

# ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional  
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## PEOPLE Vs PLACES

Steve Roud

In the past it has been easy enough to view dramatic traditions as separate dots on a map, and to speak confidently of the team or version from location A and another from location B, and so on. With few known examples in any given geographical area, this tendency is understandable and may even reflect the true nature of the tradition in certain places. However, as the available source material accumulates, and known 'locations' crowd on to the map (as is happening, for example, in Berkshire and Oxfordshire), it is becoming increasingly difficult to sort out who was who, where and when performances took place. It is also difficult to decide whether dramatic customs were particularly popular in these 'crowded' areas or whether the picture we have is distorted by the accidental concentration of collecting activity. Consequently, any conclusions we may reach about the 'density' of teams/versions must be in dispute.

These problems of identification are exacerbated by the paucity of detail noted by most 'collectors'. James Madison Carpenter (1) was one of the few who regularly noted names of informants and information regarding where, or from whom, they had originally learnt the play. Although Carpenter was often a little imprecise in the way he recorded this information in his notes, few others got even this far.

Names of performers, which are mentioned in more than one village and reports of several teams all visiting the same place, often prove confusing to the researcher who attempts to view 'versions' as separate entities. Consequently, we need to understand whether or not the performers themselves, and others in the community, viewed their customs in the same way, and whether or not this view is confirmed by the reality of the situation.

For example, did Team A take over Team B's territory when the latter ceased to perform, or did they always have overlapping territories. If teams had separate and well-defined territories, how did they evolve and how were they maintained? Did individual performers move and join existing teams and if so how were differences of 'text' and so on accommodated? These questions are, of course, just a few of the many that should be explored, and, I believe, it is only by in-depth studies of specific geographical areas that answers to these questions can perhaps be found. The minimum of information required for this type of analysis can be summarised as follows:

### 1. Participants :

- a) Names
- b) Places of Residence
- c) Ages
- d) and so on

2. Places visited
  - a) Regularly
  - b) Occasionally
3. Who they learned the play from
4. Time-scale involved

I believe it would be useful if field-workers could bear these questions in mind when talking to people with first-hand knowledge of the custom(s) in their own community.

Roly Brown, in his article on the Weston play (2), explores some of the problems he has encountered regarding identification of teams during the course of his fieldwork in West Berkshire. It is to be hoped that further work by Roly and by others working in 'restricted' areas will help to clarify the matter of how we should view these 'crowded' traditions

#### A NOTE ON THE WESTON (BERKS.) PLAY

Roly Brown

In the Carpenter Collection (1) is a copy of the Weston play, listed as being from Daniel Fisher who said that the mummers "dropped it just before the War". At Christmas 1979, during a school rendering of the Thatcham play, before an invited audience of OAPs, we were able to hear somebody joining in with the Doctor. This turned out to be Charlie Looker, who subsequently furnished the information which follows.

