

BAMPTON MUMMERS

There are 467,000 sites on Google for Mummers and there are 5510 on the Bampton mummers alone. Every one tells a different story. For a slide show of last years performances, try Bampton Mummers on Google.

Some say Mumming belongs to the late 18th C. when Quack Doctors were in abundance. Some say it goes back to the Crusades when St George had the proverbial ‘punch up’ with the Turkish Knight. This was also the time of Robin Hood and Little John. There were certainly Pagan Plays at the Court of Edward the Third in the 13 hundreds. Around this time the Church introduced Saints and Old Testament Prophets into the Drama to produce Miracle plays that would compete with the Pagan Mummers Play.

Some articles claim that there were Mummer Plays in 400 BC enacted by Latin Labourers in disguise. In fact the ‘Disguise’ has always played an important part in Mumming as it was always felt that if the Players were recognised, then the Magical Power of the play would be broken. I am the only Bampton Mummer who still uses the traditional way of ‘Blacking up’ by using a form of Soot. Mine is achieved by burning a cork on a Candle, letting it Cool, very important that, then applying it to my face.

What we feel is a late-comer to the Bampton Play is, of course, Father Christmas whom I believe is 18th Century

A Bampton Mummer Play is quoted in a book published in 1847 by the Revd Giles entitled The History of Bampton, but he does point out that the words that he uses are about a Mummers Play similar to that performed in Bampton, the words though bore no resemblance to ours.

As I say there are many theories on the Mummers plays, some by Experts and some by Theorists, but not everyone is right, nor are they all wrong, so I am not going to take sides. My own theory is that the Bampton Mummers was a play used for entertaining and possibly making the ‘Odd copper or two’ for the players in the Pubs and the Manor Houses – a form of Court Jesting. It does prove how close Paganism and Christianity are, as both believe in a ‘Life after Death’. We do wonder whether our play depicts the dying of the old year and the birth of the new one, that is possibly something else for the Theorists to mull over.

So let us leave Theory alone and talk about what I know is fact about the Bampton Mummers, which I joined in 1948 as an 11 year old. Ours is one of the only 2-act Mummers plays in the UK. You will find many plays much longer than ours with similar characters and words and it is always in rhyme. The principle is also always the same, someone being slain, then being risen from the dead by one of the characters, the belief in life after death being ever present. Some years ago I worked as a driver for the ‘After Hours Doctor Services on call’ at Witney Community Hospital, doing the Christmas Day shift I was asked by one of the Doctors what I did on Christmas Eve, so I told him all about the Mummers. “Well” he said “when I was a young lad I also was a Mummer in a small village in the Irish Republic.” So we went through our different plays; when I got to the part of Jack Finney it was exactly word for word the same as his Mummer play but with a different name for the character.

The Bampton Mummers had ceased to operate during the War Years and in 1946 the vicar, the Revd Bateman wanted to see the Mummers started up again, so he enlisted the help of Ted Hunt who had been a strong member of the Mummers in the pre war years. Ted, with his son Bob, got together a group of young Boys who met the necessary criteria of being able to talk with the local dialect. They were Philip Addison, Terry Rouse, Robert Radband, Barry Taylor, Bill Daniels and Bob Hunt. A young lad called John Benedikz who was the son of the secretary to the Icelandic Ambassador and lived in Bampton, wanted to join but was rejected as he spoke with a too cultured an accent.

In 1948 Phil Addison, who played Father Christmas, worked for a local shopkeeper by the name of Fred Tongue and was not allowed to leave his work early enough on the afternoon of Christmas Eve to participate, so he had to resign, aged 14 years! This allowed me to enrol. The method of allocating the roles for the play are the same now as they were then. If anyone leaves then the existing players in order of seniority are allowed to change their parts within the play and the vacant parts made available for the new-comers, usually the part of Robin Hood / Jack Finney, which is where I came in.

The words were all handed down by 'word of mouth'. Ted wrote the part of Robin Hood and Jack Finney on a piece of paper for me to learn. There never was at the time, a full written script, which makes the maintenance of the plays accuracy quite unique, especially when you think of the old war story, that, when an Officer sent the message back from the Front to Headquarters by 'word of mouth' stating 'SEND REINFORCEMENTS WE ARE GOING TO ADVANCE'. When it got to HQ the message had become 'SEND THREE AND FOURPENCE WE ARE GOING TO A DANCE.'

