

ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional
Drama Research Group.
Vol. 3 , no. 1. 1983.



FURTHER NOTES ON MUMMERS IN WEST BERKSHIRE 1897-1927

Roly Brown

The following notes are from work in progress and can in no way be considered complete, and are mainly offered to encourage other researchers who may find themselves faced with material of similarly fragmentary nature and to up-date existing information included in Cawte et al (1) and Steve Roud Mumming Plays in Berkshire (2). The notes can also be most usefully read in conjunction with my previous articles on West Berkshire mumming plays (3).

The period under review, as indicated, is the tale-end of the tradition in the area, and, clearly, work has still to be done on earlier years. I list the information in alphabetical order of village names.

BEEDON

Information from Bob Bosley (April 1983). Mr. Bosley is in his nineties but cannot remember mummers in Beedon. Other, younger, residents agree. It may be that the reference in the Berkshire Book (4) is fanciful when it says 'recently'.

BOXFORD

Information from Roy Pocock and Leon Huntley (Oct.1982) and Rex Mundy (Aug. 1983). Mr. Pocock suggests that the HOE BENHAM play, given to Mrs. Hilda Batson by one Thomas Tucker (5) is actually the Boxford play. Personnel included Joe Huntley (Leon's father), Bert Brown, Billy Butler, and Thomas Tucker. It was played before the First World War and was superseded by the Boxford Masques (c.1913). Mr. Pocock also gave brief details of dress, visits and locations. Mr. Mundy could not remember. Mr. Mundy, although he knew the personnel well, cannot recall the mummers. To add to this apparent confusion, Thomas Tucker actually lived a Wickham, about two miles from both Boxford and from Hoe Benham, and Wickham falls clearly into the Weston mummers' patch (6). Mr. Mundy, indeed, remembers the Weston mummers visiting Elcot Farm (where he lived at the time, c.1920) a mile or so south of Wickham. Despite all this, Leon's late wife, Elsie Huntley, gave a description of the Boxford mummers in her Boxford Barleycorn (7) but does not give dates. Much sorting out needs to be done here, and other contacts have been made which, hopefully, will help clarify the situation.

CHADDLEWORTH

Information from Fred Tarrant (May 1983). A great deal of material is being assembled here (see my previous piece in Southern Rag) (8), but it is perhaps worth passing on Fred's remark that the Mummers carried their costume from place to place. Is this an unusual practice?

CHIEVELEY

Again from Fred Tarrant (May 1983). This is the first reference to a Chieveley group that I have come across, although I've suspected the existence of such a group for some time. Fred is absolutely clear that there were Mummers at Chieveley at the same time as his Chaddleworth group.

CHILTON FOLIAT (Wilts.)

Information from Mrs. Hawkins, daughter of one of the participants (Feb.1983) and Sidney Winchcombe (April 1983). Chilton is actually in Wiltshire, but falls naturally into 'my' area. There appears to have been a continuation of mumming activity from before the First World War up to an unspecified time afterwards (about 1925). Mr. Winchcombe, aged 91, is clear that the personnell of 'his' group are different to those of Mrs. Hawkins'. His team included Bill 'Baggy' Rolfe (who may be the W.Rolfe who supplied Mrs. Batson with her text) (9), Charlie Winchcombe (Sidney's brother), who played the 'big accordion', and Bill Bush. Mrs. Hawkins remembers William Harle, William Denton, and John Looker (her father) who was Jolly Jack, (Mr. Winchcombe is insistent that in his group the character was called Happy Jack). Both give details of dress, visits, and locations. They are uncertain as to whether activity took place before or after Christmas.

COMPTON

Nobody seems to remember the Mummers here. The references we already have (10) push the date back to the early 1880's. On the other hand, Michael Claridge (Christmas 1982) offered the information that his mother remembers her father being in a group of mummers in the Compton/Aldworth/Goring area.

HAMPSTEAD NORREYS

Information from Harold Woodage (1982) and his mother and her sister, Kit Gourlay (1982 and April 1983). There was apparently a group of Mummers here before the First World War, made up from the local Scout troop and including a brother of Kit Gourlay who was later killed in action. There is no information as to which play was performed, where it was acquired or whether or not it was just a one-off.

HERMITAGE

Information from Bill 'Happy' Flitter (Sept. 1982), Bill Flitter, Bill Adnams, John and Joyce Rouse, and Louie Maskell (Oct.1982), Louie Maskell and Ted Rouse again (Apr. 1983) and Ivy Taylor (Aug.1983). All these informants refer to a group that performed just at the outbreak of the First World War. There seems to have been a previous history of mumming here, but not a subsequent one. I now have a good number of details of dress, personnel, stopping-places, and so on, and I hope to offer a much fuller description at a

later date. The Newbury Weekly News provides a few brief notes on the Hermitage mummers (11). Hermitage seems to be a hitherto unreported location.

