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Historic Shirt Race is called off after 70 vibrant years

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ONE of Oxfordshire's most popular social events has been cancelled this year because of a lack of organisers.

The historic Great Shirt Race at Bampton, near Witney – organised by the Spajers (the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Junketing) – has delighted hundreds of people annually for seven decades.

But this year's spectacle, due to take place on Saturday, May 27, has been called off after three experienced organisers resigned from the committee.

Originally, teams of two, both dressed in night-shirts, one sitting in a pram, wheelbarrow or other non-powered contraption, the other pushing, raced through the village streets.

In recent years, two races have been run, one for seniors and a joint one for juniors and intermediates.

A fancy dress parade and chariots have also been added, allowing participants to be even more inventive and attracting even larger crowds to cheer them on.

Last year, the Spajers made their highest ever profit to benefit more than 300 pensioners in Bampton and the neighbouring village of Lew.

Don Rouse, one of the organisers still in post, said: "I have been privileged to be Master of Ceremonies at this race since 1970. Every year, the fun and in-



The annual Shirt Race has run for seven decades

tensity of this important event in Bampton's social calendar have grown.

"The Spajers have always benefited from an army of volunteers and know that they would be there again. But shows in these days of health and safety regulations and restrictions need an army of officers with commitment and knowledge."

Mr Rouse is hopeful that new volunteers can be recruited to stage the event next year.

Some claim that the origins of the race can be traced back to the year 784 when Ethelred the Shirtless chased the burghers of Bampton through the



The event has grown since 1970

streets in an unsuccessful attempt to clothe his nakedness.

Others say it dates from 1067 when William the Conqueror's soldiers, stationed at Shifford, were hit by a beer drought and

invented the race to pass time.

The modern version began in 1953 when village gas man John Quick, farmer Doug Read and fishmonger Paul Bovington dreamed up the idea of a pram race through the streets to celebrate the Queen's Coronation.

John Quick had another reason for organising the race – "to combat the dreaded influx of that new-fangled television that I'm bitterly agin".

The event was revived at noon on June 2, 1953, Coronation Day, with villager Ernie Sheppard firing his 12-bore shotgun in the air to start the first race.