



*Proof that Toads is one of the biggest drawers in Old Alresford.*

# TOADS JUMP FOR JOY

**Lesley Drew finds that village spirit is thriving in Old Alresford**

**T**oads has had a remarkable affect on life in Old Alresford. This month sees the 20th pantomime to be performed in the village's Christy Hall. Standing for The Old Alresford Dramatic Society, Toads was formed by a small band of residents following the closure of the village primary school, which was swiftly followed by the demise of the only shop - and there is no pub.

The village has a thriving Mixed Club, women's institute, active parish church and a village fair committee, but the school and shop had been focal points in the daily life of the community. The gap created by their loss needed to be filled with something that would provide villagers of all ages with something where they could interact socially.

Hence, Toads was spawned. Among the farmers and farm workers, doctors, solicitors, accountants, horticulturists, housewives, police, care workers, office and trade workers,

clergy and teachers was revealed a wealth of talent. This did not just embrace acting, singing and dancing, but also music, script writing, designing, dressmaking, painting, lighting, DIY, organisational skills and sheer ingenuity. This was something in which every resident could be a part if they wished. Some with no desire to experience grease paint or the spotlight opted for front of house duties, programme selling and provision of refreshments. So many in this small village became involved there was concern as from where the audience would come from.

It was in December 1986 that Toads' first production, *Cinderella*, was staged. Imagination was required for a stage, as the village's small Christy Hall did not have one; there were few lights and insufficient seating. So many villagers, of ages ranging from 6 to 65, wanted to take part that the script, written by various members, had to cater for 30 performers,



Raquel Roberts and Alan Hughes as Simple Simon and the pointedly grand Old Duke of York.



which resulted in the country's favourite pantomime being more in the style of a review. Three crammed performances, for which a fair number of the audience was required to sit on the floor and with the cast having only one entry and exit point, were given amidst much hilarity. The first producer, Alex Sinclair Wilson, expressed the hope that perhaps there could be an annual pantomime.

*Aladdin* followed in 1987. There was still no stage but David Tigg had worked on the lighting and sound effects and this time Verena Pegg had written the script. All scripts have a strong village bias and all pantomimes are set in and around Old Alresford, with local characters in the story.

Toads' success became wider known for, besides panto, they were also producing the Spring Frolics Show and as an organisation were taking their part in the popular annual village fair. In 1988 *Snow White* was extended to four performances and a stage was hired. A trio of members produced the script and the audience comprised people from as far afield as New Alresford.

A matinee performance was required in 1989 for *Beauty and the Beast*, when Sue Alexander produced and directed and was one of a quartet of members to write the script. By then, residents Rags Lock and Cliff Watts had made stage blocks. *Jack and the Beanstalk* appeared in 1990 and, directed by Penny Matthews, had a set designed by artistic resident Lyn Constable Maxwell.

The requirement for more audience space was acknowledged in 1991 for *Babes in the Wood* as there were five performances, plus a matinee. So that audience size could be increased, the musicians were literally moved into the broom cupboard. *Dick Whittington*, *Mother Goose* and *Sleeping Beauty* followed with *Sinbad the Sailor* being the tenth annual



everyone. The uniqueness of Toads is that it started as a strictly village group and has remained so. The rules of the society state that members must be resident or have previously lived in Old Alresford. Outsiders may be included provided their number never exceeds ten per cent of the membership. This permitted the admittance of Deborah and Graham Cranmer, enthusiastic thespians who live at Abbotstone, all of two miles from the boundary of Old Alresford. It has also meant that those who for various reasons have had to leave the village can remain a part of Toads.

As the success of the dramatic society has grown, so has the need for space, particularly

Joan Roberts (Bo-Peep) and Tony Burt (Boy Blue) in 1996

pantomime. By then a pattern was established for whoever was writing the script. It was certainly still funny and the aim was to embrace all those wishing to take part.

Toads was having an enormous impact upon village life not least in the fun department. During the incumbency of the Rev. Michael Campling as rector of Old Alresford, he and his wife Ann became enthusiastic members. On a Saturday night he could be seen cavorting in hideous pink and yellow striped tights and then appeared on a Sunday in his pulpit wearing his dog collar. During his time as warden at Old Alresford Place, the Winchester Diocesan Centre in the village, the Rev. David Rogers made an impact as a

pantomime dame. In one of the spring shows he was Freddy, playing opposite Sue Alexander's Lavinia. This pairing was such a howling success that it had to be repeated on several occasions. Uninhibited residents were, it seemed, prepared to bare their chests, show their legs and wear crazy wigs for the merriment of



for the storage of props and costumes. These are currently divided between an attic and a garage. Increasing technology has made an impact. At the beginning, posters and programmes were hand-written and photo-copied. Now artistic and computer talents have resulted in wonderful eye-catching posters and programmes.

In the past twenty years the first set of children have grown up and gone away; their parents have become grandparents. Some of the founder members have sadly died, some have moved far away and yet the society continues to thrive. Each new family arriving in the village receives an invitation from Toads and many take up the offer to join. Membership embraces 8 year olds (insurance does not cover under eights) to octogenarians. Role changing is a major key for the continuing success of the society. Members have swapped back stage for production, or costume making for music. Many people have written the scripts over the years, and wonderful pianists and musicians have interchanged, though Gail Straker took the role of musical director for an impressive 12 pantomimes.

In the two decades, production and direction has been undertaken by among others, Sue Hughes, Sue Alexander, Joan Roberts, Graham Cranmer, Tony Burt, Stevie Kavanagh and Marylyn Bell. All this has meant that when a gap appears, there is hopefully someone somewhere who can fill it.

This year's twentieth pantomime is *Rapunzel* the choice of Helen Gard who says simply that it is her favourite fairy story. For the first time she has written the script and will also be taking a starring role. She appeared in the first pantomime. It is rumoured that there may be a pantomime horse. This is a

character that has been avoided for a long time due to a lack of volunteers for the rear end.

Remarkably, other long-standing performers will be seen on stage: among them, Elgan Jones and Marjorie Clarke. The director and producer this year are a husband and wife team, Joan and James Veryard. Joan, then Joan Roberts, not only performed in the first pantomime, but the majority of them ever since. She has written and directed three pantomimes and this will be her fourth time as director, whilst James undertakes the work of producer.

Naturally the passing years have brought about changes, but what Toads has achieved is a social binding of the community and the success has gone beyond the parish boundary. In 1994 they gave a street performance in New Alresford for the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, and in recent years money has been donated to charity, most notably to The MacMillan Cancer Relief.

So, where does Toads leap next? Well, as Joan Veryard points out, next May will see the 20th production. It will be a cause for great celebration with Toads being a central plank in the life of Old Alresford for many years still to come.

Toads will be performing  
*Rapunzel* in the Christy Hall, Old  
Alresford, from 6th-10th  
December. Tickets can be  
obtained from Mrs. L. Mellish on  
01962-735913.



More like a scene from a college rag week, this was the Toads' performance in Alresford for the 50th anniversary of D-Day.