

The Wantage Mummers Play

“In comes I.....”

The Wantage Mummers play has been performed since the early seventies revival 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 on record performed in the area was in 1881 when it was performed for Lady Wantage at Lockinge House, but local residents have recalled many other occasions, for example, the play was at one time performed in a trailer pulled around the Lockinge Estate.

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. 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 over £30,000 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 (West Berks.)

Although the characters and plots vary across the country there are more similarities than differences in the many plays collected and research has revealed that the plays had 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. Local and national events also had an influence on changes to the narrative.

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 Sir James Frazer's "Golden Bough" (twelve volumes published in 1890), on early twentieth century interpretation of folk customs. It is now certain that the type of mummers plays popular today did not exist before mid-18th century. Medieval references to Mummers Plays (Momyng) refer to a different type of masked play. There were also Mystery or Miracle plays with a religious basis and plays/processions in April involving the life of St. George after he became the patron saint of England during the reign of Edward III. Medieval Momyng (from the 14th C.) typically took place in England and the Low Countries during the Christmas period to Twelfth Night or Shrove Tuesday and the activity was identified by the following characteristics:

- Disguise i.e., masked (so performers couldn't be recognised) cf. the German word "mummerspiel" – a masked play.
- A mimed action of an event or play
- Visiting people's homes or Royal Courts
- A game of (loaded) dice to earn money (from the French – "Mumchance")
- A dance
- Prize giving or gift exchange

The activity probably emerged from carnival activity popular around Christmas in many parts of Europe dating from Roman times. A "momyng" performance of the above type was given to Prince Richard (later Richard II) in 1377 and poems written by John Lydgate ca. 1430 contain texts of mummings. In fact, John Lydgate wrote a play based on the life of St George, but it does not link to the present mummers play. These events, sometimes referred to as *disguisings*, continued into Tudor times and later in that period the domestic visits included a "guess the mummer" game.

Lydgate's "Legend of St George" presented him more as a medieval knight than a Roman soldier which may have been a small contribution to the current play and works by Lydgate and Richard Jonson found their way into chapbooks which were popular reading material from ca. mid-16th C. Chapbooks were to encourage reading and contained a cocktail of stories, parables, jokes, recipes, general knowledge and plays. They were printed in their hundreds and popular themes were copied by printers all around the country. (There were no copyright laws!)

When Puritanism became a force to be reckoned with (late 16th-17th C.) the Puritans set about banning Christmas frivolities, and mumming were forbidden in a series of "visitations" issued by Edmund Grindal the Archbishop of York. However, from ca. 1650 there was a campaign to re-instate the "old" Christmas ways which is possibly the origin of the line appearing in many mummers plays "*hoping old (i.e., pre-Puritan) Father Christmas will never be forgot*".

Throughout the 17th C. the mumming customs continued, the opportunity taken to scrounge a bit of money at a time of the year when folks are more well-disposed to part with it. People called "antiquarians" appeared who provided a helpful record of pastimes and customs. The first appearance in print of anything resembling the current mummers play was in **1746** in a Chapbook published by J. White called "**Alexander and the King of Egypt**" which was variously described as "*as acted by mummers every Christmas*". It was written in Drydenesque rhyming stanzas and contained

many of the lines we see in versions of the current play. It appeared at a time when heroic drama was parodied for humorous effect (“laughing tragedy”) and influenced by European *commedia del’arte*. The King of Egypt is attended by a doctor who can cure the itch, the stitch, the palsy, and the gout, etc. The play was spotted by other chapbook printers and diligent work (by M. Preston/P. Smith) has tracked down at least eighteen printers around the country who copied it.

Other plays appeared featuring either St. George, King George or Prince George as the hero and the Turkish Knight appeared from the Turkish Wars at the end of 17thC. Napoleonic wars, Nelson and the Victorians all exerted their influence on the basic play format. Related plays have been associated with Revesby (1779), Truro Cordwainers (1780), Islip (1780) Cheshire (1788) and Oxford (1794).

In the late 19th and early 20th century an interest in folklore prompted collectors to pay more attention to mumming plays, e.g., the collector James Madison Carpenter wrote to vicars asking if they were aware of any local play. He discovered that older men in the village could remember lines easily because of the rhyming couplets. The Wantage Mummers play comes from the collection of Lt-Col Barzillai Lowsley of Hampstead Norreys.

Mummers have always sought to conceal their identity either by masks, blacking their faces or covering themselves with strips of paper or rags and tall hats if theatrical costume was unaffordable. It is generally accepted that mummers were male.

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 two 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

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