

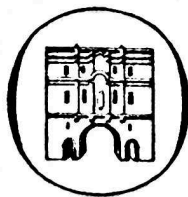
Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore

by

ENID PORTER

with Fenland material provided by

W. H. BARRETT



LONDON

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL

Himself from some hob-goblin sprite,
Fell headlong in a new-made grave.

.

And the brave crew of watchers had
The brunt of many a joke to bear
From rustics who were but too glad
To taunt them with that night of fear.

May 1st

At Melbourn, it was recorded by Women's Institute members in 1958, children went out early on May Day and gathered *peagles*¹ with which to decorate themselves. A maypole was erected on the Green and hawthorn boughs were hung on house doors. A procession of dancers, headed by *Jack in the Green*, the local sweep, who walked in a framework of boughs, made their way through the village to the Maypole. May Day was the traditional holiday for chimney sweeps, who, until the last century, wearing their top-hats, took an important part in old May Day festivities.

At Foxton, May 1st was last observed early in this century by 'Hoppity' Flack, who walked over from Fowlmere carrying sprigs of may which he gave in return for a glass of ale. As he handed over the sprigs he recited:

It be but a sprout
But 'tis well budded out,
And at your door it shall stay.²

In many Cambridgeshire villages girls carried prettily dressed dolls on May Day, showing them to people in return for money or sweets. This *May-Dolling* was continued in Swaffham Prior until c. 1960, but the collection of money was forbidden. A few of the doll-carriers in this village were, in 1950, still singing the song:

Sing a song of May-time,
Sing a song of Spring.
Flowers are in their beauty,
Birds are on the wing.
May time, play time,
God has given us May time;
Thank him for His gifts of love,
Sing a song of Spring.³

¹ Alt. *paigles*: cowslips (*Primula veris*).

² Recalled by members of the Women's Institute.

³ *ibid.*

At Over young men picked bunches of may and pushed them through the windows of young girls in the village, singing:

Arise, arise, my pretty fair maid,
And take your may bush in,
For in the morn it may be gone
And you will say I brought you none.

At Lolworth, until c. 1914, a basket of dolls was taken round the village by children after school ended. Then two lines of rope, decorated with ribbons, were suspended from trees and balls thrown over them. The Vicar's wife used to give each girl a yard of hair ribbon.¹

The preparation of a special May Doll was a feature of several village May Day celebrations. At Toft an old lady recalled in 1937 how two hoops were bent over, a doll was placed inside and then the 'cage' and doll were covered with a white cloth. A rope was stretched over the road from one tree to another and the hoops containing the doll were suspended from it. On May Day morning the village girls gathered at the spot and when anyone passed by the rope was lowered and money requested for the showing of the doll. As the white cloth was removed the children chanted;

Please to remember the garland;
This is the first of May.²

A similar ceremony was carried out in Hildersham, where, until the end of the First World War, the doll was formed of 'Mrs Jordan's wire skirt frame covered and dressed as a doll with Miss Goodwin's ribbons. Field and garden flowers were made into a garland.' The song which the children sang at the uncovering of the doll was:

Come to see our new garland so green and so gay,
'Tis the first fruits of Spring and the glory of May.
See the cowslips and daisies and the hawthorn so neat,
Together are fragrant and together are sweet.
But yet there's no garland that we may entwine
As the garland of virtue and the fading [*sic*] divine.

The first of May is garland day,
So please remember the garland.
We only come but once a year
So please remember the garland.³

¹ Information received in 1966 from Mrs Tofts, who was born in Lolworth in 1902.

² E. Counties Folklore Soc.

³ Information from Mrs Drayson, 1955.

These May Day songs,¹ recalled in the present century and in many instances occurring in primary school song books, are obviously late replacements of earlier lost traditional rhymes.

At Harston, it was recorded in 1935 by members of the Women's Institute, elderly residents of the village could dimly remember May Day being referred to as 'Sweep's Holiday' and the dancing on the Green and in the village street of *Jack in the Green* or the *May Man*. As at Melbourn, he was covered in green branches and wore bells on his legs; with him danced *Moll* or *Morris Molly*, a man dressed as a woman.

W. K. Clay in his *History of Waterbeach*,² published in 1895, records a description of May Day in the village given to him by an inhabitant in 1820:

Our May Day was our grandest holiday. Preparatory to its celebration the young men collected materials to form a garland; they consisted of ribands, flowers and silver spoons, with a silver tankard to suspend in the centre . . . Our young men, early in the morning, or rather, late at night, went into the fields to collect the emblems of their esteem or disapprobation; then woe betide the girl of loose habits, the slattern and the scold; for while the young woman who had been foremost in the dance, and whose amiable manners had entitled her to our esteem, had a large branch or tree of whitethorn³ planted by her cottage door, the girl of loose manners had a blackthorn⁴ planted by hers; the slattern had an elder tree planted by hers; and the scold a bunch of nettles tied to the latch of her cottage door.

The young men then went for the garland and suspended it with a rope in the centre of the street between two opposite chimneys; this was always done before the rising of the sun; the morning was then ushered in with the ringing of the village bells. We then attended to our domestic concerns till the after part of the day. Our sports then began; they consisted of dancing, playing at ball and every kind of sport we could devise . . .

