



## DICK WHITTINGTON



The Pantomime 'Dick Whittington' is one of the few home grown stories, along with 'The Babes In The Wood'. It is also a pantomime that presents a mixture of facts and fiction, although mainly fiction. The story is based on the real life Richard Whittington, who unlike his pantomime character was not poor, being the third son of Sir William Whittington of Gloucester.

Richard Whittington was born somewhere around 1350, moving to London where he traded in costly textiles. Like the Dick Whittington of Pantomime he did marry Alice Fitzwarren, daughter of an Alderman, and become Alderman himself, before taking the title of Sheriff. Under the patronage of Richard II he became Lord Mayor in 1397, and later again in 1406 and 1419.



As a wealthy merchant he made loans to both Henry IV and Henry VI, and large charitable donations, including the founding of the Whittington School in London. Sadly it does not appear that he had a cat of any fame, and various theories have been put forward as to how a cat came to feature so heavily in his story. One being that coal vessels of the time were called 'Cats', another is that it derived from the French 'achat' meaning a purchase. However, on Highgate Hill today there stands a statue in honour of this faithful creature, on the site where, in legend he heard the bells of London call him back to become 'Three Times Lord Mayor'.

The Pantomime adds another element to the story in the form of rats, and the arch villain of Pantomime King (or sometimes Queen) Rat. In the tale Dick and his cat journey to Morocco, where 'Tommy' as the cat is traditionally known rides the country of rats, earning Dick half the Sultan's wealth as a reward. The addition of Rats to the story possibly hark back to the Black Death which Londoners recalled with fear. Rats were the cause of the great plagues and the triumph over 'King Rat' would have been a popular ending to the story.



The first recorded Pantomime of Dick Whittington was in 1814, with Joseph Grimaldi playing Dame Cecily Suet. However, the play dates back to around 1605. Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary dated 1668, 'To Southwark Fair, very dirty, and there saw the puppet show of Whittington, which was pretty to see'.



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