

THE NOKE MORRIS

Noke is a village NE of Oxford, a few miles north of Headington and Marston. It was one of the "Seven Towns" surrounding Otmoor, which was about 4000 acres of wetland, on which they had right of commonage. Enclosure and drainage was first suggested by Sir Alexander Croke, of Studley Priory in 1781, and the Duke of Marlborough petitioned Parliament in 1801, but the men who tried to put up the notices to that effect on the doors of the parish churches were prevented by hostile crowds. Nothing came of it then because Lord Abingdon, who was paramount over the seven villages so far as the moor was concerned, was opposed. In 1815 the local landowners tried again but the legal processes dragged on till the final award made in 1829. Each commoner was allocated a share providing they fenced the land and paid part of the cost of drainage which included a new and more efficient channel for the river Ray. Many could not afford to do this and their shares were bought up by other farmers. In June 1830 the diverted river overflowed, flooding the best hay meadows, and angry farmers cut the new dykes, and allowed the river to go back to its old course. They were arrested, indicted of felony but acquitted, the judge declaring that the Enclosure Commissioner had very much exceeded the power granted to him by the Act in thus altering the course of the river. The Otmoor people took this as nullification of the Act and for the next few years fought against the enclosure vowing "to have the Moor" again. As many as 150 men would gather at night, with blackened faces or black scarves, armed with guns, tools or sticks, to cut down hedges, smash fences, gates and bridges. Men let loose cattle in the new allotments and freshly ploughed fields were turned in again by gangs at night. Shots and intimidation plagued the Otmoor Committee of magistrates that had been specially formed ^{by Quarter Sessions}. The landowners employed special constables to watch at night but their loyalty was suspect. They offered large rewards for information but none came. In 1832 Sir Croke asked for troops to be sent, but the special committee brought police from London. Only when the fencing was complete and ploughing going ahead in 1835 did the rioters give up, and the story enter folk mythology.

Cecil Sharp saw James "Jas" Somerton at Noke on 27.4.1909 when aged 78. He gave Sharp 2 tunes, Balance the Straw and Bonny Green Garters. In his Field Notebooks he wrote,

"Balance of Straw

Face in a circle, backwards and forwards, then balance the straw

Bonny Green Garters

Always starting dance."

In his formal write up, Tune Book 2186, he wrote,

"Bonny Green Garters

The Noke morris men always came on to Bonny Green Garters

(first a ring, then backwards and forwards, then a ring)

and then broke into Balance of Straw."

Later that day Daniel Shirley ^{aged 76} gave the tune of Greensleeves and mentioned Leapfrog and Old Rosin the Beau.

Noke sheet 2.

It is not sure that Somerton and Shirley were dancers from Sharp's notes. There was a morris at Charlton-on-Otmoor less than 3 miles away. At least, each year a garland was carried across the moor to Studley Priory to the accompaniment of morris dancers where Lady Croke gave the bearers 10 shillings. The dancing, but not the garland, stopped by 1863. Perhaps the dancers were drawn from all the "towns".

Old Tom Hall the pipe and tabor player lived in Noke for a while and then moved ^{in the 1860s} to Islip. Hall played for Headington Quarry until replaced by Frank Cummings about 1840/50. and was playing for Wheatley about 1860. He was known at Bucknell and was one of the teachers of Joseph Powell of the Bucknell side.

and Charlton-on-Otmoor