

WIMBORNE COMMUNITY THEATRE



THE QUARTER JACK'S CHALLENGE

Wimborne Minster, June 2000 (Wimborne Folk Festival)

CAST (in order of appearance)

Marion (Judge from the Audience)

Quarter Jack

Lady Margaret Beaufort - The King Maker and Educationalist with scroll

Alicia Payntere - The Wise Woman with herbs

Children of Alicia Payntere

Thomas Hardy - The Wessex Writer with book

Isaac and Elizabeth Gulliver - The Entrepreneurs with brandy

Mrs Henrietta Bankes - The Keeper of the Keys with bunch of keys

Alice Maud Baker - The Servant with trinket box

St Cuthburga - The Saint with Bible

Procession

Characters make their way to the Minster whilst singing "Wassail"

Wassail Lyrics

Wassail, wassail, all over the town!
Our coat it is white, and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;
With a wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

And here is to Dobbin and to his right eye,
Pray God send our master millennium pie,
Millennium Pie that may we all see;
With a wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

Then here's to the maid in the lily white smock,
Who tripped to the door and slipped back the lock!
Who tripped to the door and pulled back the pin,
For to let these jolly wassailers in.

Repeat 1st verse – last line sung twice.

At the Minster

Long table made of rostra blocks set in front of the Minster. Covered by tablecloth. Characters mingle in with the audience. Marion approaches the table and sees Hardy's poem. Reads poem.

Drum strikes. Marion, frightened, drops the poem onto the table and scurries back into the audience. Quarter Jack appears to host the challenge.

Quarter Jack: Welcome to the Quarter Jack's Challenge. Good people of Wimborne, I am Jack o'Clock at your service. As you know I am usually referred to as the Quarter Jack of Wimborne on account of the fact that I have guarded this town for the past few hundred years, marking every quarter of an hour. You may be surprised to see me in this rather unusual location, ladies and gentlemen. But, as tradition tells, it is my custom on special occasions to parade about the town and, ladies and gentlemen, this is such a special occasion, is it not? The Wimborne Folk Festival, eh, is it? *(waits for audience response)* Thank you. So to proceed. Hear ye, hear ye! On this day, I, the Quarter Jack, issue a challenge. We have arranged, at great expense, to bring to you today through time a selection of Dorset worthies, all who have contributed in some way to the wellbeing and development of this wonderful town of Wimborne. *(Drum roll)* Come on, let's hear some applause for Wimborne! *(pause for applause)* Each worthy comes bearing a gift for you all as well as some well-chosen words and when they've finished, you must decide who will be the Wimborne Personality of the Millennium. A statue will then be commissioned to stand in the heart of the town. At the threshold of the new, remembering the old, linking the past and the future. Right then, time to meet the contestants.

(as he calls them from the audience, each challenger presents their gifts on the table and take their places from left to right: Isaac Gulliver, Elizabeth Gulliver, Alicia Payntere, St Cuthburga, Margaret Beaufort, Mrs Bankes with Alice standing behind, Thomas Hardy)

Let's have a warm Wimborne welcome please to *(drum roll)*

From the 13th century, the wise woman of Cowgrove, Alicia Payntere and her family!

Ladies and gentlemen, I leap forward to the 15th century, please welcome, King Maker and Educator, Lady Margaret Beaufort!

From the 18th century, whose tomb is down there on the right, ladies and gentlemen, well known entrepreneurs and some say smugglers, Isaac Gulliver, his wife Elizabeth and their horse, Dobbin!

Next from the 19th century and the 20th, representing the landed gentry, Mrs Henrietta Bankes of Kingston Lacy, and her servant, Alice!

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, we have an outsider but erstwhile temporary resident of Wimborne, in The Avenue to be precise. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it's the Wessex poet himself, Mr Thomas Hardy!

These are the contenders today for the title, ladies and gentlemen. Each will speak in turn and try to persuade you of their claim to fame. But first we need a chief arbiter from our audience. A principal judge. Come along now – let's have a volunteer! (*ad lib*) No, too young, young man, no no.. Come along, goodness me. In that case, we'll have to choose ourselves. Now let's see. I think we'll have... YOU! (*points at Marion*)

All: YOU! (*pointing*) Yes, you!

