

Slide 1: Forty Years.....

Coming In for Forty Years....Frome Valley Morris Mummers' play from Broadway

December 1980 The Vaughan Williams Library, Cecil Sharp House.

I was living in Scotland, visiting the library to research Border songs. I picked up Alex Helms's booklet – Eight Mummers Plays, all of the Hero-Combat/Quack Doctor type.

Slide 2: Scottish Border Play

I never knew such things existed and was immediately excited. I looked through it and was instantly caught. One play was from Hawick, the town I lived in, the text from Scottish Notes and Queries, 1889. The Carpenter Collection has another six versions given by people who remembered the words from 40 or 50 years before. By January I had gathered some enthusiasts and we performed the play in Hawick again, possibly the first time for some 80 years.

These plays deal with almost impossibly deep topics – death and resurrection, the turning of the world, the hope inside winter's dark places, the comedy containing wisdom, the fool confounding the learned. The psychology of the parts and their relationship to the action could occupy an expert for weeks – and they are just huge fun.

Dorset – the Broadway play

1981. I moved back to England, to Dorchester, Dorset, where I began learning Morris dancing with Frome Valley Morris. The team has performed a Dorset play every midwinter since 1978, believed to have been performed in Broadway, near Weymouth, before World War I. The text was written out in 1934 and deposited in the County Record office in 1962.

Slide 3 : Play Text

One December evening in 1981 I cycled 6 miles to rehearse for the third year of the play's revival. Requests for performance outside December or January are rarely accepted. One exception was appearing at the Thomas Hardy Summer School. We have players who have been performing this play for between 1 and 41 years. I have missed two years in those 40 times.

Slide 4: Modern Folk Plays

The play is a typical Hero-Combat/Quack Doctor play with many generic sets of lines. Notable points:

- there is doubt as to whether the Turkish Knight has actually been killed
- the second of the two resurrections is orchestrated by Jack Vinney, not the doctor
- Jack Vinney is the southernmost outlier of his name, which occurs most often from Bristol into Gloucestershire and is Jack Finney elsewhere.
- there is, unusually, no request for money in the play text.

Slide 5: Announcer/Father Christmas

Characters: Announcer, “A room make room, my gallant boys,”

(Old) Father Christmas, “In comes I Old Father Christmas.” Dressed in brown and green, not red.

Slide 6: St George/Turkish Knight

St George, “In comes I, St George, that Man of courage bold”

Turkish Knight, “In comes I the bold Turkish knight,”

Slide 7: Doctor/Jack Vinney/Beelzebub

Doctor, “Oh yes there is a doctor to be found”

Doctor’s assistant (from 2019) “I always help the doctor, he has the skill to heal”.

(Not in the original text - added to enable an individual who really wished to, to take part.)

Beelzebub, “In comes I Beelzebub”

Jack Vinney “Jack Vinney is not my name, Mr Jack Vinney is”

Each character is hidden from the audience, and more than one entrance is used if possible, to maintain the element of surprise when each strangely clad figure enters. Reading the text takes approximately 9 minutes.

Individuals are drawn to certain characters and usually play them. Some of the company can and have played all the parts, others know 3 or 4 parts. We see ourselves as custodians of the play, which is made possible by our performance.

Costumes props and delivery

Slide 8: 1981,1985

Up till the 1990s individual performers developed their own approach and dressed according to their character. Players performed like theatre actors, with flamboyant gestures and speeches emphasising emotion and movement.

We had at various times:

Slide 9: 1985

- a portable operating table with the doctor using various instruments to extract sausages, water filled balloons etc. as he attempted at length to cure the Turkish Knight
- a sheet laid down for the Turkish Knight and red paint applied
- choreographed violent long-lasting fight scenes
- outrageous adlibs, additions to the script, comments on contemporary politics, and byplay between characters and audience members

Slide 10: 1988

- a trident held by Beelzebub linked to a gas canister to produce flames from the three prongs –we discovered a significant risk of explosion from the ill thought through set up

Slide 11: 1993

For several years the play was interpreted in the light of pagan midwinter ideas. Beelzebub wore a bullskin cloak, Turkish Knight donned an animal mask, Father Christmas and Jack Vinney wore large headgear made from woven ivy, holly, beech and other winter vegetation

The mid 1990s

Slide 12: Hardy Players

The team researched the presentation of plays before WWI and considered photos of the Hardy players production of Return of the Native in 1923. This featured a mummers play, supervised by Thomas Hardy, based on what he had seen in Puddletown when he was a child.

Slide 13: 3 scenes

As a result the costumes and delivery were standardised. The team have broadly continued in this manner up till the present day:

- The emphasis is on delivering the words in the text
- Ad-libs do occur and occasionally performers forget lines and make up some others but this is discouraged.
- The hat shape and accompanying motifs and ribbons is believed to have been a feature of Dorset mummers 100 – 150 years ago. Six of the characters wear these hats. The Doctor retained his own hat and added face ribbons.

