

## THE MORRIS ALE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The evidence from churchwardens' accounts is that Ales originated or were adopted to raise money for parochial and charitable purposes. Such gatherings were very successful and thus Whitsun Ales were continued long after the reasons for their existence had ceased, but being carried on merely for profit or sport, degenerated into amusements of a more rollicking and boisterous character. Not infrequent in the early 19th cent they had stopped by the second half of the century. The loss of such meetings must have been one factor in the decline of the Cotswold Morris. The following is drawn from several accounts, retaining the flavour of the language.

Facilities

The ideal site would be near the middle of a village where the use of a barn could be obtained, with a nearby green on which a bower and maypole could be erected.

The Maypole was set up the day before the Ale and remained up for the rest of the feast. It was a bare pole ornamented with ribbons and flowers and a garland of flowers adorning the top. The colours were sometimes what ever was available but often they were those of the nobleman or leading family of the parish.

The covered area for social dancing was often a bower constructed of boughs or a tent erected for the purpose. Sometimes it would be an empty barn or shed; at Woodstock the Duke provided one some 50 ft long, with benches round the sides and decorated with evergreens, which was called the "Bowery". Here the maidens and swains assembled to dance in the best manner their circumstances and place could afford. Each young fellow would treat his girl with a ribbon or favour and they would hoof and clump "up and down the middle and up again".

A large empty barn or some such building would be named for the occasion "The Lord's Mansion or Hall". It would be fitted up with seats to accommodate the company. An area called "My Lord's Buttery" would have several barrels of ale, brewed for the purpose. Another area, fitted up with branches and flowers, was called "My Lady's Bower" and used for the sale of confectionary and cakes, newly baked, for a daily supply of which a neighbouring oven was engaged.

Economics

The May-games at this period were planned by the sons of wealthy farmers who undertook the burden of the expence in case it ran at a loss.

The intended Ale would be announced by the Morris Dancers on their rounds and also made known upon the market days in all the adjacent towns. The dancers also paid visits to the halls of neighbouring gentry where they usually obtained a contribution.

The Maypole and boughs for the bower were purchased sometimes but more commonly they were obtained as a donation. The ale previously brewed was sold without a license, and its sale together with the cakes, confectionary and large quantity of ribbons usually saved the promoters from loss.

The Lord and Lady

At first such meetings could be attended by the highest in the parish with propriety and under these circumstances the choice of the leaders of the festivities, called the "Lord" and "Lady", or May Queen, was an honour to be wished.

The two persons were chosen before the meeting. Care was taken to select a smart, active and handsome villager as "Lord" of the May or Feast. It is doubtful whether he derived any financial advantage from the revenues that supported his state. The organisers or the friends of the Lord picked out a Lady, who ideally was a lively, pretty woman, the daughter of some respectable farmer, and to whom it could prove the prelude to obtaining a husband. She was paid for her services, being allowed daily perhaps 20 yards of ribbon and new shoes and at the end of the sports a guinea or so.

The Lord and Lady were dressed as suitably as they could be to the character they assumed, gayly and bedecked with ribbons, and, with their attendants, were free in their offers of flowers or cake, for the acceptance of which a fee was expected. Both carried <sup>as badge of office</sup> a bouquet or "Mace", which consisted of a short stick stuck into a small square of board, from the four corners of which semi-circular hoops crossed diagonally. The whole would be covered with silk ribbons finely plaited and filled either with spices and perfumes for such of the company to smell as desired it, or small cake, like the modern Banbury cake, called the "Whit-cake" and these were offered to people to taste in return for a small payment. At Kirtlington the mace was decorated in the Dashwood colours of pink and blue, with rosettes at intervals, and silk streamers from the four corners. The colours of the two maces were reversed. The Lord might also carry a tin money box slung over his shoulder called the "Treasury".

