



# ***British Folk Customs***

# **May**

***For Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2***

***By Doc Rowe and Carolyn Robson***



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## ***The Full English***

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive ([www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades.

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

**Supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Folk Music Fund and The Folklore Society.**



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Previously published by EFDSS as an education resource pack for the Summer term on British traditions, 1991, ISBN 0 85418 160 1

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## May Day

Long before official May Bank holidays the year was marked out with special days. Whether they were rent days, hiring fairs, or customary events, they all signified special dates and marked the time of the passing year. These were days to celebrate, days when people would do things, eat things, or make things that they wouldn't normally do.

In Britain, as in most parts of Western Europe, May Day marked the end of the harsh Winter months, and optimistically looked forward to the bright and productive Summer. For our ancestors, largely in rural areas, it was the major annual festival, especially on the first of May with music, dancing, and games.

The richness and variety of British traditions may sometimes be surprising and it is often too easy to ignore the effect of exposure to European and foreign influence brought to these islands over centuries. We know, for instance, the Romans had Floralia celebrations and it is thought that May Day could have its origin in the ancient festival dedicated to Flora, the goddess of fruit and flowers.

In Celtic Britain, the festival of Beltane (on the eve of May Day) celebrated the coming Spring and its associations of new growth and fertility. A key point of the agricultural year, Beltane meant "Bright fire" and bonfires were lit at night and animals sacrificed to the sun god. In later centuries people would celebrate by dancing round the fires and would walk through the dying embers for luck – not forgetting to drive their cattle through as well. The lighting of such fires survived in Scotland until about 150 years ago and in Wales up to the beginning of this century.

Although these traditions were well established, the early Christian Church did much to tame them. It saw them as unruly and pagan. The first of May was appointed the feast of St. Philip and St. James, but in spite of this attempt to displace the older feasts May Day continued to flourish and proved to be the most resilient of festivals. It was Puritanism which had the greatest effect on the traditional calendar. All customs were seen by them as "sinful," particularly those of Maying.

Generally, our view of customs owes more to Victorian sentimentality. Reformers, parsons, and school teachers reorganised and restructured May Day to create a vanished and cosy "Merrie England". May Day was stripped of its roughness and replaced by a more sanitised, charming event – 'a pretty affair for children'.

For example, the school girl May Queen deposed earlier May Kings, and Maypoles were refurbished (or recreated) and children were to dance around them with ribbons. These are now our principal images of a typical May Day. In fact, dancing with plaited ribbons dates from only the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its widespread familiarity is due to its being introduced into the school curriculum by John Ruskin in 1892.



Pageants, generally set in Medieval costume, with a multitude of Robin Hoods and King Arthurs, were staged all over the country. Ripon, Lichfield, Knutsford, and Sherbourne were major ones and these further reinforced the illusion of “Ye Olde Englande.”

The month of May does have a great number of traditions and customs. For the convenience of the general public, many May Day activities have now been moved to the new May Day holiday (or the Saturday nearest). Ascensiontide and Whit Monday events have also transferred to the late Spring Bank Holiday.

## **May Morning**

*We've been rambling all this night  
And some part of the day,  
And now returning back again  
We have brought you a branch of May  
(Traditional May song)*

In many country districts May morning, or the eve of May Day, saw young people spending the night gathering flowering branches, bushes, and greenery to decorate their houses. At one time it was very popular to go out before sunrise on May Day to collect dew from bushes. The belief was that to wash the face with the dew would make the complexion more beautiful or remove blemishes and freckles. It was also supposed to be a cure for consumption and is still thought to be effective in easing rheumatism. This practise is not only mentioned in Samuel Pepys' Diary in 1667, but we know that Henry VIII and his wife, Catherine of Aragon, went gathering May dew in 1515.

### **Mischief Night**

May Eve was known as Mischief Night in some regions (although in the North of England this fell on 4 November) and all sorts of practical jokes were played and a general nuisance made. For instance, horns would be blown in the middle of the night and tin can bands would awaken sleepers.

