

Telling *tales*

Grasmere's Taffy Thomas has been named the UK's first storytelling laureate



The poet laureate is given 600 bottles of sherry but a much more varied parcel will be delivered to Taffy Thomas when he takes up his laureate post next month. Taffy will become the UK's first storytelling laureate and will receive a 1kg bag of dried beans, a compass, a packet of love hearts, a clear glass bottle, a tall white candle, a silver, lucky charm bracelet and a whistle.

'I haven't dreamed what I'll do with those things yet but it's part of my brief to work them into stories during my two years in the post,' he said. 'Poet Brian Patten and former children's laureate Michael Rosen were involved in the selection process and the aim of the storytelling laureate is to promote oral storytelling. People come to storytelling from various routes - through

theatre or libraries but I am probably the storyteller who is closest to the oral tradition in that most of my stories come from people and have been passed through generations.'

But although the 60-year-old is now England's most experienced storyteller, he came to the artform when he couldn't speak.

Having qualified as a teacher and founded a theatre and arts companies which toured the UK and Europe, he suffered a stroke at the age of 35 which left him unable to speak for three months.

He turned to story telling as a form of therapy and now has a repertoire of more than 300 stories, tales and elaborate lies and was given an MBE in 2001 for services to storytelling.

He has converted his Grasmere home into a magical venue for his stories. There's an indoor listening room and the Storyteller's garden - a magical place filled with mysterious ornaments, lights and the storyteller's seat.

And when he puts on his Talecoat, he looks the part, too. 'It's a unique working piece of art,' he said. 'It's covered in images and people from the audience can use it as a jukebox, selecting pictures which relate to different stories.'

'My stories are for the young and the young at heart but the main bulk of the stories I tell are to school groups - children still have a passion for stories despite all their computers and electronic toys.'

Taffy is now artistic director of Tales in Trust, the Northern Centre for Storytelling and is involved in the Lakeland Festival of Storytelling and during his official two year term as storytelling laureate Taffy will undertake many official engagements across the length and breadth of the UK.

'Over the two years, I will do all within my power to promote the art and to encourage the passing on of both repertoire and skills,' he said. 'I will endeavour to lay a firm foundation for future storytelling laureates and believe this is an exciting new development for storytelling, and I am delighted and honoured to be involved at the start of a new chapter in the life of our art.'

Go to www.taffythomas.co.uk for details of Taffy's events.