Hannah: Me!

All: Yes, you!

Quarterjack: Step forward. At the double. 2 foot, 2 foot, 2 foot.. (*Hannah comes forward*)
Name?

Marion: Marion.

Quarterjack: Rank?

Marion: Teacher.

Quarterjack: Perfect. Absolutely fine. Now, I suppose you need your scoring sheet. And you know a lot about Wimborne, do you?

Marion: Not a lot.

Quarterjack: You'll know more in a minute. Right, take these sheets and take your positions. (*All sit*)
Now then, you, Marion of Wimborne, must decide who will speak first by looking at the selection of gifts on the table. Hold your gifts aloft, please. (*All wave objects and vie for attention*) You have a choice..

Marion: What should I choose?

Quarterjack: A book, a scroll, a Bible, some herbs, some brandy, the keys...

Marion: I think I'll choose this one. (*picks up scroll*)

Quarterjack: She has chosen the scroll, ladies and gentlemen. Hold it aloft, Marion of Wimborne, so that all may see it. The scroll, ladies and gentlemen, belongs to Lady Margaret Beaufort. She will speak first. Ladies and gentlemen, (*drum roll*) Lady Margaret Beaufort! (*drum roll*)

Lady Margaret Beaufort comes forward.

Margaret: Educare, educare, educare! *(general confused murmuring)*

Isaac: What does that mean?

Margaret: It means Education, Education, Education, young man!
My memory is not what it was. *(reads from scroll)* What greater gift can one give than that of knowledge? And I have bestowed the gift of learning to many over the last five hundred years. *(to Isaac Gulliver)* Unfortunately this young man doesn't seem to have taken advantage of it.
I was born at Kingston Lacy and had but one child, a son, born to me when I was 14 and already a widow. I imagined then that my legacy would be that of the dynasty of my flesh, the House of Tudor, but it was not to be.
(others sigh in sympathy)
My true legacy began with the chantry I founded in memory of my beloved parents, John and Margaret Beaufort, Duke and Duchess of Somerset, now at peace in the great Minster. Having survived four of my husbands
(others gasp in surprise)
- yes, four - I had no family to call on my fortune and so devoted myself and my wealth to founding many places of learning. My bequests grew and evolved over the centuries. There is one of local significance here in Wimborne, I wonder whether you can guess? It was made even greater than I had anticipated when it was granted a Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth I, my great granddaughter, and sadly the last of my line. It even became known by her name – have you guessed yet? Queen Elizabeth's School. By 1850 50 boarding pupils were taught and in 1970 it moved to its present site, where I am pleased to say it educates 1245.

Marion: I went there.

Margaret: My gift to education was the most lasting of my life for I have learned the flesh is weak and turns to dust but a thought that is taught lives on.

All: A thought that is taught lives on.

Applause as Lady Margaret Beaufort returns to her seat. Alice goes to help her.

Quarterjack: Time to choose the next gift. Hold up those gifts again, please. Let's see them all. That's it - the book, the keys, the Bible, the herbs..

Marion: I choose the herbs.

Quarterjack: The herbs it is, ladies and gentlemen. Alicia Payntere, the wise woman of Cowgrove! *(drum roll)*

Alicia rises to speak, climbs onto table.

Alicia: What's the value of books for those of us who can't read?
(general murmuring of interest)

A piece of vellum's a fine thing to touch and sniff, so I've been told. But the truth is that all these remedies and recipes, rhymes and spells, puzzles and potions that I've learned over the years came from the mouths of cunning men and wise women remembered all of it, down the ages, passed on with no need for writing down. And so I told my own sweet children so they would have the strength of knowing.

Alicia goes into a trance, then suddenly turns to Lady Margaret.

Alicia: I could cure you, you know.

Margaret: Oh, no, no!

Alicia proceeds to nominate a person from the audience. Child beckons him to come forward and sits him down on the block. Alicia puts a suspect mixture on his head to cure baldness. Sends him back into the audience.

