

## THE SPONSORED WHITSUN ALE OF THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The modern Morris Ale has very little in common with those documented in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The evidence from churchwardens' accounts of the 15th century and onwards is that Church Ales, usually held near Whitsun, originated or were adopted, from pre-Reformation till at least Stuart times, to raise money for parochial and charitable purposes, just like the jumble sales today and the whist drives of the recent past. Such gatherings were very successful and thus Whitsun Ales were continued long after the initial reasons and support for their existence had ceased, but being carried on merely for profit or sport, they degenerated into more rollicking and boisterous amusements. Not infrequent in the early 19th century, they had stopped by the second half of the century. The loss of such meetings must have been one of the factors in the final decline of the Cotswold Morris. The following description is based on several accounts, mostly written after the events has stopped, retaining some of the flavour and charm of the original wording. First is a composite and therefore ideal image of the core of the event and then perhaps a more realistic impression of the more rumbustious part by a visitor. A more scholarly assembly of the evidence is given in chapter 4 of Keith Chandler's "Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles."

### FACILITIES

The ideal site was considered to 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 a Maypole might be erected. The Maypole could be set up before the Ale began and remained there for the duration of the feast. It was normally a bare pole ornamented with ribbons and flowers and having a garland of flowers to cap the top. The colours used were sometimes what ever was available, but often they were those of the local nobleman or leading family of the parish.

The covered area provided for social dancing was often a "Bower" constructed of boughs or perhaps a suitable tent or marquee erected for the purpose. Sometimes it would be only an empty barn or even a shed. At Woodstock the Duke of Marlborough provided one some fifty feet long, with benches set around the sides, which was called the "Bowery", and it was decorated with evergreens. Here the maids, young women, and their swains, boy friends, assembled to dance in the best manner and style that their circumstances and place could afford. They would hoof and clump "up and down the middle and up again", this being a reference to widely known country dances with stepping. Each young fellow would treat his girl with a ribbon, as a bow for her hair or dress, or a favour, recognisable as the modern flat rosette. Now reserved for supporters of sports teams and political parties, they were once a common adornment. Those distributed at Dover's Games were yellow. Such gifts associated with fairs and markets are mentioned in folk songs, including those to the "Jockey to the Fair" tune of the Morris.

Another large empty barn or some such building would be specially named for the occasion "The Lord's Mansion" or "Hall". It would be fitted out with seats to accomodate the company for refreshments. Under the cover, an area called "My Lord's Buttery" would have several barrels of ale brewed for the

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occasion. A further area, arranged with some branches and flowers, was called "My Lady's Bower" and used for the sale of confectionary and cakes, for which a neighbouring oven was engaged for a newly baked daily supply.

#### ECONOMICS

The May Games or Ales at this period were planned typically by the sons of more wealthy farmers, or near the end of the period by publicans, who underwrote the risk of the expense in case it ran at a loss. Examples of the costings have survived.

The intention of an Ale would be announced by the Morris Dancers on their circuit and also made known during the market days at all the adjacent towns. The dancers paid visits to the halls of neighbouring gentry where they usually obtained a contribution, although little factual evidence in surviving household account books has been found. Unfortunately most of such have been lost.

The Maypole and the boughs for the Bower were sometimes purchased, but more commonly they were obtained as a donation. The previously brewed ale could be sold without a license, and its sale together with the confectionary, cakes and large quantities of ribbons usually saved the promoters from a loss. Cheap factory made ribbons became available in the 18th century from an industry centred on Coventry.

#### THE LORD AND LADY

At first such meetings could be attended by the highest in the parish with propriety and under those circumstances to be chosen as the nominal leaders of the festivities, often called the "Lord" and "Lady" or "May Queen", was an honour much appreciated.

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

The Lord and Lady were dressed as suitably for the characters they assumed as they could be, gaily and bedecked with ribbons. With their attendants, they were free in their offers of flowers or cake, for the acceptance of which a fee was expected in return. Both could carry as a badge of office a bouquet or "Mace", which consisted of a short stick as a handle stuck into the base of a small square of board, from the four corners of which semi-circular hoops crossed the top diagonally. The whole would be covered with silk ribbons finely plaited and the interior filled either with spices and perfumes for such of the company as desired to sniff, or a small cake, often like the modern Banbury cake, and called the "Whit-Cake", and these were offered also to people to taste in return for a small payment. For example at Kirtlington the mace was decorated in the Dashwood family colours of pale

pink and blue, with rosettes fixed at intervals, and silk streamers hanging down from the four corners. The colours of the two maces were reversed. The Lord might also carry slung over his shoulder the tin money box called the "Treasury".