#### The Procession

The celebrations would start with a procession round the village to the Lord's Hall, perhaps starting at the Lady's home, led by the Lord and Lady either walking or being carried on a wooden horse. Their attendants could be quite numerous. There might be a steward, a sword-bearer, purse-bearer and mace-bearer to look after the badges or ensigns of office. There would be "My Lord's Footman or Waiting Man" who might also be the man who carried a basket of cakes for sale. "My Lady's Maid" helped to sell the ribbons, but she also carried a mace that might be named the "Mace of Mischief" because the flowers were often mischievously entwined with pins as well as briars to tickle the noses of her admirers.

Besides a trainbearer or page there would be a fool or jester, whose presence gave life to the show, called the "Squire". He was dressed in motley and his ribaldry and gesticulations contributed not a little to the entertainment of some of the company. He was furnished with a weapon to prevent the crowd from impeding the progress of the Lord and Lady consisting of a stick about three feet in length with a calf or ox tail at one end and an inflated bladder suspended at the other. Alternatively to the bladder there could be a narrow round sand bag sewed in tan leather. The fool made very free use of his weapon in clearing a path or a dancing spot and the incorrigible on whom the bladder or bag had repeatedly fallen without effect seldom ventured a second stripe from the tail. He was expected to have a wise or foolish speech ready upon every occasion, for by the laughter his nonsense occasioned was commonly decided his ability as a clown. In his endeavours to raise a laugh he would try to take a man's hat off by a mere whisk of the tail, or bonnet him by bringing his hat down over his eyes by a blow from the bladder. For such tricks, rough as they were, he had full immunity in the general privilege of the clown.

The Lord's music would be a pipe and taborer or fiddler and he would play for the morris. The procession was completed by the band of morris dancers. At Kirtlington before dancing they went around the spectators carrying each a "crown-cake" on the top of their hat. These were about 9 inches across and made of an outer crust of rich currant and plum dough with a centre of minced meat and batter. Contributions in money were expected just for looking at them. For half a crown a whole cake could be bought and as this was supposed to bring good luck to the buyer a piece was often kept throughout the year.

#### The Curiosities

Early in the morning the Lord and Lady with their attendants waited by the Maypole for visitors. To these festivities the Morris Dancers came in sets from far and near, those from a distance perhaps on horseback with the manes and heads of the horses decorated with flowers, ribbons and rosettes. The procession led them first to the bower and then to the mansion to be shown the "Curiosities". The regulations and forfeits of the establishment were explained and finally the party invited to partake of the refreshments. The Lord and Lady then returned to the Maypole to wait other visitors. If while they were engaged another set arrived, often with a goodly number of their village, the new party would wait at a distance until the cavalcade could be preceded in due state.

The Curiosities were hung about outside or inside one of the buildings. A live or stuffed owl or a portrait of one was placed in a cage and called "My Lady's Parrot". Other songless birds such as the rook, jackdaw or raven were called "My Lady's Nightingales". A portrait of a lion was called "My Lady's Lapdog" and one or two threshing flails hung over a beam were called "My Lady's Nut Cracker" or "My Lord's Organ". Anyone using a name for these and other such objects other than that given them became liable to a fine. For calling them by their real names it could be as much as a shilling forfeited. No inconsiderable portion of good humour and mirth arose from the non-payment of forfeits. He that refused to pay was forced to ride on the wooden horse or "My Lord's Charger or Palfrey" and the same penalty was inflicted on anyone who miscalled it as for anything else.

The Cotswold Hobbyhorse was not a tourney horse or stick animal as in the rest of Britain but similar in character to the Gymnastic Vaulting Horse. It was a wooden machine which could stand on four legs a convenient four feet high, which could be carried on one or two stout poles, that stuck out in front and behind, shoulder high around the green. It could be painted and have a representation of a horse's head with a bridle. Upon the horse was a chair for the Lady, usually mounted sideways, such that she could hold the reins. The man sat astride the pole behind her balancing as best he could.