Alicia: Doing charms and cures was a way to make a living of sorts for myself and my children. But because we lived poorly with a great quantity of herbs and a muddle of gourds and jars all over the house, people did point and whisper. *(all point at Alicia and begin whispering)* Because we were different, they started making things up about me which weren't true. *(All start gossiping to each other)* That Alicia Payntere has put the evil eye on Agnesse Abbott's cows said my neighbour, and his neighbour, then his neighbour's neighbour. Which did build up so half the village believed Agnesse' cattle had a spell put upon them. But I know, and my children knows, that the poor beasts were sick with a bout of pox. No one listened to me. I was taken before the Moot Court at Cowgrove and sentenced, *(all slam the table)* burnt *(all stand and start clapping hands to create fire sound)* before my very own children who raged days and nights against their mother's unjust death.

Children: NO! *(clapping dies down)*

Alicia: I should hope that today you all favour the great goodness the earth offers. And do teach the old ways of tuning into nature's mysteries. And if you do not, that would be my gift to you, that you should all grow a herb by your back doors and learn from using it, what it offers you.
Come children, I have done.

Sweeping her cloak, Alicia & child return to the table. Applause.

Quarterjack: Alicia Payntere, ladies and gentlemen. Marion?

Marion: That's terrible. Imagine being burnt in front of your children. And she was trying to heal people. Terrible.

Quarterjack: Are you ready for the next challenger?

Marion: I think I'm going to choose the book.

Hardy: Ah, that's fine. Thank you.

Quarterjack: Mr Thomas Hardy, everyone! *(drum roll)*

Thomas Hardy comes forward.

Hardy: There you saw the wonderful magic of this wise woman's potions but I bring you a different kind of magic. Magic born from the imagination, using words to create images in the mind that will last for centuries. I recall one day as I sat sketching the architecture of this fine Minster church that the shades and shadows began to draw in round me and out of those shades and shadows began to emerge characters from Wimborne's past. I left sketching and I sat down and I wrote this poem. Here, let me read it to you. *(climbs onto the table)*

Drone and bell (played by Quarter Jack) play throughout.
Hardy reads, the others are attentive.

Poem

How smartly the quarters of the hour march by
That the jack-o'-clock never forgets;
Ding-dong; and before I have traced a cusp's eye,
Or got the true twist of the ogee over,
A double ding-dong ricochetts.

Just so did he clang here before I came,
And so will he clang when I'm gone
Through the Minster's cavernous hollows--the same
Tale of hours never more to be will he deliver
To the speechless midnight and dawn!

I grow to conceive it a call to ghosts,
Whose mould lies below and around.
Yes; the next "Come, come," draws them out from their posts,
And they gather, and one shade appears, and another,
As the eve-damps creep from the ground.

(Hardy moves behind the others drawing them up "shade by shade", they make arches. Slowly, to the sound of the drone and bell, they dance around the table. The music stops and the characters become themselves once more, shivering from the ghostly chill)

Quarterjack: Mr Thomas Hardy, ladies and gentlemen.

Applause. Isaac and Elizabeth Gulliver come forward

Elizabeth: After that, I think we need a drink. Go along Mary and hand them out.

Isaac: I got a right shiver down my spine after that.

Mary hands out drinks to the other.

Quarterjack: This is Mr Isaac Gulliver, ladies and gentlemen. *(drum roll)*

Isaac & Eliz: At your service *(they bow)*

Elizabeth: I remember that time in our younger days when I had you laid on the table.

All look shocked, giggling "Oooh". Isaac looks to the audience with a grin.

Isaac: You don't want to be talking like that, Elizabeth. We're fine, respectable folk. You keep our married life quiet.

Elizabeth: Oh Isaac, that's not what I was talking about. I was remembering that night when that enthusiastic customs officer young Abram Pikes came so close..

All giggle "Oooh". Isaac looks again to the audience shocked.

Isaac: So close to what?

Elizabeth: To finally catching you!

Isaac: I got to give that young Gobloo credit. He never gave up easily but you and me had him outsmarted at every turn, lass.
(to the audience) Now, here's a tale that will demonstrate to you good people of Wimborne what quick wit and daring can achieve. You will surely realise why we should be your choice for our town's new statue.

Elizabeth: It was a particularly cold night but the sky was clear and covered in stars...
(All make wind noises)

It were windy but it weren't gale force! Isaac had been out for some time waiting for his lugger the Dolphin to drop anchor off Branksome Chine.

