

MINUTES OF THE 103rd MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 28th FEBRUARY 2018

Present: - Peter Cole – Secretary

In Ted Sutton's absence Keith McClellan took the Chair.

1. Secretary's Report

Peter said that he had spent quite a lot of time going through the huge boxes of documents he had inherited, mainly from the History Society Archive. He had sorted them mostly into the order in which they had been numbered and recorded. He has now listed them, so that he could easily find anything required.

He thanked Keith for finding speakers for the next few months.

2. Keith introduced the Revd. Simon Dommett to talk about Morris and Mumming – to include the role and place of Mumming in our English folk history.

Simon said that he was aiming to explain both the similarities and differences between Morris Dancers and Mummers. When he was eight he went with his father to a Morris dancing group in Abingdon. Later on in the 1980s as a teenager he became involved with the Crookham Mummers. At University he went to Coventry and Bedford Morris groups.

In 1448 is the first mention of Morris dancers being paid the sum of 7 shillings to perform.

Around the country you have similarities and differences between local groups. The Cotswold Morris wear white with bells round their knees, a sash and hats with flowers. They use hankies and sticks. They have a Fool (known up north as a Betsy) to work as an interface with the crowd. Their dancing is almost unique in that they go “one hop two three” whereas all the others go “one two three hop”.

Going further north in the Welsh Borders country the faces are dark (due to most originally being miners). The clothes have a much more tattered appearance and the dance is rougher.

North West Morris is around Cheshire and the northern industrial towns. They wear clogs and breeches, as worn in old factories and they use sticks or twirlers rather than hankies. The music is often brass bands from the north.

Even further north instead of sticks they use long swords. There are no hats, as they would get in the way of the swords. The music and dance is slower and has a military background. It is also popular in Yorkshire.

Coming down the east of the country a sort of Rapper dance began after the invention of steel. Steel swords were shorter but more flexible, so these dances were quicker, with people running around.

Molly dancing took place in East Anglia. Each team would have their own variations.

Most Morris dances were by men, but Garland dances were usually by women.

We've been mostly round the country, but here in the Cotswolds we are more or less central. Local dances were at Hinton-in-the-Hedges, where handkerchief ones were very popular, as were agricultural ones, banging sticks on hard ground to simulate firing rifles to scare birds, or on soft ground as if planting seeds in holes. There are lots of other groups nearby – Adderbury, Brackley and our own Aynho Apricots for example. Some teams went to London to make some money there.

Then Simon turned to Mummers. Their costumes are broadly similar everywhere, as are the characters and scripts. Mummers often used strips of wallpaper as costumes, or in earlier days strips of cloth. The Mummers are in disguise – they become a different person. A Mummers' play is not a Passion Play, it is not about fertility or pagan rites, it is not a pantomime, but it is about good defeating evil. They are often seasonal. Most are produced around Christmas time, but some are performed soon after at ploughing times and others are at Easter.

Simon based his talk on an old Aynho script.

Someone such as Father Christmas or perhaps the Fool will come on to set the scene. Then the hero, often but not always, St. George or a King will appear. He will be followed by the Villain, usually the Turkish Knight or perhaps a Dragon. After this there is a Valiant Soldier who fights the Villain but gets killed or seriously injured. A Doctor appears who miraculously restores the Soldier to full health. Otherwise a new character turns up to give the Soldier a pill. St. George defeats the Villain, and the Fool or Father Christmas goes round to collect money from the crowd.

That is the gist of most plays, although of course there are three local and topical variations, mainly to build the Play up to make it longer. One is a lengthy Hero combat. Sometimes a play includes an Army Recruiting Sergeant to persuade a local labourer to join up. He may say that he would prefer to stay with his wife or marry his lover, but he eventually goes off to fight for his country. When he does this, someone says "What a fool he has been", and his wife or lover runs off with the Fool. The audience has to decide who has been the biggest fool overall. Alternatively there could be a mini sword dance play.

The person who gets the most lines in the Play is usually the Doctor.

Another example of a Mumming Play is the Derby Tup. Here a man is dressed up as a Ram with a large mouth which he can flap open and shut in time to a song. The Ram gets killed and the Sword Dancers play.

Simon compared the Aynho play with that of his old haunt Crookham, and although there are some differences the plays are remarkably similar. Many others around the country are also pretty identical. He gave out copies of the Aynho Mummers Play. It has one local difference in that the Doctor has an assistant, Jack Finney, who not only produces the reviving pill, but later on gets the entire cast to help pull out a tooth from the poor Valiant Soldier's mouth. Two more new characters appear to collect money, while the Fool plays a tune.

Keith thanked Simon for an interesting and amusing talk.

3. Forthcoming Meetings

Wednesday 28th March – **The Hidden Village** by Imogen Matthews – about a village hidden deep in Dutch woods which sheltered persecuted Jewish people from occupying Germans during World War Two.

Wednesday 25th April – **The Portway Path** – Running through Aynho since before Roman times – by Bob Hunter.

Wednesday 27th June – **James Seccull – A story of a family from Aynho to Melbourne, Australia** – Doctor Simon Smith, a Professor from Victoria University, who is a direct descendant of James Seccull has written a book about him. He is coming over to England to launch his book and speak at our meeting. He will be inviting any member of the Seccull family living in England to come to the meeting.