

# Time to burn ‘Old Bartle’ again

*Summer Strevens visits the Witton Feast in Wensleydale*

Approaching West Witton on the steady draw up the hill on the road from Leyburn, this sturdy little settlement of grey stone cottages strung along the northern facing lower slopes of Penhill seems no less distinctive than any other of the villages, hamlets or sprinkling of homesteads found on the road to Hawes. There is however, concealed beneath the surface of everyday Witton life, the secret of a curious and some would say brutal ceremony which is annually re-enacted with a sacrificial parade culminating in a fiery crescendo – the Burning of Old Bartle.

A true community occasion, the Burning of Old Bartle is a quintessential part of the Witton Feast, a weekend of village events beginning with the Cottage Show and the West Witton Fell Race run over the upper crags of Penhill. However, these are just the precursors to the real show stopper, a night time procession of some two hundred people following the progress of a gruesome Guy Fawkesesque effigy paraded down Main Street before being consigned to a symbolic fiery death.

The larger than life straw filled mannequin with a grisly masked face and flashing light bulbs for eyes is, in accordance with long-standing tradition, constructed in secret by a local family some weeks prior to the parade which is always held on the Saturday nearest 24th August, St Bartholomew’s Day. Carried by two bearers, Bartle is accompanied by a stick wielding ‘caller’ who repeatedly chants the Bartle Doggerel on the progression down Main Street, all but closed to traffic by the throng of gathered onlookers. Commencing his age-old journey at 9pm, Bartle emerges to the general delight of the crowd, and débuts on Green Hill (the possible vestige of a former

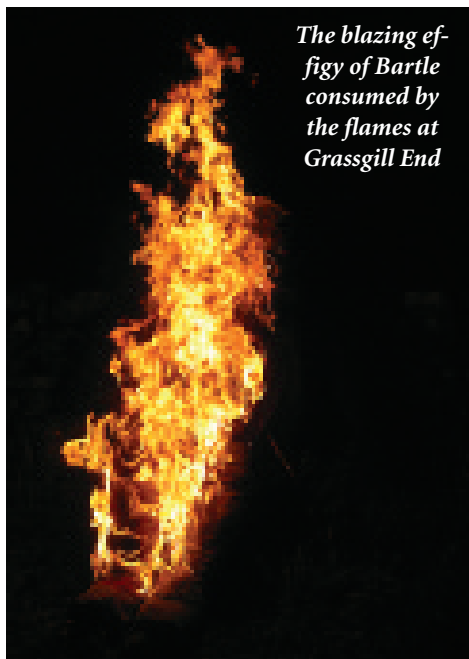
village green) in Kagram, the tiny hamlet adjacent to West Witton at the western end of the village, and here the initial merriment begins.

The Doggerel below is ritually recited at specific locations where the parade halts en route, and is also the signal for the bearers to be rewarded with a drink or two...

*On Penhill Crags he tore his rags  
Hunters Thorn he blew his horn  
Cappelbank Stee happened a misfortune  
and brak’ his knee*

*Grassgill Beck he brak’ his neck  
Wadhams End he couldn’t fend  
Grassgill End we’ll mak’ his end  
Shout, lads, shout!*

The lines of the Bartle Doggerel reference a number of the various and supposed ori-



*The blazing effigy of Bartle consumed by the flames at Grassgill End*

gins of this curious and long standing custom – the most frequently mooted identity for Bartle being that he was a sixteenth-century livestock thief who was caught operating in the area, ultimately lynched and despatched in suitably brutal fashion by the good folk of West Witton. Pursuing him over Penhill and Cappelbank Stee, he was finally apprehended at Wadham's End and put to death at Grassgill End, terminating his existence and thieving ways.

The other more devotional version stems back to the Reformation, a time when religious iconography was systematically being destroyed in line with the suppression of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII.

