

Mumming & The Wantage Mummers

By Jim Birch & Sem Seaborne

Mummers typically appear around Christmas time, performing their traditional play in the streets, pubs or private houses around the country. They may be referred to by different names in other parts of the country, such as Guisers, Johnny Jacks, Tipteerers, and Soul-Cakers to name a few. Mumming comes from the German word *mummerspiel* meaning masked play or masquerade, and indeed an important part of mummers plays is the anonymity of the performers.

At one time hundreds of villages across England had a mummers play to perform – in fact all counties except Suffolk and Norfolk. The plays were brief, informal and typically performed by the common people, i.e. farm workers, craftsmen and the labouring classes. Hence the plays were rarely written down and there are numerous examples of miscommunicated character names, routines and script.

The origins of what today may seem an anachronistic activity belong in the distant past. Strolling players in the pre-Christian period acted out myths, legends and tales of the seasons (1). As Christianity evolved, plays developed to demonstrate the value of good triumphing over evil, leading to performances of mystery or miracle plays and biblical stories. This was an effective way of transmitting the Christian message to the illiterate masses and from the 9th century was a convincing teaching technique. So, medieval references to Mummers Plays refer to a masked play which would be a mystery or miracle play with a religious basis. Roving groups of players were certainly the stuff of ancient history; however, what today is regarded as the “common” mummers play certainly doesn’t date from that era.

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. The existence of mummers plays in over forty Oxfordshire villages has been recorded (2).

Although the characters and plots vary across the country there are more similarities than differences in the many plays collected and it is certain that there was a common origin. Because participants were largely illiterate the verbal transmission of the plays from generation to generation led to the many differences in words and characters recorded, e.g. in Headington the Turkish Knight is known as The Turkey Snite; Jack Vinney is variously known as John Finney, Jack Spinney, etc.

The essential characters of the Hero-Combat play are as follows:

A master of ceremonies who introduces the play and characters. This figure is variously known as Molly, Father Christmas, Anno Domini, the Sweeper, etc.

A hero, typically King George, Saint George, King Alfred, the Africky King, King of Prussia, King William, Robin Hood, etc.

An opponent/enemy who may be Bold Slasher, Beau Slasher (Napoleonic), Bold Slash, Bull Slash, The Turkish Knight, Turkey Snite, The Turk, Turkey Snipe, French Officer, The Duke of Blunderland or Cumberland, Bold Slaughterer, etc.

A Doctor sometimes named as either Dr Good, Dr Brown, Dr Squires, or Dr Spinney,

A mystic or faith healer character diversely known as John Vinney, Jack Vinney, Jack Finney, Mr. Finney, Jack Spinney, Jack Winney, or Mother Vinney.

A beggar/pedlar figure known as Happy Jack, Jolly Jack, Fat Jack, Pedlar Chap, Saucy Jack, or Jumping Jack

A soothsayer character called Beelzebub, Old Father Beelzebub, Begbug, or Bighead

There is considerable variation, shuffling and intermixing of this cast list around the many villages. The standard common format commences with Molly or the Sweeper clearing the way and announcing the hero who proclaims his military prowess. He is then challenged by the Turkish Knight/French Officer character and they fight. The hero is wounded/killed and restored by the Doctor and either the play ends or they fight again when the French Officer is killed. In this case Jack Vinney miraculously brings him back to life (possibly by removing a tooth) and they may dance. Another character e.g. Jolly Jack will seek money for his collection and Beelzebub may play a tune on a fiddle or recite verse. There are too many variations to be specific about any of this, but Peter Millington has carried out comprehensive research on text/format variations to demonstrate the probability of an original single source. (3)

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. In fact the earliest recorded performance of a play of the modern type is 1738 in Exeter. Reviving a fallen warrior (King, Saint or Knight) is usually the crux and the most humorous part of most mummers plays, and a search of the internet will find this scene described as a "remnant of a pagan ritual", however the real origins lay in *comedia del'arte*, the improvised comic theatre of the 17th Century. (Steve Rowley)

Mummers have always sought to conceal their identity either by blacking their faces or covering themselves with strips of paper or rags and tall hats. It is general accepted that mummers were male and indeed all recorded recollections of mumming plays involve male participants; much like morris dancing it was regarded as "men's business", with the potential for aiding their weekly income. Money collected from performances over 2 days could be equivalent to two weeks labouring (4). In some cases the appearance of the play was maintained by certain family ownership.

