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THE HORN DANCE OF ABBOTS BROMLEY

To the people of this Staffordshire village this ceremonial dance performed over a wide area of the countryside every September is "The Horn Dance" or "The Horns"; to the antiquaries of the 17th century it was "The Hobby Horse Dance", and one of a number of Hobby Horse ceremonies prevalent (as they still are) in the Midlands and N.W. England. Without "The Horns", however, i.e. the six pairs of reindeer horns which mask the six dancers accompanying the Horse, the ceremony might have attracted as little notice as others, and might have degenerated, as some other customs have, into a mere annual turn-out, little above a cadging expedition, and falling more into decline each year. But so remarkable are the Horns themselves, so mysterious in their history, so unknown their origins, so wide the speculations they generate, and by now so well established their custody by the parish church, that until the present day interest has been sufficient to support and preserve the tradition and to record, though not in a homogeneous way, as much as may be known of its history, together with interpretations which from time to time have been proffered during the last 250 years.

Those who look at Cecil Sharp's description of the dance, together with the tune he himself noted, in Sword Dances of Northern England Part I may be disappointed at the sparseness of information about the dance contained in his account. In fact it may be said that serious interest in the significance of the dance did not begin until the E.F.D.S.S. awoke to the importance of comparative study, and from acquaintance with similar dances in other countries of both the old world and new, perceived that in the Horn Dance of Abbots Bromley was preserved one of the most important survivals of primitive magico-religious ceremony in England. An account, far more illuminating than Cecil Sharp's, therefore, is to be found in a review, by Douglas Kennedy, then Director of the E.F.D.S.S., in the Journal for 1939, of a work of local history called Abbots Bromley, and in the circumstantial though inconclusive account given in the book itself, gleaned from an exhaustive number of sources by the author, Miss Marcia Rice (late) Headmistress of the well-known girls' school in the village.

Miss Rice sets about her task of describing the topography, history and traditions of the village of Abbots Bromley not with the training of an historian (which she was not) but as one whose life

study has been literature: her inferences, therefore, arise rather through literary knowledge and assumptions, and certain matters which might catch the eye of the historian or archaeologist do not strike her, and some of her data do not provoke the line of possible deductions they would have done to another mind. The great value of her work lies in the collection of data from every source that occurred to her, not least from the mouths of the villagers themselves who communicated to her what they might not have communicated to a stranger, or, in a few years more might not have been able to communicate at all: and all her data is documented, though with occasional slips in accuracy.

EARLY RECORDS OF THE HORN DANCE

Miss Rice inevitably quotes, but quotes in full the famous note on "The Hobby Horse Dance" - as it was then called, in Dr. Plot's Natural History of Staffordshire (1686), and she observes that Dr. Plot did not see the dance performed, but saw only the regalia - the Hobby Horse, with the bow and arrow the rider carried, six reindeer horns or heads - three painted white and three red - and "a curious pot" kept in turns by the Reeves of the town - into which "cakes and ale" or the wherewithal to purchase the same were placed. The dance was then performed at Christmas, New Year, and Twelfth Day: and the cost of the feast, or cakes and ale, being defrayed, the moneys collected from all, whether townsmen or visitors, who had goodwill towards "the institution of the sport" went to the repair of the church and the keeping of the poor. Dr. Plot added that "they danced the Hays and other Country Dances".

There is a great deal to be read from this simple account, and not all of it is read by Miss Rice - but she goes on to quote another writer of the 17th century - Sir Simon Degge, who annotates this passage in Plot's Natural History with the remark that he had often seen the dance (and he does not disagree with the description by Dr. Plot who never saw it) and that it was continued up to the time of the Civil War. From other evidence we learn that it was revived sometime after the Civil War; was in being according to Lord Paget in 1690, was being performed "on occasions" in 1725, and has been done "time out of mind" according to the villagers who gave Miss Rice their account of it. From another 17th century antiquary, Sampson Erdeswick (Survey of Staffordshire) we learn that it was performed in the 16th century, and according to F. W. Hackwood, Staffordshire Curiosities and Antiquities (1905) it was earlier performed each Sunday before the church (the alms so collected being given to the Abbot for charity), and that it so continued to the time of the Dissolution (1534). Sir Simon Degge remarks that there was "something like it" at Stafford also, for the same purpose, and other records confirm that there was in Stafford a Hobby Horse ceremony for the benefit of the church and poor: it will be noticed that it is the

