

HISTORY WORKSHOP PAMPHLETS

Number Eight

WHITSUN

IN

19th CENTURY

OXFORDSHIRE

by

Alan Howkins

Price 60p

HISTORY WORKSHOP PAMPHLETS

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Printed in Great Britain

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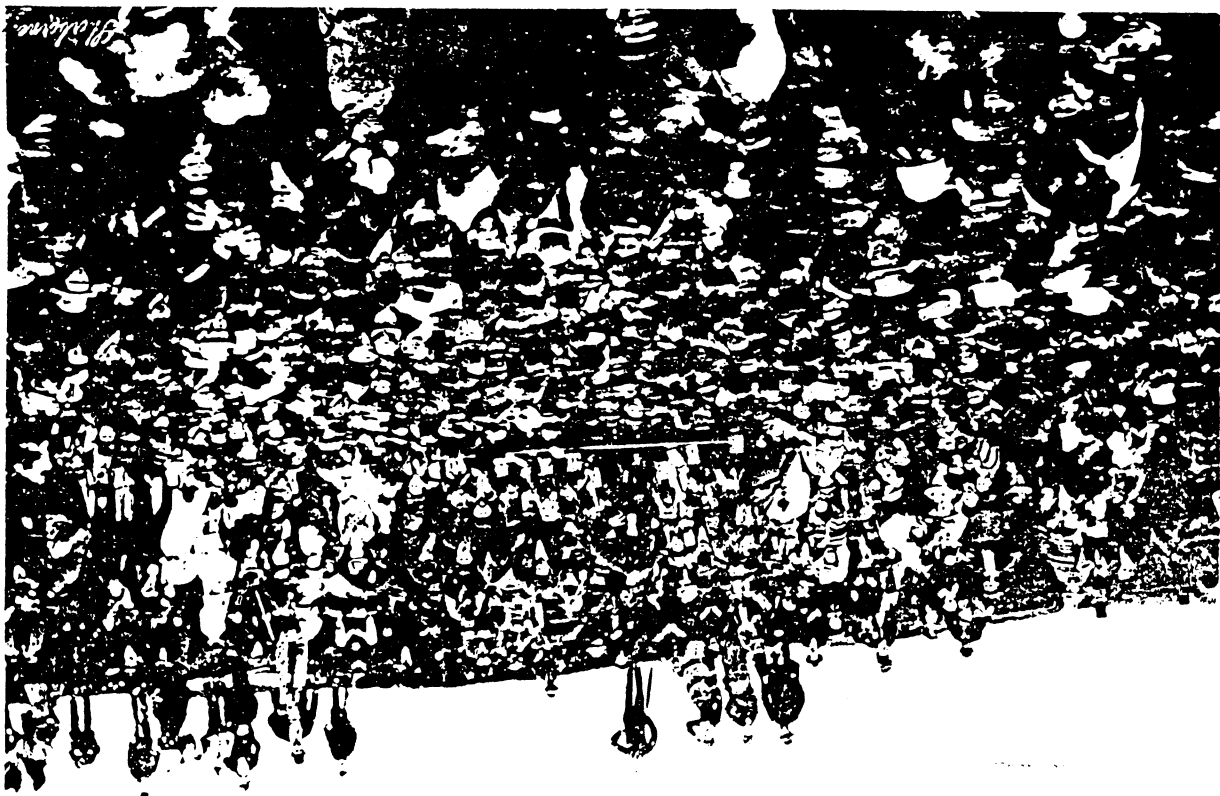
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Editorial note

Alun Howkins is a native of Bicester and a collector and singer of Oxfordshire songs. He was a student at Ruskin from 1968-70; is now at the Queen's College, and next year plans to be starting work on Norfolk farm labourers in the 1890s.



FOREWORD

My own first real contact with the kind of things this pamphlet is about is fortunately preserved for posterity. It comes from a rare, and hitherto unpublished manuscript entitled 'English Book, Alun Howkins, Form 1', and apparently drawn up at the Bicester Highfield Secondary Modern School in 1959.