#### The Penalties

Every man who paid the fine was privileged to mount the horse and be carried with the Lady round the boundaries with kisses unlimited and whether he was a bashful or forward gallant the process always proved a subject of merriment for the spectators.

A fine was often willingly incurred as men and mere boys wished to boast of their ride and of kissing the lady, and many females for mere frolic would follow suit. When a woman paid forfeit she took the lady's place and the lord had to mount and do the kissing part.

If a man would not pay in money he had to mount the horse per force and alone, with a practical lesson in rough-riding which he would not easily forget. This made it akin to the horse used as a punishment in the Army in the 17th cent. If he still refused to pay his hat was taken in lieu. Many University men would come over from Oxford for ales near Woodstock to ride the wooden horse for the fun of the thing and frequent fights took place between them and the morris dancers when they would not pay.

This was not the only indignity applied - for example there was jumping over the overwide muddy pond or stream.

#### The Oxonian

The Oxonian was walking one evening. He was suddenly aroused from his reflections. On enquiry of an honest, chubby looking clod-pole he learnt it was a Whitsun-Ale. "On elbowing through the throng, the first fellow I met who was engaged as a party in the revels was an old man dressed up in motley garb of a Tom Fool or Clown and I must say he looked his character to perfection.

'How do master?' cried he, 'May I ask your honour what you call that yonder?', pointing to a painted wooden horse placed in the middle of a ring.

'A wooden horse, to be sure', said I, 'What should you think it was?'

'A shilling, sir, if you please,' answered the clown, 'A forfeit, if you please sir.'

'A forfeit, a forfeit! What for?', I enquired, 'I'll give you no shilling I assure you.'

'Bring out his Lordship's gelding. Here's a gentleman who wishes for a ride! Bring out the gelding! His Lordship's groom. Hey! Tell her Ladyship to be mounted!'

Here I was seized by 4 or 5 clumsy clod-poles, dressed up in coloured rags and ribbons. They were forthwith proceeding to place me on the wooden hobby just mentioned, behind an ugly, red-haired, freckled trull, who personated the Lady of the revels, I bellowed out that I would pay the forfeit without more to do, and thus was I scoured of a shilling, for not calling the cursed wooden hobby his Lordship's gelding. Shortly after, one of her Ladyship's maids of honour came up to me, and begged me to look at the pretty bird in the cage, hanging over her ladyship's saloon, or dirty oblong tent made of tarpaulin. This was a great ugly white owl, stuffed, and I thought I should be safe by answering that it was the very handsomest owl I had ever seen! No sooner had I uttered this, then the fair maid of honour screamed out in treble, shriller than the squeak of a Xmas porker or a pig-drivers horn!

'A forfeit, sir, if you please, a shilling forfeit.'

'Pooh', said I, 'I've paid forfeits enough'

On which, continuing in the same strain, 'Bring out her Ladyship's cook! Here's a gentleman who wishes to marry her!'

On this all the dirty baggages, which formed the group of her Ladyship's Maids of Honour, brought out a fat ugly wench, with a nose and cheeks reddened with brick dust, and bearing a toasting fork in one hand and a dish-clout in the other; and were on the point of commencing a mock ceremony of marriage between myself and this fair siren of the kitchen; in the course of which I was to have received three pricks with the toasting fork on each buttock and to have had my nose wiped with the dish-clout, had I not saved myself by producing a shilling as the penalty of my mistake which consisted, as I was afterwards given to understand, in not denominating the stuffed owl as her Ladyship's "Canary Bird" ! "

CONFESSIONS OF AN OXONIAN by Thomas Little, 3 vols 1826, Vol 1, pp 169-73.

Comment

With such boisterous and unsophisticated humour it is easy to understand what offended Victorian sensibilities and yet such behaviour is only just below the surface today. It is very suggestive that the morris obtained its stock of characters from the Ales and not vice versa. People are more likely to dress up and play around for the then equivalent of today's Carnival, than to be attached to a specialist activity like the morris.

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