Hobby Horse in each case that was the important figure - the reindeer horns, now regarded as by far the most interesting characteristic of the dance, excited little or no attention. The Stafford dancers accompanying the Horse were said to be "something like Morrice dancers", and a 19th century account (in Mrs. Charles Bagot's Links with the Past) speaks of "Morrice dancers dressed in ribbons, and armed with light sticks which they struck in time to a tune, attended by a fool with a bell in a motley coat" dancing at Blithfield Court (the local mansion) in the snow during the twelve days of Christmas round about 1817. There seems no certainty that the Morris dancers dressed in ribbons and carrying light sticks were identical with the Horn dancers - the account is too circumstantial to permit of it: but it is possible that the two ceremonies became one - for the Horn Dance is now attended by the Fool in a motley coat, and that other Morris character "Maid Marian" or the Man-Woman - and there is no mention of these personages in the earlier accounts: moreover, the emphasis has shifted to the six dancers (or horn-bearers) as in the Cotswold Morris, and the Hobby Horse, formerly the principal character, is now merely in attendance and no longer, as formerly, carries the bow and arrow centaur-fashion.

It is probably better to add these accounts of "Christmas Morris" to other evidence we already have of Morris dancing in Staffordshire and the survivals, still extant, of Mummers' plays, and a Christmas guising (in which the Hobby Horse plays an important part) throughout the winter "season of revels" - i.e. from All Souls' Day to Twelfth Night or Shrovetide - throughout the Midlands, both West and East, including Cheshire where the Hobby Horse plays still flourish in a number of places.

CHARACTERS AND REGALIA

It has been pointed out that the Hobby Horse was formerly the "principal character" of this traditional ceremony - and that the whole enactment was formerly called the Hobby Horse Dance: slight attention being paid to the six dancers now valued as unique beside the Horse which is common to so many other ceremonies where, more often than not, he is merely "in attendance" - as he appears to be in the Horn Dance as it survives today. (NOTE - The two famous horses of Padstow and Minehead are not part of a dancing or dramatic company, and so have the stage to themselves as the Abbots Bromley horse has not.) It is interesting, therefore, to look at the Abbots Bromley Horse in comparison with other Horses which, as is well known, fall into three main types: 1) The Horse-and-Rider of the Cotswolds in which the dancer appears as the Rider from the waist upwards, the lower part only of the body being concealed by the "horse-mask" which includes a caparison similar to that worn by horses at a mediaeval tournament: 2) The Hooden or masked animal-character, one of a various company of such in which a skull or semblance of a horse's head is carried on a stick, the dancer being completely covered with a sheet or blanket representing the animal's

skin, which appears actually to have been worn until the 14th century and which is still found, an uncouth survival, here and there (this type is found in Kent, the West Midlands, N.W. England and Wales):

3) The completely masked dancer seen in Devon and Cornwall and Lincolnshire, which appears as more beast than man, but while not noticeably horse-like betrays most clearly the universal phallic symbolism of the Horse.

Dr. Plot's description of the Abbots Bromley Horse, the earliest we have, is not very illuminating, and it must be recalled that he never saw the dance, but was shown only the regalia, kept as it then was in the Town Hall: "a sort of sport..... called the Hobby Horse Dance from a person that carried the image of a horse between his legs made of thin boards, and in his hands a bow and arrow, which passing through a hole in the bow and stopping upon a sholder it had in it, made a snapping noise as he drew it to and fro in time to the Musick". At first sight Dr. Plot's Horse sounds like the child's toy - but as the dancer carried the bow in his hand and snapped the arrow to and fro, the "thin boards" must have been supported, and presumably were so supported by a frame slung round the waist or neck as in types 1) and 3) above, since type 2) requires both the dancer's hands to carry the horse-head mounted on its stick. We must therefore assume that the horse frame of iron, with realistic head forward and tail aft is either what Dr. Plot "saw", or that he really saw something of similar construction, and that since the "Person" so dressed operated the bow and arrow, the impersonation must have been of the Horse-and-Rider type, although other Hobby Horses of the West Midlands or N.W. are usually of the "skull and stick" variety. (NOTE - One would tentatively suggest that the Horse-and-Rider was the type used in the Court Morris, and may in fact be found surviving in the countryside by virtue of Court practice, since the other two types are "traditional" in character and form.) Dr. Richard Wilkes, a Cambridge antiquary of the 18th century, mentions the regalia of the Horn Dance in his Ms. History of Stafford (William Salt Library, Stafford) and speaks of a "thing made in the shape of a horse with hoops and cloathes". No pictures of the Hobby Horse are now known prior to the early years of this century when the dancers had been re-dressed as described below.

