

# **A Practical exploration of mumming and related plays, including associated dances**

*Adrian Burrows*

## **Workshop outline**

The workshop will include a practical exploration of mumming and related plays, including associated dances. We will explore the differences and similarities between regional and seasonal variations (Mumming, Robin Hood, Pace Egg, Calling On and Plough Plays).

I will explain my approach to “tradition” and use of collected material, and the many pitfalls associated with productions for modern audiences.

Participants will see a Plough Play performed and, time allowing, see videos of a Pace Egg play and a “reconstruction” (using both collected and original material) of a Tudor entertainment. (Thanks to HED players and especially Elaine Corke). Participants will have the opportunity to take part in either a Plough Play, a Christmas Mumming play, or a Robin Hood Play focussing on costume, stage craft and adaptation.

## **My previous involvement**

In 1975, a 1910 photo of the Northill (Beds) “Morris Men” dressed up to perform a street play sparked my initial interest in folk plays. After research at Cecil Sharp House, I put together a plot and script for a Plough Play, and gathered a group of friends to perform it in pubs around the Harpenden area.

This was followed by research with Tony Barratt into the Pace Egg Play. By now English Miscellany Folk Dance Group (of which I am a founder member and currently Leader of the Mumming Section) had taken up mumming, and now have three plays which they include in their public displays of folk material

More recently, Elaine Corke and I, as members of Herts Early Dance, have used material from folk plays to devise entertainments for the club’s parties in January and May.

In about 1990 I ran a series of half-day workshops for Herts Folk Association.

## **The material and my understanding of its origin and importance to English culture**

First of all I must stress that this is not a “learned paper”. All my “research” relies on secondary sources, either book, articles or internet. I have not made a statistical, scientific analysis of the material, nor spent time on checking source material for accuracy.

I have read a large number of sources and base my conclusions on my memory of these, from which I have drawn personal opinions which inform my treatment of the material.

My conclusion is that the recorded plays I have seen were almost all written down in the period covering from the 1820s to the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, although there are a few written down in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Cs, and there are references dating back to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

These recorded plays represent the tail end of a culture of entertainment and educational material, originally covering all classes of society and containing religious and secular material. Some were serious and educational, eg Mystery plays, some Comic or Topical eg Court entertainments, Masques and Jiggs.

---

\* This paper was presented at the DHDS Study Forum *Dance Disguised and Obscured* at Goldsmiths, University of London on 21<sup>st</sup>–22<sup>nd</sup> March 2013. For more information see [www.dhds.org.uk](http://www.dhds.org.uk).



Most comprised a mixture of Music, song, dance and drama, often with elaborate masks, costume and sets.

The recorded plays for the most part represent an incomplete snapshot of the last surviving examples, usually from rural settings, and usually collected as quaint examples of “folk” entertainment. They rarely hold much information about costume, music or dance (with the exception of those associated with Sword dance).

I fear also that the recording may, in many cases, also be inaccurate for several reasons:

- Firstly the information in some cases was taken from the memories of old men who had seen the plays performed in their youth.
- Secondly the collectors may well have cleaned up the script, or combined more than one source, to make it more interesting (and less incomprehensible) for their “educated” readers, or for what they saw as artistic reasons.
- Thirdly the prevalence of belief in an “Arcadian” past, “Merry England” and the idea that somehow “Folk” culture was intrinsically superior and more robust than effete intellectual artistic endeavour, may have led to selective recording and definitely tended toward the fossilisation of “Traditional” Folk material, which would have otherwise have continued its evolution by including topical material.

My treatment is therefore to respect the form of the plays, while using source material to present to as wide an audience as possible as part of the English culture which most people have lost sight of.

I do not feel there is sufficient evidence to present historically accurate “folk” plays and although it can be interesting and fun to reconstruct some, we should be aware that the changes in society for both the players and audience mean that changes in the plays are inevitable to make them accessible and enjoyable.

I do feel it is acceptable to say to a modern audience that we are performing a play comprising material drawn from particular sources, which has been adapted by the inclusion of material both old and new, and that we are performing it in a way similar to the period during which it was written down (or as a modern rendition).

## **Demonstrations**

**Demonstration 1. A Plough Play** largely based on the Bassingham Play (early 19<sup>th</sup> C), discovered in the British Library by Prof. Baskerville, and performed by Herts Early Dance “Jiggoloes”

**Demonstration DVD 2. A Pace Egg Play** researched and compiled from a large number of sources by Tony Barratt and Adrian Burrows and performed by English Miscellany Folk Dance Group.

**Demonstration DVD 3. Medicus Solvit Dubitationem Regis:** a “reconstruction” of a Tudor entertainment loosely based on historical events, with material from many sources, reworked (but still in a “Mumming” style) by Elaine Corke, and performed by Herts Early Dance “Jiggoloes”.

## **Workshop**

**Presentation technique:** The keys to good presentation are:

- Timing
- Knowing the script
- Addressing the audience

- Projection....clear speech....slow delivery.....avoiding high pitched voice
- Exaggerated gesture and body language
- Controlled response to ad lib/heckling
- Straight delivery.

Once we have chosen a play to work on we will practice these and look at stage direction, in order to present these three plays to the workshop.

