



The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side

9. Mumming, St George - 'Here come I'

The origins



We have no records of the pre-war Brackley side indulging in mumming. But it seems that the men at Hinton did so. Fred Hamer, writing in 1955 (15) wrote that: *'My informants in Brackley*



have told me that... there used to be dancers at Hinton but that they were better known as Mummers than as Morris Men.' However the modern side revived the tradition as recorded in these photos from Holdenby House in July 1978.

The performances

In the 1980s, Mumming performances on or around St Georges Day became one of the regular annual outings for the men. The reports in the logs suggest a whole range of crowd sizes, weather conditions and acting skills: (19)

Friday 23rd April 1982, dancing and mumming at The Maltsters Arms, Badby. *'The show was well-received by a largish populous. Then followed the mumming play which went down a treat'*

Saturday 23rd April 1983, Bartholomew Arms, Blakesley: *'By the time the doctor had exercised his skill, it was a veritable downpour. The populous vanished completely within sixty seconds... At 6.35pm it was abandoned.'*

23rd April 1985, The Royal Oak, Eydon. *'Hush fell over the car park and the players began the most high-spirited performance they have ever done'*

23rd April 1986, Royal Oak, Eydon. *'The BMM Mumming play was given its annual airing to a reception that has rarely been bettered... the audience participated lustily';*

23rd April 1987, The George and Dragon Chacombe. *'A good crowd assembled to watch and join in vocally. Some of the audience were heard to remark how good the show was!'*

23rd April 1996, Weston. The log makes mention of one of the players *'having to cry off at that last moment'* and of a substitute player *'learning the doctors part in the car journey there'*

23rd Apr 1997, The George, Tiffield. *'Mutterings abroad that the mumming was lacking' 'Each man had made a sterling effort to learn his words, albeit that they may have come from different plays'*

15th April 2000, The Wharf, Bugbrooke. *'The hissing damp necessitated indoor work' 'A novel line up due to sickness, voicelessness and emigration'*

23rd April 2004, The Sun, Kislingbury. *'The final curtain call produced a healthy round of applause for a spirited performance'*

Summer tour 2011. A growing shortage of youthful dancers led to the suggestion that the Summer Tour should include some mumming to give the dancers a break. In addition, the ailing performances of recent years led to the script being slightly simplified to shorten what was thought to be an over-lengthy performance and it was agreed to hold a rehearsal. The show, which went ahead at Canons Ashby House, included a choreographed sword fight and a wonderfully effective smoke pellet for the dragon. The Summer Tour log reported in detail (19).



23rd April 2012. The George, Tiffield. The log described *'the incessant damp'* so the performance took place inside where there was hardly any audience (the majority of drinkers were packed in the other bar listening to *'an electric group'*). There was *'no room for swords, nor smoke pellets'*. And to make matters worse, one of the players didn't turn up so *'John had to be the Turkish Knight, get resuscitated, don the dragon costume, get killed again, restored to life and die in an imaginary bloodbath, caused by a cheese knife'*.

Sunday 16th Dec 2012, Canons Ashby House. The men performed their mumming play as part of a Winter Wassail event in front of an audience of almost 100. The subsequent note of thanks from Canons Ashby included the following kind words: *"Just a quick note to say how much we and our visitors enjoyed your enthusiastic and vigorous performance this afternoon"*. The photos below are from that performance.



The Players

Many players took part over the thirty years to 2012. Some have performed off and on from the 1980s to the present day: These men include John Weaver, John Brewer, Richard York, Michael Robins, Mike O'Connor, Chris Arnold, Dave Wilmshurst, & Peter Barnard. Stars taking part in the 1990s were: Jon Connor, Derek Martin, Pete Harris, Jim W, and Andy Brewer. In the 2000s we were joined by Len Tuckey, Geoff Arnold, Stephen Ferneyhough, Don Thompson, Paul Bestwick and Steve Davis. Other recent reluctant conscripts in our hour of need have included Ian Phillips and Colin Reid.



Some players have focussed on perfecting specialist roles such as John Brewer and Paul Bestwick as 'Roomer' and Len Tuckey as the Dragon. Most notable in this respect is Michael Robins, pictured right, who has played the part of 'Idiot' since the mid 1980s. Others such as John Weaver and Stephen Ferneyhough have enjoyed the reputation of *'performing tarts'*, turning their skills to any character, as circumstances dictate.



St George's Day 23rd April, 2013, The Crewe Arms, Hinton



The players for this performance were, from left to right: Musician, Stephen Ferneyhough; Roofer, Paul Bestwick; Turkish Knight, Neil Jeans; Doctor, Richard York; Idiot, Michael Robins; St George, John Weaver; Dragon, Steve Davis. This performance was recorded and an edited version was included on the BMM CD, *'Skill and Tenacity'* published November 2013.