

BOXING DAY IN WILLASTON – THE MERSEY MORRIS MEN

Ask any committed Morris dancer whether Boxing Day has a special place in their world, and you should receive the answer 'Yes indeed'— it was on Boxing Day 1899 that Cecil Sharp saw and heard the Headington Quarry Morris Men and was captivated. He spent the following years travelling the land to discover and document the dances and music of the English Morris Dance traditions.

As far as anyone can recall the decision to dance on the village green in Willaston was prompted simply by the attraction of performing on this auspicious day, when the world has feasted and partied for long enough and yearns to get out into the fresh air, meet their fellows and take some exercise. We believe the year was 1992. The Mersey Morris men had practised through the winter at the parish hall on Neston Road for several years and refreshed at the Pollards Inn afterwards; what better setting could there be for this new venture than the village green with the pub around the corner? The idea fell on fertile ground, and the rest is history, 2020 being the first year that we have failed to dance on the green.

Or perhaps one should say more accurately that our Boxing Day performance has almost become tradition – the village expects us to be there on the green and who would knowingly break that thread? But tradition brings its own pressure. Each year our boss (Squire) and our dance tutor (Foreman) scratch their heads over the program – how to ring a few changes, how to involve all the men, how to engage with those watching, from children to the most senior, a crowd which has grown from a few to a few hundred and so generously shows their appreciation! Over the years we have trusted to the cheering properties of the Morris music and dance to work the basic magic, to which we have added a variety of fools and animals (devotees may remember the showman with rubber chickens and the exploding hat; the man in a yokel's smock distributing roses and sweets; the baby Morris Man hatching out from our Liver bird's egg and dancing a jig of delight with his proud father). From time to time we have welcomed our very own Scally Rapper sword team to dance, or a guest team such as the ladies of Mockbeggar Morris.

Even Mummers have appeared, performing the traditional pageant of Good's victory over Evil, to a pattern loosely based on a local play from Frankby. When will we next hear those pregnant words, 'In Comes I...'?

With the help of a succession of landlords at the Pollards Inn who have happily contributed a tureen of hot toddy to the event, we have tried to warm the insides of our spectators and keep the chill of inactivity at bay, with cake as accompaniment. In more recent years we have recognised that many of our audience are eager to chase away the chill with a dance, and finished the performance with something suitable from the English folk dance repertoire.

The tradition keeps developing. We now have a full PA system; perhaps we shall soon have celebrity comperes, a Strictly Come Dancing element with village residents having a go, with a full audience phone in vote to follow who knows? We never thought that we would be taking the dance to the streets of the village but we're glad that we did.

Thank you Willaston – Boxing Day is always fun, and we look forward to dancing for many years to come.

P.S. What we really need most of all, is for aspiring dancers and musicians to come and join the team. COVID allowing, we shall offer you a taster in 2021 at the village hall, and look forward to seeing you there - the Morris tradition in Willaston must continue!