

This is the time of year when most of us feel depressed by the short days, the cold, the difficulty of getting about, and the prospect of two or three months of the same before the welcome return of spring.

How much worse it must have been for our ancestors, who depended more directly on the land and the weather for their livelihood, and how much more important for them to take what steps they could to protect themselves against the vicissitudes of winter.

The mummer play, versions of which can still be seen in Oxfordshire at the turn of the year, appears to have been a symbolic and a practical part of these preparations. They were originally performed by poorer villagers, mainly farm-workers, to earn money, or payment in kind that would help to support their families through the winter.

The name may derive from mumping, a word for begging, usually carried out on December 21, the midwinter solstice. Don Rouse, a long-standing member of the Bampton Mummers, suggests it's a corruption of 'miming'.

He said: "When I first started



■ Burnt cork helps disguise the mummers' identities. Below, the troupe gathers for a photograph



Mummers

the word

How our ancestors must have taken heart from plays that lifted the gloom of long, cold winters, writes *Julie Webb*

as an 11-year-old in 1948, we used to walk around like carol singers, knocking on doors and asking 'Would you like to hear the mummer play?' Like as not we'd get the answer 'No, bugger off, you've got dirty feet!'"

Records of mummer plays go back as far as medieval times, but the theme of the ousting evil spirits, representing winter, by the good spirits of spring by implication is a reassurance to fellow villagers that present discomforts will not last for ever, probably dates back to pre-Christian Britain.

"We've no idea when the Bampton play began," said Don, "but we have clothes from the 1890s for a character called Old Tom the Tinker — a shawl and a bonnet. They were into cross-dressing even then!"

Wherever the plays are performed, there tend to be certain common characters. The Headington Quarry play



■ Don Rouse, who is celebrating his 50th year as a Christmas mummer in Bampton, poses for this Victorian scene

— whose first recorded performance was, rather strangely, by the Mothers' Union around 1800 — demonstrates the essentials.

These are a narrator, often Father Christmas — presumably grafted on in Victorian times — a good person, usually St George or King George, and a bad person, often a Turkish knight, clearly reminiscent of the Crusades, and possibly also of the Celtic king of Midwinter — 'the Gloom'.

There is a doctor to perform the crucial task of reviving the 'dead' hero and thus the promise of spring. In most plays, a cure is effected by the extraction of something from the body of the 'patient'.

There is a suggestion that this trick, in whatever form it takes — producing an animal's tooth or a clothes peg or a couple of large walnuts (use your imagination!), was originally performed at harvest suppers. It went down so well that the mummers adopted it in the hope of bringing in extra money.

There is usually some other light relief in the form of a fool. In Headington Quarry, this is Big Head, who dresses as a buffoon, but it can be the cross-dresser who, as Don says, "talks a load of twaddle" in a ripe Oxfordshire dialect.

Other people seem to have joined over the years, without obvious rhyme or reason — well reason at any rate, since the play is entirely in rhyme.

There may be a Robin Hood and a Little John, a 'posh gentry', as Pete Davies of Headington Quarry puts it, represented by Jack Finney, and characters from each end of the age spectrum who symbolise the old and the new years.

Don said: "Even if they don't have the same characters, they share the same words. "Our play was handed down by word of mouth until the 1960s, when someone recorded it and sent us the typescript.

"Things become distorted, but not as much as you'd think. "In 1970, we were short of a Father Christmas.

"We found an old man, 70 on Christmas Day that year, who played him in 1938. He was worried he wouldn't know the words, but what he remembered was exactly what we had written down."

There is a long tradition of improvisation between characters and use of local references, particularly in the 'operation' scene and in banter initiated by the fool.

"We play to our audience" said Don. "Sometimes it can become extremely bawdy."

It was considered in many villages that, for the magic of regeneration to work, participants should not be recognised — a practice that would protect them from the shame of begging. So they blackened their faces with burnt cork or dressed in rags worn inside-out.

The progressive shortening of plays over the years may be due to players having an eye to the main chance — the

quicker you could do your play, the more places in the village you could get to, and the bigger the potential paying audience.

Nowadays, mummers collect for charity or to offset the costs of performing. Headington Quarry's play lasts half an hour, touring the village pubs on Boxing Day. It incorporates carols on hand-bells to begin the proceedings and dancing to accordion music.

The Bampton play is the only two-act one in the country, involving participants in hasty changes of hats.

It is performed in the village on Christmas Eve, collecting about £400 for the SPAJers — the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Junketing, which provides funds for elderly villagers to enjoy themselves.

"We put on about 16 performances," said Matthew Green, who plays Old Tom the Tinker, and another dodgy character, presumably of Germano-Irish descent and uncertain spelling, pronounced 'the Royal O' Prussia King'.

"We go to any house that invites us, big or small, starting at four or five in the evening and ending up in the pubs some time after 10pm."

Watching a mummers play at the pub with a festive pint is a good way to remind ourselves what Yuletide celebrations are about and to thank our lucky stars that we can get through the winter with greater certainty of survival than our forebears. ■



■ Festive fun . . . the mummers, pictured above and left, perform their hilarious theatre, often preceded by Christmas carols or handbells. Nowadays, they collect for charity

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