#### THE PROCESSION

The celebrations would begin with a procession around 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, to be described later. Their attendants could be quite numerous. These might include a steward, a sword-carrier, a purse-holder and a mace-bearer to look after the badges or emblems of office. There would be "My Lord's Footman" or "Waiting Man" who might also be the person 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.

The procession could call at various houses.

Besides a Train-bearer or Page, there would be a Fool or Jester, often cheekily called the "Squire", whose presence gave life to the show. 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. As an alternative to the bladder there could be a narrow round sand bag sewn 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 strike from the tail. He was expected to have a wise or foolish speech ready upon every occasion, for by the laughter that his nonsense occasioned his ability as a clown was commonly decided. In his endeavours to raise a laugh he would try to take a man's hat off by a mere flick 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 recognised customary privilege of the traditional clown.

The "Lord's Music" would be a pipe and taborer or perhaps a fiddler and he would also play for the morris. The procession was completed by the band of Morris Dancers. At Kirtlington they supposedly went around the spectators before the dancing each carrying a "Crown-Cake" on the top of their hat. These cakes were about nine inches across and made with an outer crust of rich currant and plum dough and 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 following year.

#### THE CURIOSITIES

Early in the morning the Lord and Lady with their attendants waited by the Maypole for visitors. The Morris Dancers came in sets to these festivities from far and near, those from a distance perhaps on horseback with the manes

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and heads of the horses decorated with flowers, ribbons and traditional raised rosettes used on harnesses. 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 await other visitors. If while they were engaged another set arrived, often with a goodly number of their villagers, 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. Typically 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 a 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 more vulgarly "My Lord's Organ". Anyone using a name for these and other such objects other than that temporarily given them became liable to a fine. For calling them by their real names it could be as high as a shilling forfeit, a very significant sum for labourers in those days when wages were 12/6d to 15 shillings per week. No inconsiderable portion of the spectators' humour and mirth arose from the non-payment of forfeits. He that refused to pay was forced by the attendants or perhaps by the Morris Dancers to ride on the wooden horse, or "My Lord's Charger" or "Palfrey", and a similar penalty was inflicted on anyone who miscalled the horse as for anything else.

The true Cotswold Hobby Horse was not a tourney horse, that had not been seen in the Cotswolds since the Restoration at least until reintroduced by Darcy Ferris at Bidford, or a version of the stick based animal as was common in the rest of Britain, but was similar in appearance to the modern Gymnastic Vaulting Horse. It was a wooden machine which could stand on four legs a convenient four feet high, which could be carried shoulder high around the green by one or two stout horizontal poles that stuck out in front and behind. 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

No doubt there were many different forfeits imposed, the Victorians were particularly fond of the concept, but the horse was that most frequently remembered. At the event even jostling the Lady might incur one.

Every man who paid the fine was privileged to mount the horse and be carried with the Lady around the boundaries with unlimited kisses allowed, and, whether he was a bashful or a forward gallant, the process always proved a subject of merriment for the spectators. Experiences and attitudes could be different then. A fine was often willingly incurred as men and mere boys, today's teenagers, wished to boast of their ride and of kissing the lady, and many females for mere frolic would follow suit. When a woman paid a forfeit she took the Lady's place and the Lord had to mount and perform the kissing part.

If a man would not pay in money he had to mount the horse alone, and would

be given a practical lesson in rough-riding which he would not easily forget. This made it akin to the horse used as a punishment in armies, at least till the end of the 17th century. Although then the pole would have a metal top ridge and the prisoner may have also had weights attached to their feet. Such an apparatus was also used elsewhere to indicate community disapproval of behaviour by either carrying in local parade those who had offended or their effigies. If he still refused to pay, his hat was taken away in lieu. Many University men would come over from Oxford for the Ales near Woodstock to ride the wooden horse for the fun of the thing and frequently fights took place between them and the Morris Dancers when they would not pay. Riding the horse was not the only indignity imposed on the forfeiters, for example there was the forced option of jumping over an overwide muddy pond or river.

#### THE OXONIAN - A Visitor

This is a less sympathetic view.

The Oxonian was walking one evening. He was suddenly aroused from his reflections. On enquiry of an honest, chubby looking clod-pole, he learnt that 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 four or five 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 cussed 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 Christmas porker or a pig-drivers horn!

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

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