

# **Joey the Toad: an Orford Drunk of Legendary Proportions**

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I was terrified of Rocky the first moment he laid eyes on me. I'd never been afraid of dogs, grew up with them after all, but Rocky was fierce. A slavering Boxer ready to eat a seven year old for lunch. Old Fred just laughed, though I didn't think it was funny. He often told stories about Rocky. Told me he could jump the pub wall. Just what I needed, a boxer with mythical capabilities, the wall was eleven feet high. That didn't do too much to calm my poor nerves.

There was a nicer tale though, one that was more plausible. We all liked the tale of Joey the Toad. Whether myth or reality, he ended up in that cellar somehow. Now toads can live solitary lives, and Joey must have lived the life of a drunk in a monastic cavern. That cellar was cold. I mean it was cold in summer, so you can only imagine how bitter it was in winter. A northern English winter. Yet Joey never complained. He never left. Every time I went down there I could find him, leering bug eyed through the beer slops.

Joey was a drunk. His waddling gait and rotundity resembled for all the world those middle aged draymen who delivered the barrels every week. They were big, red faced jovial men. They must have sworn and cursed a lot, but they always had a smile for me—a seven to ten year old bottle yard urchin. At least that's what I was if I was around when the barrels were being delivered.

I'll always remember those smells. It started with the diesel fumes richly polluting my nostrils as the old seven ton Bedford flat back drew up at the back yard gate. Those fusty old wooden gates were Greenall Whitley green and cream, once. Now I could home in on the wood lice like a truffle pig schnuffling out delicacies. The smells were deep, damp and sodden. The finger snapping latch needed some careful handling. The yard was long and narrow with a number of outhouses. The least forbidding was the one nearest the gate. An old tool and paint store where I kept my Chopper. Though I daren't linger too long in there for fear of some old apparition that might have been lurking in the stale webs and crusty shadows. The room smelled like the windows hadn't been opened since 1928, when the Blackburne Arms was built.

When the draymen came in though, that huge cast iron hatch in the floor would open and the ramps would go up against the edge like a suicidal slipway for a ship that couldn't be launched from any shallower angle. The ramps must have stood at 60 degrees. Huge sacks, probably full of sawdust and stinking like hessian hell, lay at the bottom.

The draymen should have been atlases all, by the way they handled barrels all day, but these guys lifted from the waist. They never needed to hoist anything higher than gut level, unless they were empties going back on the truck. Their daytime diet consisted of ale, at least a pint in every pub they delivered to. This was in the days before the drinking and driving laws tightened up and the breathalyser hit the streets dispensing immediate judgement and certain doom to draymen caught drunk at the wheel. But atlases, no, they were heavy and squat, round bellied, gruff and jovial. They wore heavy, cracked leather aprons that stank of blood, sweat, diesel, oil and ale. They'd flop the barrels down off the truck and another would cock them on to the steel rim and twist-roll them at 60 degrees over to the hatch. Then they would launch them down the slipway to land with a great thudding thwack, winding the belly of the sack like a rogue punch from a heavyweight.

My eyes must have been lit up all the way through. They tousled my hair with hard, dirt-cracked hands, and chatted and joked. They had kids my age too. Joey must have been waking up by now. It was delivery day for him, which meant another round of fresh ale slops to slurp up, fatten up on and stagger back to his gutter home like a tramp blessed from heaven with a bacchanalian orgy of ale and food. Wood lice, grubs

and a fine assortment of other insects were laid at Joey's banquet. A cellar like this was teeming with them. Wood lice and ale, what more could a toad want? Why else would a toad spend his life deep down in a cellar when there was a huge garden above, full of damp, fresh air?

My Dad would be down in the cellar in his wellingtons by this time giving orders and organising the empties and laying the new ones horizontally on their wooden frames. This part I liked. He'd clean the pumps, all the whining and whirring of the electric motors that pumped the beer up to the taps, where the customers would be thronging in a few more hours. Clamouring to get a pint of the working man's opium. That's what my Dad liked to call it. Clean pumps really keeps them coming. Clean pumps build a solid reputation of die hard drinkers. They'll never go anywhere else. My Dad once told me, "they don't come in pubs for the ale, they come in for the landlord". Clean pumps meant more slops for Joey.

Anyway, my eyes lit up and Joey's toadlips slobbered as my Dad picked up the shining heavy brass taps, smelling of bitter, ingrained deep in the brass. And the mallet—a heavy wooden mallet scored deeply with the imprints of thousands of brass taps before—would clobber the taps and punch them deep into the wooden-corked holes of the barrels. A spray of ale burst forth like liquid pay dirt, brown gold with a frothy head. I could see Joey now, lifting slightly from his toadsquat, pushing forward like a sprinter on the blocks. The incongruous site of a toad at the ready, head of the queue, out of licensing hours, no different from the customers banging on the door at twenty eight past five:

— open up you miserable bugger!

Joey was in first, as my Dad took a stiff yard brush and splashed through puddles of ale in his wellingtons sweeping the slops into Joey's canal, the elixir of toad life, a Ganges of ale, washing marinated wood louse corpses straight into Joey's gaping maw. The heavy cellar flap banged down and was padlocked again and Joey was left all alone in his subterranean paradise, with fat wood lice and a stygian flow of underworld ale.

Once we caught Joey and took him for a swim in the bath. Took half an hour to clean the slime and muck off the bath after sending him home again—my mum was horrified. He was still a fair swimmer and must have thought he was on a package to the

Med. Anyway, Joey was a celebrity for years. We'd go looking for him again and again.

The brewery was getting more commercial by the early seventies though, and the mass market for tank beer was taking off. Huge copper tanks were installed in the cellar, the barrels disappeared. It all became more scientific now, the alchemy fading into the old whitewash as the damp peeling fungus-like flakes of old were surgically slopped over with new. It never would taste like ale from the wood either. But that's progress I suppose. The customers still came though. What's an English community without its local after all? There were the inevitable complaints and grumbings from the regulars, but they still kept swilling it down.

And the draymen were sobering up too, no more barrels to hump, the tanks were filled by pump straight from the truck instead. Driving habits had a rude awakening as breathalysers lurked in waiting. Life goes on. But for an unsung, die hard hero of the end days of the real era of the ale swilling tradition, things may not have been so easy. Joey went cold turkey. He didn't have the chance to waddle up to the counter asking for more. And even if he could, he wouldn't have been able to pay for a round.

No, Joey disappeared quickly with the advent of the tanks. No more slops, the cellar was much more sanitary now, maybe even the wood lice were sobering up. The smell had been enough to get you tipsy. Poor old Joey. I'd like to think he had a revelation, an epiphany of sorts, sobered up, checked his bulk and clambered up the slipway, splintered crag by splintered crag, an Eiger to a toad. I'd like to think he came home to his wife and kids somewhere in the garden after how many years of pilgrimage in the cellar—I wouldn't be able to count. Old Fred said Rocky picked him up and carried him down. The way he snarled at me, Joey would have been a snack. But however he got down there, I hope he got out and lived his old age out in that overgrown garden, raising great grandtoads and snapping happily after the fat summer bluebottles. Even so, the reality may be more sobering and I can still see that faint glow, the glow that I saw the day before we left the pub. The last time I ever went down in the cellar and saw what I thought was the wart-green ghost of Joey the Toad.