### **May Gosling**

In the North of England, particularly Lancashire, the first of May was a kind of late 'April-Fooling' when all sorts of pranks would take place and “May Gosling” was the shout if you managed to trick someone. More fool you, though, if you went past the midday Boundary! The response would be “May Goslings past and gone. You're the fool for making me one!”



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## **May Birching**

In the North West and Midlands, May Birching was a key feature. Between sunset and dawn, the May birchers would be on their rounds secretly fixing greenery to people's houses. Each branch or spray was carefully chosen by the Birchers because its name rhymed with whatever they considered to be the most outstanding character or quality of the householder they visited. Pear rhymes with fair, lime with prime, but briar, holly, and plum, stood respectively for liar, folly, and glum. Hawthorn in flower was a compliment, but any other thorn was seen as 'scorn.' Nettles, thistles, and weeds had a more direct association. Although this practise could generate some ill feeling, it was generally seen as fun. It had largely disappeared by the end of the last century.

## **May Plants**

Many plants were considered unlucky, although this varies from place to place. Black sycamore and ash were disliked in Cornwall; rowan and birch were frowned upon in Scotland and Wales. Generally it was felt inadvisable to bring into the house any whitethorn, blackthorn, elder, broom, alder, furze, or snowdrops. But in Ireland, after drawing the first water on May morning, flowers would be left at wells. Children made bouquets of fresh flowers to be laid on door steps, window sills, or hung up in the house.

## **May Day in Oxford**

An early start is made on May morning in Oxford. Magdalen Tower at six o'clock sees the choristers of Magdalen College Chapel at the top of the tower singing Te deum Patrem Colimus, a custom begun in 1509. Spectators turn out to hear the singing and to see the many Morris Dancers in the city streets. A similar ceremony, 'Singing on the Bargate,' takes place in Southampton at sunrise by the Choristers of King Edward VI School.

## **Morris dancing**

Meanwhile, in a number of places throughout England, other Morris men are dancing in the May at dawn. In Hastings we see the first appearance of a Jack-in-the-Green, a man completely covered in leaves. Similar characters appear at Rochester and Whitstable on the May Bank Holiday also accompanied by Morris sides.

## **The May Queen**

The May Queen, representing the goddess Flora and often accompanied by a May King, is central to most modern revivals. She, along with a galaxy of other associated personages, appears at Knutsford in Cheshire at their Royal May Day on the first Saturday in May. Started in 1864, it became a Royal May Day after a visit by the Prince of Wales in 1887 and it is a mixture of practically everything that we think of associated with May Day. As well as large tableaux and a procession, there is a Jack-in-the-Green, Robin Hood and his Merry Men, lots of Morris teams and King Canute... to name but a few! A tradition of tracing

mottoes and patterns in dyed sand on the streets of Knutsford in the early morning is reputed to have come from King Canute. After he had crossed a nearby ford in 1017 he is said to have sprinkled sand from his shoes in the path of a passing bridal party and he wished them as many children as there were grains of sand, which became symbolised as good luck. From this legend came the name of the town, Knut's ford.

## **Garlands of Green**

Greenery was not only collected for house decoration, it was also gathered by primary school children to make garlands. In many English villages children would parade with garlands of flowers, sometimes fastened to sticks or in the shape of a cross, or fixed to hoops. This was done in the hope of collecting money. Sometimes this was known as May dolling because often placed in the centre of the garland was a small doll. Various descriptions of the doll include "Virgin Mary," "Flora," and the "May Queen," the doll might be in the garland itself or sometimes in a decorated box covered with greenery. Sometimes there was a garland song begging for the pennies and householders were asked if they wished to see the May Doll of Queen. If they did, then the doll would be uncovered and the bearer would expect a coin or a gift.

The actual garlands still vary a great deal in shape and size: from simple posies tied to long wands or flower chains wreathed around staves to very elaborate double or treble hoops covered with greenery and flowers. There are also reports of very tall pyramids of greenery. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Lincolnshire, willow wands were decorated completely in cowslips and known as 'May Gads.' In Northumberland children would carry cushions of greenery with flowers peeping through.