On Whit-Monday my Dad borrowed Mr. Powell's car and took me and my sister out for the day for a drive. Because my mum is a cook in the hospital she had to work so she could not come. We drove to the Cotswold Hills which were very nice and we picked some flowers for my Mum. We went to a place called Winchcom where there is a castle and we had dinner there in a cafe. After dinner we went to Bibury and to a place called Bampton. Bampton was good fun, there were lots of men dancing. They are called Morris dancers, but they are nothing to do with the factory but are very old. They danced facing each other and waved handkerchiefs. They were dressed in white with blue and red ribbons and bells on their feet. There was a man called a fool who had a clown's costume on and went round hitting people with a ball on a stick. He chased my sister Tina and was very funny. There was a man with a cake with a sword in it. Afterwards we sat outside a pub and had some lemonade. My Dad had some beer. When we went home we were tired and happy and had enjoyed our half term.

Since that date my growing interest and love of English country music has taken me to Bampton many times, and it was the love of the old music and the atmosphere of Bampton which led me to the work for this pamphlet.

However there is little in it about Bampton and the 'old ways'; the pamphlet deals more with the taming of the holiday. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the old ways were dying in the 19th century and although they survived in some villages, these were exceptional. Secondly, lack of sources, there is much more information about 'club day' than its more spontaneous predecessors. Thirdly the 'taming' of Whitsun occupied the greater part of my period, since the new ways were already gaining a foothold in the 1810s.

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I have to admit that my feelings about Whitsun have changed during the writing of the pamphlet. To put it simply I feel personally ambiguous about the process of 'taming'. When I began I had no doubt that I was 'on the side' of the old ways - now I am no longer sure. The old Whitsun represented a world which was in many ways more sympathetic than the one which succeeded it. The libertarianism of many village communities for instance can only be more attractive than the later imposed, and highly regulated work discipline. Similarly the Morris represents a culture (now all but dead) which contained some of the finest songs and liveliest dances that Western culture has produced. I am also deeply in sympathy with the old village and most of the communitarian features it threw up. But there is another side to Whitt and one which equally inclines me to take the opposite view. Simply the old Whitsun, or aspects of it, was nothing short of barbaric. Bull baiting, dog fighting, badger baiting and bare fist fighting were not romantic subjects for a sporting print but revolting and bloody spectacles of man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures. In the last analysis my mind is not firmly made up and the reader must attempt to judge for himself from the evidence presented.

I should like to say a word of thanks to all those who, either directly or indirectly, helped bring this pamphlet to the light of day. Firstly to Raph and Anna, for painstaking editing and checking, and all the comrades of the History Workshop, without whom it certainly would never have been possible, and without whom I would never have even heard of social history let alone written about it. Secondly, and in a different way equally, to Sue Himmelweit, a great comrade, a fine person and my companion through the writing of this. Thirdly, to my parents for being good parents. Fourthly, to the bearers of the tradition, most of whom don't know me from Adam but whose songs and music are the ultimate inspiration of this pamphlet. Thanks then to Reg. Hall and Francis Shergold at Bampton as well as Mr. Tanner in that village, to Jim Phillips of Quarry, the entire Abingdon Morris side, and to any one who plays, sings or dances in the old way. Finally, just people who have been nice in the last two years when a town boy found himself unhappily amongst the gown, especially Tim Mason, John Prestwich, Dr. Alistair Parker, John Walsh, Dan Davin, and Phillip Waller.

Lastly, a word about sources. In my account of 'the old ways' I have relied heavily on a source referred to in the footnotes as 'Manning MSS'. These are the notes of Percy

Manning, a fellow of New College and an amateur folklorist, who amassed a great deal of material in the twenty or so years before the great war. Much of this is conventional antiquarian stuff, but it also includes some remarkable village autobiography and memoirs of an altogether different quality. This material was collected for Manning by Tom Carter, a self educated stone mason from St. Clements in Oxford City who deserves better treatment from posterity than he had hitherto received.

I should like to humbly dedicate this pamphlet to the farm workers of the world, in the belief and hope that soon they will have what is rightly theirs.

Alun Howkins

Oxford City, December 1972

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They ploughed him in the earth so deep,
With clots upon his head,
Then these three men they did conclude
John Barleycorn was dead.

