

The Wantage Mummers Play

“In comes I.....”

The Wantage Mummers play has been performed since the early seventies and is a typical mid-Berkshire/Oxfordshire mummer’s play of the hero-combat type.

Similar plays have traditionally been performed in many of the villages around Wantage, viz: East Hendred, Lockinge, Ardington, Stanford-in-the-Vale, Uffington, Aston Tirrold, and Steventon. The Wantage play is based on the Steventon version but conforms to the general mid-Berks model (see B. Lowsley (1888) pp. 17-21). The last mummer’s traditional play performed in the area was in 1881 when it was performed for Lady Wantage at Lockinge House.

The play is traditionally performed at Christmas and in recent years this has taken place on Boxing Day (St Stephen’s Day) in Faringdon, Wantage and Childrey. In the nineties, Letcombe and Hanney were also visited.

There are generally three types of mummers play: Hero-Combat; Wooing; and Sword Dance based. Most of the plays in Oxfordshire are of the former type and although local names and characters vary they are similar in principle.

At one time hundreds of villages across England had a mummers play to perform – in fact all counties except Suffolk and Norfolk. The play is based on a good versus evil scenario or death and resurrection. The generalised format is for a presenter to announce participants, a hero enters (St George or King George is common) who proclaims his warriors skill. An opponent enters (French Officer or Turkish Knight), who challenges him and they fight; typically one is slain or wounded. A (quack) doctor is called on who professes his healing powers and cures the fallen man. Various super-numerary characters appear such as Jack Finney (or Vinney), Johnny Jack, Billy Sweep, Old Father Beelzebub, etc.

In the Wantage play the hero is naturally King Alfred and the villain a French Officer (Napoleonic) called Beau Slasher. The presenter or sweeper is Molly; and after a sword fight in which King Alfred is injured a Doctor appears (locally known as Dr Squires). King Alfred is restored and another fight ensues in which Beau Slasher is killed. A mystical character called Jack Vinney is called on. It is possible that this is a corruption of Jean Vianney, (also of the Napoleonic period); a famous French priest associated with supernatural healing powers. (The Catholic Church in Wantage is dedicated to St Jean Vianney).

Jack Vinney (incorrectly introduced as a Spaniard!) cures Beau Slasher with his strange potions and “dentistry” and everybody is happy. Happy Jack then appears proclaiming his poverty and family to support and begging for money. Traditionally agricultural workers doing the mumming play could make two weeks wages from 2 days performance of the play! Over the past 20 years Wantage Mummers have donated ca. £15,000 to a wide range of local and national charities. (See website)

Old Father Beelzebub is announced and appears with a “club” and dripping pan. He is a kind of soothsayer figure and “brings a rhyme to please you all”. In other plays he plays a fiddle or does a jig. The Wantage “rhyme” or doggerel, traditionally reviews the political and public events of the year in a satirical manner. The performance finishes with a dance like a Morris dance and is carried out with old fashioned Hockey sticks that came from Stockcross.

Although the characters and plots vary across the country there are more similarities than differences in the many plays collected and it is almost certain that there was a common origin. Because participants were largely illiterate the verbal transmission of the plays from generation to generation led to many differences in words and characters evolving. E.g. in Headington the Turkish Knight is known as The Turkey Snite.

Throughout most of the 20th C. it was believed that the plays had ancient pagan or fertility related origins. This was largely due to the influence of James Fraser's "Golden Bough" on early 20th C interpretation of folk customs. It is now fairly certain that the type of mummers play popular today did not exist before mid-18th C. Medieval references to Mummers Plays refer to a different type of masked play (Mystery or Miracle plays with a religious basis). Roving groups of players were certainly the stuff of ancient history but it hasn't proved possible to link the current plays with these groups.

The word Mummer probably derives from the German word *mummerspiel*, literally meaning masked play. Mummers have always sought to conceal their identity either by blacking their faces or covering with strips of paper or rags and tall hats. It is general accepted that mummers were male.

It is possible that a play so widespread throughout the country had its origin by being published in commonly available chapbooks. Many of the rhyming couplets appear in identical form in many areas, suggesting they came from some sort of script. It is quite likely that Beelzebub was in the original version. Ronald Hutton refers to a chapbook published mid 18thC, containing the full text intended for groups seeking to perform a play around Christmas time. Four lines from this play appeared in a version performed in Exeter in 1738, but the "silence" prior to this speaks volumes, since other folk customs (e.g. Morris dancing) fully populate the folk custom records for a considerable number of years prior to this. The absence of a recorded referral to this type of play before 1738 almost certainly confirms its non-existence.

Many other words were used for mummers in different localities; viz: Tipteerers, Guisers, Johnny Jacks, etc. The modern mummers play differs from traditional performances in 2 notable ways. Firstly there was not such an event as "going to see the mummers." They came to see you – visiting pubs and big houses to entertain, sing songs and collect money. Secondly the performance was more ritualistic and the participants didn't play for laughs (see Thos. Hardy Return of the Native). The modern tendency to use elaborate costume, ham it up and give a pantomime performance with participants taking on characterisation certainly didn't happen.

Most traditionally transmitted mummers plays ceased after The Great War. The custom was greatly revived from the 1960's onwards. The oldest play in Oxfordshire is believed to be that in Islip where the local Clerk of the Parish had written it down (1780). But it is a living tradition and changes happen to all the plays forced by current events and the Wantage play is no exception. It will never be exactly the same this year as last year, so come and see it!

Old Father Beelzebub

(with acknowledgements to Steve Roud, *The English Year*, Penguin Books 2006; Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, Oxford University Press, 1996)

December 2013