

Chasing his tale

Sue Allan goes to Grasmere to meet the king of Cumbria's fine storytelling tradition, Taffy Thomas

Thousands of children and adults know the work of storyteller Taffy Thomas. For about 30 years he has taken his art to the public with his companies Magic Lantern and Charivari. It was while performing with Charivari's touring arm, the Fabulous Salami Brothers, in 1984 that a stroke floored him, at the age of just 36. With the support of his wife Chrissie he took up storytelling as speech therapy, and now with a repertoire of more than 300 stories, collected mainly from traditional oral sources, Taffy tours nationally and internationally, working as an entertainer and in education. He's also patron of the Society for Storytelling and in 2001 was awarded the MBE for services to storytelling and charity.

He cuts a striking figure in his "Tale Coat" – a unique, working piece of art, gorgeously embroidered by textile artist Paddy Killer with images from traditional stories. Audience members are invited to point to an image, and Taffy tells the story, a bit like selecting a tune from a jukebox. Today however he's dressed in normal garb as we settle down for a chat over a cup of tea in the conservatory of his tiny cottage in Grasmere, just around the corner from the Northern Centre for Storytelling, which is rapidly making the village as well-known for storytelling as it is for Wordsworth and gingerbread.

"My interest in storytelling actually began in the 1950s in a little semi-detached house in Somerset," he says. "The best day of the year was Boxing Day: the only day in the year that both sets of grandparents came on the same day. And I realised if I could get them talking – and it sometimes took a glass of sherry to do it – they would start to tell me stories."

The origins of Taffy's style of storytelling go back even further, to the ancient traditions of these Isles. Many of his teachers have been "from the tradition": travellers such as the late Duncan Williamson and Betsy White and the West Country storyteller Ruth Tongue. I find it astonishing that he can remember so many stories, but he says it's done visually – which is why the Tale Coat works so well.

How did the proud West Countryman end up living in Cumbria?

"Love will draw you where gunpowder wouldn't blast you!" he declares. "I came here to work with Welfare State Theatre Company and Chrissie was a community dancer here at the time. We started going out, and then we started staying in, and that was it."

"There were two things in the county which made

me feel really rooted here," says Taffy. "One was the Ellen Valley Band Christmas ceilidh at Ireby, where I went to tell some stories, and the other was going along to the World's Biggest Liar competition over in Wasdale. I was very warmly received by lots of lovely people, although it was years before I got placed. I've never won it but I got a third."

What's the difference between a story and a lie? He gives me a sidelong glance over his glasses: "There are plenty of things that have happened that are not true, and plenty of things that are true that never happened."

I'm baffled but he doesn't elucidate, just smiles.

Taffy's certainly well bedded into Cumbrian lore now, researching and re-interpreting local stories and even local food. One of his most recent projects was with local chef John Crouch and has resulted in a fantastic book of recipes and stories, *Three Golden Apples*.

Meanwhile the Centre for Storytelling is used as a venue for conferences and courses on the use of storytelling in health and education, its "Listening Room" is very well used, and the garden even more so for seasonal family storytelling performances, with braziers and torches for warmth and atmosphere in the evenings.

"Our three busiest days in the Storyteller's Garden are our Lake District Summer Music Festival event in August, Halloween, and our special Christmas night on December 18 – a mixture of Christmas stories and songs with mince pies and wassail. The wassail is hot spicy cider, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and cloves ... and brandy gave me my jolly red nose."

He can't resist performing, and I'm a very receptive audience, until I remember this is supposed to be an interview and I ask a question: granted that there's no such thing as a typical day, what does a storyteller do all day? "We probably have four or five performing days a week all over the country, from schools to village halls, folk festivals, weddings, literature festivals and after-dinner events, as well as groups coming here to us. One of the nicest events this year was Solfest, with my apprentice Dominic Kelly. At the end a little lad came up for a book. His mother said 'We're from Seaton and my little boy has never wanted a book, never read a book and never owned a book. But he's insisted he won't go anywhere today unless I buy your book, and I've got to sit and read it to him.' I was tearful, and feel quite tearful telling you about it now. If we win people's hearts with words, then the step to literacy is a small one."



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Taffy Thomas has been telling tales for more than 30 years, often with the help of the embroidered 'Tale Coat' behind him

Photograph: Phil Rigby

My level of literacy is found wanting, though. As I'm leaving Taffy tries me out on a Cumbrian riddle he collected from an old lady in Penton:

Riddle me, riddle me randy-o

Me mother gave me some seeds to sow.

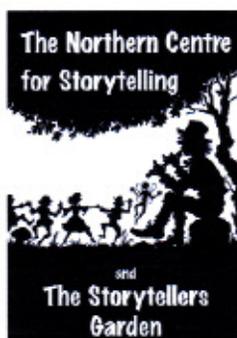
The seeds were black and the ground was white,

Riddle me, riddle me randy-o.

"Here's a clue: it's seasonal," he says. As usual I give up and have to be told the answer ... but you'll just have to guess – or look at the bottom of the page. **Life**

■ Christmas in the Storyteller's Garden will take place on Thursday December 18 in the evening. Tickets cost £5 for adults, £3 for concessions, and a family ticket costs £12 for two adults and two children. This is an outdoor event, so please dress warmly, although there are contingency plans for wet weather.

Story walks are led by request, and the Storyteller's



Garden can also be booked for private parties or celebrations, with storyteller.

Three Golden Apples, is available price £6.99, plus postage, direct from the Storytelling Centre. Phone to order and for postage details.

For further information contact Tales in Trust, Church Stile Studio, Grasmere, Cumbria LA22 9SW

Tel: 015394 35641 or mobile: 07855 628012.

Visit www.taffythomas.co.uk

■ The South Lakeland Storytelling Club is presented by the Centre at the Watermill Inn, Ings, on the first Tuesday of the month at 7.30pm. Admission free. Visit www.lakelandpub.co.uk.

■ The Society for Storytelling will be holding its national Gathering in Grasmere and Rydal on April 3-5 2009.

The answer to the riddle is making a Christmas pudding or cake – the seeds are raisins and the white is flour