It is possible that a play so widespread throughout the country had its origin by being published in commonly available chapbooks. Chapbooks were introduced in the 16th Century and became an affordable source of popular folk literature, containing poetry, nursery rhymes, plays and political and religious texts. They had a peak of popularity in the 1700's from when our current mummers play is believed to originate. Similar publications existed in France and Germany (e.g. Volksbuch).

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 (5, 6) 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 the version performed in Exeter in 1738, but the historical “silence” about plays of this type prior to 1738, 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 prior to that date.

The traditional mummers play differed from modern 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. (4)

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 (see later). It will never be exactly the same this year as last year.

The Wantage Mummers Play

The Wantage Mummers play is a typical mid-Berkshire/Oxfordshire mummer’s play of the hero-combat type. Similar plays have traditionally been performed and collected in many of the villages around Wantage, viz: East Hendred, Lockinge, Ardington, Stanford-in-the-Vale, Uffington, Aston Tirrold, Chaddleworth and Steventon. The last mummer’s traditional play on historical record in the area was performed in 1881 for Lady Wantage at Lockinge House, but local residents have recalled many other occasions *since then*.

In the mid 1970’s a few men decided to put on a mummers play as part of Wantage’s summer celebration of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee (7). They found a text (8) which was linked to the nearby village of Steventon and customised it for the occasion by changing the characters to, among others, The Queen, Prince Charles and Prince Philip. The group were then sufficiently enthused to perform the play at Christmas time and for this stripped the text back to its original form, save for the retention of King Alfred (born in Wantage in 849) as the hero and an enhancement of the Beelzebub role which is described later. This script has been used ever since except for one or two years early on when, to provide variety, the Chaddleworth play (9) was performed.

The play is essentially similar to that described by Lowsley (8) as a mid-Berkshire mummers play. 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 (10); 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. 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.

Since inception Wantage Mummers have only performed on Boxing Day (St. Stephen’s Day) and always in the open-air with, for the first half of its existence, additional performances inside pubs, some of them in the evening. However, for the past 20 years performances have only been open-air at three venues. There has always been a performance in Wantage Market Place and, for decades, one in Faringdon Market Square. The third performance has been at various pubs but for over a dozen years has been at The Hatchet, Childrey. The performance times have become standardised; 10.00 Faringdon, 12.00 Wantage, 13.00 Childrey.

In the early years the performances were similar with costumes largely based on what players might have worn in the previous century, although the portrayal of Jack Vinny as a punk rocker in the first performance was a portent of things to come. Unscripted business has always been important but it was later on, and perhaps reflecting a turnover in some of the people involved, that the current philosophy fully evolved. This is to make the play distinctly different each year while keeping the text sacrosanct. Hence no re-writing and the traditional story line maintained and with ad-libs severely reined in, although this does not extend to the off-stage characters who provide a Greek chorus to steer and stimulate audience reaction.

Within these constraints Wantage Mummers feel free to make changes in costume and theatrical business, i.e. regarding costume, King Alfred, wearing an approximation of Saxon warrior dress, and the French Officer, in Napoleonic frock coat, stay essentially the same. (It must indicate something about mumming that a thousand year gap between hero and villain is considered unremarkable). Other parts may change costume with different players - reflecting their view of the character, or perhaps just the contents of their wardrobe. Over the years Molly has shown interesting variations – ranging from the quintessential Dame, through “ze Madonna wiz ze big boobies”, to a disturbing apparition of beauty. The noble Doctor has upon times reflected personal attributes (academic dress in the year the player was awarded his PhD), popular culture (more than once Dr Who and his sonic screwdriver have appeared) and contemporary events, e.g. in Oct 2006 Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium, so in Dec 2006 the doctor appeared in a chemical suit and examined the deceased King Alfred with a Geiger counter. The other main character, Jack Vinny, has usually had costumes (11) based on his “*come from Spaane*” origins but recently, an example of the player influencing the character, has turned into a green man (with Spanish overtones). Of the minor characters, Happy Jack has always been a tramp and Beelzebub’s persona will be described later in this paper.

Some of the visual gags which Wantage Mummers introduce centre round unsuccessful hi-tech attempts to cure the slain King Alfred before the Doctor eventually produces the traditional “*pills to cure all ills*”. As befits his lowly foreign status the deceased French Officer just gets a soaking from Jack Vinny’s collection of pigeon’s, donkey’s and gracehooper’s

bodily fluids plus a dentally induced evisceration. Sound also plays a part in performance, Wantage Mummers have always incorporated music, not only for the coming-on song and for the couple of morris dances performed after the play while the collection is made, but also to highlight the action.

