

ROOMER

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FOR, O! FOR O! THE HOBBY HORSE IS ^{NOT} FORGOT

Paul Smith

While recently writing an essay on graffiti, I came across the following notes on hobby-horses in English churches in V. Pritchard, English Medieval Graffiti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

SHILLINGTON: All Saints (Pritchard 1967, 13-14)

"...One of the most baffling objects to identify, and one which remained a mystery for over two years, was the hobby-horse (figs. 14, 15, and 16), and it was not until other specimens were found that the problem was solved. The fact that they were all drawn in an upright position added greatly to the difficulty of recognizing them. The German word steckenpferd (=stick-horse) describes the hobby horse graffiti more aptly than ours, and may afford a clue to its origin. The long stick, the loop by which the horse is held when the rider is astride, the ears, eye, open mouth, and shaggy mane, are common to them all (figs. 14, 15 and 16). It is possible that the head was made of straw or basket-work, and interesting specimens of such work, called 'corn-dollies', can still be seen in some churches: strangely enough, there is rather a fine one at Shillington. Fig. 14 is on the jamb of the south doorway at Shillington. Fig. 15 is on the jamb of a small Early English doorway which originally led to the tower of Girton Church, Cambridgeshire. The initials may or may not be connected with it, but the shape of the 'A' is early and could well be as old as the doorway. And fig. 16 is on the wall of the south porch at Wallington Church, Hertfordshire. It seems that the hobby-horse was not allowed into the church.

In the churchwardens' accounts¹ of St. Mary's, Reading, there is this reference: '130 Item, payed to the Mynstrels and the Hobby Horse on May Day 3 shillings 1557'.

Drawn in the decorative margin below a miniature (c.1500)² illustrating a tournament in full swing, there is a group of small figures on hobby-horses. They are apparently fighting a mock tournament, and one can imagine the great amusement this would give to the crowd. As the drawing of the stick is, in each case, carried down on to the stone below, the graffiti must be in situ, and a reasonable guess at their date would be soon after 1300."

WALLINGTON: St. Mary (Pritchard 1967, 118)

"The Church was given to the monks of St. Albans by William de Wallingford in the twelfth century..."

A hobby-horse is incised on the wall of the south porch (see fig. 16)."

fn. 1. Oxford English Dictionary (1933), vol. V, p.317

2. B.M. Add. MS. 24098



*Fig. 14 Shillington
3/8 orig. size*



*Fig. 15 Girton,
Cambridgeshire
3/8 orig. size*



*Fig. 16 Wallington,
Hertfordshire
3/8 orig. size*

From The New Penny Magazine, No. 63 (Jan. 6, 1900) 632-634.

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THE NEW PENNY MAGAZINE.

“MUMMING.”

A QUAIN OLD CUSTOM.

ONE of the quaintest and most rapidly vanishing of ancient customs in this country is that of “mumming.” The word, if traced to its Danish derivation, signifies disguise by means of a mask; but modern mummers are not sufficiently full-feathered to be in a position to include this form of masquerade dress amongst their “effects” or properties, and for a similar reason they cannot clothe their persons in sheepskins as should be, but are content to hide their ordinary tattered garments by vari-coloured strips of paper, their head gear also elaborately covered with the same material.

Their knees are frill-less, a thing which would not have been countenanced in the glorious heyday of the art long since departed; their weapons are no longer fashioned by the village blacksmith, as it is found that wooden sticks cost less. Coal dust is substituted for burnt cork, and is far more effective.

Berkshire is the home of mumming and of mummers, and during November and December one sees it occasionally performed in small out-of-the-way villages such as Dorchester (where the accompanying pictures were taken), a place some six miles from Abingdon.

Essentially it is a Christmas performance, but the actor-manager likes to make as long a season as he can wear out of the period, and preliminaries are always in active rehearsal for some time previous to the performance.

The play chosen is always the same, but the cast varies considerably.

“St. George and the Dragon” existed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and is one of the most familiar legends on record. The libretto is in doggerel rhyme, which is well adapted to the idioms of the yokel actors, of whom the *dramatis persona* entirely consist.

This, briefly, is the plot.

Molly, a man dressed to resemble a woman (for which disguise modern mummers enter not into fashionable details), flourishes (what should be) a broomstick, “Welcome or welcome not,” defying all Press criticism at one fell stroke.

A rambling statement is made. King George is introduced, and he there and then asserts his indifference:

“I care not for Spaniard, French, nor Turk; where’s the man as can do I hurt?” following up with threats of a curdling nature.

This challenge is at once accepted and the glove thrown down by a gentleman with the pseudonym of Turkish Knight,

his head adorned by an orthodox fez.

A vigorous contest ensues, and a general moulting takes place; and here the various authorities are at variance—sometimes it is that King George comes off best, and sometimes the other man. Anyhow, a doctor is hastily summoned.

“I be the noble Doctor Good, and with my skill I’ll stop his blood. . . . I’ve got pills



“HAPPY JACK.”

"MUMMING."

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to cure all ills, the itch, the stitch, the palsy, and the gout."