With the Horse, as Dr. Plot says, "danced six others, carrying on thir shoulders as many Reindeer's Heads, three of them white, and three of them red with the arms of the chief families (i.e. Bagot, Paget and Well) depicted on the palms of them, with which they danced the Hays and other Country Dances".

This is the most important paragraph in Plot's description: he clearly says the horns were reindeer, and he properly describes the dance itself as of the country-dance type (corresponding with 16th century descriptions) and not the "joyful Morris incontinent" which numerous 16th and 17th century descriptions clearly show to be the

morris dance we know today.

Miss Rice describes the horns (now white and blue, not white and red) very carefully, and more accurately than Cecil Sharp who was sadly misinformed, and though she reaches no conclusion about their possible origin, nor about the semi-legendary second set (which were elk, not reindeer) mysteriously lost - if they ever existed - she makes a remark en passant that it would be interesting to pursue - namely the connection between the reindeer and St. Nicholas, and the fact that the church, dedicated to this Saint, stands as other churches dedicated to St. Nicholas may be found to do, on the site of a pagan worshipping place. (NOTE - St. Nicholas has other characteristics than those associated with the benevolent Bishop of Myra: he is the most popular saint of North Europe, particularly Iceland, where the good Bishop does not seem to have journeyed, and, as every child knows, travels everywhere in a reindeer sleigh - a vehicle associated in the 17th century with witchcraft. His festival is now December 6th, but changes in the calendar would put this day at one time as much as 14 days late, i.e. practically Mid-Winter day.)

There are many excellent photographs in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library showing these horns and the ancient wooden heads into which they are set, the whole being mounted on a stick after the fashion of the Hobby Horse or animal character described as type 2) above. The dress worn by the horn-bearers in all these photographs going back more than 50 years is, unfortunately, modern and of a conventional "Elizabethan" character: no one knows what was worn before. Dr. Plot does not say, but the inference should point to the sheet, blanket or animal skin.

Neither Dr. Plot nor other writers of the 17th and 18th centuries mentions any other characters, though in the survival as known during the last 50 years there are two others (not counting the boy who, instead of the Horse, carries the bow and arrow) who may be seen in Sir Benjamin Stone's and other subsequent photographs: namely, the Fool and Maid Marian or the Man-Woman. These two personages so well known elsewhere may have accompanied the dance "time out of mind", for none of the antiquaries described the dance in action, but only the regalia: or they may possibly have been added when the dancers were re-dressed after the manner of the Morris dancers in the Tollet Window at Betley (now at Minsterley), or even at some date in the late 18th or 19th century when this window gave rise to much antiquarian research concerning the Morris dance. (NOTE - see J. M. GUTCH - The Lytell Geste of Robin Hood, Introduction, for notes on the Betley Window, together with an illustration. See also E. J. NICOL - "Some Notes on the History of the Betley Window" Journal of the E.F.D.S.S. Vol. VII No.2 1953.)

But both Dr. Plot, and the later Dr. Richard Wilkes of

Cambridge and Wolverhampton, who married Rachel (or Rebecca) Manlove of Abbots Bromley, mention a "curious pott" or Pot-lid in which the cakes and ale or monetary contributions were received; and Wilkes also mentions a Sword. Either the Sword - which would have cleared or "whiffled" the way for the dance-procession - disappeared, or Wilkes mistook the Bow and Arrow for it. The "Pot", if such a thing ever existed, has also disappeared; but it is possible that this object was the other important piece of regalia still surviving, sometimes called the Ladle, or locally the Pipe or Match, now carried by the Maid Marian, and popularly supposed (though not by the dancers) to serve for that collection of money which was the purpose of the "Pot".

Dr. Plot writes at some length about it: "To this Hobby Horse Dance there also belonged a Pot which was kept by turnes, by four or five of the chiefs of the town whom they call Reeves, who provided cakes and ale to put into this Pot. All people who had any kindness for the good intent of the Institution of the Sport giving pence, a piece for themselves and their families; and so foreigners too, that came to see it, with which money (the charges of the Cakes and Ale etc. being defrayed) they not only repaired the church, but kept their poor too: which charges are not now so cheerfully borne." Sir Simon Degge, annotating Dr. Plot, recalled a similar "good intent" at Stafford. It is just possible that the "Pot" is the content of the offering made, rather than the receptacle in which it was placed.