**Choices of plays:** A Plough Play based on the Bassingham Play (early 19<sup>th</sup> C). This represents a number of plays from Linconshire and Cambs, performed on Plough Monday

A Robin Hood Play Based on the Inglesham Christmas Play - 1840 to 1850, with additions from Bristol

A Mumming Play based on J.H.Ewing's play in "Aunt Judy's Magazine" Jan.1884. There is no time of year recorded, but is typical of a Boxing Day Mumming Play.

### **Costume**

There appears to be little evidence of the costume worn at the time these plays were collected. Apart from a few posed photographs, there is only reference to players bedecked with ribbons, paste board and bits of mirror, and to either outlandish garb or Sunday best.

I feel that whatever costume is adopted, the more time spent in making it look striking and appropriate to the setting, audience expectations and period portrayed, the more successful it will be.

It is worth mentioning masks for while being very effective dramatically, they can make it very difficult for the players to be clearly heard, especially outdoors.

Blacking up, while being referred to in a number of sources is problematic in today's anti-discriminatory culture, and using multi-coloured face paint has the same disguising effect, while offending no one.

### **Dances**

Many of the script refer to "taking a dance" and some to "a Morris dance", but with the exception of plays associated with Sword dances (from the Northern Counties) there is no specific detail. This gives us considerable latitude for choice.

The cluster of Plough Plays in Linconshire and Cambs coincides well with the distribution of Molly dancing and I recommend drawing on Cyril Papworth's collection of Cambridge Bowling Alley dances, for Molly dances in these plays.

Pace Egg and Mumming plays seem to scattered over most of the rest of the country, and often coincide with Cotswold Morris.

Some plays refer to "dancing a jig" or "hornpipe". Both danced as solo dances in many areas, and I think suitable for inclusion where a member or members of the cast have the requisite skills.

### **Music and Song**

While many of the plays have song lyrics, few specify tunes, so again some detective work among folk singers is called for to match lyrics to tunes known to be linked, or to find tunes which fit.

## **Structure of the plays**

While this will become apparent in looking at the plays, it is worth just mentioning the outlines

The “basic” play consists of:

- An introduction
- A dispute leading to a fight
- The death of one of the combatants
- Summoning and interrogation of a doctor
- A cure
- A dance
- A closing song or speech

This applies to most pace Egg and Christmas Mumming plays

There may be multiple fights and cures, sometimes multiple doctors appear, or a faux doctor (Jack Vinney).

In Many Christmas plays Old Father Christmas comes in to introduce the other players, and may be accompanied by Dame Dolly or Old Molly or little devil doubt, who may share this role, or provide an extra comic role.

The Robin Hood plays are typified by the main characters being from the Robin Hood Legends, and closely following the ballads.

In some of the Sword dance plays, the introduction takes the form of a calling on song, there is no fight death or cure, but moves straight to the Sword dance, there may or may not be a closing song or speech.

The Plough plays have the addition of a series of players wooing a lady, usually with the Fool winning her hand. This is woven into the basic plot, and may also have an extra comic character (Dame Jane) who tries to steal away the Fool by claiming he is the father of her Bastard.

### **Some of the source material I have drawn on:**

A Country Parish A.W Boyd (1929) Ch 10 “Customs”

The Mummings Act; or Morris Dance (1840) Pub: J.Pierce & Son Sheffield

Keynsham Mumming Play (1822) C# House Library ?

Notes on English Moresk Dancing c.1500:

Andy Richards Stroud Pipe & Tabor Symposium Talk July 2004

Kemps nine daies vvonder:

Spring & Summer Customs in Sussex & Surrey: Fran & Geof Doel & Tony Deane  
(Photocopied extract) Ch 4 May Garlands, Maypoles & Jacks-in-the-green.

Inglesham Christmas Play (1840-50) Alfred Williams 1922

The Death & Life of Little John Barleycorne (source uncertain)

Bassingham Men’s Play (1823) Sir. C.F.Bromhead Baronet, Thurlby Hall.

C# House Library ?

Bassingham Childrens Play (1999 entered by Peter Millington). C# House Library ?

Kirby Longsdale Pace Egg Play

(collected in Auckland by Andy Smith from Peter Diffy who had emigrated to New Zealand)

Red Stags Mummers Play (based on the Crookham Play) (Christmas 1996 performance)

Mumming play (performed by Greenham Morris 1994)

Pace Egg Play ( no ref)

Kirmington Plough Play: R.J.E.Tiddy (1923) (from internet, ref no noted)

Swinderby Plough Play (1842) British Museum MS 24,546, fols 46-47

Broughton Christmas Play (1924) Baskerville "Mummer's wooing plays in England

Bulby Plough Play (1923): R.J.E.Tiddy "The Mummers Play".

Johnny Jacks Play Overton (1923): R.J.E.Tiddy "The Mummers Play".

Jerusalem Plough Play (1914): E.C.Cawte "English Ritual Drama"

Cropwell Plough Play (1890) Mrs. Chaworth Musters. C# House Library ?

Robin Hood Plays (Various) Bristol Renaissance Faire based on: "Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England" Claire Sponsler

"The Elizabethan Jig and related Song Drama" C.R.Baskervil

"The Hobby Horse and other Animal Masks" Violet Alford

"Ritual Animal Disguise" E.C.Cawte

"The English Folk Play" Sir Edmond Chambers

"English Folk Dancing" Douglas Kennedy

"Robin Hood – The true history behind the legend" Nigel Cawthorne