

PETE SHAW'S POEMS

Answerphone announcements	8 & 9
Atheist, Humanist or Agnostic?	3
Bloody Straw Bear	14
Card Poem	4
A Day on the Somme - full version	5 & 6
A Day on the Somme - short version	7
Lovemaking versus poetry	16
My Old Car	13
The Otter	12
Roger Long	2
Saturday in Town	11
Train to Wellingborough (or Nene Valley Railway part I)	10
Woman or a Man?, A	15

ROGER LONG

Written December 1996 - Imaginary characters, but the scene and atmosphere I know well from playing melodeon for years for the annual carol singing ramble round Bretton each December with Peterborough Folk Dance Club.

It was in the second verse of "Hark the Herald Angels"
That I first became aware of something wrong.
And even though I'd got my scarf right up around my ears
I couldn't help but notice Roger Long.

The fourteenth of December was the day, as I remember
We were going carol singing for a lark.
Raising money for the blind or some other worthy cause
From the houses all around Bretton Park.

We'd done it every year, we knew just what to expect
One carol whilst collectors prowled about
Then another whilst they stood and waited at the doors
And the householders pretended they were out.

But this year it was different, Linda Williams she had gone
And brought along a friend to swell the ranks
We weren't the sort of folks to give a singing test
So we welcomed him with "Great" and "Cheers" and "Thanks".

Roger's looks were ordinary, nothing out of normal
And his speaking voice was bassy, plain and clear
But when he started singing, it was like the hounds of hell
Had been loosed to welcome Christmas and New Year.

For "Silent Night, Holy Night", he'd really belt it out
But in "Gloria" he'd sing Molto Piano
And if his first note was a low one, somewhere down there at the bottom
Then his next was high, castrati or soprano.

But Roger really was a nice bloke, you couldn't take offence,
And we tried hard not to grin when he was near
So over soup and coffee, after it was over
Said "Well sung - will you come next year?"

ATHEIST, HUMANIST OR AGNOSTIC?

20 August 1996

The subject may generally not be your pigeon
But sometimes there float up thoughts of religion.
After long years of guilt, you now know where you stand
Not really believing, but can't dismiss out of hand
What could be important and a great revelation
But on which there's a shortage of hard information.

When we're young there's the Bible and the good baby Jesus
Carols and hymns and a sermon that frees us
To think about everything our small minds can reach
In preference to hearing some old man preach.
His words all seem distant and so far away
And nothing to do with the rest of the day.

At the same time, we're brought up in class
To have faculties critical and let nothing pass
Without the scientific or mathematical proof
And then it's RE, which seems some sort of spoof.
To believe in the Bible deserves fits of laughter
When you're told it was written seventy years after
The events which gave Christianity's name -
Chinese whispers was always my favourite game.

Without hard evidence you just can't believe
But you see it helps others when they grieve
You approve of the principles behind all the cant
And support their rights whether they rant
Or sit in a pew and quietly pray
And they think that there's something at the end of the day
Those you admire, was all their devotion
Just for the purpose of public emotion?
So the subject may generally still not be your pigeon
But sometimes you ponder on thoughts of religion.

Card Poem

1996

I'm sorry this card's a bit tacky.
I bought the best one that they had.
I hunted for all of two minutes
Finding it made me feel glad.

But the card that I wanted was dog-eared,
It looked like the corners were chewed.
It was this one or "Happy Birthday, Mother"
Or one from the section called "Lewd".

"Ah yes - I'll tickle her fancy"
And at least end up with a grin
But they were all "Enjoy your Birthday"
Enclosing cheap condom within.

I paused at the card saying "Mother"
But winced as I thought what you'd say
You're only 40, not 70
At some time during the day.

So this brings me back where I started
From wherever I've happened to roam.
And although I never did find a good card
I hope you enjoy the wee pome.

A DAY ON THE SOMME – written under the War Memorial in
Albert, France on Easter Saturday 1987.

We visited the Somme today
A day like any other.
Tony, shorts and T shirt,
Mark, a postcard to his mother.

France was warm and welcoming,
Easter Saturday, '87,
French bread and cheese and their red wine
Were our idea of heaven.

We walked the grassy trenches
In the Parc of Newfoundland,
It was nice but slightly puzzling
We didn't understand.

Lunch beneath a monument,
Lying beside the car
“Tomorrow Bayeux and Normandy”
And “would we get that far?”

But after lunch it started
With the photos on the wall
Of men and mud and munitions,
Our banter began to fall.

Gleaming British shell cases,
Rusty German guns
Graveyard after graveyard
Rows and rows of people's sons.

It was at the Lochnagar crater
That the horror began to appear.
From a history book we understood
That death had walked just here.

Grinning death was the victor then
Crowned in triumph that day
First July, nineteen sixteen
Down by Albert way.

At the crater lip, we read their accounts,
And we learned the lie of the land.
We each of us saw how it had been
And now we understand.

Some died before they left the lines,
Vapourised by artillery fire.
But most of them died in the main advance,
Machine-gunned to death on the wire.