There are still Garland ceremonies today. At Charlton-on-Otmoor, Oxfordshire, a large wooden cross covered with yew and box leaves stands above the rood screen in the church. On May Day this is taken down and redecorated with fresh greenery and flowers and the children carry small decorated crosses around the village and bring them to a special service. Also in Oxfordshire at Bampton, the Spring Bank Holiday marks the beginning of the traditional Morris Dance season. In the morning children bring out a selection of garlands which are judged in a competition at lunch time. May Dolls are sometimes used in these.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May children carry two elaborate garlands of flowers around the quiet village of Abbotsbury in Dorset requesting gifts of money from householders. One garland is decorated with wild flowers and the other from cultivated garden blooms. In former times Garland day marked the beginning of the fishing season and each boat had its own garland



which, having been blessed, was put on the bow of the boat and taken out to sea. Each garland was cast into the waves as a safeguard for the lives of the fishermen. The garlands are now laid at the foot of the war memorial at the end of the day.

In 1954 an overzealous policeman, who had only just moved to the district, stopped the children and confiscated their money as 'they were breaking the law by begging.' The following day saw an even bigger procession of older villagers who complained to the Chief constable about the attempt to destroy their age old tradition. You can still see the Garlands being carried on 13 May each year.

## **Wild Horses**

The horse, apart from being the main working animal on the land, has always been a potent image and a symbol of strength and virility. It is also the central focus in a number of May Day festivities.

Every May Day, in Padstow, Cornwall, thousands of people come to see the two famous Hobby Horses, the 'Old 'Oss' and 'Blue Ribbon 'Oss.' Each is a man completely hidden under an enormous frame draped with heavy, black tarpaulin which has many layers of black paint on it. The frame rests on his shoulders and his head is covered with a heavy mask – representing the rider. A symbolic horse head and real horse-hair tail is fixed to the rim of the frame. To the accompaniment of accordions, drums, and singing, this 'Oss is teased and danced through the streets of Padstow all day long. Imagine dancing in the 'Oss on a very hot May Day. Not only are there two adult 'Osses, but the children have their own that appear during the first part of the day. And the drumming goes on...

Further along the coast at Minehead, in Somerset, the Sailor's Hobby Horse appears. This horse, rather like an upturned boat in shape, is covered in hessian and heavily decorated with ribbons and rags and makes an appearance at dawn on the first of May at Dunster Castle. Accompanied by musicians, it then spends the next three evenings performing around Minehead and collecting money from those it meets. This hobby horse tradition has fewer visitors than Padstow, but the horse is no less dramatic: its stepping, cavorting, and shrieking is an exhilarating sight and if you happen to get in the way of its long rope tail as it swings around, you certainly won't forget the experience!

Horse representations appear throughout the year in a variety of customs and will also be seen regularly in a more comic form as part of the Morris dance.



## Maypoles

When much of the countryside was covered with forest, the tree was considered the prime product of all nature and often a single, tall, straight tree would be used as the Maypole. Usually selecting pine, larch, elm, birch, or ash, a tree would be cut down on May morning, stripped of its branches, except perhaps for a few at the top, and would be carried to the centre of the community with great ceremony. Adorned with flowers and garlands, it would serve as a centre piece to the May Day celebrations. The Puritans hated them. Ironically, the only vivid descriptions we have of many of our earlier traditions are hysterical outbursts against them.

