largely an extension of their everyday life. “We don’t dress totally like this all the time but there are certainly many elements that are the same,” says Lisa. “It just feels right for us,” adds Paul, who admits that steampunk as a concept is rather idealised. “I think we are trying to turn things back to a time before it all went wrong. Steampunks are very polite. We celebrate good manners and treating people decently and I get to wear goggles. What could be better?”

The oldest steampunk present at this tea time gathering is 78-year-old Jan Blight from Corfe Castle whose son Will, a 43-year-old Purbeck postman turned handyman, is a long term member of the League.

“I thought it sounded fascinating and as I’ve been interested in steam and steam locomotives since I was a child I thought I’d come along,” says Jan. She was not disappointed. “I think it’s absolutely marvellous and of course it appeals to people of my generation because it rejects the crudeness of modern society. It feels good to go back to a gentler time.”

Did she have any issues sorting out a costume for her first steampunk outing? “Oh that wasn’t a problem,” she says. “I just picked a few things out of the wardrobe - a black skirt I bought about 20 years ago, a Victorian blouse I picked up in a charity shop and my son lent me some brass goggles to hang around my neck.”

The steampunks certainly seem a cheery bunch but, however vivid their imagination, they also seem firmly rooted in reality. Would they like to have lived in the Victorian era? David Wilson shakes his head gravely. “It must have been a very exciting time but there are two words beginning with A - anaesthetic and antibiotic - that tell me it wouldn’t be a very good idea at all. “He then considers for a minute. “Mind you it would be nice to go on a day trip back to 1851 and take a look at the Great Exhibition.”

To find out more go to The League of Bournemouth Steampunks page on Facebook.

Lisa McQuillan’s steampunk hat

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David Wilson and his wife Liz