For decades the fights have had music and have become increasingly stylised. Traditional swordplay is still at the heart of the fights but each year the perfidious French Officer cheats to the laughter and boos of the audience. This usually involves him pulling a gun and if King Alfred responds in-kind manipulating the situation to his advantage, only once has King Alfred's weapon technology triumphed. Most years a tatty cap-gun makes an appearance, which gets a laugh, but a further surprise is introduced when, on the French Officer pulling the trigger of this feeble weapon, the concealed special effects man discharges an 8mm blank cartridge whose unexpected very loud noise makes the audience jump.

Recently Wantage Mummers decided that even this was getting a bit tame so the cap-gun was rigged to explode into flame. Occasionally the method of killing King Alfred has been turned into contemporary comment. Football fans will recall that in the 2006 World Cup a French player (Zinedine Zidane) was sent off for a memorable foul – in that same year the French Officer killed King Alfred by a head butt to the chest.

Wantage Mummers development of the play has been influenced, perhaps unconsciously initially, by the places in which it has been performed. The open-air performances have always been at sizeable venues, e.g. to accommodate the current Wantage crowd the audience have to stand as far back as possible so the performance area is about 7m x 14m. This means that the mummers now have to arrange props and business on a scale which is visible over those distances.

Although the intention of Wantage Mummers is to perform the original play with only sight-gags added there has been some breaking of the rules. A decade ago the mummers found that, because of all the business going on, it needed a backstage man to look after the props, do the sound effects and help collect the money. It seemed only proper that he should have a costume – so Old Father Christmas arrived in 2004. As a non-speaking and non-acting addition this seems to not challenge the mummers' desire to retain a traditional performance.

Considered rather more serious is the twenty year old decision, taken in a moment of weakness, that Wantage Mummers would get a laugh from the audience by changing "*I be the nawble Doctor Good/An with my skill I'll stop his blood*" to "*I be the nawble Doctor Squires/I can cure any man with me pliers*", Dick Squires being, at the time, a well-known popular local doctor, as was his father before him. The change has been kept in but now it is not funny because three quarters of the current audiences have no idea who Dick Squires is, but this is a prime example of how folk history evolves. The mummers are now debating whether they should revert to the "proper words" or whether Wantage Mummers through the passage of time, have legitimately developed the tradition. That there is such soul searching about a small change to a script which is already not wholly original might be thought perverse, or can be taken as an example of how quickly performance practice hardens into a tradition.

There has also been a significant enhancement of the Beelzebub character. The play ends in the traditional way with the entrance of Old Father Beelzebub carrying club and dripping pan and often in devilish guise (12), although his costume, may change from year to year if there

has been some incident to which a visual reference can be made, e.g. in 2002 he was dressed as that well known terrorist, Sammy Bin Limer (Fig 9) while, by way of political balance, in 2004 he appeared as a big-eared George W Bush. In the anniversary year of the start of the Great War, Beelzebub appeared as a WW1 Tommy.

After speaking the traditional verse which ends the play but with “...brings a rhyme...” substituted for “...brings a fiddle...” Beelzebub adds a curtain speech. This has been a feature of the Wantage Mummings performance since the start of the revival, in which time (except for two occasions caused by absence) only two people have played Beelzebub. The speech consists of satirical verses on the events of the year. The texts of the past twenty five years’ monologues have been archived and form an interesting social record.

In the mummings view, this speech, being spoken after the action has finished, does not interfere with the traditional form of the play but does add an interesting difference each year. The introduction of fresh material every year certainly has an effect on the performers and Wantage Mummings believe also affects the audience. The performers have the mental challenge of thinking up new business every year and the first rehearsal, where this is done, tends to be one of great hilarity as various highly amusing scenarios are trialled, most of which have to be rejected as being too tasteless for public performance.

With every year having some differences from previous years the performers do not get stale and their excitement at seeing how the new tricks will go down communicates to the audience. This is enhanced by Wantage Mummings only performing on one day in the year, Boxing Day is a special day for the mummings and this comes through in performance.

For the audience, the introduction of bits of business and topicality means that the play appeals on several levels. It is traditional and there are probably people who attend on that basis, but it also contains pantomime for the kids (and adult kids) and the topical allusions are appreciated by the discerning. The latter segment of the audience is likely to be particularly interested in Beelzebub’s doggerel and it is possible that some people come mainly for this verse as a few subsequently buy a copy of the text off the Wantage Mummings website.