More men killed in just one day
Than in the whole of the Crimea,
Plus in the whole of the Boer War
And the whole of the war in Korea.

The sun was still warm on our skins
But now the temperature felt very low.
I glanced at the others and quietly said
“I think that it’s time to go”.

A DAY ON THE SOMME – shortened version to less than 30 lines.
Original written under the War Memorial in Albert, France on Easter
Saturday 1987.

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ANSWERPHONE ANNOUNCEMENTS 1997

Please wait for this message to play
Before quitting and running away
I think there's a chance
You'll invite me to dance
Or at least think of something to say.

Messages both light and weighty
From people aged 8 to eighty.
But if you've nothing to say,
Please go away,
We hate empty messages, matey.

I'm here, on the end of this phone,
To tell you that nobody's home
But I'm hoping today
Your message to play
- If you don't like the poem, just groan.

You don't leave messages, do ya?
So I'm leaving one here fo' ya
All pleasant and gay
To improve your day
But if you don't leave me one, then screw ya.

2 double 6 1 5 3
But there's nobody home you see
Or I'm here, on the net,
Or the phone or I'm wet
In the bath or I'm having a wee.

People leave messages here
Whenever the phone line's not clear
Whatever, don't fret, I could be on the 'net
Or I could have gone out for a beer

You've probably figured by now
I'm out, or online, and just how
You could leave me your name
And more of the same
Just by speaking after the tone
And if you feel like writing me a last line which rhymes for that
limerick, so much the better

TRAIN TO WELLINGBOROUGH (or Nene Valley Railway, part 1)
written 1988

Life's like a trip on an old-fashioned steamtrain
Starting so gently, taking its time,
Except for the chuffs, you'd not know you were moving
Gently over the line.

I remember the time with my Nan on the steamtrain,
Me, all of six, not missing a thing.
The platform moved past, then the click of the wheels
Gradually made me sing.

Life as a child is never forgotten,
Colours so vivid, impressions so strong.
Those who were there would never have guessed
The memory'd last so long.

I remember the smell of my Nan - not perfume,
Lavender water, or something like that.
Sat with her grandson in the compartment,
Grey hair, hatpin and hat.

Life in a family - all rough and tumble,
Wonderful warm, argument prone.
But with growing up comes separation
And first pain of being alone.

Me and my Nan knew none of that feeling
As through the Nene Valley we trundled that day.
To a relative's house with outside convenience
A few dozen miles away.

Not a long journey, maybe an hour,
But I recall it time and again.
Excited young boy, first time without parents,
And a ride on a real train.

But life gathered speed, things have happened so quickly
Seventy odd years have gone galloping by.
Troubles and joys like countryside glimpses
And nobody seems to know why.

SATURDAY IN TOWN

Written 21st Dec 1988 to go before the Leon Rosselson song "The Ugly Ones"

Saturday - I'm in the town
A very busy space
But take away the shoppers
And look what's round the place

I wouldn't like to be like him
A punk by any name
Obviously stupid
There's no-one else to blame
Out of work - there's jobs about
You only have to try
Quick, look away - he'll see you
Don't catch his eye.

I wouldn't like to be like her
A mongol from her face
They say they're gentle, even so
Give her loads of space
Why do they always
Let them out alone
Isn't there somewhere to lock them up
Some sort of council home?

I wouldn't like to be like him
In his shabby jacket
Cider bottle at his side
I don't think I could hack it
Red, stubble-faced and old,
In his dirty clothes
And the little droplet
Hanging from his nose.

THE OTTER

12 December 1995 – sent, tongue in cheek, to Poetry Now who had published everything else I submitted. They didn't want this one, though.

A wonderful beast is the Otter
An animal covered in fur
It swims all the night in the wotter
And sleeps all the day in it's lur.

MY OLD CAR

14th January 1988

“It’s a *dream* machine”
They said about my car
Eleven years ago,
“The best by far”.

“It’s a *clean* machine” they said,
“Not bad for five years old”
That made me glad.

“It’s a *steam* machine” the scrapman said today
But I felt sorry as I watched it
Towed away.

Bloody Straw Bear - words composed 16.12.97 by Pete Shaw about the much-loved Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival, to the tune of an idea from Bloody Orkney Town, written during WW2 by an unknown British soldier.

The Straw Bear Festival's a bloody cuss
Started bloody bad and got bloody wuss
And no-one cares for bloody us
At bloody Straw Bear.

Bloody Whittlesey on Straw Bear Day
Folks come here from miles away
And can't find anywhere to bloody stay
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody procession's a bloody farce
Takes a bloody hour to bloody pass
You might as well sit on your bloody arse
At bloody Straw Bear.

That bloody plough is a bloody sight
Bloody rusty? Bloody right!
And the blokes that pull it are bloody tight
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody Straw Bears are bloody slow
They'll get stuck in the pubs you bloody know
And they're falling to bits as they bloody go
At bloody Straw Bear.