*But their chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their maypole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus: They have twenty or forty yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweet nosegay of flowers tied to the tip of its horns, and these oxen draw home this maypole (this stinking idol rather) which is covered all over with flowers and herbs, bound about with strings, from the top to the bottom, and sometimes painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it with great devotion. And thus being reared up, with handkerchiefs and flags streaming at the top, they strew the ground about, bind green boughs about it, set up summer halls, bowers and arbours hard by it. And then they fall to banquet and feast, to leap and dance about it, as the heathen people did, at the dedication of their idols, whereof this is a perfect pattern, rather than the thing itself.*

*Philip Stubbes: Anatomie of Abuses 1583*

In some places Maypoles are still permanent fixtures and, although often decorated with brightly coloured rings or spirals and stripes painted on them, they are adorned only when May Day comes round. The Welford on Avon pole has bright red stripes like a barber's pole and is seventy feet tall. At Barwick-in-Elmet, near Leeds, the height is 88 feet 6 inches and this pole was replaced completely in 1960. In fact, it is taken down every third year on Easter Monday, repainted with its red, white, and blue spiral and its four garlands renewed, to be set up again on Whit Tuesday. The next festival is scheduled to take place in May 2017. The Maypole Raising is a great event with ropes, pulleys, and ladders. Before the crowning of their May Queen, which follows the Maypole Raising, it is customary for a climber to shin up the newly decorated pole and give the fox-shaped weather vane a spin.

When adjoining villages had their own maypoles, a sense of rivalry was sometimes created. Stealing maypoles almost became a tradition in itself and there are many examples, especially in Cornwall. Usually done under cover of night, Gawthorpe in Yorkshire lost theirs in 1850; Barwick-in-Elmet had theirs stolen in 1829.

Evidence that Maypoles were more common years ago is to be found in the many references to them on pub signs and street names. Another maypole stood on the site of St. Mary-le-Strand and was 134 feet high. Decorated with greenery, streamers and

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lanterns, it was set up in 1661 on the return of Charles II and the first revived May Day. It stood for over fifty years and was finally removed by Sir Isaac Newton who used the wood to support a reflecting telescope!

## **The Puritans**

May Day was most threatened between 1649 and 1660 when England became a Republic following the defeat of the Royalist 'Cavaliers' by the Republican 'Roundheads.' Under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, the Puritans ruled the country. King Charles I was publicly beheaded and the Monarchy was abolished along with the House of Lords and the Anglican Church.

The Puritans were pious and especially disapproving of the unruly dancing and heathen festivities surrounding May Day. They reacted intensely against the idolatrous Maypole, the symbol of pagan worship. In 1644 they prohibited all celebrations by an Act of Parliament, which not only applied to May Day, but included Christmas and other festivities. This ban was to last until the restoration of Charles II and the return of the monarchy on 29 May, 1660.

It is evident that a large number of customs disappeared in this period, but some, simply having gone underground, were rekindled on the return of the King and many were revived. Some revivals were probably less an indication of resilience or survival but more an expression of loyalty to the King. It is likely that some May Day traditions moved to 29 May for this reason.

## **Oak Apple Day**

Do you wear oak-apple leaves on 29 May? It was common in some counties of England to celebrate this day rather than the first of May. At one time, if you didn't wear oak-apple leaves, you would risk being stung with nettles or kicked and pinched for being a 'Roundhead.' This is still celebrated by children in Sussex as "Pinch-Bum-Day."

King Charles II, in his escape from the Roundheads after the battle of Worcester in 1651, reputedly hid in the Boscobel oak and, after the Restoration, a variety of ceremonies associated with the oak were introduced on the 29 May. Rather than celebrating the date of this escape, the date is that of the Restoration of the King to the throne... and his thirtieth birthday!



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Pensioners at Chelsea Royal Hospital, London, (founded by Charles in 1682) celebrate their Founders Day – the 29 May. His statue is decorated and the Chelsea pensioners parade with sprigs of oak leaves on their bright scarlet jackets. They celebrate with beer and plum pudding.

The villagers of Wishford Magna in Wiltshire have an ancient, common right to collect stray wood or broken branches from the forest of Grovely. To continue this privilege they must formally make an annual declaration. Grovely Rights is one of the customs that moved to the 29 May after the Reformation.

