

First, a little explanation about what this is and why we do it. The former Vicar of St James Church in Rotherham and our lovely chaplain Megan went to theological training college together, and so when St James was first putting on a summer musical with the local children, Megan was asked to send some eager students up to Rotherham to help out. This started about a decade ago and had kept going every year since then. The church runs the musical as a service to the community, giving the children an opportunity to gain confidence, develop team working skills, and so on.

I arrived in Rotherham on Sunday, the day before the children first arrived, and was introduced to the team of people I would be working with. There was one other current Jesus College member, fellow undergraduate Tom Iszatt, and the rest were made up of Jesus Alumni and people connected to the church. Overall it was a diverse, enthusiastic and friendly group of people. We had dinner together in the downstairs hall (food and lodging was our payment for helping out for the week), and then did a read-through of the script (in which I may have been a little over-enthusiastic).



The play we would be performing was Pirates vs Mermaids, a roughly 40-minute musical which tells the story of the two titular groups. Initially quite antagonistic, the pirates and the mermaids have to learn to work together when the pirates find out they need to learn to swim in order to pass their “Arrr Levels” (taken at Me Hearty High). So the pirates sail off to the mermaid caves, the mermaids teach the pirates to swim and the pirates return the favour by scaring off a crocodile.

We then went off to meet the various local people who would be putting us up for the week. Tom and I stayed with the local area dean and his wife. They were a lovely couple although we sadly did not get to see much of them as we were always out for most of the day and would arrive back with energy for little more than going to bed!

Monday was the first full day of activity, when most of the children would arrive (we also had a few stragglers turn up later in the week). We weren’t entirely sure how many would turn up as

most parents tend to bring their children along with no prior warning, based on previous years we were expecting roughly 30 participants, which proved to be about right.

The morning was spent with some typically cheesy warm-up/icebreaker games, which saw varying levels of participation from us helpers. Then we started learning some of the songs, followed by auditions in the afternoon.



The evening's entertainment was collectively assigning roles to cast members. There was a narrator, four each of major pirates and mermaids, and lots of smaller roles including pirate teachers, the head of mermaid security, the aforementioned crocodile and a VERY chatty parrot. We then departed to one of Rotherham's many pubs (as we did most nights).

The next four days have largely blurred into each other, I remember lots of rehearsing, driving around Rotherham picking up materials for costumes, props and scenery and rearranging the front of the church to resemble a pirate ship. Most of us helpers tended to gravitate towards particular tasks, being less musical myself, I enjoyed helping the children to make their props and scenery, one particularly challenging task was working out how to reinforce the tinfoil pirate cutlasses in order to give them some rigidity, followed by trying to prevent the inevitable outbreak of impromptu sword fights.

Saturday was performance day, arrival, final setup, a run-through of the play that was a little uncertain due to having to cope with the illness of one of our principal characters, but was still accomplished with the surprising degree of professionalism that I had come to expect from these performers. The show itself was a complete blur, partly because I spent most of it hidden away ready to adjust banners and raise sails (having elected myself to be about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the stage crew). Judging by the enthusiastic applause from the audience of family members and church community, it went pretty well.



Finally we had to pack everything up and return the church to its original condition. Then one more night in Rotherham, attendance at the morning service (including a few of our greatest hits from the show) before saying farewell to a tiring but incredibly entertaining and rewarding week.