There he lay sleeping in the ground
Till rain from the sky did fall,
Then Barleycorn sprung up a green blade,
And proved liars of them all.¹

Whitsun, like May day and Easter, is in origin a celebration of the end of the darkness, infertility, and cold of winter. When primitive man planted his grain at the beginning of winter it seemed to him that it lay dead in the cold ground through the long dark months. Then, as the frosts ended, the apparently dead seeds came to life and pushed up their small green shoots. However the cycle of death and rebirth was not left to chance factors: man intervened in the process with his own sympathetic magic. Until recent years in the Balkans young couples made love in the furrows to encourage the corn to grow. At Padstow, Cornwall, on May day, a man dressed as a horse is danced through the streets, and then made, to fall, exhausted, to the ground. The crowd gathers around him singing gently and urges him back to his feet. When he finally rises the triumphant shout goes up, 'Oss Oss, We Oss' and the song and dance begin again through the streets. In the past, the man who danced the horse was naked under his wide skirts, and young girls caught under them were taken to the ground when he 'died', which assured them of fertility in the coming year.

Unite then Unite and we shall all unite
For summer is come unto day
And whither we are going then we shall all unite
In the merry morning of May

1. John Barleycorn, possibly one of the oldest songs in the English tongue it tells, in allegory, how the earth and the seeds die in the winter only to come back to life magically in the spring. Collected from Edward Warren, South Marston, Wilts, in A. Williams, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames*, Reprinted 1970, p.246.

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goes the Padstow song, although its vitality is impossible to appreciate without its tune, played on melodeons and kettle drums.

These elements of sympathetic magic were retained when magic was rationalised into ordered religion. In the Spring Judaism celebrates Pesach, the festival of escape from Egypt, of deliverance out of bondage, while in the Christian calendar Easter, the festival of death and resurrection, falls at the same time. Whit Sunday, in the Christian calendar, is a further symbol of rebirth, marking the time when Christ finally ascended to heaven, six weeks after the crucifixion, passing on his spirit in the tongues of fire that appeared over the heads of the apostles on Whit Sunday.

The incorporation of these 'pagan' elements into the Christian calendar gave Whitsun many of the characteristics to which clergymen from John Bromyard in the fourteenth century to Edward Elton, Vicar of Wheatley in the nineteenth, most strongly objected. John Bromyard wrote a number of sermons specifically attacking the old spring festivals, which he treats as the Devil's own revenge for the severities of Lent, 'to annul . . . contrition'.¹ 'The rigours of Lent now give place to the rejoicings of Eastertide; and the thoughts of men and women turn to the open, the merry greensward, May-games and revelry, whither they will go with heads rose-garlanded for the feasts and shows.'²

The celebration of Whitsun in the past was not always clearly separated from May Day. As we shall see maypoles form an important part of Whitsun celebrations in Oxfordshire; while the children of Bampton carried May garlands around on Whit Monday until the beginning of this century.³

Chappel quotes a much earlier example of 'going Maying', from Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares*: 'On . . . the first day of May, commonly called May-day, the juvenile part of both sexes are wont to rise a little before midnight and walk to some neighbouring wood, accompanied with music, and the blowing of horns, where they break down branches from the trees, and adorn then with nosegays and crowns of flowers. When this is done, they return with their booty homewards, about the rising of the sun, and make their doors and windows to triumph in the

1. Bromyard, Sermon, 'Contritio' in G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Oxford, 1966, p.393.
2. Bromyard, Sermon, 'Munditia', paraphrased in Owst, *loc.cit.*
3. Jackson's *Oxford Journal*, (hereafter J.O.J.), 25 May, 1907, p.7.

flowery spoil.'¹ In Bicester a degenerate form of this custom was still carried out by children in the early years of this century. Mrs. Cherry of Bicester gave me this version of the song which they sang as they carried the garlands from house to house:

Good morning ladies and gentlemen we wish you a
merry May

We hope you like our May garland because it is May
day

A bunch of may, I have brought you, and at your
door I stand

It is but a bit but it will spread about the work,²
of our Lord's hands. . . .

To Puritanism May games and Whitsun were anathema, whether because of the work ethic (as some historians have suggested), or simply because they were most hostile to the 'profane' side of religious festivals and feasts. We don't have to look far in the literature of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for attacks on the traditional sports and games. Philip Stubbes in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1585) denounced the frolics and games taking place at 'May, Whitsuntide, or some other time of the year'; and singled out maypoles for a vehement attack.

But their chiefest jewel . . . is their May-pole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus: they have twenty or forty yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweet nosegay of flowers tied to the tip of his horns; and these oxen draw home this May-pole, (this stinking idol rather), which is covered all over with flowers and herbs, bound round about with strings, from the top to the bottom, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children, following it with great devotion. And thus, being reared up with handkerchiefs and flags streaming on the top, they strew the ground about, bind green boughs about it, set up summer halls, bowers, and arbours, hard by it; and then fall they to banquet and feast, to leap and dance about it, as the heathen people did at the dedication of their idols, whereof this is a perfect

1. W. Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, New York, 1965 ed., Vol. 1, p.132.
2. Song from Mrs. Cherry of Bicester in Oxfordshire, collected by author in May 1971.

