

Maureen James, *The Peterborough Folk Club Mummers Play – an interesting history!* Mummers Unconvention, Bath, 2012.

### **The Peterborough Folk Club Mummers Play – an interesting history!**

In the late 1960s Mike Herring, a member of Peterborough Folk Club, decided that he and his friends should perform a mummer's play. He wanted it to have an historical base and so carried out research at the local library. He later related how the finished script was based on a play described in an edition of the Peterborough Advertiser from 1902<sup>1</sup> as well as three other plays from the local area. This 1902 account, recalled by Mr George Thompson of Westgate, Peterborough, stated that the play had been performed in 1847 and 1848.

The newspaper speculated on the ancient origins of this, and other Mummers plays, and also acknowledged some unusual lines. Notably:

*...There's my sister Poll, and her hoof and hellet  
There's my brother and his peg and wellet...<sup>2</sup>*

The newspaper also described the performances in the locality:

the play was rendered at all the principal private houses and inns in the City. There were nightly performances throughout the month of December. The Mummers, or Morris Dancers, as they were called, used to be well received ... Mr. Thompson has still many pleasant recollections of the hearty and cordial reception the Mummers received from Earl Fitzwilliam at Milton...<sup>3</sup>

With regards to the transmission of the play:

Mr. Thompson said he was taught the play orally, no portions of it that he knows were ever written. Others before him had learned it in a similar way, and it had in that manner been handed down from generation to generation....<sup>4</sup>

And of the characters and costumes:

The characters were King George, Beelzebub, and a Doctor. King George and the Doctor wore shirts adorned with a plentiful distribution of ribbons and coloured paper, while Beelzebub's proportions were considerably increased by a lavish stuffing of straw back and front.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately Mike Herring no longer has a record of his other sources, but the short play he compiled was performed by him, his brother and their friends from Peterborough Folk Club, in November and December 1968 and in December 1969.

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They received good press coverage, and I am grateful to John Herring for hoarding these cuttings and also keeping his diaries from the time, which show the following performances during the winter of 1968/9:

Swaffham 29/11/68; Millstone Pub, Barnack 14/12/68; St.Neots 16/12/68; Kings Head, Whittlesey 18/12/68; Stamford Folk Club 19/12/68; Red Lion, Warmington 20/12/68; Peterborough Folk Club 22/12/68; Boston 23/12/68; Norwich 29/12/68; Peterborough City Folk Club 30/12/68; Peterborough Octopus Club 1/1/69<sup>6</sup>

As you can see, the majority of the performances were at pubs and folk clubs in and around the Peterborough area including Whittlesey, in the Kings Head (now a private dwelling), and Warmington, where they memorably stole the poker from the Red Lion Pub! They also travelled further afield, to folk clubs in Stamford, Louth and Boston, Lincolnshire and Norwich.

The cast at this time comprised Dave Bishop as King George, Pete Shaw as Beelzebub, John Herring as the Doctor, John Watson as The Fool, Margaret Watson as Dame Jane and Pete Honeyball as Jack. Mike took the role of Director and first reserve<sup>7</sup>. A Super 8 film of the performance was made and in January 1969 a copy of the script and an audio recording were deposited with Peterborough archives. The following winter the cast had three changes. Ellen Allen took on the role of Dame Jane, Stuart Hansen also joined the cast, and Mike took a defined role. They also gave fewer performances. These were the Coffee Pot Club 16/12/69; Octopus Club 17/12/69; Stamford Folk Club 18/12/69; B.S.C. 20/12/69; Peterborough Folk Club 22/12/69; Louth Folk Club 28/12/69.<sup>8</sup>

At Christmas 2002/3 whilst organising some arts event in my home town of March in Cambridgeshire, I found out about and hired a local mummer's group called the Midwinter Mummers. The performers were all English Civil War re-enactors who were looking for something to do during the winter. I was informed by them that their play was collected by them from an elderly man in 1989, and that "it had first been written down at the Black Bull in Whittlesey in 1745." Knowing little about the history of such plays, I accepted this information and inserted it in my press-release

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along with the fact that the play had been performed by the Midwinter Mummers at many venues including Sulgrave Manor in Northamptonshire, Wisbech Folk Fayre and annually at the Straw Bear Festival in Whittlesey along with numerous pubs in the locality. The following year we booked a repeat performance in the market place during which we even had a dog watching from an upper window of the Exchange Pub. Shortly after this we saw the group again at the Straw Bear Festival in Whittlesey. We were very impressed with the festive nature of the short play, the entertainment value, and the fact that it was continuing an old tradition. We talked with thespian friends about putting on such a performance in our town. Our local pantomime group had folded and this seemed like an excellent way of filling the cultural gap.

