

# Comet country

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**COMET REPORTERS**  
**take a look at people**  
**and places that make**  
**our area what it is today**

## It's good to wobble!

**E**GYPT and Baldock may seem poles apart, but one lady is bringing a taste of the Middle East to the market town.

Bridget Poulter teaches raqs sharqi, a form of Egyptian dance.

And Bridget is doing it for the women - providing an alternative to the gym that is suitable for any ages and, unlike belly dancing, you get to wear the exotic clothes without putting your tummy on display.

Bridget, who works as a market research officer at North Hertfordshire College, said: "Raqs sharqi can be danced by anyone, regardless of age, ability, size or body shape. You certainly don't need to be 18 and a size 10 to take part."



■ Bridget Poulter on stage at the Rhythms of the World Festival

### Get into shape the Egyptian way

"Older women bring a softness and maturity to the dance that can be extremely moving to watch. And you don't have to hold everything in - it's good to wobble!"

And what are the benefits? Bridget said: "Apart from giving people the chance to dress up in lovely colours and jangly hip-belts, raqs sharqi is a wonderful way to exercise and makes a big change from going to the gym or even yoga and pilates."

Bridget, from West View, Letchworth GC, added: "The dance uses the whole body, not just the hips, and is great for improving mobility in the spine, shoulders and strengthening leg, back and stomach muscles - but in a gentle way."

"The majority of women start in their 30s, like myself. I think it has something to do with finding an exercise form that is more holistic and helps women accept themselves, get back in touch with their essential femininity and express who they are."

"It's wonderful watching women who start classes quite shy and closed up, begin to soften and relax, and gain in confidence - but most of all have fun."

Bridget, 43, finds time to perform with the group Tabeya at community events, private parties, hen nights, weddings and workshops.

She also dances regularly at Rhythms of the World in Hitchin, at the raqs sharqi showcases at the Steiner Theatre in London, and at the Out of Africa Festival in Carnaby Street.

Bridget has studied with senior teachers in the UK and in Egypt.

Her interest in Egypt started when she was young. She said: "It was initially sparked off by visiting the Tutankhamen exhibition as a child, and I used to dress up in my mum's chiffon scarves at every opportunity, and present Dad with Turkish delight on Father's Day."

"I even remember making a fancy dress costume at 16 using milk bottle tops as I didn't have sequins - not to be recommended as they are uncomfortable and a little bit cheesy!"

But it was in Baldock where it all started as the first time Bridget tried Egyptian dance was at her

She said: "The then resident belly-dancer dragged me onto the floor and I've been hooked ever since."

This spurred Bridget on to start classes at the Letchworth Centre for Healthy Living about nine years ago.

She took over when her teacher moved and is now going back to the place it all began.

She said: "I really enjoy bringing the dance to a new audience, and Baldock seemed a good place to start. It seems to have had a negative press recently, what with the town hall problems and the mixed blessing of the bypass."

"I'm sure there are lots of women living in the newer estates in the town who would really benefit from joining this alternative way of keeping fit."

"Not everyone wants to wear Lycra and go red in the face, and Egyptian dance offers something that more conventional exercise cannot."

"The drum rhythms and joy of dance connect with something deep within us, counter-acting the speed and transience of modern life."

Bridget teaches on Mondays at The Settlement in Nevells Road, Letchworth GC, from 9.30-10.30am, Mondays at Shephall Leisure Centre, by Barnwell School in Stevenage, from 7.30-8.30pm, and at Baldock Community Centre on Thursdays from 8.30-9.30pm, as well as running classes at Letchworth Centre for Healthy Living. She is holding a free taster session on Friday, March 9, at North Hertfordshire College's Stevenage site and is planning to hold a 'Wiggle and Shake' learn together for mums and daughters in the future.

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