The carrying of a ladle by the Man-Woman is common enough in the North West Morris, and this female emblem is often conveniently used for the collection of money; but the local name for the object carried at Abbots Bromley is a nearer designation, and while it has the same symbolic significance, it can hardly be said to look like a pot-lid (as Wilkes described it); but pence might have been received in it and transferred to a pouch carried by the bearer. It seems clear that the Pot, whatever its form, served to provide the feast and to fulfil the good intent, and imparted to the official Reeve who kept it the importance of Treasurer or Bagman: which, in turn, suggests that he should not be identified with the Maid Marian who now rather secretly carries the Pipe or Match, and who may not, originally, have been one of the Hobby Horse's animal company.

DRESS

No one now knows what the traditional dress of the Horn Dancers was, since the dress worn at the present time is of no more than sixty years' standing, and is a fanciful though honest attempt at reproducing the pictured costume of another dance and another place. The oldest testimony comes from Grandfather Bentley whose family, together with that of the Fowells with which it intermarried, has contributed many dancers to the team. Grandfather Bentley was born about 1790 and said (see P. 73 of Miss Rice's Abbots Bromley), "The dancers wore their own clothes, but each dancer had the colour of his horn (i.e.

white and red, or white and blue) in bits of cloth sewn to his jacket, down his trousers, and on to his hat." This is a true traditional dress. William Rock, a local shoemaker, born in 1864, said: "In old days the dancers had loose ribbons - red, white and blue, pinned on like guyzers." (It will be remembered that the horns, emblazoned with the arms of Bagot, Paget and Welles, were painted three white and three red - later blue.) William Adey, born in 1859, and the oldest living dancer in 1936, said that in his young days the dancers wore their own clothes, and sometimes pulled off their jackets. This is not very illuminating as it stands, but where a traditional dress has died out or become impoverished, it is not unusual for dancers to wear their jackets inside-out "to show the sleeve-linings": to put on clothes inside-out is also said to make the wearer invisible to fairies, whom, at the same time, he can then see. Towards the end of the 19th century we hear also of the Maid Marian "dressed as a woman", and the Hobby Horse "draped at the back" from Miss Lowe, the daughter of the vicar; Miss Lowe also added that the dancers wore their ordinary clothes. Indeed, it is only too common for traditional ceremonial dress to decrease to a few poor rags, or to die out altogether if the custom is not supported, and "the luck" maintained.

About 1887 or a little earlier, the Rev. J. M. Lowe, then vicar of St. Nicholas' Church, and nearing his retirement, proposed that new costumes be made for the dancers, and that his wife and daughters, assisted by the vergers' wife, should make them. It seems each dancer had his own suit, the general design being blue trousers, a fur-trimmed jacket or vest, showing coloured sleeves, or the sleeves of a coloured shirt, and a red velvet hat, trimmed with a feather. Report says that the vicarage bed-curtains were used in the making of this costume, and Miss Rice adds: "They (the vicar's family) may have got their ideas from an old edition of Shakespeare containing a picture of a Morris or Horn Dance." It is a pity that Miss Rice did not investigate this suggestion further. The picture to which she presumably refers is the engraving in Johnson and Steevens' edition of Shakespeare's Henry IV Part I (1778), depicting the painted window at Betley, the property of George Tollet, and frequently known by his name. The window shows in twelve panels the characters of a Court Morris which although usually assumed to be English has suspiciously close affinities with continental depictions of about the same date (15th century). Although no very great resemblance is now discernible between the dress of the Horn Dancers themselves and that of the dancers in the Betley Window (since the Horn Dancers' dress, as devised by the Rev. J. M. Lowe and improved upon in 1904 by his successor, Mr Berkeley is in effect "Tudor", in its components of Jerkin, breeches and flat cap; whereas the doublet and hose of the dancers in the window are characteristically 15th century), the Maid Marian's dress is clearly an adaptation of the May Lady's in the same window. A comparison of photographs of the Abbots Bromley company taken at the turn of the century when the costumes were new, with the window, or with the pictures of it in Knight's Old England, Gutch's Lytell Geste of Robin Hood, Sharp's Morris Book Part I, or E. J. Nicol's "Notes on the History of the Betley Window" in Journal of the E.F.D.S. 1953, sets the relationship beyond

doubt.

The "improved" costume introduced in 1904 by the vicar, the Rev. Stuart Berkeley and the churchwardens, by subscription, has been described by Mr. Berkeley's daughter (later Mrs. Simpson, wife of the Dean of Peterborough). It provided a uniform dress for each of the dancers - green tapestry breeches with oak-leaf and acorn pattern, green stockings and caps, and sleeveless coats (three crimson and three green) or sleeveless coats over shirts showing green or crimson sleeves. Mrs. Simpson added, "We followed our own fancy and were not bothered by any antiquarian scruples". Fortunately, the following of fancy did not obliterate the essential distinction between the two "sides", representing the agonist and antagonist always to be found in folk drama. The Fool was dressed in "proper motley" i.e. the uniform of a court jester, instead of the miscellaneous fineries of the folk Fool, but the Maid Marian's dress retained vestiges of its immediate predecessor in which can be discerned the 15th century tunic or robe, and the veiled steeple hat although, unstiffened, this now hangs down instead of rising straight from the forehead.

