

Guisering today on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border

Ripley is in Derbyshire, at the heart of the former Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire coalfield, and close to the border with Nottinghamshire, which follows the course of the Erewash River. Ripley Morris Men were formed in 1924, ceased dancing in the 1950s, and reformed in 1981. In December 1982 we performed the Derby Tup play around Ripley, but it was not very well received. In January 1983 we were contacted by Percy Cook who told us about the Guisers play he used to do as a child, before the First World War, in Hammersmith, a small hamlet half a mile from the centre of Ripley.

Percy was born in April 1892, and he last performed his play in 1904 when he was 12. He could, however, remember all the words lucidly, and we tape recorded his performance, which concluded with two songs, one taken from his mothers music box, the other a local children's rhyme. He told us that he used to wear his father's old stripped football shirt, his mother's old hat, and that four of them, doubling up parts, would travel widely around the area, as far as five miles from Ripley, performing the play in houses and pubs.

We performed Percy's play outside his house on Glebe Avenue, Ripley, the following Christmas, using wooden swords he had made for us. This first performance was followed by one at Ripley Hospital, then 15 more that night, and we have performed it every Christmas since. Percy's Hammersmith Guisers Play is *very* short, only 38 short lines, delivered by five characters. It is ideal to perform in a modern pub, where attention spans are also very short. We can easily manage 15 or more performances a night.

We have performed on the three (or four) Fridays in December before Christmas, about 40/45 performances each year, at pubs/clubs around Ripley, Swanwick, Riddings, Somercotes, Selston and other local villages. In recent year's pub, club and miner's welfare closures have removed some of our regular venues.

Venues are agreed with the landlord in advance, by the tour leader who volunteers each year, and routes and times vary year on year. There is no pre-advertising, partly because tours can easily run off schedule by extra performances added in for upstairs parties or

back rooms, or time to drink free beer given by the landlord, but mainly so that people cannot decide to avoid the performance by coming in later, or leaving earlier.

We burst in, perform, collect, and disappear (after a beer).

The collection is for Ripley Hospital League of Friends, a very popular local charity. Ripley Hospital was built entirely by public subscription in 1928 following the death of an injured miner from Pentrich Colliery, near Ripley, who died on his way to Derby Hospital 13 miles away. The League of Friends collects £80/100,000 a year to support the hospital. The Hammersmith Guisers play brings in around £1,200 each year for the League of Friends, and we have collected well over £25,000 from our guising for the Hospital.

The publicity we give the event is afterwards, when we give the money to the Hospital League of Friends at Ripley Hospital, on the first Thursday in January. This is always publicised in local newspapers, and we have made the front page when we topped £10,000, and £20,000, cumulative collection.

We are not the only guisers group performing in the area. Black Pig Morris perform a Selston-origin play further south down the Erewash Valley, four or five performances in December, and Old Oss Mummers perform a Mansfield-origin Old Oss play, a couple of performances in the Erewash valley in December.

There is quite a strong local guising tradition in the area, some older people know the words, and there are texts for 12 local plays, 5 of which Ripley Morris have collected from former guisers. Whilst guising seems to have died out in Ripley after the Great War, in the mining villages to the north and east it carried on until and during the Second World War, and afterwards in Riddings until at least 1976, in Ironville until at least 1978. We have some interesting reminiscences from our former guiser informants.

The texts for the local plays vary quite a lot, King George, King George's Son or St George usually fights Turkish Knight or Young Turk, but in Selston, which is in

Nottinghamshire, his opponent is Buy Guy, Bull Slasher or Slasher, and the whole event is known as Bullguising.

The first time Ripley Morris performed our Hammersmith play at the Bull and Butcher in Selston, following the demise of Selston Morris, an old woman jumped up when Turkish Knight started to speak, and hit him over the head with her handbag, exclaiming “You’ve got the words wrong!”

We all used to black up our faces, following the tradition, but in recent years some of us disguise ourselves using other colours; white, red, green, blue, etc. There is no policy on this, it is the individual’s choice, but blacking has caused embarrassment and offence, and this is dissipated if a variety of disguise colours are used.

Performers volunteer each year and for each tour, and provide their own costumes as they wish. Costumes tend to vary year on year, and as most performers like to do different parts year on year and tour on tour, tours tend to look quite different. We never rehearse. There are very few words to learn. First performances on each tour can be a bit ropey, but there a few customers in the pubs at early doors.

We always perform ALL of Percy Cook’s words, but not in the order he gave us. We bring Beelzebub in before Turkish Knight, because it flows better that way. If we have enough performers out some of Beelzebub’s words are taken by an Old (or young) Woman character.

We have added in an extra character, the Policeman, to stop the second fight, which otherwise just fizzles out lamely. This role is usually taken by one of our men who is a 6ft.4in ex-policeman and he can have quite an impact on some of the more unruly audiences. The Policeman makes up his own lines, which are different for every venue, and usually refer to where we are going next, so that the audience can go in a different direction.

We have introduced a Dragon, when we were asked to do the play on St Georges Day, but this hasn’t come out in December yet. We like to add bespoke lines for different

venues, usually puns on the name of the place, and we usually add a topical reference or two, to keep it fresh. We have quite a few ad lib type quips, which have appeared over the years, and work well, which are thrown out at random if the audience is engaging and enjoying the play. Performances can, therefore, take surprising turns at different venues.

We like to get the audience involved; our favourite is the nurse, plucked from the audience to revive Turk before the doctor comes in. Some nurses can be very enthusiastic, including the male ones. Things can get quite chaotic if we meet a large hen party, but not all the venues are so popular, and we sometimes outnumber the audience, but we always perform the play, even to an audience of one.

Most of our guisers are in their 60's, our oldest is 82, and a number of regular guisers have died in recent years. We have questioned why we do it, and 'part of the routine' seems to be the main reason. We know that hardly anyone locally is interested in the play, or would miss it if it stopped. We will carry on for a few more years yet, and perhaps cut down on the number of performances.