

CHAPTER 1

The Burryman

It is the second Friday in August and something strange is happening in the town of South Queensferry, near Edinburgh, in Scotland. A tall green man is moving slowly along the main street. He is holding his arms in the air. They are in a straight line, just below his shoulders. In each hand he carries a long stick. There are flowers at the top of each stick. There are also flowers on top of his head but no one can see his eyes or mouth. This is because his whole body is covered in burrs. They are sharp, and hurt him as he walks. Two men hold onto the sticks as they guide the 'Burryman' through the town.



The man inside the burrs is John Nicol. When he was offered the job of Burryman, he was asked three questions. Are you strong and in good health? Do you know what the dangers of this job are? And are you a bit crazy? John laughed and said 'yes' to all three questions.

The Burryman happens once a year, always on the second Friday of August. On that day, dressed as the Burryman, John spends more than nine hours walking around the streets of South Queensferry.

It is a hot, tiring, uncomfortable job. The main problem is the burrs. They come from the tops of the burdock plant which grows wild in this part of Scotland. The burrs are very sharp and stick into John's skin. More than eleven thousand of them cover his body.



'About a week before the festival, I collect the burrs with my Dad and a few friends,' John explains. 'We collect them in bags and take them back to the town. It takes a whole day to collect all the burrs. Back home, we stick them together in large squares. We also make the flowers I need for my head and the tops of the sticks. Once that is done, everything is ready for the big day.'

No one knows for sure when the Burryman festival started but it is very old. Doc Rowe from South Queensferry has spent many years studying old traditions. 'We think it's around 900 years old,' he explains. 'People thought of the Burryman as a form of protection from bad luck. The festival was popular in Scottish fishing towns like South Queensferry. After a bad year's fishing, people would choose a man to become their Burryman. The idea was that bad luck would stick to the burrs and be taken away. People believed this would help them catch more fish the following year. After a while, the event was held every year.'

'Today, things are different. Now Burryman Day is a way for the people of South Queensferry to remember their history.'

On Burryman Day, John gets up early and goes to the Stag's Head, a large pub in the middle of the town. He walks into a back room and takes off his coat. He sits down, dressed in long cotton underclothes. It is the last time he will be able to sit down for over nine hours. He then puts a balaclava over his head. His eyes and mouth are now the only parts of his face that people can see. It is time to put on the burrs. John cannot do this himself. Other people have to do it for him.

Doc Rowe has the honour of putting on the first square of burrs. Once that is done, other people can also help to dress the Burryman.

'It's interesting,' says Doc, 'because a moment arrives when you can't recognise John any more. He disappears under the burrs and becomes a strange "thing" rather than a man everyone knows.'

Under the costume, John tries not to think about what is happening. 'The burrs go through my clothes and hurt my skin,' he explains. 'If I think about the pain it gets worse. So I try not to do that.'



By 8.30 am John is ready. He still has to wait for another twenty-five minutes. At 8.55 am, guided by his two helpers, he finally leaves the pub and steps into the street. Burryman Day has begun.

Already, John is hot under the burrs. He can't see, hear, or walk very well. He can't sit or drop his arms down either – the pain would be too great. He can't eat or go to the toilet. All he can do is walk, stand or drink. Even these things are difficult.

John describes what the day is like. 'It's a very long day. The only thing I am able to do without pain is drink. When I stop at people's houses this is what they give me. It's their way of showing how grateful they are. Of course, I can't put a glass to my mouth so I have to drink through a straw.'

As John walks through the town, some children hide behind their parents. Others move closer to get a better look at the Burryman.



'One of the things I notice most are the children,' says John. 'They are either frightened or interested in my appearance. Dogs, too, can't quite decide what I am.'

For John, it is a long day. There are more than five hundred houses in the older part of South Queensferry and John walks past them all.

At the end of the day, John Nicol finally arrives back at the Stag's Head. It is 6 pm and time for the burrs to come off.

'It's the moment I've been waiting for,' says John. 'I feel so grateful when they take off the burrs. At last I can sit down.'

When the burrs come off there is blood all over John's back. He also has a lot of bites from small insects that were hiding in the burrs.

Many people cannot understand why John accepted the job of Burryman. For some, it is not worth all the pain and hard work.

But John does not agree. 'For me, it's important,' he says. 'It's a real honour, and I want to do it for as long as I can.'

It's an honour for John's family, too. 'I'm so proud of him,' says his mother, Senga. 'I don't think many people would do it. He's fantastic. He's a great Burryman.'



To learn more about the history of South Queensferry and to discover some other strange British traditions, read pages 13–15.



Now watch Clips 2 and 3 and answer the questions on pages 16–17.