

BEMBRIDGE

SZ 6488

1. Collection Stephen Roud : Letter from Frank O'B. Adams, 10.5.1977 :

"I was born and lived in Bembridge, in the Isle of Wight, and remember when very small 'The Christmas Boys', but it was in 1911 when I took part, and although some of the characters are forgotten, some of it still remains.

Firstly, there was no written script. It was handed down, year after year by word of mouth. Of those characters I remember there were the Doctor, Turkish Knight, Johnny Jack and his wife, St. George, and others - about eight or nine altogether dressed in home-made costumes.

In 1911 I was St. George, and as far as I can remember my part was

In comes I, St. George, tonight  
The man that wears the stars so bright  
I come here tonight to save that pretty maid  
And kill that Turkish Knight  
With my glittering sword and spear I won ten crowns of gold  
I fought the fiery dragon and brought him to a slaughter  
By means of which I won the King of Egypt's daughter  
Where is that Turkish Knight?

(Enter the Turkish Knight)

What was said then I don't remember but there was a clash of swords and he was killed. St. George was dressed in a suit covered in coloured frills, sewn on, with a helmet with a pampas grass as a plume. Turkish Knight had baggy trousers and blouse, with fez. The Doctor, with a top hat and black bag, had pills and medicine, and in his dialogue

I can cure the itch, stitch, palsy or gout  
Or any rheumatics that go in and out  
Broken legs or broken arm  
I can very soon cure the pain

Little Johnny Jack was dressed non-descript, with a bag of dolls on his back - his family....

In comes I Little Johnny Jack  
With wife and family at my back  
They are large and I am small  
But I'M the best man of them all

His wife, with a broom, came along sweeping, saying

Sweep, sweep, all I find I'm going to keep

Johnny turns and says

What did you say, you dirty old faggot?  
I'll give you a warming

And they have a row.

It was great fun, I know that, especially spoken in dialect. For instance it was never Turkish Knight. It was 'Turkey Snipe'.... if it was being played in one of the village inns, the Doctor or Little Johnny Jack would enter the scene with one of many

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sayings, one being

Ten O'clock and no-one here?  
It's time the big-heads did appear

(Walk in the Big-Heads) which was the signal for a collection for the 'Boys'....".

Mr. Adams was 'nearly 82' when he wrote this letter. Unfortunately he died within a few days of posting it.

2. Cawte et al. list both E.C.Cawte Collection and Robert H. Adams Collection as sources of information on Bembridge - I have not seen these.

BRADING

SZ 6087

T.H.P. : "...In entering the village, on Christmas Day, we were accosted by a ragged crew of "mummers" in gay dresses of shreds of coloured paper, and skilfully-cut pages of copy-books. Their performance seemed to resemble that which one reads of as usual in other countries, with the addition of a black-faced actor in a ragged smock, and carrying a stout cudgel with a bell at one end, a supernumerary, may be, for the special performance of Brading village. He acted the part of prompter, stage director, and master of ceremonies. Is he to be met with elsewhere?"

BRIGHSTONE

SZ 4282

Cawte et al. list Collection Robert H. Adams as source of information on Brighstone - I have not seen this.

CALBOURNE

SZ 4286

Long : Gives a long text: "...as represented in the Island forty or fifty years ago, is derived from two copies in MS. (one of older date than the other), verbal relations, and the writer's own recollections..". However, he does not give a location for this version. Cawte et al. list Long's work under Calbourne, adding Collection Alex Helm as further source of information, but I have not seen the latter.

CHALE

SZ 4877

Cawte et al. gives Collection Robert H. Adams as source of information on Chale - I have not seen this.

EAST COWES

SZ 5195

Ernle : "...At that time (about 1855) a version of our play still existed in the Isle of Wight. It was acted at Christmas by a party of young fishermen from East Cowes, who used to come to the Rectory for the purpose. In general outline the two plays (see under WHIPPINGHAM) were alike. But after the death and revival of the Turkish Knight, Buonaparte enters and vaunts his various triumphs. His recital is cut short by the arrival of Nelson, who bids him cease and draws his sword. They fight, and Nelson runs Buonaparte through the body. I thought this play very superior to our own, partly because the actors had real cocked hats and gilt buttons on their uniforms, but mostly because they fought with metal swords whose clash and clank were more real than any noise we could produce with our wooden weapons..".