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pattern, or rather the thing itself.¹

Some Puritan magistrates tried to suppress the spring festivals. James I, although a Calvinist (of sorts) did not back them up, and in 1618 issued his *Book of Sports* directed against those Puritan magistrates and preachers who taught that 'no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in Our Religion'.²

Our Pleasure . . . is, that after the end of Divine Service, Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful recreation, such as Dancing (either men or women), Archery for men, Leaping, Vaulting, or any other such harmless recreations; nor from having of May Games, Whitsun Ales, and Morris Dances; and the setting up of May Poles, and other sports therewith used . . .³

Although there were attempts during the Commonwealth to suppress Whit Ales they showed considerable powers of survival. The earliest description of Whit Ales in Oxfordshire comes from Blount's *Ancient Tenures*, published in London in 1679. Blount writes:

At Kidlington in Oxfordshire the Custom is, That on Monday after Whitsun week, there is a fat live Lamb provided, and the Maids of the Town having their thumbs ty'd behind them, run after it, and she that with her mouth takes and holds the Lamb, is declared *Lady of the Lamb*, which, being dress'd with the skin hanging on, is carried on a long Pole before the Lady and her Companions to the Green, attended with Music and a *Morisco Dance* of men and another of Women, where the rest of the day is spent in dancing, mirth and merry glee. The next day the Lamb is part Bak'd, boyl'd, and roast, for the Ladies feast, where she sits majestically at the upper end of the Table, and her Companions with her, with music and other attendants, which ends the solemnity.⁴

1. Quoted in Chappell, *op. cit.*, p.133.

2. *The King's Majesty's Declaration to his Subjects Concerning Lawful sports to be used*, London 1618. Reprinted in *An English Garner, Social England Illustrated*, New York, 1964, p.312.

3. *Ibid.*, p.313.

4. Quoted in P. Manning, 'Some Oxfordshire Seasonal Festivals' *Folklore*, 1897-8, p.312.

In Oxfordshire Whit Ales survived into the nineteenth century. As late as 1837 *Jackson's Oxford Journal* was able to write, 'In no other part of the united kingdom, we believe, are these old English revels [i.e. Whit Ales] celebrated with such spirit, and so much original character, as in the midland county of Oxford, particularly at Woodstock, Marston, Beckley, Headington, etc., septennially, and at the village of Kirtlington annually in the week following Whitsun-week . . .¹ This list would seem to be far from complete for the years before 1830. To it we can add with certainty, Milton-under-Wychwood, Brill, Chalgrove, Finstock, Charlbury, Bucknell, Eynsham, Kidlington and probably several others. While all over the county there were the village 'feasts' at Whitsun, which were often descendants of Whit Ales.

Blount's description fits, in most respects, the most perfectly recorded of the Whit Ales, the Lamb Ale at Kirtlington which was held until 1858. Tom Carter, who was collecting Oxfordshire folklore for Percy Manning in the 1890's, interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Pearman of Kirtlington, and from their account drew up the following description of the Kirtlington Lamb Ale:

The centre of the festivities was the "Bowery", a shed made of green boughs set up on the village-green, where the ale previously brewed was sold during the nine days of the feast without a license, the proceeds going towards the expenses incurred. One of the villagers was chosen "Lord" of the feast, and he with his mates picked out a "Lady", who was paid for her services. At 11 o'clock on the Monday morning the "Lord" started from the "Bowery" to the "Lady's" house, whence a procession marched round the village. . . First came a man carrying a live lamb on his shoulders, which was, if possible, the first-born of the season, and the finest of the flock. Its legs were tied together with blue and pink ribbons, and blue ribbons hung round its neck. Next came the "Lord" and "Lady" gaily dressed and decked with pink and blue ribbons. . . The "Lord" carried slung over his shoulder a tin money-box called the "treasury". Both he and his consort held in their hands badges of office, known as "maces". . . Following the "Lord" and "Lady" came the Fool, known as the "Squire", who wore a dress of motley, and

1. *J.O.J.*, 6 May, 1837, p.4.