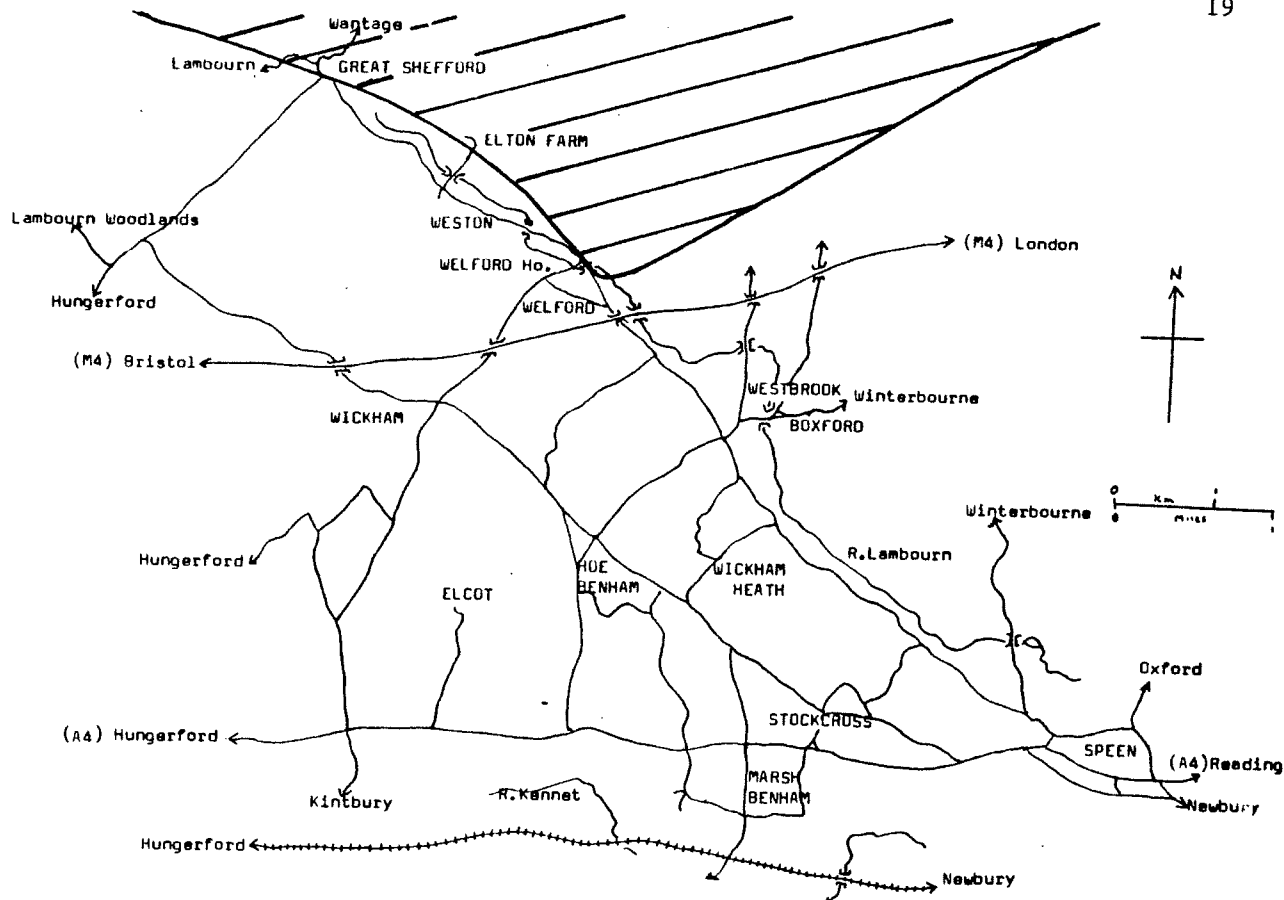
Mr. Looker commented that it was Daniel Fisher who re-started the mummers after the first World War and "I take it that he played with older people before the War". Other members at the time were Ben Birch, now dead, who played Slasher (Bold Slasher in the Carpenter Collection); Orry or Harry Herbert, also dead, who played Happy Jack (Little Happy Jack); Alf Prince and Fred Perris - Mr. Looker is not sure which of them played King George (Queen Mary in the Carpenter text) - and Ern Barrett, who played the Doctor, as did Mr. Looker himself. Albert Hunt, also now dead, played the "squeezebox". A couple of characters are, as yet, unaccounted for.

Ern Barrett is, in fact, a younger relative of Daniel Fisher and it was Ern who gave me a version of the Lambourn play which I described in Folk Review in 1978 (2) (where Ern's name is given incorrectly as 'Bennett'). Understandably, in view of the Fisher/Barrett genealogy, there is considerable overlap between the two plays and this may, in part, account for the King George/Queen Mary mix-up. Memory, no doubt, has done the rest. At any rate, Ern has confirmed several of Mr. Looker's details. Mr. Looker considers the Carpenter version to be as accurate as he can remember. However, he is only really able to recall fragments.

He further commented that "The older men liked the beer, I think that was why they wanted to start the mummers again", and in a RS. to one of his letters says that "we younger ones did not drink" and went for the fun and a bit of pocket money, adding that agricultural wages were "very small".

God Bless the Master - with Albert Hunt on melodeon - was evidently sung first, after which Daniel Fisher (it isn't clear which part he played - he was definitely 'our leader' though) would knock and ask the residents if they would like to see the mummers perform. When Mr. Looker's turn to say his lines as Doctor came he was carried in piggy-back; he was aged around 20 at the time! That may seem odd but, in fact, Jack Smith who played the Doctor at Chaddleworth, around the same time as Fred Tarrant, says that he too was carried in piggy-back.