Isaac: *(mimes, sitting on his hobby horse, watching and waiting)* Ho there, John! Tell them to load those casks carefully into the wagons! We don't want any spillages of brandy tonight! Here, bring me one of those casks. I'm going on ahead tonight to see my lady wife.

The Quarter Jack passes him a cask.

Isaac: Look out for any trouble and I'll meet you at St Andrews in Kinson.

He waves, turns and rides off. Others make galloping sounds.

I galloped over the gorse and heather, homeward bound to Elizabeth. As I reached the crossroads, I heard the sound of hooves and a cry rang out.

Voices: Stop in the King's name!

Isaac: Ha Ha, come on lass! *(gallops faster)*

Elizabeth: The Gobloo chased him over the heath but Isaac gave him a good run for his money and arrived home minutes before him.

Isaac: *(dismounting)* Unsaddle the horse and turn her loose in the paddock. *(gives member of the audience the hobbyhorse. Still carrying the cask, knocks on the door)* Elizabeth, open this door! Hurry woman!

Elizabeth: Isaac, what's going on?

Isaac: Don't just stand there, woman. Revenue men coming. Get that trap door open.

Elizabeth pulls back carpet and opens door. Isaac leaves cask and crawls in - under table.

Elizabeth: Then there was a banging on the door such as you've never heard.

All bang on the table.

Voices: Open up in the King's name!

Elizabeth sees cask and hides it under her skirts.

Elizabeth: He was shouting and banging and raising the households throughout Kinson with his cussing.

Voices: Open up in the King's name!

Hardy: I know you're in there.

Mrs Bankes: You smuggling swine!

Voices: Open up in the King's name!

Elizabeth: *(to her maid)* Girl – stay calm and let him in. Just a minute *(arranges her skirt over cask)* All right, now!

Alice, acting as maid, opens the door.

Elizabeth: Why, sir, this is an unaccustomed pleasure, to be receiving a distinguished looking gentleman, such as yourself, on such a cold night. Oh it's my husband you've come to see, is it? Well sir, I'm afraid he's not at home. What's that you say? No sir, it would be wasting your time waiting for him for I know his business will detain him at least until the morrow.
Search my house! Surely sir, you do not presume that I am some slip of a girl who knows no better than to allow you in without a warrant from the magistrate! Now off with you, young sir! It is not seemly to be visiting respectable married ladies at this hour without the master of the house present.

Gobloo leaves. Isaac peeps out from under the table.

Issac: My brave and smart girl. *(they embrace)* But now he's found his way here, the rogue will be back. Of that I'm sure.

Elizabeth: And the very next day, with his document clutched in his hand, he was back, banging on the door and shouting.

Voices: Open up in the King's name!

Margaret: I demand entry to search this property.

Cuthburga: I have a magistrate's warrant.

Alicia: Open up I tell you.

Isaac: But once again, my quick thinking...

Elizabeth: *Our* quick thinking.

Isaac: Our quick thinking saved the day, and what would have been a grave disappointment for all our clients.

Elizabeth: Isaac, come here and lay down!

All show shocked reaction.

Isaac: Elizabeth, my dear, this is hardly a good time for..

Elizabeth: Isaac, just shut up for once and do exactly as I say. *(he lies down)* Pass me that box of wig powder.

Lie as still as a corpse, for my dear, that is exactly what you are. We are mourning your sudden demise of the plague.

Isaac: The plague!

She liberally applies the powder to his face and hands, crosses his arms. St Cuthburga places her cross on his chest. Elizabeth rehearses her look of grief. Isaac coughs and splutters, then lies perfectly still. All make knocking sound on table.

Elizabeth: Girl, open the door and let the gentleman in. *(Alice opens door. All start crying)* Oh sir, little did I think when you last saw me that our next meeting would be such a sorrowful one. Sir, you intrude on our grief. Yes, you may see my husband but you will hear not a word from him. He's dead! My Isaac! Felled by the merciless hand of the plague! My own dear husband. His cheeks so pale. His life-blood drained. His warmth and vigour all gone! See, sir. See for yourself his cold, stiff plague-ridden corpse!