In 2011, after years of procrastinating, my husband and I finally persuaded a small group of our friends that the time was right to perform a mummer's play and we asked the Midwinter Mummers for help. Our contact in the group happily gave us not only a copy of the script, but also taught us performance techniques including how to fight using swords. When we asked for more information on the background to the play we were informed that our 'mentor' had collected the play himself, from an old man named Mr. George Shepherd, whilst working in an old people's home "just outside Whittlesey."

We also found an entry for the play on the Master Mummers Directory of Folk Play Groups as follows:

Our play is a quack doctor play given to us 1989 by a man from the Whittlesea area, he was 92 at the time, and remembered doing it as a boy in the scouts and in the church youth group in the '20s and '30s. He said it was written down by his grandfather in the Black Bull pub in Whittlesea<sup>9</sup> sometime in the 1880s.<sup>10</sup>

We spent a couple of weeks learning our lines, obtaining costumes and preparing to perform at three local pubs. As we did this we came more and more to appreciate the beauty and the simplicity of the lines within the script. They flowed so well and really showed how they had passed down the generations orally. But, on the eve of our first

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actual performance we received a call from the wife of one of the Midwinter Mummers to say that they would “allow us to perform the play this year but did not want us to perform it in the future, unless we dramatically altered the plot.” They ideally wanted us to find another play to perform. I had, by this time, written an article on mummer’s plays for a magazine and knew a little more about the genre. Enough to know that the play had the feel of being from the ‘oral tradition’ and also that Peter Millington’s research showed that such plays were rare in Cambridgeshire.

In order to satisfy the group that the roots of the Whittlesey Play were indeed ancient and that it was linked to all the other Quack Doctor folk plays around the country, I carried out an extensive search of the database of the 220 folk play scripts that have survived to be included on Peter Millington's Folk Play website<sup>11</sup>. From this I ascertained that the ‘Whittlesey’ script has passages in common with many other folk plays (from Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Rutland, Derbyshire, Northamptonshire, and even one line from the Isle of Man!) that were predominantly collected between 1845 and 1905 (with 2 collected in the 1950s).

So close was the match to a number of the plays that whole pieces of dialogue, were not just alike but actually identical. I was also surprised to find that, of the 142 lines in the Whittlesey script, all the lines could be matched to other plays on the database.

The less close match was in the lines:

*I'm huffed and puffed up like a fly,  
From across the salt sea, Above the lofty sky.*

Though this bears a resemblance to the White Boys Christmas Play (1845) from the Isle of Man, collected by W Harrison.

*It is a kind of rough tough, coming up like a fly,  
Up the seven stairs, and down the lofty sky.*

I put the details of this research in a heartfelt letter to the Midwinter Mummers and we (The March Mummers) performed the play in The Stars, The Acre and The Ship in

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our town on 10th December 2011. It was well received, gained good press coverage, and we had a great time performing it. We also raised £50 for a local charity. A film was made of our performance and posted on the ‘Shape your place’ website<sup>12</sup>. It also soon appeared on the local newspaper site “The Cambridgeshire Times<sup>13</sup>.”

We were however apprehensive as to the future, as we could not comfortably perform the play we had grown fond of and did not have another to replace it, though we heard that there was such a script from about 15 miles away.

This play had been performed by the Brian Cookman and the Mepal Molly Dance group in Cambridgeshire and Kent in the late 1970s and sounded hopeful<sup>14</sup>. However, when I managed to locate a copy of the script I realised that it was an adaptation of the Bassingham Men’s Play from Lincolnshire, and would have required more members than we had in our group and more time than we thought the people in our local pubs could spare to watch. The search for a suitable script continued in the summer, starting at Cecil Sharp House, where I found a predictable dearth of Cambridgeshire plays. However I did come across a reference to a play in an edition of the Peterborough Advertiser from 1902.

