

Organising a Period Ball by Christine Rogers

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Why are you running it -- for enjoyment or to raise money?

Who are you hoping to attract -- dancers or non-dancers?

If you are running a ball solely to raise money, you need to consult a professional party organiser.

If you are running a ball for enjoyment and for people who enjoy dancing, read on.

FIRST THINGS

You need a venue accessible to your 'market' of possible ticket--buyers, a Master of Ceremonies, a band, a caterer (if you are offering refreshments) and a market.

Decide, and keep in mind, just how authentic you want your ball to be and make this clear to everyone. You may prefer fun to be put ahead of authenticity.

Book the MC, the venue and band early – some are booked up two years in advance. You will need to decide the period of your ball before you can book the MC and band. It would also be preferable to have a venue commensurate with the period.

The MC should have experience in the dances of the period and experience of running a ball. He/she will be able to advise how many tickets you can reasonably sell for the size of the venue, and you will need to know this in order to work out the cost of the ball and therefore the ticket price. He/she may also be able to recommend a band.

You can run a ball with recorded music if the MC is willing and able, but live music is vastly preferable. If the MC is using recorded music, he must be licensed for it. And have someone to help manage it for him/her.

THE VENUE

The venue should have an uncarpeted floor, preferably wood, ideally sprung and a good acoustics. It must also have a licence for music and dancing.

You will need at least one changing room, with mirrors, tables, some chairs and preferably rails for clothing. Experienced dancers may prefer to change in one room as couples pack their costumes together and help one another to dress, but less experienced dancers may find this embarrassing and prefer two rooms.

You need to check whether there are constraints on the time when music can be played and also, if your ball is in spring or summer, whether windows have to be kept closed.

You will need a kitchen for the caterer and space/s for eating/drinking, also crockery, cutlery etc.

You will need the venue for at least an hour before the ball starts, preferably two, and for at least 30 minutes after the ball ends, preferably an hour. This can be cut down if all your guests will be arriving in costume but they will need to know in advance if there will be no changing facilities.

The venue will need to be accessible to your 'market' --

- consider accessibility by car, and parking
- consider accessibility by train, underground, bus
- consider convenience for guests coming in by air or Eurostar, if you think this likely.

Be warned that some venues have acoustic equipment that cuts off all electricity if the decibels go above a certain level. Check that this equipment is set at a suitable level for a ball as chaos can result if everything stops and all the lights go out suddenly.

THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Never book an MC inclined to be sarcastic or short--tempered.

Keep the MC advised of the balance between experienced and inexperienced dancers, as ticket sales progress.

Check final arrangements for both MC and the band carefully ahead of time.

THE BAND

The band should be able to play the right music, preferably on the right instruments. They should have experience of playing for a ball of the right period, or at least be willing to take the time to acquire the music, learn and practise it.

Check that the band have music notation for the period; if they do not, see if the MC can supply it. Ideally the MC and band should have worked together before, if not they should meet before the ball to check through the music.

Specialist bands for period balls are few and far between, as are specialist MCs, but are worth seeking out as they can make a considerable difference to the success of your ball. If the ball is to be C19 or C20, upmarket and expense not to be spared, you might consider one of the regimental bands, who are very capable and professional.

Check how much time before the start of the ball the musicians need to set up and what time they want to gain access to the venue.

Either the band, the MC or the venue will have to provide amplification for band and MC and this equipment should be PAT tested or it may invalidate your insurance.

If the MC and band want to use amplification provided by the venue, they will need to check in advance that they know how to use it.

If the band want to use a piano provided by the venue, it is as well to ensure that the piano is professionally tuned immediately before your event. This will cost extra and must be included in your budget.

Either the venue or the band will have to deal with paperwork for the Performing Rights Society.

THE DANCING

How will your guests know how to do the dances?

Do you want to have rehearsals in advance of the ball?