What, sir? You do not wish to approach any further? You must depart so soon? Then, leave us with our grief for soon they will take his body from me! *(breaks down completely)*

Isaac *(sitting up)*: Oh, you little beauty. *(they embrace)* My burial took place with a coffin filled with stones and I left Kinson for a few months to let matters settle. We could tell you a few more tales of near misses with them philistines, but I tell you this, ladies and gentlemen, in all my exploits, I never once did resort to this *(pulls out pistol, all sit back aghast)* and never did I allow my brave men to use violence to further our trade. We continued our business, providing hundreds of stately folks with high quality wines, brandies, gin, silk, tea and lace; all at very reasonable prices.

Elizabeth: Very reasonable prices. Very.

Isaac: So, Wimborne, we leave you this *(holds up bottle of brandy)* and our gift to the millennium of gentlemanly conduct, quick wit and enterprise. Thank you.

They bow and move back to their seats. Others clap.

Isaac: They made me "esquire", you know. Buried in the Minster..

Elizabeth: Yes, yes and I suppose I had nothing to do with your success? Come on, Isaac, sit down and let the next story begin.

Quarterjack: Well, Marion, what do you say?

Marion: Well, that certainly was a very amusing story. Now then...

Quarterjack: She's making her choice, ladies and gentlemen. The keys!

Marion: Who do they belong to?

Mrs Bankes: Ah, the keys. Come, Alice. The keys are mine.

Quarterjack: Mrs Bankes of Kingston Lacy, ladies and gentlemen. *(drum roll)*

Mrs Bankes comes forward and takes the keys from Marion. She holds them up proudly.

Mrs Bankes: These keys represent duty. These are the keys to the estate of Kingston Lacy built by my family. For generations we gave employment to the people of this town. Through all these years we have brought stability and prosperity. Sometimes it was a struggle but I never shirked my duty. I was a widow for many years with only my children Ralph, Daphne and Viola..

Alice: Oh, dear Miss Viola..

Mrs Bankes: Don't interrupt, Alice. ..only my children for comfort and company but I carried out my husband's wishes and managed the estate diligently. When Ralph, my beloved son, came of age I was proud to hand over the estate to him. And he gave you the finest gift of all – the land for you all to enjoy. *(Applause)* I haven't finished yet.

(Land of Hope and Glory starts playing) A beautiful park to walk in (for a very modest charge) with its bluebell woods and gardens and the church of St Stephen's. And the house of Kingston Lacy with all its treasures – paintings by Velasquez, Rubens and Vandyck. One of the finest art collections in England! Wouldn't you agree, Mr Hardy?

Hardy: Quite so, Madam.

Mrs Bankes: Wonderful gifts for the whole town. The key to civilisation is duty.

Isaac: I never pay no duty.

Mrs Bankes: Do not forget this as you move into the new millennium. A sense of duty will serve you well. That is the end of my address, ladies and gentlemen.

Applause.

Come, Alice. (they start to return to seat)

Marion: Hang on a minute. Stop. *(Mrs Bankes & Alice freeze)* What about her servant? She hasn't told us her story.

Alice: *(flustered)* Oh please, you must forgive me but I haven't much of a story to tell.

Marion and others urge her to tell her story.

Alice: But I haven't even brought you a gift.

Marion: That doesn't matter. I would really like to hear you tale.

Mrs Bankes sighs impatiently but returns to her seat.

Alice: Well if it please you, Ma'am. I entered the service of the Bankes family, who resided at Kingston Lacy, as a nursery maid to their dear young ladies Miss Daphne and Miss Viola. I confess that I was particularly fond of Miss Viola. In fact I even gave her a pet name. I used to call her "Cissie". Please don't think me impertinent but I do sincerely believe Miss Viola was fond of me too, because on my birthday, which was just any other day to everyone else, she gave me this.

She produces a trinket box, shows it to the audience and holds it affectionately.

Alice: Oh, how I treasured it!
I never had much time to look at it though as it was a very hard job being a nursery maid. My favourite part of the day was just before I had to put the little ones to bed. I used to love brushing Miss Viola's hair. *(starts brushing child's hair)* She always cursed it for being so wiry but to me it was the most beautiful hair in the world. A mass of chestnut brown cascading down her back with golden curly ends.

