

# Ex-teacher weaves tall tales from city

## Past characters help stories to remain relevant

By Patricia Thompson

**M**ICHAEL O'Leary, otherwise known as the Hagstone story-teller, spins folk yarns of the legendary characters of old from King Arthur to Finn McColl.

But anyone expecting a Celtic bard, living in the admittedly interesting past, will be disappointed. Many of Michael's tales might have their roots obscured by the mists of time but they are very relevant to the modern day.

The former primary school teacher works widely in schools and children in Bevois Valley might hear all about Southampton's very own Sir Bevois, who sleeps under Bevois Mount, while youngsters in Millbrook could be encouraged to create their own folk tales about their surroundings.

"I call myself the Hagstone story-teller because I live in Northam and the first Ordnance Survey map for the area showed an ancient monument here called the Heg Stone," said Michael.

"I'm very proud of living in Northam and like the idea that I am in the middle of the city in a very urban area and it's not all fey and Tweetie Pie."

The 45-year-old father of three gave up a career as a primary teacher three years ago to become the city's only full-time story-teller and his services are now in such demand he has only had two free days this year.

He said schools often find his work useful in helping fulfil the speaking and listening elements of the National Curriculum, and it can help teachers develop fresh ideas about story-telling.

He comes from a mixed background of Irish/Scottish/Welsh ancestry and was raised in Scotland and Wales, where his interest in story-telling began.

He said: "As a small child in Scotland there was a shepherd who used to tell me stories from the Highlands and there was story-telling from the Irish side of the family and more from Wales.

"As a young man I lived in Ireland for a while and with travellers for a short time and I travelled around a lot.

"Most people were going to Marrakesh then but I took a wrong turning and ended up in places like Norway and Lapland, where I picked up more folk tales."

He moved to Hampshire in 1977, married and worked as a greenkeeper in the Meon Valley and in Southampton's Parks department, which provided more modern story-telling inspiration.

He said: "The gardeners tended to raconteur a lot and that was relevant too."

In his 30s he went to Southampton University, gained a geography degree, spent a year working on the Southampton Playbus and then five years as a primary school teacher.

In 1995 he quit to devote his time to story-telling, partly motivated by the frustrations of seeing teach-



**BARD WORK:** Miké O'Leary in full flow at St Mary's primary school, Southampton.

ers swamped with so much paperwork, but also because he felt story-telling really had something to offer to youngsters.

Now he works in libraries, schools, museums and play schemes and also runs workshops for staff.

His work doesn't only involve telling tales; he also encourages children to tell their own stories, aiming to boost their confidence and their interest in their community.

He said: "Story-telling is something other people can do. It does not have to be perfect like a play. I ex-

plain to children that they are already telling without realising it."

Many of his stories are based on Southam legend, including local characters Sir Bevois, part and Jossian.

He said: "It is good to give a child a bit of the area where they live.

"Stories about Southampton can show them live in a fascinating place."

Michael O'Leary can be contacted on: 635083.