

## THE REVIVAL OF A MUMMERS' PLAY

Up to the outbreak of the 1914-18 war a play was regularly performed by the Mummings in most villages throughout Britain especially during the Christmas period. They went round the houses, inns and farms of their locality with their play which, apart from some regional differences, was basically the same all over the country. No one as yet has really satisfactorily explained this basic similarity of the mummings' Christmas play. Folklorists refer to it as a hero-combat play in which the hero St. George kills a Turkish knight in a sword fight. A Doctor is called in to attend the victim who after a usually comic cure is brought back to life again. All then join in a concluding dance to music usually provided by Big Head. Beelzebub then goes round the onlookers collecting money in a frying pan, and threatening those slow to pay with his club. After wishing everybody a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year the mummings leave for their next place of call. This is the basic theme of what is better referred to as the St. George mummings play to distinguish it from other types of mummings' plays. Although the St. George play is mostly performed at Christmas it cannot be classified as a Christmas play. It is still performed at Easter in some northern counties, and on 1st November, All Souls' Day in Cheshire. These plays are referred to in the literature as Pace-egg Plays and Soul Plays respectively.

The St George Play is found all over Britain, and despite some regional differences it is basically the same. Such differences are mostly in the names given to the characters in the play, but the lines they speak usually remain the same. St. George may be called King George, or the Turkish Knight may be Bold Slasher. In general Big Head is called Happy Jack or Jack Finney in the south, Tom Pinney in the midlands, Tom Fool in the east, and Johnny Funny or simply Tom in the north. Many villages of course will have local variations, but again this is usually restricted to the name of the local doctor, or some reference to a local character. In this respect the Mummings compare to the Morris Men in so far as the basic steps of the Morris dances are found all over Britain, but some villages have their own variations.

In fact the Morris dancers traditionally performed the Mummings' play at a time when there was much more dancing in the play.

Wheatley, a village near Oxford, had its mummings going round performing their play at Christmas up to the beginning of the first World War. But after the end of hostilities this custom, like so many other old traditions gradually petered out. In 1969 the writer interviewed Mr Arthur Smith who went round with the Wheatley mummings when a boy apprentice. He was then 84 years old and the last of the Wheatley mummings, but unfortunately he could only remember a few of the stereotyped lines of the play. He did however speak of Ding George, the Doctor, Jack Finney and Beelzebub appearing in the play. He also said that they blackened their faces, and fastened strips of coloured tissue paper cut notchy-notchy i.e. jaggedly, and fastened all over their hats, jackets and trousers. This was the traditional dress of the mummings so that each individual performer could not be recognised. Then from about the mid-19th century the mummings began to dress as the characters in the play.

When the Wheatley mummings no longer went round with their play, the mummings from Holton, the neighbouring village a mile away, began to 'do' Wheatley as well, but some time after the end of the second World War they too only continued spasmodically. In 1969 the Oxford University Morris Men visited Mr Percy 'Joe' Fonge who had been one of the Holton mummings. He gave them the Holton play and they performed it round the inns of Wheatley until 1974. They then experienced difficulties in continuing, and were pleased to hand it over to the newly formed Wheatley Society. The Holton play with a prologue spoken by Father Christmas proved interesting as it had two fight scenes in which the Turkish Knight falls in the first, and King George in the second. The Doctor and Jack Finney are called in to attend them. Jack Finney brings the Turkish Knight back to life again with a pill and a few drops of medicine.

The Doctor cures King George by pulling a large tooth out with the help of Jack Finney and the others. Then he and Jack Finney "raise the fallen King with the aid of a bladder". The play ends with Big Head coming in and playing a tune.

But this was the Holton mummings<sup>1</sup> play and it was felt that an attempt should be made to find the- Wheatley play. So far this has been unsuccessful, but a Holton text of the late 19th century was discovered by Dr Hassall. This provided a problem as it differed considerably from the one given by Mr Fonge. In 1975 the writer visited Mr Fonge who by then was 86 years old and the last of the Holton mummings. He was somewhat reluctant to talk as unfortunately he had seen the Oxford University Men perform the play he had given them, and was rather upset about it. "They didn't do it as they should, they done it all ways, anyhow," he explained. In fact after the entry of the Doctor, the part he used to play, he had stepped in and corrected them. He just could not stand by any longer when it was not being done as he had told them. This gives an interesting insight into the attitude of some of the old performers towards the Mummings play. "We did the proper act," he said, "and you have to take your time," whereas now, "they got no idea and only said what they thought." When told we were considering doing the Holton play he said very firmly "I want to tell you if you put the mummings act on, it's got to be done proper otherwise I shall stop it." Then in a more reflective tone "I doubt whether anyone would now as times have altered and they're not so interested as we were."

This attitude of Joe Fonge, and others like him, for 'doing the proper act' for whatever reason, shows how at one time an oral tradition could be handed with very little change. The mummings play like Morris dancing has a long history originating in seasonal ritual. As ritual drama the insistence on continuity of tradition, and resistance to change would be even greater. But the mummings play is a living tradition as well as an oral one, and some change will inevitably come about over the years. Changes took place long before Joe Fonge's time particularly during the 18th century when the mummings play changed from ritual drama to secular drama. It was then used to express national feelings particularly during periods of war. St. George the hero of the play becomes King George, Nelson, Wellington, or some other popular hero of the day, and the Turkish Knight the villain is replaced by a black American dog, a French Officer, Napoleon, or some other national enemy of the day. But although the name of the hero and the villain in the play-are changed the lines they speak mostly remain the same.

