

## Northwich Chronicle

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### Soul Stars!

#### Ancient tradition survives thanks to performers

At one time many Cheshire villages had traditional soul cakers. Today only Antrobus Soul Cakers, the longest running group in the country and Comberbach Mummers, who were revived a few years ago, keep the tradition alive in the Northwich area. Jane Matzen reports

A Link back to the pagan past of more than 2000 years ago still survives - thanks to the few remaining groups of soul cakers and their strange play with no written words - which is performed every year around Hallowe'een

Few can boast longer service as an Antrobus Soul Caker than Edward Isherwood, now aged 64, who was 14 when he stepped in because the war had robbed the village of some of its star performers.

I was part of a young team from the youth club who were gathered together to keep things going and it just carried on from there, says Edward, a retired lorry driver who lives in Manor Avenue, Higher Marston.

Just like many other families connected with soul caking he has grown up with the characters who populate the weird and wonderful goings-on the play that used to strike terror in village children years ago.

His grandfather Eddie Plumb was in the gang, as was his father Wilf Isherwood, and now his son Eric 39, is following in his footsteps.

Says Edward: "We do it mainly to keep an old Cheshire tradition alive and to meet up with the lads for a few nights every year. Apart from that it must be something in the blood.

The play is believed to have links with the Celtic worship of the horse goddess Epona, with the nine performers representing the souls of the local dead.

The action starts with a sword fight between King George and the Black Prince which results in the prince being slain and a Quack Doctor being summoned.

After the Prince recovers, the Letter-In, who acts as the equivalent of a modern day master of ceremonies, urges the two combatants to lay down their swords and rest for 'he that fights and runs away will live to fight another day'

They all leave, except the Letter-In, and are replaced by several new characters, including the village idiot called Dairy Doubt, a tramp called Beelzebub and a Wild Horse and Driver.

Where exactly it all comes from has been lost in the mists of time. But for many years the soul caking tradition has formed part of the folklore connected with Halloween.

Recalls Edward: 'The performances start on All Souls Eve when the ghosts are supposed to walk about. At one time people would be frightened of it, but these days they don't seem to worry. We used to call at country houses and farms and if the occupants were in bed, they would let you in for fear of attracting bad luck'

Edward has been donning a wig, shawl dress and bloomers as the Old Woman, the mother of the Black Prince, for as long as he can remember. He has suffered for his art on more than one occasion including the night he was thrown out of the gents' toilet when he went to change his costume at a pub!

I think I was chosen for the part because I was one of the youngest and I have taken some ribbing over it through the years, although not so much these days. It's not a part everyone wants to do because it takes so long to get ready for it.' He says.

Years ago, when many more villages had their own gangs of soul cakers, fights would often break out when they met.

A real horse's skull is used to depict the horse and it was a tradition that whenever groups passed each other they would try to pinch the other gang's horse's head.

I can remember fists flying about and things getting quite heated says Edward.

In the old days we used to call at various houses in the area and at the end of the performance the occupants would give us a glass of beer and something to eat.

Over the years the Antrobus Soul Cakers have turned performances into a profitable fundraise for charities raising between £400 and £500 annually.