The day starts with a boisterous tin can band in the early hours and villagers go out in the night to cut green boughs. One large bower is hoisted to the top of the church tower to bring luck to any weddings in the next year. Most important is the visit to Salisbury Cathedral, six miles away. The company, headed by women bearing faggots or sprigs of oak which are given to the Dean, go to the high altar and proclaim, 'Grovely!, Grovely!, Grovely! and all Grovely!' This reaffirms their rights to gather the wood for another year. A dance is performed inside the Cathedral as well as outside on the green by women holding sprigs of oak on their heads. The same women, carrying bundles of dry firewood on their heads, lead the impressive procession through Wishford village to celebrate another year under the wonderful Oak Apple Club's banner.

At Castleton in Derbyshire, Oak Apple Day is Garland Day. The garland is made by a group of men who spend hours attaching flowers to a hive-shaped frame. A large posy of flowers, known as the "Queen," is made by women. The Garland King and his Lady appear in the early evening dressed in period Stuart costume. On white horses, they parade around the village. After their first ride, the King has the hollow, flower-covered 'Garland' placed over him. Over 3 feet high, weighing about sixty pounds, this garland covers him down to his waist. It is then topped with the "Queen" and the Garland King has to 'wear' this in procession through the village.

Accompanied by a brass band, young dancers and an escort of cubs and brownies, the procession stops at the village pubs for refreshment and the young children dance the 'Garland Dance.' They later do a display of ribboned dances around the maypole in the square.

Lastly, the King and his consort visit the churchyard. The "Queen" is removed and the main garland hoisted off the King's shoulders and pulled to the top of the church tower where it is fixed to one of the pinnacles. The "Queen" posy is placed on the War Memorial and the Last Post is sounded. Dancing then takes place in the village.

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## **Time Out**

An excuse to move May celebrations to a later date – such as 29 May – was probably a welcome one for some people in the North of England, since a great deal of these traditions rely heavily on flowering plants and greenery, a slightly later germination in the North of England must have made the gathering of sufficient blooms in early May difficult enough. But worse was yet to come...

Britain and Europe used to observe the Julian Calendar, introduced by Julius Caesar, based on an average year of 365  $\frac{1}{4}$  days. As it turned out, this calculation was about 11 minutes too long! The mistake was not noticeable at first, but after one thousand years the seasons had shifted by nearly eight days. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, astronomers realised that eleven days had accumulated and, in 1582, Pope Gregory XIII changed the calendar omitting the extra days.

Britain did not observe the Gregorian Calendar but, in 1751, an Act of Parliament (Chesterfield's Act of March, 1750) was passed declaring that the day following 2 September, 1752, would become the 14 September. Many people believed they were being cheated out of eleven days of their lives and riots broke out with people crying "Give us back our eleven days!"

## **Dressing Up... Well**

If you live in Derbyshire your greenery and flowers may well be carefully cultivated for use in an annual Well Dressing – another custom whose antiquity is believed to go back to pre-Christian times.

Water, regarded as the necessity of life, was highly respected and regular ceremonies and offerings at springs and wells were intended to appease the water deities thought to inhabit them. Despite opposition from the Church and the rededicating of many to more 'respectable' Christian saints, these 'holy wells' were still revered and visited for the curative properties of the waters. The ceremonies became a thanksgiving for pure water. But waters were thought more potent if drunk on particular days and May Day and Ascension Day were regarded as particularly beneficial.

The wells are 'dressed' with large framed panels decorated with elaborate mosaic-like pictures made of flowers and leaves. Large, shallow wooden frames are filled with smooth moist clay onto which are pressed leaves, flower petals, berries, mosses, pine-cones, and other natural materials to make up the colourful image. The subjects, which differ every year, are usually Biblical scenes, although more recently modern themes co-exist.



Paddington Bear appeared in the Year of the Child and Morris Men in Heritage Year. Whales, dolphins and global warming have been used as themes in our more ecologically aware times.

Initially, the designs are drawn onto large sheets of paper and then, using a needle, the lines are pricked through to the clay surface. These outlines are usually then emphasised using berries and seeds, the main areas filled in last of all with the colourful petals – usually the day before the dressing ceremony. The completed dressings, which are often 10-12 feet high, will remain bright for about a week, though this will depend on the weather. A light spraying with water helps to keep the clay moist and the vegetation fresh.

