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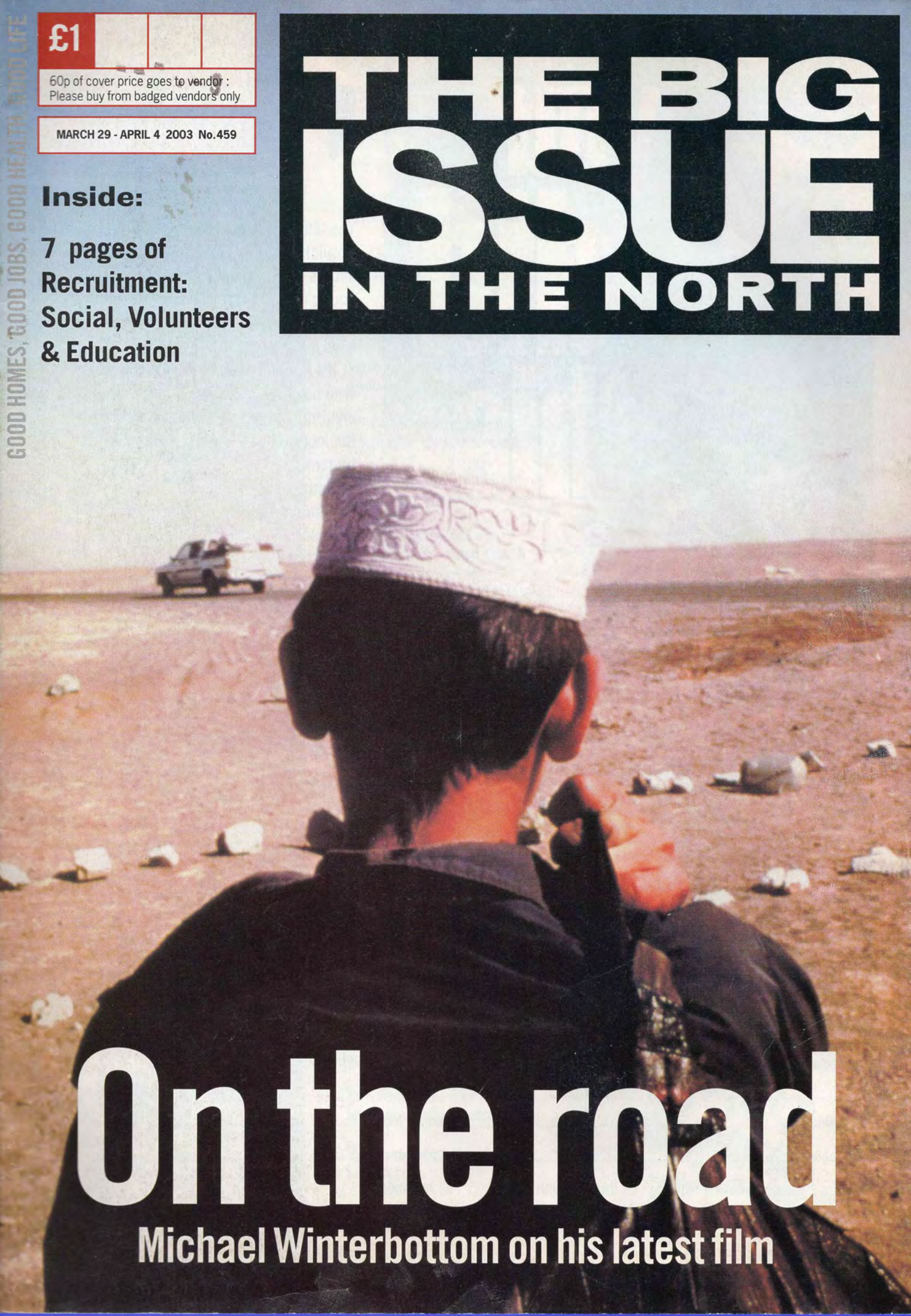
GOOD HOMES, GOOD JOBS, GOOD HEALTH, GOOD LIFE

THE BIG ISSUE IN THE NORTH

Inside:

7 pages of Recruitment: Social, Volunteers & Education



On the road

Michael Winterbottom on his latest film



GETTING UP AND HAVING A THRASH: MEMBERS OF YORKSHIRE UKULELE CIRCLE DO THEIR STUFF.
PHOTOS: CLAIRE WOOD

String quartet

The legend of George Formby is alive and kicking in West Yorkshire - thanks to the endeavours of the Yorkshire Ukulele Circle BY STEVE LEE

It's not every night you get to meet a septuagenarian ukelele playing ex-hypnotist who goes by the name Aussie Jack, a jovial man who eagerly proffers a business card boasting specialities including "George Formby songs, popular sing-a-longs and children's parties".

Then again, it's not every night you get to attend the monthly meeting of Yorkshire's very own Ukulele Circle.

Tucked away on a narrow, anonymous side street – a fact as predictable as the garish carpets, freezing cold toilets and piping hot pie 'n' peas supper – is Mirfield Constitutional Club. With it's name tactfully changed, some time ago, from Conservative Club (a marble bust of Churchill gently warming above the fire gives the game away) the venue plays host to all things ukulele on the third Tuesday of every month.