These could be on the day before, during the morning of the day of the ball, or, two or more rehearsals well in advance (e.g. a month before, a week before).

Has the MC chosen a programme commensurate with the abilities of the dancers you expect?

Is the MC willing to take these rehearsals? Can he supply recorded music to avoid the extra expense of having live musicians for these and has he a licence for using recorded music in public and also the equipment?

Where will the rehearsals be held? Include the cost of the venue in your accounts.

If the MC does not want to take rehearsals, could someone else take them? Will the MC provide the necessary information to enable this?

THE CATERING

Before booking a caterer you need to decide on what type of refreshments you want to offer, then discuss the details of food, drink (alcoholic, non-alcoholic, water, beverages), seating, table covering and decoration, etc. with the caterer.

If providing supper, check with ticket buyers, MC and band whether they have special dietary requirements.

Are you going to have a bar available to guests, or are you going to supply drinks?

Beverages are often very well received by dancers, especially in winter. Water should always be available and, if guests may be driving to the ball, fruit juice and other non-alcoholics should be available at the bar.

If the venue does not have a permanent licence for alcohol, either the caterer or the organiser needs to apply to the local council for a Temporary Event Licence. This is quite simple.

The caterer will need to know the time when he has to have food prepared and this should be discussed with the MC. Some venues insist on their own caterers, or may be able to recommend caterers who know the venue. Some venues will allow guests to bring in their own wine, or even their own refreshments.

You could do the catering yourself, or have a 'New England' supper where everyone brings something and puts it on the table for all to share.

INSURANCE

Does the insurance carried by the venue include compensation for accidents happening at your ball? If not, the organisers of the ball should carry full public liability insurance.

PUBLICITY

Your 'market' of guests will need to be considered before you can decide on publicity.

Flyers, advertisements or 'invitations' should be designed in line with the period, as should the tickets.

Publicity should include the names of the MC and band, as this may help to sell tickets.

If suitable for your ball, tickets might be accompanied by:

- a note of what costume will be acceptable and changing facilities
- notes about the dances and any rehearsals/ classes in preparation
- a map of the venue and how to get there
- suitable accommodation in the area
- interesting places to visit in the area
- a note of what time the venue will be open for arrivals and what time it has to close
- a note if non--period items are not to be allowed in the ballroom
- a note regarding the taking & posting online of photographs & video. Will a professional photographer be present?

STAFF

Depending on what is provided by the venue and the caterer, you may need people for certain jobs:

- collecting tickets, checking guest list and collecting cash if necessary.
- helping set out chairs and tables
- If you are not having a reception, someone should be at the door, ready costumed, to welcome arrivals and making sure people know where to go

- Helping to clear up. If you want to use the venue again -- leave a good impression!

A photographer might be a good idea -- but your guest may want to take their own photos as well and the photographer will have to know this.

EXTRAS -- to be included as you feel would fit your ball

- Decorations -- floral or otherwise
- Raffle or auction
- Competitions of any kind (e.g. 'best dressed')
- Dance cards (not usual before about 1840 but for a Regency ball you could provide Quadrille cards)
- Special commemorative fans for an upmarket ball (consult Greenwich Fan Museum)
- Reception in advance
- Special event to be held on the following day if people are travelling some way to get to the ball and staying in the area overnight.

HELPFUL

Check with the band and MC at least a week before the ball that all is well and they have the right date!

Check with the venue a week before the ball that all is prepared in accordance with your agreement.

On arrival, ask the caretaker or manager to check acoustic equipment setting (see under Venue)

Look after the band and MC -- make sure they have water available and provide supper.

Supply mirrors, clothes rails and hangers if the venue does not do this.

Decide how to open your ball -- consult the MC.

FINALLY

Decide how to close your ball -- after the last dance you may be thanking people who helped, and, if so, don't forget the band and MC

You may need to remind people that the venue is among housing and ask them to be quiet when leaving.

Make sure you have plenty of help to clear up when the dancers have gone.