It may be no coincidence that the Burning of Bartle always takes place on the Saturday nearest St Bartholomew's Day, this being the saintly dedication of West Witton's church and Bartle being the contracted version of that name. It is possible that Bartle may be a representation of the wooden statue of St Bartholomew, a religious treasure venerated in his place of worship and hidden by the villagers during the Reformation from the ransacking soldiers sent to implement the removal of idolatrous images from their local church. The subsequent chase played out in the verse may well follow the progress of the villagers on the run with their revered icon, attempting to preserve the effigy of their patronal saint from the agents of the Crown, the statue damaged at various places along the route of the pursuit until it was eventually captured and consigned to flames at Grassgill End.

Again harking back to the Protestant Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Bartle has also been identified with Abbot Adam Sedbergh of Jervaulx Abbey, the picturesque ruins of this once substantial Cistercian house about nine miles from Witton. The Abbot, whose enforced involvement with the ill-fated Pilgrimage of Grace led to his

eventual imprisonment in the Tower and later execution, knew full well that the anti-Reformation rally was doomed from the start, but the men behind it were insistent that he join their cause. Knowing that his fate would be sealed if he participated with the demonstration against Henry VIII's schismatic measures, Adam hid out in the surrounding countryside, but was eventually discovered and roughly manhandled and physically coerced into joining the cause at Waddam's End in West Witton, the location of his capture one of the specified locations mentioned in the Doggerel verse.

There are however other strands of folklore woven into the Bartle tale, and the origins of how Bartle's Burning came into being. Another truly mythical candidate is the Bad Old Giant of Penhill, in local legend an ill-tempered ogre said to utilise the lower slopes of Penhill for his pig farming venture, that is when not tirelessly engaged in terrorizing the inhabitants of Witton and devouring the odd maiden for good measure.

One version of the giant's story pertains to his discovery that his prize boar had gone missing, with the blame laid firmly on the folk of West Witton. Tired of his regime of intimidation, the villagers joined forces and chased the giant from Penhill, setting his castle ablaze in the process. However there is another tale, telling how the notoriously brutish giant inhabiting the heights of Penhill was actually vanquished by his once faithful hound, Wolfhead. One day, with the giant on the point of devouring an innocent shepherdess, Wolfhead reconsidered his loyalties, chasing his master round and round the hilltop, nipping at his heels, the giant tripped over a boulder and pitched head first over Penhill Crag, and presumably "brak' his neck" in the fall to Grassgill Beck, as here there is supposedly a barrow, an ancient burial site, marked by a pile of stones and which is known locally as The Giant's Grave.



*West Witton Moor overlooking West Witton village. Picture by Dave Porter*

It is also said that on the slopes of Penhill an ancient hill figure may have existed, forgotten in all but local folklore, perhaps adding substance to the myth of the Penhill Giant.

There is even the further suggestion that Burning Bartle may have originated as a pagan harvest ritual linked with ancient flaming sacrifice to any one of the pantheon of pre-Christian Sun deities, as the annual timing fits well with many similar pagan ceremonies.

Whatever the true roots of this unique, and it must be said bizarre, tradition, it would seem that Burning Bartle is an amalgam of many ancient customs, which over the centuries have been tailored to fit the age. There is even a way-marked walk, the Bartle Trail, which can be followed around the village and

the lower reaches of Penhill with embedded mosaics set into the drystone walls pictorially marking Bartle's progress toward his grisly end.

Certainly the local enthusiasm for this remnant of ritualistic folklore is in no way diminished, the scorched and blackened area of drystone wall at Grassgill End serving as a year long reminder of what has taken place. Nevertheless Bartle in return brings prosperity wherever he goes, demonstrating a great generosity of spirit in view of the fiery fate repeatedly befalling him year after year in the flaming finale where the Bartle effigy is anointed with a touch of accelerant and set ablaze to the general delight of the cheering crowd. The definite high point of the Witton calendar, Burning Bartle keeps the flame of his story well and truly alight – long may it continue! ■