LAMBOURN

Information from Ernie Barrett (Nov.1982). Ernie was part of the Weston group, that much is now clear (12). He suggests that there was no Lambourn play as such. Gerry Townsend (Spring 1983) on the other hand, suggests that there was - another probable tangle.

NEWBURY

I am indebted to Clive Stevens who passed to me the information that Bill Wheeler (in his nineties), ex-Newbury resident, spoke of mummers from Northcroft Lane in Newbury. Subsequently, Bill thought that they may have come from Chaddleworth but Fred Tarrant (Aug.1983) was quite adamant that 'his' mummers never visited Newbury. Northcroft Lane, according to Bill, was a rough area - the City part of Newbury, where Bill himself lived, was a place where, proverbially, policeman ventured in pairs. The whole history of the City is fascinating. It was a fiercely independent area that had its own mayoral election.

WESTON

Information from Charlie Looker (see my previous piece in Roomer) (13). Apart from Rex Mundy's confirmation of visits by the Weston mummers (see above under BOXFORD), Charlie has added the odd piece of information - practice took place in the village hall, then a Church Mission hut; the group existed in the early 1920's, and Daniel Fisher comes more and more into the picture as the dominant personality who would not, for instance, allow any frivolity during the proceedings.

YATTENDON

Information from Henry Print (May 1983). Mr. Print thinks that there may have been mummers in Yattendon, but certainly before his time. That pushes the date back into the last century and since the only previous reference we have is dated 1897 (14), it seems likely that we have to look at the early 1890s as the last date of performance here. Mr. Print has a beautiful photograph of the Yattendon Minstrels of the 1890s. There were many similar groups in the area who well merit a separate study.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. E. C. Cawte et al, English Ritual Drama (London: Folklore Society, 1967) pp.39-40.
2. Steve Roud, Mumming Plays in Berkshire (Andover: privately circulated, 1980)
3. Roly Brown, 'Mumming in West Berkshire', Folk Review Sept. 1978, pp.9-13.
Roly Brown, 'Traditional Topics: The Chaddleworth Mumming Play', Southern Rag Vol. I, No.4, April-June 1980, pp.27-28. Roly Brown, 'A Note on the Weston (Berks.) Play', Roomer Vol.3, No.2, 1982, pp.18-20.
4. The Berkshire Book (Reading: Berks. Fed. W.I.'s, 1939) p.29.
5. H.M. Batson, Our Wessex Mummers' Plays (n.d.) - this is the principal source of earlier texts at my disposal (see Roly Brown (1978) op.cit.) being a collection with a preface by Hilda M. Batson, wife of the curate of Welford. To be quite fair, Mrs. Batson heads her text "As played at Hoe Benham" and ends it with the date 1898.

6. See Roly Brown (1982) op.cit.
7. Elsie Huntley, Boxford Barleycorn (1970) pp.151-2.
8. Roly Brown (1980) op.cit.
9. See H. M. Batson op.cit.
10. e.g. Major B. Lowsley, A Glossary of Berkshire Words and Phrases (London: Trubner, 1888) pp.17-22.
11. Newbury Weekly News 11th Dec. 1912 and 8th Jan. 1914.
12. See Roly Brown (1978) and (1980) op.cit.
13. Roly Brown (1982) op.cit.
14. H. C. Beeching, 'Pages from a Private Diary', Cornhill Magazine Feb. 1897 p.269 (the author and location of this reference are identified in Cawte et al, op.cit. p.40 fn.2).

Announcing the publication of
 THE PEACE EGG, or, ST. GEORGE
 An Easter Play
 An original chapbook from Edwards and Bryning
 with a brief history by
 Peter Stevenson

During the last two hundred years, chapbooks containing the texts of traditional plays have been published in several places in Great Britain. Of these, the Peace Egg Chapbooks are one of the most numerous and sixteen different printers are known to have published editions, mainly in the nineteenth century. Most of these were produced in Lancashire and Yorkshire (Manchester, Preston, Rochdale, Leeds, Bradford, Otley) with solitary known editions in London and Glasgow.

The original chapbook included in this publication is an example of one of these Peace Egg chapbooks. It was published by the firm of Edwards and Bryning from Rochdale, Lancashire, and the text it contains has been performed by teams of pace eggers in Rochdale since the turn of the century.