Music starts, all sway. A sudden drum beat and Alice doubles up in pain.

Alice: It was on such a night that I started to get stomach pains. Of course I knew there was something wrong, but how was I supposed to know it was appendicitis? Anyway, the next day Nurse Stanley scolded me for coming so late to the nursery. I tried to explain that because it hurt so much when I bent over the fire grates to blacken them it took me twice as long. As punishment she wouldn't let me see the children. I never saw Miss Viola again. *(music)*
The only gift I can humbly give to you for the future is that of dedication. Dedicate yourselves not only to your work but more importantly to each other. As I dedicated my life to Miss Viola.

Alice gives Marion the trinket box and returns to the table. St Cuthburga rises.

Cuthburga: A sad tale indeed. Mrs Bankes, your church of St Stephen's is indeed very fine. But remember, this has been a sacred place for more than a thousand years.

This will not be the first but third millennium to be witnessed by this holy place, and by the town that now surrounds it.

Imagine how different this place might now be, had I not been called by my brother, King Ine of Wessex, to found his monastery here in Wimborne, in the year of our Lord 705.

The Minster town of Wimborne seems a peaceful and prosperous place now...

Marion: You obviously haven't seen it on a Friday night!

Cuthburga: But marauding Vikings laid waste to my monastery, and kept the people of Wimborne in fear of their lives. But the Christian faith remained strong and the church was rebuilt. You can even see the Saxon tower over there.

This is my church! It is called the Minster church of St Cuthburga. How proud am I of this magnificent building you see behind us now.

Lady Margaret, you were the mother of a great king, but I too came of royal blood. I was wife to the King of Northumbria and the sister of the King of Wessex. Like them, and like young Alice – and indeed like Mrs Banks herself – I shared a sense of duty and dedication, which has shaped my life.

Those of you who lived here in recent times must not forget those who came before you – we are all, every one of us is important to this place and this town.

You, the people of Wimborne who are taking this town into the third millennium will, in your turn, help to shape its future.

My gift to the town and people of Wimborne, whatever their faith or belief, is that of peace and harmony, both with others and within themselves.

Quarterjack: So, Marion, you have indeed heard all the challenges. Now it is time for you to speak. You from the end of this twentieth century who face a new age. Time for you to decide whose gift should be chosen and carried across the divide. Whose statue will you choose to make to stand on our green in years to come perhaps to remind people of this last millennium? Remember, Marion..

All: The choice is yours. *(all point at Marion)*

Marion: I don't know. *(to audience, ad lib)* Which one shall I choose? They were all brilliant..

Quarterjack: I will have to hurry you, Marion. Time waits for nobody.

Marion: I know. I've got it!

Music – Millennium Pie. Marion starts to arrange the challengers as a frozen statue.

Quarterjack: Marion appears to be making a statue, ladies and gentlemen.

Marion: Yes, there, I've done it.

Quarterjack: Wait a minute. Marion, you were asked to choose *one* personality. They can't all be winners, can they?

Marion: Well, I couldn't just choose one. They were all important in their own right. Each of them is different. Like Cuthburga said, they were all important - Christianity, education, dedication, duty, healing, business sense, poetry. Although I have to say in the case of Alice I think she was robbed. You shouldn't have to suffer in silence. Just think of all the wars that have been fought this century all in the name of duty. It's important to take on board all of these traditional values but at the same time we have to add new ideas. The past and the present shouldn't be separate. They've got to go hand in hand.

Quarterjack: And so, good people of Wimborne, The Quarter Jack's Challenge ends. It is time for the wassailing to begin. The words are in your programme, so please join in.

All: *(sing)* Wassail, Wassail, all over the town!
Our coat it is white, and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;
With the Wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

And here is to Dobbin and to his right eye,
Pray God send our master Millennium Pie,
Millennium Pie that may we all see;
With the Wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

Then here's to the maid in the lily white smock,
Who tripped to the door and slipped back the lock!
Who tripped to the door and pulled back the pin,
For to let these jolly Wassailers in.

Cast bow

Circle Dance and Conga round the Minster Green

The End