He is then supposed to stuff a large pill into the mouth of the fallen victim; whereupon the cure is completed, and they fight yet fiercer than before.

"In my drug bottle is one pennyworth of pigeon's milk, mixed with the blood of a grasshopper and one drop of the blood of a dying donkey."

He then takes a pair of pliers and proceeds to pull out one of the teeth of the prostrate



THE "TURKISH KNIGHT."

This time the other foeman falls; but the doctor declines to intervene:

"No, I see he's too far gone."

A jester is then called in, by name "Jack Vinny."

"My name is not Jack Vinny; my name is Mr. John Vinny. I can cure a magpie with the toothache," he says, and then this eminent medico gives gratis a highly valued prescription.

swordsman, exhibiting as a result a big horse tooth, which he should have previously secreted up his sleeve.

Pliers are seldom produced, but a boot-lace with the tooth (a fixture at one end) obviates increasing the stock of properties with which these strolling players are lightly burdened.

Once the tooth is out, the two dance together and Molly sends for "Happy Jack," a very melancholy person, who passes the hat round:



THE "TURKISH KNIGHT" SLAYS "KING GEORGE" AND "DOCTOR GOOD" EXTRACTS THE HORSE'S TOOTH ON A BOOT-LACE.

and if the collection exceeds expectation, spectators may be favoured with an encore.

This is just a rough outline, showing that the play has no claims to merit of a high order; nevertheless from house to house this little company will wander seeking admission, if no further than the front door or kitchen, and putting in as many "turns" as they can in a night, until it is time for them to cast off their home-made costumes and count on another day's work in the field before the next performances the following night.

The time-honoured legend is full of very tragical mirth; and, if it boasts no further result, it does but "shorten winter's sadness" amongst those whose only ray of sunshine it may be.

SALLY: "Please, ma'am, I can't find the broom."

Mrs. Shipshape: "Haven't I told you often enough to have a place for everything, and everything in its place?"

Sally: "Yes, ma'am, I did that, but I've lost the place."

A PALACE OF SALT.

A PALACE of salt, dazzling as snow, has just been erected in Salt Lake City, Utah. This architectural marvel covers about eight acres, and is modelled after the design of the World's Fair buildings in Chicago. The salt was applied to the wooden structure by a spray, the water of the Great Salt Lake, which is twenty-five per cent. salt, being used, with the addition of a certain chemical which renders the quickly solidifying salt impervious to water. Seen from the interior, the structure appears like a palace of crystal rock. The building incloses a space one hundred and sixty feet square, and is in the shape of an octagon, surmounted by a dome, relieved by tall, square towers, one hundred and thirty feet in height. Around the palace are walks, a lake and a fountain, open spaces ornamented by trees, shrubs, and flowers. The building will not melt under the action of the elements; it will neither burn nor fall down with age, but will be enduring as though of stone. It will be used for the purpose of a permanent Utah exhibition of minerals and other products.

18th CENTURY MUMMERS AT SHERBORNE, GLOS. [SP 1714]

Keith Chandler has forwarded the following early references to Mummings at Sherborne. They are taken from an account book of the Dutton Family, which is held in the Record Office in Gloucester, reference number D 678/FAM/96D. For further details of this source, and the wealth of material it contains for Morris Dance researchers, see Keith's article 'Morris Dancing in the Eighteenth Century: A Newly discovered Source' in Lore and Language 3:8 (1983) pp.31-38.

The relevant entries are as follows:-

1791	26 December	To two Sets of Mummings at Sherborne	0 7 6
1792	26 December	To the Mummings	0 2 6
1798	26 December	To the mummings of Sherborne	0 2 6

If these references are to 'Plays' as we know them, they are the earliest we have yet come across for Gloucestershire by a considerable margin. The earliest reference for the county in English Ritual Drama is circa 1830 for a fragment from Chalford.

The American collector James Madison Carpenter noted a text from Thomas Saunders of Sherborne in the early 1930s (microfilm copy in Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and at CECTAL, University of Sheffield). According to Carpenter's note, Saunders had learned the play from his brothers, who in turn had learned it from their grandfather, Albert Hooper. Keith Chandler adds the information that "Albert Hooper was born 1845 \pm one year (aged six at the date of the 1851 census) and was the son of Isaac Hooper, who was born about 1816 in Windrush, which is near to Sherborne. From Albert Hooper's birth date, we may suggest that he could have been in a Mummings' set as early as the 1860s. In addition to Saunders, Carpenter also interviewed other natives of Sherborne. Daniel Large claimed to have learned the play during the early 1880s, as did Thomas Pitts (born 1855). Thomas Bunting (born about 1860) learned the play about 1873 and was a performer during the 1880s. Both he and his brother William learned it from their father James Bunting. Pitts added that the play text was 'thought to be very old in village when he learned it.' Folk memory is notoriously elastic in regard to accurate dating, but one might expect a century to be considered 'very old', giving some plausibility to the performances of the 'mummings' during the 1970s as offering a play in the form which we now define it." English Ritual Drama also notes a 'No Text' reference in the D. R. Howison Collection.

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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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