

WE ARE NOT OF THE RAGGED SORT Pete Coe

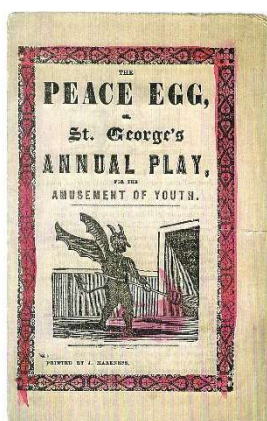
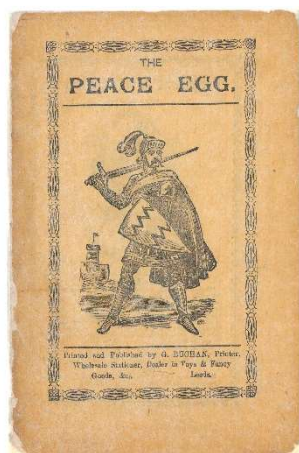
In the late 60s, singing with Chris Coe around the Midlands folk clubs & festivals, I saw The Coventry Mummers & met up with Ron Shuttleworth. He got me interested in these plays & I bought some of the books of plays published by Alex Helm & Chris Cawte. By then I'd realised that there were Souling Plays in Cheshire, in villages near where I'd lived (Antrobus) & Comberbach.

By the mid-70s we'd moved to Ripponden in The Ryburn Valley in West Yorkshire to work for our recording company, Leader Sound. With local musicians, there were sessions & The New Victory Band organised barn dances in the village to try out new tunes, dances & songs.

Over the next few years we'd formed Ryburn 3 Step, a community folk organisation, & developed a regular programme of song & dance events, weekly workshops & sessions. We were always looking for new projects where there might be interest.

Well, although I knew a fair bit about mummers plays, I'd never actually been in one so it was time to sound a few people out. Locally, on Good Friday, we could still see The Midgely Pace Eggers performing in The Calder Valley & The Bradshaw Mummers in September along The Ryburn Valley, at Rushbearing & anytime someone offered them money elsewhere! So, we needed to avoid conflicting with these established teams in terms of when & how to perform. We decided that a play & presentation, with more of a sense of mystery & occasion, would be a good way to welcome in the New Year, particularly if it could include other members of our folk community building into a bigger event.

CHAPBOOK pub. G. Buchan , Leeds from the Frank Kidson Collection



pub. Harkness, Preston

We assembled our play from a variety of chapbook versions avoiding gender & national stereotypes & no 'blackface'. We created 'Common Jack' to lament the death of St George' with a tub thumping speech written by James Bowen. Beelzebub's surrealist incantations were purloined from a variety of characters & plays with some more recent additions. As you'll see the main interchanges between, St George, The Prince Of Paradine Common Jack & The Doctor remain fairly standard though The Doctor can be creative at times. We could see that the costumes in development were aimed at a visual impact so some rehearsals were mimed to practice gestures & establish a physical presence. Then we focussed on delivering the rhythm of the text rather than trying to 'act' & we made no concessions for audience interplay. Looking back, I think most of the cast subscribed to the old view that these plays may have been old rituals with texts added later. I don't think we believed they were pre-christian ceremonies but were quite happy for a variety of theories as long as our audiences were bewitched, bewildered but mainly bothered!

THE ORIGINAL CAST Adrian Jackson, Steve Harrison, Ian Slim, Mel Howley, James Bowen & me.

COSTUMES & CHARACTERS



Annie Dearman designed & made our costumes, she'd looked up other team costumes but as she had a first in textile & design she took our disguises to another level. So the Queen of Sticky Backed Plastic designed costumes that were reflective in the half-light, colour coded for each character, good insulation against low temperatures & rain but a liability in high winds.

So each actor was seven feet tall & Mel Howley (who had escaped from The Bradshaw Mummers) gave us the name 'The Long Company' & the (very) substantial swords & other props were made by blacksmith Jim Cooper.

For our first year we'd picked out several outdoor performance spaces & leafleted the surrounding area. We made the basic mistake of expecting an audience to come to us. It was a very cold winter, icy underfoot & we wished we'd stayed indoors as well. In one block of flats someone opened their window & regaled us with Led Zeppelin at full volume & at another as we passed by one cottage them indoors, looked out their window at us outdoors, drew their curtains & locked the door! Next time we'll go where people are!

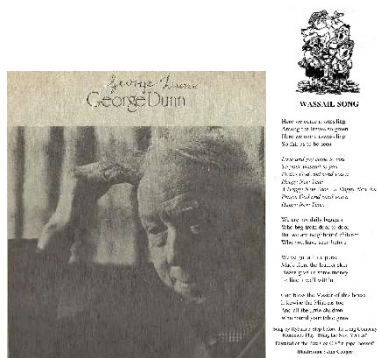
By the next year we'd found pubs with a decent performance space, outside for the play, & a decent space inside for a following session of seasonal songs & music. We've now got four, well-supported venues...The Rose & Crown, Todmorden, The Hog's Head, Sowerby Bridge, The Fleece, Elland & The Old Bridge, Ripponden. Only four performances on the 2nd, 3rd, 5th & 6th January.

PUBLICITY POSTERS & CARDS



Original design by Karen Cater & published by Hedingham Fair.

GEORGE DUNN & WASSAIL SONG



Song & music has always been an important feature of our play called BRING THE NEW YEAR IN as it gives other members of Ryburn 3 Step, singers & musicians, a participating role. Myself & Chris had moved north bringing with us George Dunn's Wassail Song which had proved popular so we could include that as part of the celebrations. I looked at other calling on songs from other plays but none really fitted so a new one was commissioned. Having such magnificent costumes the Long Company Year cast were keen to have a melody to enter & exit the performance spaces, thus displaying their catwalk skills. So, The Long Company March was devised, easily playable on a variety of instruments, even with frozen fingers. The band grew from accordion to include trombones, tuba, clarinets, whistles, recorders, melodeons, concertinas & drum. The simple melody grew parts, harmonies & additional random improvisations.

BAND & LONG COMPANY MARCH



The calling on song BRING THE NEW YEAR IN sung with menace & malice by Beelzebub to introduce each character...

“In comes Old King Christmas dressed in green & gold & may he never be forgot his story left untold”

AND SO THE PLAY BEGINS

As the play concludes Old King Christmas entreats the audience to contribute to local charities...

“Our collecting box is recommended”

The cast group forward then raise their various props then circle round & process off back into the darkness, whence they came.

ON TWELFTH NIGHT THERE MAY BE FIREWORKS



There follows a session of seasonal songs, tunes & novelties within.