Edwards and Bryning first published Peace Egg chapbooks between the foundation of their printing works in 1900 and the First World War. To date, four editions are known to have been printed, the last one being around 1959. Of this last edition, a thousand were published and it is one of these originals that is included.

The short history of the chapbook, prepared by Peter Stevenson, looks at the part played in the continuance of the pace egg tradition in the Rochdale area and the effects it has had on the tradition.

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Publication Date: 1982 ISBN 0950 815209

Price: £1.00 (postage and packing 20p extra)

Orders should be addressed to: The Traditional Drama Research Group,
 c/o The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, The University,
 Sheffield. S10 2TN (0742-78555 Ext. 6295)

CORRESPONDENCE

From Sam Richards, 6 South Street, Totnes, Devon.

"I have not yet attended any of the Traditional Drama Research Group's meetings or conferences, but I do subscribe to Roomer, and would simply like to register the following queries.

Judging by the contents of Roomer I may perhaps be forgiven for thinking that traditional drama consists entirely of matters surrounding St. George, Mummers, Fools, Robin Hood, and Chapbooks, etc. Do specialists in traditional drama include any of the following in their studies?

1. Local pantomines
2. Punch and Judy
3. Street theatre, past and present
4. Toasting contests (as with black DJ's)
5. Some of the more elaborate party games which involve role-playing, disguise, or representation of animals
6. Children's games which basically involve play acting, playing house, or any of the goodies and baddies range. These, after all, are improvised plays which follow patterns
7. Monologues, especially those requiring dressing up.

If not, why not?

And while I'm on my hobby horse (!), is it possible to justify the use of the word 'Traditional' even in the narrow context of the mummers play? I'm beginning to have this argument with song specialists. How is it that folklorists have appropriated the word 'tradition' as if it were any more accurate or descriptive than the now touchy word 'folk'. In the realm of drama can anyone point to any play or dramatic activity that isn't traditional. What could be more traditional than the proscenium arch play? All art, all cultural activity is based on the existence of traditions and the manipulation or alteration of these to make new traditions. Surely the point of interest for folklorists is, which traditions are we talking about, how are they distinctive, how do they work, is there anything about them which is qualitatively different from other traditions. Dare I suggest that we discuss folk traditions, and, instead of traditional drama, drama-as-folklore. Ditto for all other folklore genres. There's no such thing as 'folksong' but there is 'song-as-folklore'.

Then, of course, we're back to discussing 'folklore'. In my book that's better than appropriating a useful word from the language as if it applied only to what we study".

FOLKLORE SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

The Folklore Society holds a limited number of copies of some of its past publications, which are obtainable from Dr. Hilda R. E. Davidson, 24 Owlstone Road, Cambridge CB3 9JH, England. Until the end of 1983 they are available to Folklore Society members at reduced prices. Cheques to be made payable to The Folklore Society, and sent with the order.

	Members' Price	Normal Price
W. Bonser, <i>Bibliography of 'Folklore' for 1958-67</i> (a subject-index of <i>Folklore</i> vols. 69-78)	50p	£1.00
Theo Brown, <i>The Fate of the Dead: Folk Eschatology in the West Country after the Reformation</i>	£5.00	£6.50
E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm, and N. Peacock, <i>English Ritual Drama: A Geographical Index</i>	£1.50	£2.00
E. C. Cawte, <i>Ritual Animal Disguise</i>	£8.00	£9.00
Roger Elbourne, <i>Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire</i>	£5.00	£15.00
Roy Judge, <i>The Jack in the Green: A May Day Custom</i>	£5.00	£7.50
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Ruth Tongue, <i>Somerset Folklore</i> (ed. K. M. Briggs)	£2.00	£3.50
P. V. A. Williams, <i>Primitive Religion and Healing: Folk Medicine in North East Brazil</i>	£7.50	£17.50

FUTURE PUBLICATIONS

The next titles forthcoming in the Folklore Society's Mistletoe Books series will be:

Clement A. Okafor, *The Banished Child: A Study in Tonga Oral Literature* (Central Africa).

Alex Scobie, *Apuleius and Folklore*.

These volumes will be obtainable from Dr. Hilda R. E. Davidson, 24 Owlstone Road, Cambridge CB3 9JH, England. It is hoped that they will appear in September, 1983.

Further titles are planned; manuscripts or outlines for consideration should be sent to the Hon. Publications Officer, The Folklore Society, c/o University College London, Gower Street, London EC1E 6BT.

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

ISSN 0262-4095

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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