Lichen and oatmeal are regularly used and even grains of rice and sago. The rule seems to be only organic matter. Spaghetti, and even human hair, has been included in more recent dressings and this has led to some controversy. The artistic rivalry between villages is not inconsiderable. The first dressings of the season occur at Tissington in Derbyshire on Ascension Day with Etwell and Wirksworth later in the month. These dressings continue throughout the summer months in Derbyshire, North Nottinghamshire, with one or two in Staffordshire and Gloucestershire.

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of wells dressed over the past 15 years. There were over 150 last year and a detailed programme can be obtained from the Peak Tourist Office in Bakewell.

## ***Silver and Green***

*Upon the First of May,  
With garlands fresh and gay  
They nimbly their feet do ply  
In honour of th' milking paille  
(The Milkmaids Life c 1630)*

A garland of a very different kind was paraded by the milkmaids of London and the Home Counties. Their 'Garland' was an arrangement of trays, plates, and other silverware sometimes carried for them by a porter. Frequently escorted by musicians, the milkmaids danced through the streets and would call at the houses of their regular customers to collect tips.

May Day was also observed by Chimney Sweeps as their holiday and they would parade through the streets. It became quite usual to see the Milkmaids and the sweeps in procession with each other. A wonderful painting of the Milkmaids' Garland in the Victoria and Albert Museum clearly shows milkmaids dancing accompanied by two chimney

sweeps and a peg-leg fiddler. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17306/the-milkmaids-garland-or-humours-oil-painting-hayman-francis-ra/>

Samuel Pepys notes having seen the milkmaid's Garland in May of 1667 and there are numerous other accounts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Milkmaids were accompanied by Chimney Sweeps, musicians, imps, clowns, a Lord and Lady and a Jack-in-the-Green.

*Look the garland dances!  
When was such a wonderscene?  
O! I find as it advances  
There's a Jack within the green*

Jack-in-the-Green was a curious addition and was a man entirely encased in a pyramidal framework covered with green leaves.

Later, it was he who carried the garland of silver flagons and dishes on his frame. Regular reports are found of the participants ending their day with 'drunken behaviour and vulgarity' and there are frequent comments of general public disapproval as well as direct court action. The parade gradually became more subdued, probably with the decline of the young chimney sweeps resulting from the 1840 Act of Parliament forbidding the use of 'climbing boys' who risked life and limb cleaning chimneys. Reports of the Jack-in-the-Green character continue up to the First World War and there have been a number of revivals in the past twenty years – often by Morris sides.

## **Beating about the Bush**

Jack-in-the-Green is generally referred to these days as a 'Green Man' and there are a number of revived May customs featuring this character. The Green Man was, however, a term first used in 1939 to describe the foliated head that we find in many churches on bosses and carvings – a man's head intertwined with twigs or leaves.

To confuse matters even more, a Jack o' the Green character is mentioned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but is simply described as carrying a walking stick and a floral wreath. Another character regularly associated with the May Day celebrations is Robin Hood. Both these characters are, however, commonly confused with the Jack-in-the-Green and are frequently mistaken for the same.

This tells you something else about folklore; such a perplexing area of research that quite often folklorists, researchers and (especially) newspaper journalists will fail to notice specific local subtleties. It is common for them to simply group all the elements from one particular



location or event and associate them with another. In this context, the influence of *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer (1922) cannot be overlooked with its obsession with vegetation spirits and the ritual death and resurrection cycle.

## ...Beat That

Ascension Day, or Rogation day, is the day for Beating the Bounds, or boundaries, of your parish. There has been a recent revival of interest in this ceremony which had a dual purpose of blessing the land and keeping up the memory of the parish boundaries in the days before formal maps. Although some are kept up annually, most 'beatings' are done every three or seven years.