By the end of the 19th century the mummings play was mainly performed for entertainment and as a means of raising money. Joe's father played cricket for Holton and in 1909 the Cricket Club was short of funds. Joe suggested to other boy supporters of the club that they do the mummings play in order to raise some money. They continued going round with their play at Christmas until the outbreak of the first World War. After the end of the war the Cricket Club again needed funds so the mummings play was resumed. They then started going round the neighbouring villages of Holton, including Wheatley, where the play was no longer performed. However when Joe was asked where he had first learnt the play it turned out that he had got it from a book in Worminghall in 1907 where he and other boys had done it before his family moved to Holton two years later. This explained why the play he started in Holton was different from the 19th century Holton play. All he could remember about the book was that it belonged to one of the boys' father and had contained three Mummings' Acts. One was the play they had learned, another was about Robin Hood, but the third he had forgotten.

Holton is some five miles nearer to Wheatley than Worminghall so the late 19th century Holton play was considered to be nearer to the missing Wheatley play than the Worminghall one. But there were other mummings plays from villages within three miles of Wheatley which had been recorded in 1914 by Tiddy namely Cuddesdon (p. 217) and Waterstock (p. 206). Comparison of the three texts showed that, even by this time, the traditional mummings play was beginning to break down. The similarities and differences

cannot be considered here, but some general points must be made. Although the names of the hero and the villain differed Holton and Cuddesdon still retained their classic vaunts, but Waterstock did not. All three texts showed however, that the hero was only wounded in the first fight, and when cured, was told to "rise and fight again". A second fight, in which the villain is killed is enacted at Cuddesdon, implied after more quarrelling at Waterstock, but at Holton is only tagged on at the end and an old woman replaces the villain as victim. Other research has shown that this is the situation in many other areas particularly in later St. George plays. As the plays become so they performed to raise money they become shorter to allow more places to be visited. One way is to only depict one fight scene, but despite this the victim is often told to rise and fight again. The traditional play is still sometimes remembered as St. George the champion of England is as often the victim as the Turkish Knight. This is another example of the continuance of an oral tradition even after the purpose of it has changed.

The Doctor's classic travels and list of diseases he can cure is still present in all three plays except Waterstock, which does not have the cures. He cures the wounded hero at Holton and Waterstock, but at Cuddesdon he is raised by the Headman. The part of Jack Finney the fool which figures so largely in both Oxon and Gloucester traditional plays, is in the process of being taken over by the Doctor. Jack Finney is still called in at Waterstock after the implied second fight "to do more than you, or any man can do", but at Cuddesdon and Holton he only has the 'big head and little wit lines' and plays at the end. At Holton however, where the Doctor has Jack Finney's traditional travels as well as his own, they get the response "Be you Jack Finney?" which seems to echo his original part. Jack Finney still has his classic cure for a magpie with a toothache at Waterstock, but at Cuddesdon it has been given to the Doctor, and at Holton it has been forgotten.

Although many of the lines spoken -by the characters were found in all three plays, the action in the plays differed. In all of them the hero is wounded in a sword fight, cured by a Doctor, then told to rise and fight again, except at Cuddesdon where the Headman tells him. The Doctor cures the hero with a pill at Holton, with a pill and by drawing a large tooth at Waterstock, but the Headman simply raises him up at Cuddesdon. It is worth noting that at Waterstock the Doctor can only cure the hero "if he's not quite dead". The hero rises and kills the villain in a second sword-fight at Cuddesdon, implied at Waterstock, but not at Holton although the old woman, the second patient, is knocked about. The Doctor cures the second victim with a bottle of medicine at Cuddesdon, by pulling the old woman's tooth at Holton, but at Waterstock Jack Finney is called in "...come to do more than you (presumably to the Doctor) or any man can do". When asked what he can cure he lists his drastic beheading cure for the magpie with the tooth ache. He insists on being addressed as Mr in all three plays which is another of his classic lines. He also plays the music for the concluding song or dance.

These differences in the theme of the surviving St. George plays of the Wheatley area could only be resolved by further research, and by referring to other Oxon texts of the period. Stage directions stating that St. George was only wounded in the first fight as at Cuddesdon were also in texts from Glympton and Long Hanbro'. The Doctor only being capable of curing him if not quite dead as at Waterstock were also found at Long Hanbro' and over a large area as well (Cinderford, Glos; Penn, Bucks; Leamington, Warwick; Keynsham, Somerset; Kirton, Lincs). Glympton and Long Hanbro' had the Doctor failing to cure the second victim as "he was too far gone", and this too was found in other areas (Kempsford, Glos; Leamington, Warwick). The fool then being called in to attend the villain as at Waterstock and Worminghall is also found at Headington, and bringing the dead man back to life again is found at Glympton and elsewhere (Icomb, Glos; Great Walford, Warwick; Burghclere, Hants). All those plays in which Jack Finney assists the Doctor in usually the tooth pulling cure are, in the opinion of the writer, examples of Jack Finney being relegated to merely the Doctor's assistant as his traditional part is forgotten or shortened.

Until such time as a Wheatley text is found, the St. George mummers play revived at Wheatley, as far as the lines are concerned, is a compilation half from HO I ton and the rest from Cuddesdon and Waterstock in about equal parts. The theme of the play has been based on Waterstock after research into other Oxon Plays. This seems to be the traditional theme of turn of the century plays in which St . George is wounded in a swordfight, cured with medicine by a Doctor, then kills the Turkish Knight in a second swordfight. The Doctor is called again to attend the dead victim but cannot as he is beyond his skills. The Fool is then called in and brings the dead back to l'i f e by drawing a tooth, and the play ends in song and dance. The revived play was first performed by the-Wheatley Society at Christmas in 1975. it was then appropriately handed over to the newly formed Wheatley Morris dancers who have performed it ever since.

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