Slide 14: 3 scenes

- The Doctor, Turkish Knight and Father Christmas dressed according to character with face ribbons or a beard.
- The Announcer was given a knotted dyed string costume based on an Austrian midwinter figure in an Innsbruck museum, reminiscent of Northern Ireland straw boys and the 1930s Overton and Longparish Mummers.
- Jack Vinney adopted a green raggy jacket

Delivery

Adlibs, character acting and minimised movement were abandoned. Based on comments from 19th century performers and audiences we aimed at:

- short fight sequences of a few blows
- delivering lines in a loud monotone with little expression
- entrances of characters on cue
- lines delivered standing still with a minimum of movement
- characters finishing a speech join a line of those already in the performance area, stepping forward when starting the next set of lines
- minimum props – Announcer (broom), Father Christmas (staff), combatants (sword and shield), doctor (bag and bottle), Beelzebub (frying pan with fire or red bike lamp, club), Jack Vinney (toy singing bird)
- finishing the play by singing the final lines moving in a circle, hands on the shoulder of the character in front, before leading off
- Beelzebub re-entering the performance area to collect money in the frying pan

Slide 15: St George, fight scene, Jack Vinney

The objective was to emphasise the words and use costume and stillness to create a sense of mysterious otherness. This limited the time spent on each performance (minimising the possibility of audience boredom, enabling more performances per session).

Performance times and venues

For the first few years performances were limited to outdoors on Saturday before Christmas in Weymouth and Dorchester shopping streets in conjunction with Morris dancing. There was an evening show in The Wise Man, the pub across the road from the Morris practice hall.

Towards the end of the 1980s this programme expanded, with several evenings leading up to Christmas devoted to visiting pubs in South and West Dorset.

By the 1990s the team were going out 6 or 7 times, with 15-25 performances. Venues were pubs and several folk clubs. Sometimes a minibus transported the team. Performances were not arranged beforehand and often the first those in the bar knew

of the play was a bang on the door and the Announcer's entrance. A favourite night was the Weymouth walking tour with 6 or 7 shows and free drinks. Very seldom did this approach result in difficulty or a bad reaction from bar staff and customers.

Slide 16: 2 groups, Beelzebub

However by the 2000s things changed. Maybe it was the effect of drink driving laws, the availability of supermarket cheap alcohol or the trend to home entertainment. Village pubs increasingly became restaurants in all but name, town pubs were no longer full in the lead-up to Christmas, landlords became increasingly wary of a bunch of weirdly dressed performers. Folk clubs had pretty much closed. We resorted to only visiting places we knew would offer a welcome. We gave up cold calling and for the last 12-15 years have performed by prior arrangement, with notices and publicity. It means that we produced marketing material to explain the play and

Slide 17: Flyer page 1

devoted time to personally visiting establishments to confirm dates. I have to say this has seldom resulted in attracting a large number of observers. There were also engagements at functions including parties, carol services/evenings and Christmas events. Like many community groups we have fewer people to draw on and some years have only performed one or two nights.

The Dorset context today

Slide 18: Symondsburry village and play

Symondsburry's play has a confirmed almost unbroken history back to the early/mid 1800s. Currently performed each New Years Day, cast members must be born in or live in the village.

In addition there are 6 or 7 mumming teams performing each winter, with occasional one-offs, such as the plays written for Broadmayne performers in 1993, Hardye School Dorchester students in 1986 or for the Sailors Return, Weymouth music session, in c. 2018.

A Hoodening play

Slide 19: Hoodening 2006

In addition to keeping the Broadway play alive for 41 years Frome Valley Morris Mummers have written a play based on Kentish Hoodening and performed this at folk festivals and in pubs from 2004-c. 2010. Sadly lapsed due to not enough people being interested in keeping it going.

Memorable times almost at random

Turners Puddle deconsecrated church: the owner reroofed it and held an annual Christmas event for 3 or 4 years with carols, a string quartet, poetry and the play. First time we changed in the stable, then were promoted to the big house.

Slide 20: Turners Puddle church

Mumming at Turners Puddle Church

Standing in the frosty dark
Candle light through stony windows
The church porch black and drear, the door unseen.
Shuffling feet and hands hidden in clothing,
The frost penetrating even inside the folds.

Yes, the magic of that time, bright clear magic
Bright bright stars framed through bare tree branches
Bright bright stars shining in pitch black sky
Gravestones in the cold white grass
We waited in turn for the music to finish
Then we waited for each of our cues
Straining to hear the progress of the play.
One by one we entered until only two of us were left in the cold.
I would not have been anywhere else.
I went through the door to candle light and the remaking of the world.

Too many anecdotes

The play has given me experiences I would otherwise never have had.

Slide 21: Favourite places

Touring the Purbecks by minibus, fetching up at the Square and Compasses, being offered trays of Russian spirit, Belgian fruit beers, so loved by Paul that his eyes span round. Finishing with the landlord going to bed, leaving the bar to the customers. Everyone paid for what they took.