There were apparently more carols but Mr. Looker cannot remember them. The mummers wore rag, not costume, and travelled on foot via footpaths across the fields in an area roughly bounded by Weston, Wickham, and Welford, taking in Westbrook, Boxford, the Stockcross public house and Marsh Benham - a sort of outpost across the Bath Road (the A4). This



perambulation took several nights to complete, with the following specific stops being made: Welford House (Major Houlden - Fred Tarrant from Chaddleworth calls him Houldin); Elm Farm House (Mr. Werham); Hoe Benham (Mrs. Baker); and the Old Farm, Wickham Heath (Mr. Stacey). The Chaddleworth mummers (3) also visited Welford House, but, in the main, the Weston team's area 'fits' the border of the Chaddleworth territory, and Fred Tarrant commented that the Chaddleworth boys knew very little about the Weston boys. The Hoe Benham play I have collected (4) is, however, quite different to the Weston one, and as there is no possibility of confusion here, for the moment I assume the existence of a separate team in Hoe Benham.

Obviously, much more investigation is needed and I've already made another contact. Obviously, too, Daniel Fisher seems to have been a key figure both at Weston and at Lambourn, and also known well at Chaddleworth. However, as the accompanying map begins to show, a clearer picture may be emerging in terms of local geography and the gradual accumulation of detail is revealing the common and diverse practices of each mummers side in the area.

#### NOTES

- (1) Weston text : Carpenter Collection (Microfilm in Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, London) Reel 2, frames 1025-6 (as per index to the Collection compiled by Dr. E.C.Cawte).
- (2) BROWN, Roly : 'Mumming in West Berkshire' in Folk Review, Sept. 1978, pp.9-13.
- (3) For the Chaddleworth play, see: BROWN, Roly : 'Traditional Topics : The Chaddleworth Mumming Play' in The Southern Rag Folk Magazine Vol. 1 No.4, April/June 1980, pp.27-9.

- (4) The Hoe Benham play exists in several copies, all apparently stemming from Mrs. H.M. Batson:
- Reading (Berks.) Public Library : MSS BTW/D 3794 (History of Welford Vol.7 : Circa 1900). See Folklore 39 (1928) pp.273-9.
  - T.F. Ordish Collection (Folklore Society Library, London) Box 6 : in a small typed collection of play texts, signed by H.M. Batson. Text headed "As played at Hoe Benham, Christmas 1898. From T. Tucker".
  - Roly Brown had access to a further copy from a resident of Boxford (see Folk Review op.cit.)

According to Crockford's Clerical Directory (1890), one Alfred Stephen Batson had been curate, then rector, of the parish of Welford with Wickham from 1876 to 1890. He is not listed in the 1911, but I have not been able to check the intervening years.

#### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

##### Traditional Drama Research Group Indexing Workshop

12 June 1982 (10am to 5pm) Nottingham

For further details contact: Peter Millington, 6 The Pingle, Long Eaton, Nottingham.

##### Traditional Drama 1982: The 5th Annual Conference on Traditional Drama Studies

16 October 1982 - Sheffield

For further details contact: The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, Sheffield. S10 2TN

#### APPLIED MUMMING

Paul Smith

The following extract and illustration are taken from The Graphic - Christmas Number (Dec. 25, 1891), 7. The exact interpretation of this item is, as yet, uncertain. Perhaps readers may have comments.

#### AN UNDRESS REHEARSAL

ALL youthful playgoers, especially those of the masculine sex, long to penetrate into the inner mysteries of theatrical life; they regard with envy any acquaintance who has visited that mystic region "behind the scenes;" and, in default of such indulgence, they peep curiously at the little door through which the members of the orchestra go in and out, and which leads to what is technically termed the "mezzanine floor;" and they are delighted if, before the green curtain draws up, they catch sight of the legs of a stage carpenter, clad in the trousers of ordinary life. Elderly people, on the contrary, who by dint of sad experience have lost many of the illusions of their younger days, prefer to preserve those which appertain to the theatre. They don't want to realise that the beautiful woodland scenery is only so many yards of painted canvas; they strive to believe in the stage moon; and when the bright white light casts a silvery radiance over the ghost's armour, they would rather not be reminded by some precocious youngster at their elbow that it is due to chemistry.

Preach, however, as we may, a great many persons will continue to take a peculiar interest in those special phases of theatrical life to which the public are not ordinarily admitted, so suppose we gratify their curiosity by paying a visit, if not exactly "behind the scenes," at all events in front of the scenes at an unusual hour of the day, namely, at about eleven A.M.

