

The Hollington Tipteerers. The last true mummers team in the world?
By Keith Leech

The Hollington Tipteerers were formed around 1985 when Mad Jack's Morris of Hastings decided to take out a mummers play. I went to the Vaughn Williams memorial Library and researched all the plays local to Hastings, there was in fact only one recorded and that was from the suburb of Hastings, Hollington. Hollington is mentioned in the Domesday Book has an 11th century church and was a rural farming village It was subsumed into the Borough of Hastings and St Leonards during a period of urban growth in the 1940s and 1970s. It is on the northwest outskirts of the town and is the site of most social housing in the area. Tipteering is the term for mumming in the Sussex dialect.

The play was very short and clearly fragmented, the biggest omission was the doctor's lines where the original handwritten script simply says 'a doctor then revives him'. Most of the Sussex plays follow a very similar pattern and therefore the more complete lines from the play in Fittleworth, West Sussex was spliced in. Later the player who now plays Father Christmas added himself some lines, 'we only have a short time to stay, but there's fighting men to see before we are away' is cannibalised in part from the Netley Abbey Play and 'The door is closed and I am in' is scavenged from a play of various origins first collected in Sir Edmund Chambers book, 'The English Folk Play'. Nevertheless the play is very short and over and done with in around 5 minutes. This is significant because it has led to the evolution of how and where the play is performed.

A crew volunteered and it was decided to use traditional clothes with a St George cross on a tabard for King George, Top hat and tails for the doctor and similar. In the early days all the team sooted their faces although this has tended to move towards the use of masks and rags for disguise. The doctor is now the only character who still soots his face. One performer says it's because he got fed up being nagged for having black on his pillow.

We then needed to decide where to take the play, whether to advertise or not or just turn up and do it. Partly due to sheer laziness and partly because one member pointed to a Thomas Hardy passage where in 'Return of the Native', the mummers are described waiting out in cold and entering one by one –it was decided to not warn anybody but just turn up. This was considered the 'traditional' way to do things and has been how it has been done ever since. The Hollington Tipteerers often refer to themselves as guerrilla mummers. The idea being that they arrive do the play, collect and have a drink as quickly as possible so that they can get to the next pub, and do as many pubs as they can in one evening. Unless proven wrong they feel they are the only team of mummers in the country who still do things the traditional way and boast of this when performing. In practice as they tend to do the same pubs on the same day annually their presence is usually now anticipated. The play has been randomly performed on a moving train from Rye to Hastings to a single passenger and on a Brighton doorstep to a young mum and her kids. There is one semi organised stand and that is on Winkle Island in Hastings Old Town after the morris dancers on Boxing day. Typically the doctor will enter and go to the bar where he asks the landlord if it is possible to do the play. If asked what it is he says it's a traditional play, we have always done it in this pub (whether we have or not), it will last 5 minutes we will go round with the hat and all buy a beer. (The last bit usually sells it to them).

He then either leaves the pub and we move on, or he goes and sits down somewhere; the idea being he is just a customer come in for a drink. His odd dress and sooty face usually have by now given it away to the customers who are now expecting something. If he goes to leave it isn't unusual for regulars to say to the landlord 'let them in'. The play then happens with each part coming in in turn saying their line. The players all wait outside whatever the weather and come in one by one. The doctor stands from wherever he has put himself as if he 'just happened' to be in the pub.

The play follows its course and we finish with a song. Sussex Tipteering plays usually finished with a Christmas carol, the 'Sussex Carol' being the most popular. The team decided that this was not appropriate for the style of play we are doing so sing the traditional wren song popularised by Steeleye Span 'Please to see the King'; once in front of Peter Knight of Steeleye Span who happened to be in the pub.

The doctor then steps forwards and says. 'That was the Hollington Tipteering play that has been performed around these parts for the past 400 years and although it's crap we can see no reason why it should die quite yet. Usually to big cheers'. Then says 'Oh look I've got a hat' the crew reply 'Well fancy that' then he says 'If you put some money in here I can buy the boys some beer'. The team go to the bar and the bag duly pays for the beer. On a normal evening the bag pays for sufficient beer for

the whole team plus any taxi or rail fares. The team only perform where they can arrive and return by public transport, so do not usually do pubs that are too far from a station. The idea is that there will be a good density of pubs in a small area. Occasionally they have been invited to do the play in local large houses, or church fairs. The team is strictly set to seven members so that the bag will go round and 'camp followers' may get a drink if there is a sufficiently large bag. The team boast that the money collected is not for charity but simply for beer and this usually brings more money into the bag. Any bag leftover is kept as cash in the doctor's bag until the next year and then just goes back into the pot. They not only claim to be the last mummers who do not arrange their tours but also the last who use the bag for the sole purpose of spending it on travel and beer.

There are of course occasions when it is clear the audience is hostile in which case the play can go very quickly sometimes omitting the song and just leaving. Only once in the history of the team has the decision been made to stop the play and just leave because the audience was becoming threatening. Once in one of the usual haunts in Lewes (where there had always been a good reception) the heckling was more than usual but good natured so the play continued. However Brighton and Hove Albion had been playing at home and rival supporters were on each side of the bar with the play happening in the middle. All went well with some good natured banter until the play ended. Half the team had just bought their beer when a chair flew across the room followed by most of the furniture. This I believe is the only time we have left without finishing our beer. This is not usual, normally the audience are very appreciative and engage us in long conversations about the play. The technique of just turning up unannounced has led to us performing in venues we would never normally have chosen, like wine bars and a trendy craft beer bar in Brighton which was packed with youngsters who all 'got it' and loved it. It gives a flexibility where if one pub turns us away we simply try our luck at the next. It also brings the tradition to an audience who would not normally have come across it in any other way. There is always the risk of course of running across another mummers group, but this has only happened once when we ran into the Peacehaven Tipteerers (basically the Copper family and friends) in a pub in Lewes. After some good natured banter and a couple of beers we agreed separate routes and all met up at the Lewes folk club for a finale.

The players get a part and stay in that part each year for as long as they wish, many have been in the group since it started. Getting into the play is therefore very much a matter of 'dead man's shoes'. If somebody wishes to join they have to be agreed by the whole crew and then may have to spend many years following the group around, helping carry coats and so on until a part appears. There are occasions when a player cannot get along and at this moment the new player will get an opportunity to stand in. Although still loosely associated with Mad Jacks Morris the majority of the crew are not now members of the morris team. They are predominantly male but women have been known to play parts.

On occasion if there are insufficient numbers parts will be dropped or doubled up. Once in a while if at a party or if happening to be travelling in kit to a stand players have been known to do the whole play by themselves. As a consequence the whole crew know the play by heart and therefore do not practice and again take pride in being quirky. Ad libs, particularly on contemporary news items, are common place, and never shared with the other players until they appear. Then quick thinking ensues to return with a suitable (usually rhyming) reply. This adds to the spontaneous feel of the play which is deliberately never over polished.

The Hollington Tipteerers believe they are therefore the last true mumming side who never deliberately rehearse, never tell anybody they are coming and only collect for beer money. Unless challenged otherwise by other teams a claim they are hoping to uphold. So the gauntlet is down.