In 1936 a Linton resident, then aged 88, recalled that when she was a young girl little girls went from door to door early on May Day with flowers. Later in the day the young of both sexes from Hadstock danced from there to Linton, on to Bartlow, and then back to Hadstock by a different route—six miles in all. They danced in pairs,

¹ May songs were sung at night on the eve of May Day as well as early on May 1st. An 84-year-old Cambridge woman recalled in 1960 that her mother, born in Rampton, used to speak of the 'Midnight Mayers' who went round the village singing.

² Camb. Antiq. Soc. Proc. VI.

³ *Prunus spinosa*: the sloe.

⁴ The common hawthorn, *Crataegus oxyacantha*.

holding hands. The first pair held up their hands, as in Oranges and Lemons, and the next ran under singing:

Piggety Gutter, Piggety Gutter,
Call the hogs to supper;
Some are fat and some are lean
And some go to the butcher's s'e'en.¹

Many schools chose or, in primary schools, still choose a May Queen and her attendants. At the former Eden Street Higher Grade Girls' School in Cambridge, which was later the Central School and is now the Girls' Grammar School, this practice continued until 1943, after which the position of May Queen was replaced by that of Head Girl of the school.

In several Cambridgeshire villages old place-names recall that, in former times, Maypoles were set up on May Day. In Hildersham, for example, stood a conical mound, removed in 1852, which was called locally *Maypole Hill*.² In Little Shelford older residents still, in 1920, referred to going through the allotments, first made in 1880 on former open ground, towards Obelisk Hill, as *going up the Maypole*.³

W. H. Barrett recalls that in the Fens round Ely and Littleport it was believed, until the end of the last century, that anyone who was out early on May Day morning would see the ghosts of all those who had been drowned in the Fen rivers and dykes. Lightermen working on the barges which carried goods between King's Lynn and Cambridge were highly superstitious, despite their reputation for rough behaviour. On May Day they always kept their boats tied up, probably because of this belief concerning the ghosts of the drowned.

Fen housewives liked to gather dandelions for wine-making on May 1st, as these were thought to make the best wine; the flowers were also given to children to smell on this day to inhibit bed-wetting for the next twelve months. Women allowed the peat fire which had been burning all winter in the parlour or 'best room' to go out on May Day. The hearth was then freshly whitened and the room kept closed all summer except for some such event as a wedding, a funeral or when the chapel preacher came to tea.

In the Fenland inns, to the beginning of this century, May Day was recognised as the day on which labourers could renew their

¹ Arch. E. Counties Folklore Soc. The Piggety Gutter rhyme and dance closely resemble the Shrove Tuesday celebrations (*q.v.*). The informant may have confused the two.

² In a lecture delivered in 1923 by the late Dr W. Palmer of Linton and subsequently printed in pamphlet form by the *Cambridge Chronicle*.

³ F. Wale: *Survey of Great and Little Shelford to 1920*.

credit with the landlord; with haymaking and harvest to look forward to the men could expect to earn steady money. The slates, therefore, on which their drinking debts were recorded and which had been kept hidden by landlords all winter, were brought out again and hung on the taproom door.

W. H. Barrett also remembers the children of Brandon Creek and neighbourhood playing the game of *Honey Pots* on May Day. Boys and girls squatted on their haunches in a large circle, hands clasped under their knees. Then all the players began to edge towards the centre of the circle until there was a screaming, struggling mass of children trying to clamber over one another so that the winner could finally stand on top and shout that he, or she, was 'King' or 'Queen' of the May. Early in this century girls were firmly forbidden by their mothers to take part in the game, which had such disastrous effects on their clothes and which, moreover, led to an unseemly display of their underwear.

Since c. 1960 some of the members of the Choir of Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge have ascended the 65-foot tower to sing early in the morning of May Day. There are no attendant festivities such as the breakfast parties on the river which form part of the May Morning singing at Oxford on the tower of Magdalen College; indeed, most Cambridge people are unaware of the Sidney Sussex custom. In 1967 eleven members of the Choir, wearing dinner jackets, sang, for an hour, not only hymns but madrigals, which included *Sumer is icumen in*; *Now is the month of May* and *My bonny lass she smileth*.

Rogation-Tide

Members of Barton Women's Institute recalled in 1958 that a united service was held, earlier in the century, in the village on one of the Rogation Days. The congregation assembled in the church and then, singing the Litany, followed the robed choir in procession to one of the local farms, where a service was held in a field, the Baptist minister usually giving the address.

Ascension Day (Holy Thursday)

The custom, which is still observed, of the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, ascending the tower to sing at mid-morning on Ascension Day is of comparatively recent date.¹

¹ Plate 15. The custom was introduced at St John's College in 1904 by Dr Rootham, for many years Organist and Master of the Chapel Choir.

Curator and Secretary

~~R. Wilson~~

Tom Doig

1902

Barkway School Log Book

Herts County Records H.Ed/1 7/4

1st May 1902

May Day. Children let out early a few minutes to allow them to take their dolls and garlands round.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Tom Doig', with a large, sweeping flourish extending upwards and to the right.

TOM DOIG

28th April 1985