

Festive spells threaten to set village on fire

Withit Without, 14 December: It's that time of year when goodwill rears its head. Even since Christianity adopted a heathen festival as it's own, there's been no avoiding either this or the razzmatazz accompanying it.

While it is pointless arguing against the tradition of celebrating the birth of one's Messiah, the huge commercial convoy that rolls relentlessly in its wake is more a homage to Mammon than something belonging in a place of worship.

A mass of Yuletide characters inevitably get dragged out every year, but the one with the most appeal is Scrooge. Why on earth his creator Charles Dickens was moved to haunt this endearing curmudgeon so that he reformed is one of literature's more enduring puzzles.

Even more irritating than Christmas itself, however, is the habit of those who fill their humble dwellings with paper chains and tasteless glitter. Worse still are those who attempt to upstage their neighbours by draping the outsides of their dwellings with festoons of winking lights, obese Santas in red plastic and inflatable reindeers, all of which must play havoc with their electricity bills.

Mercifully, none of my neighbours participate in these ridiculous indulgences; we leave them to those at the lower end of the village. But here in Wizard's Foot Lane, the woman next door, The Winepot, is up to something.

According to the regulars propping up the bar at the Pie & Strumpet she has been collecting locks of hair and nail clippings and asking the village's general convenience store for some weird products not usually found on its shelves, namely laurel, rosemary, sloe twigs, poisonous caper spurge leaves and wormwood.

All she managed to acquire was a pot of dried bay leaves, which is near enough to laurel I suppose, and when challenged about what she wanted them for said she planned to pop them into a pork casserole.

As for the wormwood, The Winepot admitted she was experimenting with the manufacture of the illicit drink absinthe. No one doubted her word, indeed several asked for an update on her progress as if she was successful they would be interested in buying a bottle or six.

I do hope she is not embarking on a programme of white witchcraft as part of her grand plan to save the planet. If she is discovered she will not be burned at the stake, of course, as was the norm in some of the high and far off days, but she may find the villagers rather less tolerant of her drunken wassails, and there could more be than the usual number of bonfires in the 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany.

My suspicions are based on hard evidence. She appeared at Halloween in a pointed witches hat with the words 'where's the party' inscribed on the side before staggering around the village muttering some of the more hackneyed lines from the Scottish play.

When he delivered a mystery package to the house, Postman Prat observed that The Winepot's Christmas tree was dripping with corn dollies, those medieval fertility symbols heavy with carnal and sinister undertones.

Worst of all, as she sweeps the leaves from her front lawn with an old style witches broom, it takes very little imagination to picture her straddling it, raising a force five and taking off into the night to spread toil and trouble in the village of Fiddler's Bottom three miles to the north. A Happy Christmas to you all.
