



The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

A Traditional Northamptonshire morris side

3. The 1700s – ‘Gaily Bedizened’

The resurgence of the Whitsun Ales

It's helpful for us to understand the Whitsun Ales of the 1700s because they remained the key annual event at which the Brackley men continued to perform during the 1700s and 1800s.

After the restoration of the monarchy with the return of Charles II in 1660, the Church was content to leave matters as they stood, but others sought to revive the ales, for a combination of profit and community goodwill, usually with the agreement or support of the local landowners or gentry, and again many of these were held at Whitsun. The post-Reformation ales retained some of the features of their predecessors, in particular the semi-formal ceremonial aspects of electing a Lord and Lady, a Fool, and other office-holders to organize and preside over the event. A greenery bower and morris dancers were prominent features. (6)

Church ales had been common all over the southern half of the country, but the later Whitsun ales were concentrated in the South Midlands. Many lasted into the first half of the 19th century. It's probably for this reason that Morris dancing continued to flourish in this part of England long enough to be collected by Cecil Sharpe and others in the early 1900s, and subsequently named by them as ‘Cotswold’ dances.

The Whitsun Ales of South Northamptonshire

Although we have no recorded details of Whitsun Ales in Brackley itself, the Brackley Men were clearly an integral part of these occasions in South Northamptonshire. The descriptions in the following passages, taken entirely from Anne Baker's ‘Glossary of Northamptonshire words and phrases’ published in 1854, gives us a wonderful insight into the Whitsun Ale processions held at Kings Sutton and Greatworth, as recalled by local folk at that time. (10)

‘The Whitsun-ale seems to have been one of the most important amusements of the middle, as well as of the humbler classes, and with its various pageantries and revelries it occupied a whole week; I have no notice of its observance except on the south-western side of the county.

At King's Sutton, my informant witnessed the last celebration of it about the commencement of the present century (ie early 1800s): a barn was fitted up for the entertainment, and he thus describes the procession: - The procession used to go to the neighbouring villages, and at the principal house they presented a plum-cake, called a crown-cake from its price when sold.



** It is stated in a note in Brand's Popular Antiquities, edited by Halliwell, that "the mace is made of silk, firmly plaited, with ribbons on the top, and filled with spices and perfumes, for such of the company to smell to as desire it."*

Greatworth. The Whitsun-ale was formerly kept at Gretworth, but has been discontinued since 1785. As the procession in some measure differed from King's Sutton I shall give it:

A May-pole with garlands was fixed up for the merry company to dance around, and the Morris Dancers, with the grimaces and gesticulations of the fool, added to the hilarity of the assembled multitude. A barn was prepared for the banqueting; and all those who misconducted themselves were obliged to ride a wooden horse, and if they were still more unruly, they were put into the stocks, which was termed being my lord's organist.

Kings Sutton Whitsun Ale Procession



*(The Morris Dancers were dressed with cross-belts of broad ribbon ornamented with five roses before, five behind, and one on each shoulder, with bunches of blue and red ribbon at each hip. For further particulars of their dress and mode of dancing, see Morris Dance, p. 31***)*

Morris Dance. An ancient rustic dance, formerly an accompaniment to the Whitsun Ales and May Games; still continued, in some parts of the country, as a Whitsuntide amusement, when different parties go from village to village, performing their various evolutions. A set consists of six or eight young men, one of whom generally represents Maid Marion, or Molly, as she is now degenerately called; another personates the clown, or fool; and the remainder are without their coats and waistcoats, and with the cleanest and best shirts they can procure, gaily bedizened with pendant ribbons and rosettes of various colours; sometimes, as Beaumont and Fletcher describe them in the "Knight of the Burning Pestle":

"With bells on legs, and napkins clean unto their shoulders tied; with scarfs and garters as you please." (11)

The fool is variously, but always grotesquely, attired, sometimes with a cow's tail at his back, sometimes covered with skins; and in the neighbourhood of Brackley, he is called the squire or fool, and has a gridiron and fish drawn on his back. He always carries the usual badge in his hand, an inflated bladder with beans, fastened to a staff about two feet long, or a bladder is attached to one end of a short stick, and a calf's tail at the other. He rattles and beats the bladder about to clear the way for their performance, or plays tricks for the amusement of the company.

Molly carries a ladle in her hand, with which she solicits money from the spectators. The dance consists of a variety of manoeuvres, rapid changing of postures, striking first the toe, then the heel on the ground, which occasions great jingling of the bells; repeatedly clapping their hands, then their knees, and each other's hands...

The set of Morris dancers attendant at the Whitsun Ale... often consisted of six couple... They were dressed in scarfs or belts of broad ribbon, one over each shoulder, crossing in the centre, ornamented with bunches of blue and red ribbons, or blue and orange; five rosettes were placed on the scarf before, and five behind, with one on each hip. Their hats were also decorated with rosettes and streamers of the same coloured ribbons. On their legs they often had as many as six rows of bells, six in a row, of different sizes graduating from the knee to the ankle. They were attended by a fool, but a piper was substituted for Molly, who had a whistling pipe in his mouth, and a tambourine-drum suspended from his wrist or elbow, upon which he played with a stick. They danced chiefly on their toes with a spring, all keeping time together, and flourishing either handkerchiefs or sticks in their hands. It has been thought desirable to record these vestiges of our popular past times the more minutely, as, from the change in the tastes and habits of the people, and the growing refinement of the age, they will soon disappear altogether, and "thereof nought remaines but the memoree".

The first definitive records of the Brackley Morris Men

May 1725 and June 1731. On both these occasions, the Brackley men were paid half a guinea for dancing at the Whitsun celebrations at Aynho House, the seat of the Thomas Cartwright. (From: Northamptonshire Record Office, Cartwright papers, Josh Burton 1722-35)

A number of sides danced here during the 1720s and 1730s. In June 1723 the men from Kings Sutton, Aynho and Chesterton were each paid 5 shillings. In June 1727, Chesterton were again paid 5 shillings. In June 1731, Aynho and Croughton were each paid half a crown, as were Somerton in June 1732, and Kings Sutton in June 1735. But on the two occasions when the Brackley Men are mentioned in the accounts, 1725 and 1731, they were paid half a guinea. We can only imagine what this higher payment may reveal about their local reputation or the quality of their performances. (2)

31st May 1766. Jackson's Oxford Journal reported on page 3 that: 'Yesterday the Squire of a Whitsun-Ale, attending his company of morris dancers in that city (which he had imported from Brackley in Northamptonshire) having been somewhat insolent as well as troublesome in playing the fool, had the misfortune to get himself committed to Bridewell as a vagrant'. Keith Chandler offers an observation about the likely renown that might have been held by the Brackley men: 'in what manner might the organisers of the 1766 Whitsun Ale in Oxford have been made aware of the existence of a morris dance set at Brackley, twenty five miles distant, unless the team possessed a reputation which ranged far beyond the immediate locality?' (2)

Greatworth Whitsun Ale Procession

Constable

Esquire or Lord's Son

Fool

(Attired in a motley garb, with a gridiron painted or worked with a needle on his back, carrying a stick with bladder and calf's tail)

My Lord's music

My Lady's music

Majordomo, and his Lady as Queen of the May
Supporters on each side

My Lords Morris
(Six in number)

Butler

Butler

Treasurer
(With sash and box)

Treasurer
(With sash and box)

(The whole decorated with badges of orange and blue)