St George's ribbons include dreadlocks from a performer who cut them off for charity

The annual New Year party at Bothenhampton village hall. We provide the play, music, song, poems, stories, social dancing. Bob and Evie, sadly gone, the bread and cheese.

The mumming scene from Return of the Native with the New Hardy Players in Julian Fellowes garden and receiving a magnificent fish stew in the house after a rehearsal.

Hearing the affectionate cries of "F off", "not another one" and "I'll revive him" from a woman who squatted over the prostrate Turkish Knight in the Chapelhay Tavern, Weymouth. A great night.

The Bull at Swyre, empty, save for a few customers and a brass band. Carols were sung, the play enjoyed. Another great evening.

Slide 22: Bath Mummers Unconvention

The Mummers Unconvention at Bath in 2011/12, realising the great variety in our heritage and meeting lots of other folk who understood.

2018 and 2019 two small Dorchester pubs welcomed the play and cheerfully undertook their own publicity. Enthusiastic patrons filled both bars. So good.

Going the Rounds

The Thomas Hardy Society has promoted this wonderful event biannually since c. 2005. Carols from the Hardy manuscripts are sung in West Gallery style in locations that the choir in the novel Under the Greenwood Tree sang them. Approx. 100-120 people take part, walking round Bockhampton and Stinsford, taking cider at Hardy's birthplace and finishing in Stinsford church, where his tomb is and where he attended services. We have been fortunate to be asked to perform the play, first when the final

carols were sung in Kingston Maurward House (Knapwater House in the novels), then at Stinsford Church, with its recently inserted West Gallery.

Slide 23: Going the Rounds

Twenty First Century Tenants of the earth: midwinter

The meekfaced oft-whiskered fools singing lustily in Stinsford church,
The womenfolk likewise trilling, merrily fluting the parts to old carols,
The instruments bowed, blown, and fingered, holding times and lines.
In the gallery the mummers lurk, awaiting their cue.

Before this, a hundred or more, many in some imagined caricature of period dress.
Close by Thorncombe Wood they murmured, sang and moved on.
Travelling by foot, lantern lit, conscious, oh so conscious.
Swelling carolling, tunes scarcely heard today; an antique occasion,
Perhaps it so may seem; not for those who sang or played or witnessed.
Onward, past cottage, lane and hedge, darkly to Bockhampton,
To stand before casement windows as if in a novel page
To walk by riverside path to the old Stinsford Church to hymn and carol there.
I would like to think the old choirmaster heard us,
Deep though his body was buried, as if we were that poetic band of angels.

Slide 24: Holy screens, consumer palaces

That same night I passed lighted rooms, inhabitants seemingly in thrall.
Coloured images, inane chatter of holy televisual screens.
Many others parade in bright consumer palaces,
Gathering and garnering, gaining chattels for life and death.

Perhaps the old poet himself might see all this
Maybe the sons and grandsons of old choristers still hear Christmas airs
Perhaps the long gone mummers still play among the clouds.
These could be mere signatures; as if an echo of eternity rings in this place.
Those we celebrate knew they were tenants, not owners of the earth.
They would have known that where your heart is, there is your treasure.
They would have realised that to lay up your treasure in heaven is a key to life.

Slide 25 2 groups, Beelzebub

So, those who sang the carols into hearts ablaze with quiet,
Who religiously sang them round their parish,
Whose poetry recorded their piety, their true substance,
Their stuttering play a reminder of inevitable death and resurrection
The staged fight, the crazy doctoring, the request for coin
Repeated each year as if the calendar depended on it.
All those possessed an insight, an insight indeed.

Where are the children and grandchildren of those who sang and played?
Will we, like them, be seen no more in the taverns of this age?
The moving screens, the places of selling, the brassy entertainments.

Slide 26: 4 pics

I went walking in the dark, singing, thinking of well thumbed holy books,
Of other lives in other times,
To land in Stinsford church and hide in the gallery,
Waiting to interrupt the singing.

“A room make room, my gallant boys, and give us room to rhyme...”

The playful mummery begins.

Announcer, Father Christmas, St George, Turkish Knight, Doctor and assistant, Beelzebub, Jack Vinney, each in turn.

Doggerel verse from a caretaker, prison warder, teacher, yes and others,

Characters peculiar, serious, jovial, the players hidden and unknown,

Repeating word of perpetual realities consonant with the darklit midwinter season;

This dark light of birth and rebirth, fit for a fool indeed, and for the wise.

Slide 27: Christmas shopping event

Whiskered fools, fluting women, music makers, beribboned wide eyed mummers, The tenants of the earth.

Humanity desperately needs and seeks to touch things beyond individual self, to achieve insight, empathy and to recognise reality. These plays, with their death and resurrection, their silliness and depth, their appeal to our deepest mind, offer just such an opportunity. A 19th century mummer from Wiltshire commented “This be like parson’s work.”

Slide 28: 4 scenes