



## Mummer's the word

*Forty years of the Knaresborough Mummers*

**Q**uestion: What do Guy Fawkes, Napoleon Bonaparte and the Loch Ness Monster have in common? Answer: They're all characters in plays performed by the Knaresborough Mummers, who celebrate their 40th anniversary this year.

The team's history is intertwined with that of the Knaresborough Folk Club, which in 1974 was run by John Burrell. His friend Richard Hardaker suggested performing a mummers play for the club's Christmas party. The experiment was a success, and John was to discover that a mummers team is for life, not just for Christmas: forty years later he remains the team's "Mummer Superior". Since their formation the Mummers have appeared

at folk festivals all over the country and even overseas. On one notable trip abroad they performed one of their plays entirely in German. If a little was lost in translation, much was gained in appreciation, and no doubt some Germans concluded that Yorkshire must be a curious place indeed.

Mummers plays tend to be short and humorous. Their origin is unknown and their stories vary, but most have a theme of death and resurrection. The hero of the play is usually a famous character like St George, who is challenged to a duel by an enemy such as the Turkish Knight. A fatal confrontation is always followed by a miraculous cure, as a doctor revives the victim (for a fee, naturally).

*The mummers performing Robin Hood in 1978*



*A performance for Edwardian Day in Knaresborough in 2004*

The play is sometimes concluded with a sword dance or a song. Mummers plays have been performed for countless years throughout North Yorkshire, examples having been noted in many locations including Ripon, Thirsk and Boroughbridge.

While the Knaresborough Mummers often used traditional sources for their performances, they always injected a contemporary twist to proceedings, adding a liberal dose of Goons or Python humour to the mix. Some of their plays were written by members of the team, like the 'Knaresborough Miracle Play', featuring local characters such as Mother Shipton and Blind Jack. Their most recent offering was 'Robin Hood and the Friar of Fountains Abbey', based on the legend of

Robin's riverside encounter with Friar Tuck. This was performed at the Abbey itself, although neither of the combatants braved a ducking in the River Skell. Authenticity has its limits.

The mainstay of the Mummers' repertoire is the 'Blue Stots' play, which was traditionally performed at Christmas time in towns and villages around the Vale of York. The team were keen to present a play with a local connection, and while it was known that a Blue Stots play had been performed in Knaresborough and Harrogate, few details had survived. Team members Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin cast their net a little wider, and were able to assemble a complete play based mainly on a text collected from Marton-cum-Grafton, with additional material from Raskelf and Nether Poppleton. Chas and Stuart published *The Return of the Blue Stots*, in which they noted that the original performers were often farm workers (Blue Stots being a corruption of 'plew stots', or bullocks) who were cadging for money or treats. They would

“ Acting talent is not necessary – in fact it’s discouraged ”

blacken their faces and pin rags to their inside-out jackets, both to look comical and to disguise their identity should their visits cause offence to the locals.

The Knaresborough Mummers keep this Christmas tradition alive, touring pubs every year around Harrogate, Knaresborough, Nidderdale, Easingwold and Marton. Unsuspecting drinkers and diners come face to face with characters like Beelzebub and King Slasher, whose noisy arrival causes a variety of reactions.

Audiences are usually intrigued, as the Mummers bang frying pans, trade insults and clash swords. The slain hero rises to fight another day, and when the hat is passed round the contributions are often generous. The Blue Stots play is short, so the team are able to cover many pubs in one tour, and the tradition of following each performance with a beer ensures a drinking schedule worthy of William Hague. More creditably, in 2012 the team notched up its 2000th performance.

These days the money collected goes to charity, and over the years the Mummers have donated over £12,000 to local charities such as Follifoot Park Disabled Riders Group, Jenynruth Workshops and Martin House.

To mark their anniversary the Mummers

are hosting a special concert at Knaresborough's Frazer Theatre on Friday 7 November. The concert will offer a rare chance to enjoy a performance by celebrated local folk group Kitsyke Will, who have reformed especially for the event. Also on the bill is special guest Robin Van Zelst and some other friends from the original Knaresborough Folk Club. Tickets are available to purchase online from [wegottickets.com](http://wegottickets.com). See the Theatre's website for the link.

As well as celebrating their past, the Knaresborough Mummers are looking to the future, in quite a literal sense: in 2015 they plan to unveil a new play, a science fiction romp which will coincide nicely with the latest instalment of Star Wars, although the movie's budget may be slightly larger. The team are particularly keen to enlist some new members, and would be pleased to hear from anyone interested. Acting talent is not necessary (in fact it's generally discouraged), but an odd sense of humour is essential. ■

*For more information on the Mummers and their anniversary concert, visit the website [www.knaresboroughmummers.org.uk](http://www.knaresboroughmummers.org.uk) or contact John Burrell on 01423 566112, email [jburrell1@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jburrell1@hotmail.co.uk)*

## MANGLED ENGLISH

Funny the things you find in car parks. Thanks to J Mannikin of Fulford, York, who sent this cutting from the *York Press*.

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