Shoppers at Oxford's Marks & Spencer on Ascension Day are surprised when a troop of choristers, academics, and visitors enter the lingerie department and proceed to beat a spot on the carpet with long canes, yelling "Mark! Mark! Mark!" The store was built directly over the boundary of the parish – appropriately the parish of St. Michael's! There are thirty-one venues in all and others include the covered market, the Town Hall, Boots the Chemist, the inside of a bike shop and a pub! The day finishes with a drink of ivy-beer, doughnuts and a scramble for hot pennies thrown from the roof of Lincoln College.

It is quite normal to bump on the boundary marker any child attending the perambulations in order that locations would be 'sorely remembered.' In London, a school boy is held upside down by his feet from a boat in the Thames where there is a boundary... making sure he has emptied his coat pockets first, of course!

## Whitsun Ales & Cheeses Roll...

Robin Hood was a prominent character in the May Games of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and has been incorporated in the May Day repertoire. He also became interchangeable with the Lord of King of the May as well as Jack-in-the-Green. He gets in everywhere!

Early popular representations were often unflattering, showing him as a kind of rustic buffoon or jester, but there was a deliberate attempt to dignify him during later centuries. It was the Victorians, with their interest in the medieval past, who finally shaped the image of Robin Hood as the English folk hero we think of today.

First mentioned in *Piers Plowman* in 1370, the Ballads of Robin Hood were very popular and widely available through printed broadsheets and chapbooks. Performances of Robin



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Hood plays and ballads are regularly mentioned at Whitsun in Churchwardens' Accounts throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries for 'monies paid for costumes.'

### **May Games**

Whitsuntide was the period of May games, mainly for the young people who, after dancing round the maypole, would try out their strength and skills in wrestling and archery contests. Other games included foot races, trying to catch a greased pig, or making a funny face through a horse collar, climbing a greasy pole, running after a pig with a shaved and well soaped tail, sack racing, plus singing and dancing.

Dover's Games near Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds were "instituted in the reign of James I by Robert Dover, an attorney, and featured football, skittles, quoits, shovel board, cudgel, cock fighting, bowling, wrestling, pitching the bar, horse racing, ringing of bells, jumping in sacks etc." The celebrations also included Morris dancing. The village of Temple Sowerby in Westmorland used to hold a story-telling competition on May Day up until the last century. The winner was considered the greatest liar...

A preposterous game is Cheese Rolling, an event which was formerly held on the old Whit Monday but is now transferred to the Spring Bank Holiday Monday. Not for the faint-hearted, this takes place on 5-in-1 slope called Coopers Hill, near Birdlip in Gloucestershire. Large Gloucester cheeses are rolled separately down the slope and pursued by young men. There are also races for the young women, too. The winner is the person who manages to reach the bottom first. Any hope of catching the cheese, which rolls at an alarming rate, is soon abandoned. St. John's Ambulance officials are kept busy assisting those with injuries. The ritual is connected with the maintenance of grazing rights.

Whitsun was also the time for walks, processions, and feasts associated with local clubs, particularly Village Friendly Societies. There would be parades around the whole of the community with members in their best clothes, carrying staves, banners, and often accompanied by a local or club band. Frequently, it would also be celebrated with a fair. The day usually ended with a club dinner or a feast.

## **Sticks and Bells...**

Morris Dancing was traditionally associated with Whit week. Nowadays it is seen at other times of the year, the Summer months especially. "What's it all mean?" is the most frequently asked question.

Enough has been said of ritual origins... pagan fertility cults... scaring evil spirits with bells and hankies... fights between good and evil... weather control! At best these are only supposition. Whether they were ritual dances or not has to remain a mystery – we just



don't know. The earliest documentary evidence of the Morris dance stems largely from Churchwarden's Accounts from the 15<sup>th</sup> century or early reactions to traditions – not always favourable.

These days there are many varieties of Morris. Many of the differences are regional; but even in one area there can be considerable variation in styles of dancing and costume. Handkerchief dancing is probably the most common but there are dances with sticks, with garlands and with swords of wood or metal. Each village may have its own repertoire and style of performance. Perhaps there is a local team near you. Contact them and find out more about it.



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