I went to Peterborough archives at the Central Library to consult the publication and found the short play that Mike Herring had consulted over 40 years ago. I realised that this play included the 8 lines that I had not been able to find on the database. With the help of the assistant archivist I located the original script deposited by Mike Herring which was practically identical to the script supposedly written down in Whittlesey in either 1745 or the 1880s including stage directions. I realised that there was a good chance that we could comfortably continue performing the play, but that more detective work was required. Fortunately the script included a cover sheet with details of its provenance including the contact details for one of the performers. A couple of phone calls led to me locating Mike Herring who gave me information on the play and also granted permission to perform it. He also said that if we let him know the date he would come along to watch. At this time I also told him about the Whittlesey play, its similarity to his, and how it had been successfully performed in the locality for over 20 years with virtually no change to the script.

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I analysed the Peterborough script to try to find clues to the three sources that were used to supplement the 1902 play, but have not been able to locate them. However I have matched different parts of the script to others on the folk play database as follows: Plough Monday Play from Clipsham, Rutland (collected by M G Cherry in 1904); Mummings Play from Thenford, Northants (collected by A E Baker 1854); Bassingham Plough Jaggs Play (collected by Ethel Rudkin 1952); Bassingham Men's Play, Christmas 1823; Lincolnshire Plough Jags Play 1890 (collected by E Bentley-Wood); Selston Mummings Play (From the WEA Selston, 1983); The Plough Play from Tollerton, Nottinghamshire (collected by M Shepherd in 1950) and the Ploughboys Play, Cropwell, Nottinghamshire 1890.

Alongside this, I revisited the man who supposedly collected the script in Whittlesey and was informed this time that it had been collected from Mr Shepherd and written down by the elderly man's "great-grandfather, who had performed it in Whittlesey". I considered searching the historical records to attempt an authentication but aside from finding out that the census returns for the town in 1881 do not include the name Shepherd and the calculation that a man who was 92 in 1989 would have been born in 1897 and consequently aged 23 in 1920 indicates that the informant would have been a bit old to be in the scouts! However being in the Fens, at age 20 or 30, he would have been referred to as an "old boy."

I am now left with the puzzle – could a 92 year old man have seen the script deposited by Mike Herring in Peterborough Library and memorised the contents...? Or could he have seen the play when it was performed by the Peterborough Mummings at the Kings Head in Whittlesey in 1968.<sup>15</sup> Or could Mike Herring have stumbled upon, and copied the same play that was recalled by the 92 year old man and believed that it evolved from four local sources? Or is it all just a coincidence...? Whatever the answer, we will be performing the Peterborough play in our town this December only we will be making a major change to the script to bring it in line with the 1902 play. We will be having the King slay Beelzebub. We hope this change will be sufficient to satisfy the Midwinter Mummings.

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<sup>1</sup>Peterborough Advertiser Wednesday 23 April 1902

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup>The Super 8 film has now been located and is being copied. John Herring has also provided scans of some newspaper cuttings and Pete Shaw has some photos of the performances. Copies of all of these will shortly be deposited at the Peterborough Archives to be kept with the script.

<sup>8</sup> Copied by the author from the diary of John Herring.

<sup>9</sup>The group have chosen to use the old spelling of the town. This is also used for the name of the railway station.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.mastermummers.org/groupslist.php?format=full&oID=142&year=&format=full&csName=&otCode=G&step=&search=>

<sup>11</sup>Using a key word or phrase search of the folkplay database - <http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVEOV4EC9Zo&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>13</sup>The Cambs Times Monday, December 12, 2011

[http://www.cambstimes.co.uk/news/video\\_gallery\\_march\\_theatre\\_group\\_brings\\_early\\_19th\\_century\\_plays\\_back\\_to\\_life\\_to\\_perform\\_in\\_town\\_s\\_pubs\\_1\\_1151450](http://www.cambstimes.co.uk/news/video_gallery_march_theatre_group_brings_early_19th_century_plays_back_to_life_to_perform_in_town_s_pubs_1_1151450)

<sup>14</sup>Verbal information from former members Steve Bramble, Bill Morris, Annie Newark, John Claydon & Keith Cheale. The play was featured in the Ely Standard Thursday 5 January 1975.

<sup>15</sup>The Kings Head was at 10 Gracious Street, Whittlesey and is now a private dwelling.