

Introduction

When you enter Great Torrington by road you pass signs that say, 'Cavalier Town'. In 1646 the last battle of the English Civil War in the south west between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers was in Torrington. One could imagine that was the sole reason for the 'Cavalier' description on the nameplates. However, if one lived in Torrington, one might think quite differently because since 1970 there has been a group of men who have certainly made their mark on the locality, who call themselves the Torrington Cavaliers. I guess most people think of them as the folk who build huge bonfires, often replicas of famous landmarks or buildings, and then set fire to them. These fires regularly attract tens of thousands of people to the town and massive amounts of money are raised for local and national charities.

To understand the origins of the Torrington Cavaliers one needs to go back to the early nineteen-seventies. Back then, Great Torrington was a small market town and had a population of around 3500. It was economically dependent on farming, glove making, crystal glass and the dairy factory down in Taddiport. Cars were far fewer than today. Weekly Council House rents were about ten shillings in old money (50p) and the average wage was around £7 a week. It has never been a town that is full of affluent people. The majority of residents were 'Torringtonians,' born in and around the town, who'd grown up together at school and who worked locally. They were used to making their own entertainment which, by and large, was pretty conventional. That was all about to change.

The Torrington Cavaliers began in 1970 after building a float for the 350th Celebration of the Mayflower in Plymouth. Thirty five years later they built and burnt the amazing half size replica of Nelson's flagship, 'HMS Victory' which had over 20,000 people watching the spectacle on the Torrington Commons and thousands more watching on Sky TV, as far away as Australia and New Zealand. In 2010 there should be a Medieval Castle bonfire built on the Commons.

Just before Mayfair in 2008 the current Cavaliers Chairman, Chris Stacey, asked me if I'd write a history of the Cavaliers. He was worried that as time passed, many tales, deeds and disasters attributed to the Cavaliers would be lost to the community. This book attempts to tell the tale and record a number of their deeds.

The Cavaliers are a unique band of brothers who are all male. To the outsider it might appear that they have a kind of exclusivity about them and in many ways they do. I've been involved in sports teams in one form or another for over fifty years and experienced the camaraderie that male sports teams share, be it in soccer, cricket or rugby. I'm not too sure that women either have those opportunities in their sports or understand the mentality that particularly binds blokes together in tight teams. Maybe the après activity in the pub has a bearing on it all, who knows? Many a Cavalier told me that, on this day or that day, when they were doing some madcap activity they were, 'petrolled right up.' It could have been the title of this book.

The Cavaliers are a very tight body of guys. During the writing of this book a relatively new member, Ken Merrick; one of the original Cavaliers, Judd Bond; and Entertainers accompanist Graham Lock all died. Within the Cavaliers I could see just how much they felt the loss of these important links in their very strong chain. I believe Ken was even laid out wearing his Cavalier 'T' shirt. I hope the stories you read in this book will evoke that feeling of special

identity that the Cavaliers share. Their motto is, 'All for One and One for All' and they try to live up to it.

Understandably time dims the memory and in this book there are recollections from way back from many of the Cavaliers. The detail they recall is often quite remarkable. I have attempted to corroborate each 'story,' or 'fact,' wherever possible, so that their anecdotal accounts are as true to reality as possible. It was not easy. However, I was surprised at just how many of their memories of spoken repartee do tally. The 'Victory' bonfire administrator, Tony Easton, told me, 'Every time the Cavaliers meet in a group, invariably in a pub, you've only got to, for example, say something about Dolton and someone will say, "Gawd, do you remember that time we were out at Dolton and Lardo stuck his sword through the ceiling?" The stories become folklore, apocryphal even, passed down over time, and everyone tells exactly the same story because it's been told so many times before.'

If there are errors of fact, then they are accidental, and I ask for your understanding.

I hope you will also see that whilst the bonfires are central to a lot of their work, the Cavaliers get up to a lot more than that. Much of what happened, particularly in the Seventies, has been outrageous to a point of almost disbelief. One also has to recognise that you can't include everything that they've done. A lot of what has gone on is pertinent and personal only to them. I have no doubt that once published there will be questions asked as to why such and such a story has been either included or overlooked. I've made an honest attempt to get a true flavour of their fun and games. Inevitably I've had to form my own opinions and draw my own conclusions. They are based on many hours of conversation and cross checking of information. The interviews I have taped with these guys have often had me in stitches. These great raconteurs were also chuckling away while they told me their tales. They obviously love being a Torrington Cavalier.

I hope you enjoy the read and accept it in the spirit in which it has been written. I've been privileged to write it and, in the spirit of their many charitable deeds, you need to know that neither I, nor anybody else, will make any financial gain from it.

Bob Brewer