There's coppers around, but nevertheless
The bloody traffic's a bloody mess
Are we bloody fed up - bloody yes!
At bloody Straw Bear.

All bloody clouds and bloody rain
And bloody puddles and no bloody drains
The Council's got no bloody brains
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody dancers are all bloody old
Wearing bloody scarves in the bloody cold
And even their sticks have got bloody mould
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody musicians aren't bloody immune
They always start too bloody soon
They're bloody loud and out of tune
At bloody Straw Bear

Pig Dyke in St Andrews, having a spree
Performing a ballet - if it's left to me
I'd shoot the lot, you bloody see
At bloody Straw Bear

You can't move for bloody yanks
Do we want them here? - no bloody thanks
They pay with dollars or bloody francs
At bloody Straw Bear

All the pubs are bloody dear
Two bloody quid for a bloody beer
And is it good? No bloody fear!
At bloody Straw Bear.

Yes the bloody pubs are a bloody cheek
The bloody glasses must bloody leak
And getting served at the bar takes a bloody week
At bloody Straw Bear.

No bloody Doctor or bloody nurse
You could break you neck, or bloody worse
If you don't end up drunk bloody first
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody ceilidhs make you smile
All the bands are bloody vile
They only cramp your bloody style
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody callers are a bloody game
All their dances are the bloody same
You dance them over and over again
At bloody Straw Bear.

All their tunes are bloody old
But all the tickets are bloody sold
And you can't get in for bloody gold
At bloody Straw Bear.

There's Sid Kipper from Norfolk & from
Newcastle come
The High Level Ranters on the run
That Johnny Handle's just a Geordie bum
At bloody Straw Bear.

The bloody weather is bloody gales
There's bloody rain and bloody hail
Roll on Monday we bloody wail
At bloody Straw Bear.

The whole bloody Festival is bloody odd
The bloody organiser's a bloody sod
The Director thinks he's bloody God
At bloody Straw Bear.

On Sunday we burn the bloody Bear
When everyone can bloody cheer
But they'll build another next bloody year
At bloody Straw Bear.

I feel bloody daft stood bloody here
You bloody lot you bloody leer
I reckon you're all bloody queer
At bloody Straw Bear.

Best bloody place is bloody bed
With bloody ice on bloody head
You might as well be bloody dead
At bloody Straw Bear.

Yes, you might as well be bloody dead
At bloody Straw Bear.

A FRIEND OF THE COUNTRY – 8 January 1988

Clare is a man of rural attraction
Who lived in the past in an old-fashioned way.
Attractive to us, and to the trendies
Without being black or gay.

They approve of his life because he was poor;
The trappings of poverty are all the rage,
Roll-up machines, flat hat and a Guinness
Inverted snobs in our age.

He's liked just as much by the false intellectual,
Seeking 'kudos' on the literary scene.
Name dropping everywhere, upper class accent,
Telling you soon where he's been.

He also attracts the out and out weirdo,
Looking for meanings in all of Clare's lines.
"Clare was a spaceman, here on a mission"
I haven't heard yet, but there's time.

But why do we like this localised hero?
What is his secret for people like me?
Not much before of wordified learning
In literature, failed GCE!

Perhaps he appeals to our deep sense of longing,
Someone or something we can't possibly get,
On the surface accepting our whole situation
While something sleeps on in the depth.

Maybe we see ourselves there in his failure,
In each of our lives we fear little of worth.
The world passed Clare by, save moment'ry stardom.
He never saw riches on earth.

He was a true friend to the bird and the badger
For each tree or flower he could find a neat rhyme.
We'd all like to think we're a friend of the country,
But mostly we don't find the time.

A WOMAN OR A MAN?

I walked round the dancefloor, feeling pretty cool
I thought I saw an angel a-sitting on a stool.
But I just couldn't tell, even though I'm not a fool
If she was a woman or a man.

She was the kind of girl that a man could really crave
From her high heeled shoes to her permanent wave
Except maybe she could do with a shave.
Was she a woman or a man?

I asked her then to dance and I took her by the hand
She held me so tight, it was hard for me to stand
She was built like a lumberjack, I couldn't understand
If she was a woman or a man.

I walked her home, it was quarter past four,
My heart was a-thumping as we paused by some door
When she kissed me then, I thought that I was sure
If she was a woman or a man.

But she stole my wallet and she knocked me off my feet
She jumped on a skateboard and made a quick retreat
All I found was a wig, laying in the street.
Was she a woman or a man?

Well I just don't care if she's mean or unkind
Though she stole my heart and robbed me blind,
I was so impressed that I really wouldn't mind
If she was a woman or a man.

LOVEMAKING VERSUS WRITING POETRY – 14 January 1988

Lovemaking versus poetry.

They say it's all to do with energy,
Both depend on mental flow
On releasing pent up feelings,
Both are ways of letting go.

But it doesn't really matter
Which is right of those above
It's very hard to write good verses
After you've just had your leg over.