Triskaidekaphobia? Not in Akaroa!

by Gillian Blackmore

The fear of the number thirteen was nowhere in evidence on Friday May 13 at the Gaiety Hall when locals and visitors enthusiastically joined hands in the Dance of Mathematics.

Led by Canterbury University Senior Lecturer in Mathematics Dr Bill Baritompa and his band, we were taking part in a traditional Barn Dance designed by Bill to combine his love of dance and mathematics and to show that maths can be fun.

And fun it was.

Bill's joie de vivre was infectious and accompanied by the toe-tapping music of the doodlesack, lagerstick, banjo, flute, violin and piano accordion we were soon well on the way to mastering the grand chain in the dance "Lucky Sevens".

This required serious counting - if you've passed someone on the street in the last few days muttering ".....5, 6, 7 swing!" you'll get the picture.

We made friends while we made waves, discovering patterns and symmetry in "Waves of Tory" and demonstrated the chaos theory when "The Grapevine Twist" proved rather more complicated.

There was even a spelling dance, "OXO", for those more linguistically inclined.

The pièce de résistance was surely, in a nod to Akaroa's origins, Frère Jacques, danced and sung as a round.

You've all sung this, but danced it?

Suffice to say it involved four concentric circles dancing in opposite directions and at different times, but we performed with true Gallic panache and flair and a lot of hilarity.

Our performance may well be captured for posterity - a film crew from "Campbell Live" was recording the event to be shown in conjunction with a visit to NZ by British author Simon Singh of "Fermat's Last Theorem" fame.

I have to admit that we came for the dancing, but by the end of the evening we were hooked and duly presented ourselves at the Akaroa Sports Complex on Saturday morning for the second part of the event - Maths Entertainment.

It was great to see so many children among the audience and all were soon enthralled as Burkard Polster ("The Great Burke") introduced us to mathematical juggling.

Patterns such as Robot Drop, Rubenstein's Revenge and Windscreen Wipers emerged in a breathtaking display of dexterity.

I can't give away the secret of nine-ball juggling, but Burkard's sequence with squealing balls brought the house down.

He confided in the children that the squealing balls are really our tortured mathematical souls, which he specialises in capturing and bottling.

Next we learned that the hippopotamus is in fact related to the whale!

Mike Steel took us on a journey into the genetic era, biology and mathematics intertwining to demonstrate how molecular data is used to discover and map links between species.

Phylogenetics was fascinating but complex, and the younger children drifted off to play outside.

They were soon lured back though to learn how to send secret messages and break codes.

Ben Martin's lively presentation "(Not) Really Secret Codes" involved us all in discovering the mysteries of code-making, from Caesar's Cipher, used in battle 2000 years ago, to present day computer encryption methods.

If Dr Baritompa's aim was to show the human face of mathematics, then he and his colleagues surely succeeded.

We might have arrived as tortured and captured mathematical souls, but we left informed, entertained, and captivated.

Burkard Polster explains the mathematics of juggling at the Akaroa Sports Complex.