The Hobby Horse wears a vaguely Tudor cloak, giving no indication of the "cloathes" mentioned by Wilkes; and two little boys, also in vaguely Tudor dress, carry the cross-bow formerly carried by the Hobby Horse, and the triangle which adds a naive percussion to the melody of the dance.

THE MUSIC AND THE DANCE

Miss Rice prints four tunes on P. 73 of her book, and notes that there was once an "old score", according to Miss Lowe (daughter of the vicar who retired soon after 1887). This "old score" has never been seen by the present generation of dancers, or by Mrs. Bentley from whom so much information was locally obtained. (NOTE - Leadership of the dance has resided in the Bentley family to certain knowledge at least since 1790, and according to family tradition for 400 years: the name of the family is now Towell, by marriage.) The tune recalled by Miss Lowe, searched for by the Rev. Stuart Berkeley, and referred to in Folk-Lore Journal (1893), was recovered by Mr. Buckley, music critic of the Birmingham Post, from Mr. Robinson, wheelwright and fiddler, as far back as 1857/8. Mr. Buckley communicated this tune to Cecil Sharp (see Sword Dance Airs, Book II, Preface) who published it. This is the tune the E.F.D.S.S. use.

The other three tunes printed by Miss Rice are "an old tune" acquired from the dancers in 1924 by the persistence of the School of which Miss Rice was Headmistress, and printed in the Leaflet of SS. Mary and Anne's Guild; a tune communicated by Mr. Williams Adey (b. 1859), and recalled as being used in his youth; and a tune resembling the SS. Mary and Anne's tune, communicated by Edie Sammons, sister of the concertina player. The tune printed by Cecil Sharp in the text of

Sword Dances of Northern England also resembles this St. Anne's Tune, as Miss Rice calls it.

For very many years now the dancers have used any popular tune known to them or their musician who, also for very many years, has been an accordion or concertina player. Mrs. Bentley however (b. 1866) recalls that in her childhood the dancers were accompanied by a fiddler. This fiddler may, or may not, have been Wheelwright Robinson who owned the carpenter's shop opposite St. Anne's. Mr. Robinson, who was already 80 in 1878 when he sold his business "never went with the Horns" but, according to later report, was the only person who could play the old tune of which "the score" was lost.

Recalling what Dr. Plot and his contemporaries referred to the ceremony as "A Hobby Horse Dance", it may be of interest to record that John Playford printed "A Hobby Horse Dance" in Musick's Delight (1666) and in Apollo's Banquet (1669-93); while others appeared in Pills to Purge Melancholy, attached to a ballad "Jolly Roger Twangdillo", and in Antidote to Melancholy with various words.

It will also be recalled that Dr. Plot, who never saw the performance, said "They dance the Hays and other Country Dances". Those who have seen the dance, or studied Sharp's notation of it, will recall that a great part of it consists of single-file serpentine movements interspersed with stationary figures in which the dancers (divided according to their colours) advance, retreat, and salute each other with sweeping movements of the horns which mask their heads; a comparison with Sir John Davies' description of the Country Dance in Orchestra, a Poem of Dancing (1597) will show that Dr. Plot's designation agrees pretty well with Sir John Davies'.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

In her enquiries among the inhabitants of Abbots Bromley, particularly amongst those families intimately connected with the dance for several generations, Miss Rice mentions "Old Mr. Rock's Big Book full of information" - borrowed by a friend and never given back; "Mrs. Bentley's printed Book" containing references to the Horn Dance - borrowed by "a gentleman" and never given back; "Mrs. Fitchett's Book" containing a woodcut of the dance and printed with the old long "s" - i.e. probably before 1800; and Mrs. Bentley's note-book (1904) containing a list of properties in the handwriting of Mrs. Berkeley, wife of the then vicar.

The dance, once performed at midwinter, is now performed on the Monday following the first Sunday following 4th September: i.e. the Monday in Wakes Week. The dancers have now purchased a second set of horns (bought in 1963) in order to preserve the horns which are kept in the church, should they perform the Horn Dance at other times during the year. A replica set of horns is kept at Cecil Sharp House, and can be seen by those who are interested.

* - Indicates that the book or periodical so marked is not in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

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