FRESHWATER

SZ 3487

Chart : Gives text of "...the old mumming play called 'The Christmas Boys' written in broad dialect...". He does not say where on the Island this performance took place, but a letter written by him to Thomas Ratcliffe (and preserved in a collection of the latter's papers in Worksop Public Library) only six days after the text was published, includes the comment: "I saw the 'Christmas Boys' played in Freshwater I.W. in 1894..".

(Many thanks to Peter Millington and Idwal Jones for this reference).

KINGSTON

SZ 4781

Garle : "...The Christmas Boys, or Mummers, who are also still to be seen in some parts, were performing about Shorwell and Kingston as recently as 1898, from the writer's own knowledge when he was temporarily living at Kingston Rectory. The 'company' was generally composed of eight or nine, raised from the surrounding farms, with a few shermen. On the occasion referred to their costumes were, to say the least, somewhat grotesque : one, representing a Turk, wore a paper suit of many colours; others were dressed in garments of stronger material, and wisely so, too, as they had to stand a good deal of knocking about; 'King George' carried a sword, a weapon evidently obtained from some wreck on the neighbouring shore; a soldier sported a red coat, which, judging from its cut, had done more duty in the chase than on the battlefield; Father Christmas, with his wife, a doctor, a Great Head and Blundered, with one or two beggars, completed the cast...".

ST. HELENS

SZ 6289

Collection Stephen Roud : Two letters from Portsmouth residents, in 1977:

"...One of my aunts told me that my grandfather took part in the

local mummers play there and that he always played King George or Saint George. It used to vary from place to place. Unfortunately all my aunts and uncles that were old enough to know the details are all dead now. My father also...."

"I have recently retired from teaching and regularly took the Mummers Play of St. George and the Dragon from the book Old England at Play published by George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd. This play was almost identical to the wording of a mummers play which my grandmother remembered being performed in the village of St. Helens, I.O.W....".

SEAVIEW

SZ 6291

Collection Stephen Roud : Letter from Sea View resident, 1979 :

"I can remember my father, Clement Greenham, who was born in this village in 1883, telling me that at Christmas time there used to be Mummers who called at the door and were invited in to entertain the family. He knew all the rhymes, but I'm afraid I can only remember one or two...one couplet ran like this "Here come I, Mackerel Jack, my wife and family at my back", and another was "Here comes I Beelzebub, and in my hand I carry the grub". My father's house was fairly small, so I don't think there could have been more than about half a dozen mummers, and I rather assume that they were local lads who dressed up and performed to make a bit of Christmas money. However, my Mother who was born in this village in 1893 couldn't remember mummers, so either they didn't call at her house or the custom had died out in the early 1890's...I am 60 now...".

SHORWELL

SZ 4582

See entry under KINGSTON.

WHIPPINGHAM

Ernle : "My mother, whose childhood and youth had been spent in Wiltshire had, however, often seen the Wiltshire mummers from the surrounding villages act this play, and from their lips she had learnt the words. As she had learnt them orally, so did we. They were never set down in writing...My mother took care that we were word-perfect, but otherwise gave us no special instructions, except to come to the middle of the platform, hold our heads up, and speak out...". Gives as much of text as he can remember.

YARMOUTH

SZ 3589

Cole : "...At Christmas, too, we had the Mummers, with their Bellman, The Valiant Knight, The Turkish Knight, and other legendary characters, acting a play, the origin of which is said to date back to the time of the Crusades...".

## EASTERN ISLE OF WIGHT

Smith : "...Colonel Jolliffe has also sent me the result of his remembrance in the eastern parts, where I heard it when a boy. The words he gives to this character are slightly different and not quite so indicative of antiquity as those of my own recollection which are:

Here comes I, old Beelzebub  
Upon my shoulder I carries my club  
In my hand I carries my pan  
And don't you think I'm a jolly old man? "

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This list includes all references to Isle of Wight Mummers or Christmas Boys known to me at the time of writing.

I would be grateful for any additions or corrections which readers can offer, and I hope to be able to produce a new edition if sufficient new material comes to light.

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