"We get people from all over," committee member John Beevers tells me, pipe and pint of bitter on the table in front of him, uke' by his side, "Preston, Sheffield, Huddersfield – we cover quite a big area."

Currently boasting around 80 members the Circle has been meeting, in various locations, for over quarter of a century. The format of their get-togethers involves, "all getting up and having a thrash" (Beevers' term, not mine), prior to loosely formatted solo, duo and trio mini-sets and, as a finale, another "thrash" (ditto). Before, during and after said proceedings much talk is talked, laughs laughed and tunes sung along with. Oh, and a few pints are sunk too.

"It's a great get-together," says Beevers, "we all just enjoy music really and it's great to be able to do something just for the pleasure of it with no pressure, just for fun."

Right on cue, a mass rendition of *When I'm Cleaning Windows* breaks forth in 'The Astral Lounge' and leads neatly into the inevitable question – just how important has the George Formby legend been in keeping ukulele playing alive?

> "It's quite an easy instrument to play, there's only four strings and I think that's the appeal"

"Very important because as you can see," I turn to scan a proliferation of Pringle knitwear and a sea of brogue shoes in various hues of brown, "we do have mostly older members – though we have 11 and 12-year-olds come down here – and George meant a lot to these people."

"There were better players than George around in his time," Beevers continues, as he suddenly becomes more animated, "but where George scored was all the fancy rolls and strokes with his right hand."

A rapid and, even to a ukulele layman, impressive demo of said techniques follows.

"He got through the whole of his life playing about 20 chords but, at the height of his career, he was the highest paid entertainer in the UK and the third highest in the world, and that's fact."

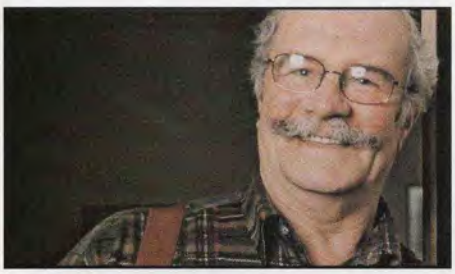
It's doubtful Beevers' friend Charlie Hever ever aspired to such giddy heights of four-stringed infamy but he looks like he's probably had an equally eventful life.

"As a kid, George Formby was in vogue and he inspired me," Hever tells me, running

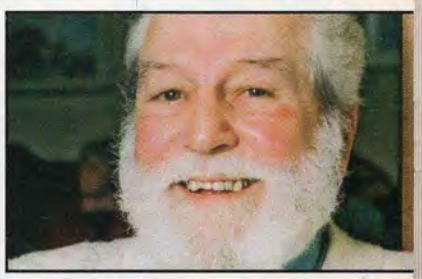




LIKE-MINDED FRIENDS HAVING A GREAT GET-TOGETHER: VARIOUS MEMBERS OF YORKSHIRE UKULELE CIRCLE MAKING THE MOST OF THE EVENING.









"There were better players than George around in his time but where he scored was all the fancy rolls and strokes with his right hand"



his thumbs up and down the inside of some rather fetching braces, "but I only started playing nine years ago when I found out there was a ukulele society."

Like a real life Seth Armstrong but with a better sense of humour and more grandiose sideboards, he explains the instrument the majority of the Yorkshire Circle play are technically ukulele-banjos.

"The proper uke' is like a little wooden guitar but that's a very soft, quiet instrument – there's more power with these. The original instruments came from Portugal but the sailors ended up in Hawaii with them and, somehow, they ended up over here."

"Some people do ridicule the instrument," concludes Hever, "but we just enjoy us selves and that's it."

Back in the Astral Lounge, amongst the 'Yorkshire Bitter, quality and value, still only £1 a pint' posters and a framed picture of Her Majesty, things are hotting up.

One virtuoso goes down a treat with a rocking version of *Who Do You Think You Are Kidding Mr Hitler* which neatly segues into *Roll Out The Barrel*, whilst songs about *Rafferty's Pig* battle it out with musical tales from the Far East concerning the inimitable, omnipresent *Mr Woo* and a particularly well received *Little Bit Of Blackpool Rock*.

Stella from Shipley even has a stab at a Black Sabbath cover version. Well, not really, but you get the feeling that in the prevailing atmosphere of genteel fun and general bonhomie, she would have been rewarded for her efforts all the same.

"It's quite an easy instrument to play, there's only four strings," says John Beevers with a smile, "and I think that's the appeal. When I'm travelling I throw mine in the car and when I stop for a cup of tea and a sandwich I get it out and play in the car at lunch time."

Leaning on lampposts, snacking in lay-bys or having a group 'thrash' with like-minded friends, the ukulele's day is far from over.

The next meeting of the Yorkshire Ukulele Circle takes place at Mirfield Constitional Club on April 15. For more information call John Beevers on: 0148 442 1254.

A museum in Stockport is going mad for National Hat Week... See p.22