

## No wonder there's a twinkle in Beelzebub's eye by Derek Yarwood

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There was a devilish twinkle in Beelzebub's eye. "One night" said Tommy Lafferty from behind his large, brown cotton-wood beard, "I got through 17 pints."

On that occasion he had to admit, he was one player who was more staggering than strolling. "But," added Tommy proudly, "I was still up bright and early for work the next morning."

Electrician Tommy, 55, is one of the bright sparks of a unique company of amateur actors. And it's a tribute to his self-sacrificing dedication – not to mention staying power – that he has been knocking back the beer in the cause of his splendid art for 20 years or more.

Other colleagues, required to perform roles less demanding than the ale-swigging son of Satan, of course have been playing their parts even longer. Fifty years some of them and still going strong.

"Soulcaking" is the name of the game. And among the tiny villages and hamlets of rural Cheshire there is no finer bunch of soulcakers than Tommy Lafferty and the rest of the gang from Antrobus where they've been observing this quaint Hallowe'en custom since Methuselah was a land.

At one time every village had its own gang of soulcakers, whose rivalries often extended to pinching each other's props and even to fisticuffs. But now only Antrobus survive to carry on a tradition that is rooted in the very beginnings of English folk lore

For two weeks every year, opening on All Hallows Eve (October 31) the Antrobus Soulcakers pile into a van and, accompanied by a surprisingly large convoy of supporters, travel the country lanes of Cheshire calling at pubs, dance halls and parish rooms to stage a play which is part ritual, part historic pageant - with a touch of pantomime thrown in.

There are indications that it was once a pagan fertility rite which has somehow become involved with the more Christian practice of singing chants on All Souls Eve to save the good souls of the dead from the clutches of the Devil. Later, resurrection and the symbolic triumph of good over evil became woven into the fabric of the play. Nowadays it's played strictly for laughs.

Old Beelzebub still makes an appearance in the 20 minute action – but instead of horns and a forked tail he wears the guise of a rascally poacher and wields a clog and a dipping pan.

## Resplendent

And when King George (actually St George, of dragon-slaying fame) goes into battle against the villainous Black Prince of Paradise, his combat kit includes a bandsman's uniform and peaked cap and a wooden sword.

His opponent is no less sartorially resplendent in ex-service issue police tunic and Kaiser Bill style spiked helmet while the Letter-in's top hat and tails and the Driver's red hunting jacket and jodhpurs also reflect the improvised ingenuity of the wardrobe department!

A village idiot, a man dressed as an old woman, a doctor who dispenses magic as well as medicine and a three-legged horse whose costume is frowned by a real equine skull reputedly 200-years old, are the play's other characters whose form would seem to demonstrate the debt that the modern pantomime owes to the soulcakers' art.

The Soulcaking story varies from place to place. Odd corruptions have crept in as no-one, apparently, has bothered to write down the script; it has simply been passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The Antrobus version, interrupted only by two more pressing engagements in the theatre of World War, must, however be the longest-running show of all time.

It also has the curious reputation of being probably the only dramatic production ever to be "booked" by the order of a last will and testament!

It happened about a dozen years ago on the death of a Major Arnold Boyd, the well-known Cheshire ornithologist, naturalist, author and patron of local folk customs. It had been he who had revived the village soulcakers when World War II ended, and thereafter the gang made his home at Frandley House, Antrobus, the first stop on their Hallowe'en round,

In his will Major Boyd requested they should perform their play one final time in the old mansion house.

## Booming Voice

David Goulburn, 43, who plays the evil Black Prince, lowered his booming voice a decibel or two to explain: "We did as he wished, and performed the play to an audience of two. They were the people who were winding up the Major's affairs at the house. I don't think they really knew what was going on."

Audiences in the 50's were generally a bit unenthusiastic, recalled David who is the third generation to go a-souling. Whereas at present, he added, there seemed to be something of a revival of interest in folk activity.

But has Soulcaking a future? "It has if we have anything to do with it" said David, raising his voice to full Black Prince pitch. "We will certainly keep it going as long as we can. And no-one in Antrobus wants to see it die out."

Younger men are coming along to ensure continuation, too. Adrian Peters, an instrument artificer who portrays Mary, the mother of the Black Prince, is only 24. He followed the example set by the grandfather and two uncles of his wife who were members of the past Antrobus gangs.

## **Eccentricity**

Now, coached by the old hands like Jack Thompson, who is still prancing about under Wild Dick's horse blanket at the age of 72, and Wilf Isherwood – who's not saying how old he is, but he's been Soulcaking for about 50 years – Adrian has added a Monty Pythonish eccentricity to the traditional "dame". David Burned, a nurseryman who runs a stall on Warrington Market, is also among the newer recruits to Soulcaking. He plays Dairy Dout, the red-faced village idiot, school boy cap askew and shirt tail flapping.

"It is an odd thing to get hooked on" he says. "But when I first saw the gang perform I was completely enthralled. It just did something to me, and I watched them every night after that. I am interested in folk customs and this is definitely one which is worth preserving."

David and the rest of the gang – Jim Wright and Bernard Hurst complete the line-up – will be gratified to know too, that their efforts to keep Soulcaking alive are being noted well beyond the ancient portals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wheatsheaf Inn which is the group's base. For later this month

They have been invited to put on their play at Cecil Sharpe House in London, the very bastion of folk lore in this country.

As for this year's season locally, last Wednesday's hectic four pubs-in-two-hours opening night schedule raise the usual quota of smiles – and a few quid for charity into the bargain.

In the bars and lounges of Little Leigh, Acton Bridge and Weaverham, though there were those among the audience to whom the one act comedy must have been all Greek. And from the focus of attention, later, the performers have clearly been upstaged by that grotesque, grinning skull with its fibre glass fillings.

Still, as these old troupers will readily admit, that's show business!