People who have watched previously, liked the show, and are considering coming again are encouraged by knowing that they are going to see something a bit different, but not so different that they will not like it. This leads to repeat business and with Wantage Mummings having been going nearly forty years there are now three generation families attending. This build-up of a core audience coupled with performing “same place-same time” means that Wantage Mummings have become imbedded in the local scene. Going for a morning stroll to have a drink and watch the mummings is what people around Wantage do on Boxing Day.

Although most of the support is local the mummings have met audience members who have travelled more than 50 miles, including Cardiff, London and Birmingham. The mummings have not counted the audience over the years but estimates that, on a fair weather Boxing Day, up to four hundred people now watch, which is a little over one percent of the catchment population.

Whereas traditionally mummings may have performed for their own reward, one of the other changed aspects of the modern play is how the collected offerings are used. Over the past 18 years Wantage Mummings have donated over £17,000 for the organisations listed below.

It is felt important that the regular audience should be informed of beneficiaries and this has been achieved by the introduction of a placard paraded before the performance.

Current audience numbers at the three venues are roughly eighty, two hundred and one hundred and fifty. With the exception of the first venue this is about full capacity as effective audience space is limited by sight line and, particularly, audibility issues.

Experience has shown that Wantage Mummers have developed a way of upholding a traditional mumming play whilst simultaneously providing something new for the audience to appreciate each year and providing the performers with annually renewed interest. The pleasure the mummers get from performing and the capacity audiences attracted indicate that this approach works, at least in the Wantage locality and for this set of mummers.

References:

1. Brian Day, *A Chronicle of Folk Customs*, Hamlyn, Octopus Publishing Group, 1998.
ISBN 0 600 59595 1
2. Christine Bloxham, *May Day to Mummers*, The Wychwood Press, 2002
ISBN 1 902279 11 5
3. Peter Millington, *Textual Analysis of English Quack Doctor Plays: Some New Discoveries*. The International Traditional Drama Conference 2002; Traditional Drama Research Group, Sheffield, UK, pp 97-132
ISBN 0 9508152 3 3
4. Steve Roud, *The English Year*, Penguin Books 2006;
ISBN 13 978 0 140 51554 1
5. Ronald Hutton, *The Rise & Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700*, Oxford University Press, 1994, ISBN 0 19 820363 2
6. Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, Oxford University Press, 1996
7. Private Communication; Tom Bower, Paul Smith, Max Williams
8. The source is forgotten but consideration of what was available in pre-internet days and a comparison of the texts indicates that it was almost certainly taken from "A Glossary of Berkshire Words and Phrases" (English Dialect Society, London, Trubner, 1888) by Barzillai Lowsley . His notes indicate that what he terms "the mid-Berks play" was observed in (at least) Steventon, Brightwalton and Compton (villages 5-10 miles from Wantage) and it can be inferred that the printed words are those used in Steventon. For the founder mummers the linkage to Steventon was enhanced by the mother of one of them, Max Williams, recognising the words from performances of the Steventon mummers she had seen as a child in the neighbouring village of Marcham. Mid-Berks text at:
http://www.archive.org/stream/aglossaryberksh00lowsgoog/aglossaryberksh00lowsgoog_djvu.txt
9. Text at <http://www.vwml.org/record/TFO/2/1/29/5>. Chaddleworth is a village about 10 miles from Wantage.

10. Compared to the Lowsley text a few lines of extraneous tangle talk have also been cut from Molly's introductory speech.
11. Lowsley records Jack Vinny being dressed as a jester.
12. Lowsley records Beelzebub being dressed as Father Christmas.

Organisations benefited by the Wantage Mummings

Year	£Sum	Organisation
2014	1240	Combat Stress
	560	South & Vale Carers
2013	1500	Caudwell Children
2012	1700	The Children's Society
2011	1400	MIND
2010	1000	Berks Bucks Oxon Air Ambulance
	500	Help4Heroes
2009	1200	Cancer Research UK
2008	1100	NSPCC
2007	950	Melanoma Foundation
2006	800	Starlight
2005	750	Cancer Research UK
2004	480	Tsunami Appeal (DEC)
	650	Child Brain Injury Trust
2003	500	CRUSE Bereavement Care
2002	400	Barnados
2001	390	Save the Children
2000	400	Barnados
1999	1000	Save the Children
1998	250	Abingdon Hospital
1997	300	Indian Salt Mine Workers
1980s		Various : Helen House Hospice

Further information: www.wantagemummings.org.uk

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