Somehow or other we convince the grim Cerberus who guards the stage-door of the theatre that we have the right of entry. Perhaps we are a personal friend of the manager's, perhaps we supplied the author of the forthcoming burlesque with six of his most excruciating puns, perhaps we are an acquaintance of the pyrotechnist who furnishes the variegated fire which the dragon emits from his hideous jaws—anyhow, we seat ourselves quietly in one of the back rows of the stalls. The fronts of the boxes are all enveloped in large canvas cloths, there is no light except some dingy daylight which struggles in over the back of the gallery, saving the glimmer of an occasional candle which may be seen travelling

along the lobbies, and there is not a soul visible except a couple of charwomen, who may be dimly perceived sweeping among the dark benches of the pit. Presently, however, some slight movement is perceptible on the stage, two or three carpenters begin to busy themselves with the scenery, somebody lights a gas-rake which hangs over the orchestra, a musician, who perhaps represents the whole band on this occasion, begins scraping his fiddle, half a score of ladies and gentlemen, including the manager and the author, takes their seats in the stalls or stand at the wings; and then the stage manager, a most energetic gentleman with double glasses on his nose and his hat on the back of his head (theatrical people will recognise this portrait), makes his appearance, and looks anxiously round to see that everybody is present who is wanted for the rehearsal. The scene is not very exhilarating, for the stage is dimly-lighted, and the house is chilly and draughty; but it is worth seeing from the incongruities which it presents. Everybody is attired in their ordinary walking dress, and that circumstance alone would make the rhyming and punning absurdities of the extravaganza seem more absurd than usual. Besides this, there are all sorts of interruptions, people make mistakes in their delivery of the text, and are eagerly corrected by the anxious author; or the same gentleman, addressing the lady who plays Prince Hansom Kabbi, says, "Excuse me, Miss De Wilderspin, the point of that joke is completely lost if you deliver it so;" whereupon Miss De Wilderspin pouts her pretty lips, believing her own reading to be the right one. But the incongruities of costume are the funniest of all. Observe the young lady with the fur-trimmed jacket. How the people would stare at her if she walked down the Strand with those lady-like gilded fetters on her slender wrists! Her companion, too, with sword and shield, would attract no small amount of attention. But the queerest of all the figures is the Dragon, with his short double-breasted coat and common-place trousers and boots. He really looks a more comic monster in his present guise than he will at night when his scaly armour is complete. At last the rehearsal is over, and the performers, chilly and hungry, go off in search of a well-earned luncheon.



THE NEW BURLESQUE—AN UNDRESS REHEARSAL

From The Graphic -- Christmas Number (Dec. 25, 1891), 7.

PUBLICATIONS NEWS

Peter Davison, Popular Appeal in English Drama to 1850 (London: Macmillan Press, 1982) 221pp (£17.50)

David Fergus, 'Here Comes in Goloshans', Scots Magazine (Jan. 1982) 420-424

Wayland D. Hand, 'From Folk Legend to Folk Custom: The shift from Narrative to Dramatic Contexts', Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore II (1976) 11-19

Peter Voorheis and Ronald J. Meyer (Translators) -P. G. Bogatyrev, 'Scenery, Artistic Place and Artistic Time in Folk Theater', Folklore Forum 14:1 (1981) 33-40

Elisabeth Warner, The Russian Folk Theatre (Cassette R801; Exeter Tapes, The Language Centre, The University of Exeter, Queens 1979)

Reprints of Ian Russell's article - 'In comes I, Brut King: Tradition and Modernity in the Drama of the Jacksdale Bullguisers', Journal of American Folklore, 94 (1981), 456-485 are available from him at cost price (£1 including postage). The article details a Notts-Derby mumming tradition recorded in 1977-78. Write to Bridge House, Unstone, Sheffield. S18 5AF

NOTES

Pinner, Middlesex (TQ 1289)

Keith Holland has written to point out that the text published in Edwin Ware, 'Memories of Old Customs', St. Edmunds Review (Northwood Hills Parish Magazine) No. 97, Jan, 1966, pp.9-10, is a composite version made up of parts of the traditional Pinner play and fragments of the Bampton, Oxon. text published in Joan Cannon, 'The Christmas Mummers: A Sketch from the Past', The Sign Dec. 1937, pp.162-3. Mr. Holland discovered this when he visited Edwin Ware in 1966.

TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GUIDE

Since the publication of the above guide in 1972 by The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, considerable advances have been made in Traditional Drama studies. Consequently, the types and varieties of questions we may wish to consider have similarly expanded. With this in mind, we are soliciting ideas for a revised edition planned for 1983. Anyone having any materials, ideas or comments for consideration should contact Paul Smith, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, Sheffield. S10 2TN

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

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