The authenticity and accuracy of the words of the Bampton Mummers was tested in 1970. Roy Barratt from Glebelands, whom we had performed for on many occasions, had recorded the play, something that he always did every year. Unbeknown to us a microphone was secreted away somewhere; after a few years it became part of the play to 'seek the mike'. Roy then very kindly secured the services of a secretary to type out all the words from the tape, but there was a slight problem, as always, the Mummers being, as I said a form of Court Jesters, would play to their audience and the script would 'go out of the window'! The Taped performance bearing little resemblance to the traditional play. So it left a lot of work for Ted Hunt, Bill Daniels and myself to go through it word by word to make sure that it was authentically correct. The final script was then written out as an official record to protect it for immortality.

In 1970 we had suddenly, through illness, found ourselves without a player for Father Christmas. Ted remembered that before the war Bobby Wells, son of the famous Morris Dance expert Jingy Wells had played the part and enlisted him to help us out. Now Bobby had not played the part since 1938, a gap of 32 years. That Christmas Day was Bobby's 70th birthday. At rehearsal Bobby expressed his doubt as to how accurate he would be, and was encouraged to say it as he remembered it, viewing the script as he performed, we were amazed that it was indeed word perfect.

Senior members of the Mummers have always attended rehearsals to protect the tradition and words of the play to ensure that lapses do not creep into the script. Though we have allowed just one adulteration into the play in honour of Ted Hunt. In the days when there were many Pubs to visit, it was important that the players were able to withstand the Heckling that they would be getting from the inebriated members of the public, so during rehearsals we would do the 'Heckling' to prepare them for what was to come. Ted was performing Old Tom the Tinker, when he got to the bit where he says 'Now I had pity on this poor dead dog,' trying to throw him off, I slipped in a question to him saying, 'why was he a pedigree?' and Ted came back instantly saying 'No he were a Bitch.' It completely threw us all into fits of laughter, as it does to all our audiences to this day. When Ted died we decided to keep it in, as we felt that it was a tribute to a man who had done so much for the Bampton Mummers.

The clothes that are worn by many of the players go back many years. The Shawl and Bonnet worn by 'Old Tom the Tinker' still to this day, was in the Mummers at the end of the 1800s, worn in those days by Shady Wiltshire's dad. Shady was a character, well known to many Bamptonians to this day. We have a photo from 1920 showing it being used then. Many Mummer groups use crêpe paper as part of their attire and according to the 1920 photo was also used in our play then. Only Robin Hood was dressed accordingly when I joined. There was an Antique dealer who lived in Bampton in 1946 called Mr Keene (He had a lovely daughter called Elizabeth to whom St George the Knight took a shine) he

very kindly kitted the Mummers out in a more authentic style, the Knights were issued with smart ex Military style jackets and Head gear. The Helmet worn by St George, the Turkish Knight's Fez and Bold Little John's Staff are all still with us to this day. The Stethoscope that I used as the Doctor is a Teat Cup (very appropriate for Chest inspections) from an old milking machine used by my Father. Up until I got too large for the Morning Coat, I wore one presented to us by Major Colvile, the present coat came from Dominoes in Witney, at a cost of £10. My Doctor's Bag and a real Stethoscope was given to us by Dr Bullen. When Arnold Woodley played the part of Jack Finney he made a Paper Mache head to authenticate 'My Big 'ead and little wit.' But it was so big that his voice was lost inside it! The Swords and Shields were made by Roy Hewitt who with his sons were members of the Mummers for a period of time.

Up until the late nineteen fifties we always went out on Christmas eve walking to all the big (rich) houses hoping that they would let us in to perform for them, a remnant of the Court Jesting days. They would have servants to do their Christmas decorating and food preparation, so more often than not they would be having a party to see Christmas in. We were very often made welcome, just as carol singers would have been to help set the Christmas scene. Though sometimes it did not always run as smooth as we would have liked; just imagine the scene, a knock on your door and as you open it, there before you would be a group of dishevelled teenagers, blackened faces, probably soaked through and with dirty shoes, wanting to come into your nice clean and warm house to have a 'fight' on your best carpet! So you can understand, that on some occasions we were turned away after probably walking a mile to get there. On these occasions we did not wish them a Happy Christmas!

Visiting the Pubs on Christmas Eve would have been a total waste of time as the English Rural Christmas bore no resemblance to the present time. The traditional Christmas Eve then, was for there to be no decorations put up in the homes until the children had gone to bed, so all Mums and Dads would be working that night to get everything ready for Father Christmas to come. So needless to say the Pubs were empty. But on Boxing Day, well that was totally different, with 11 Pubs in Bampton at the time, it was indeed a joyous occasion, everyone was very happy, it was definitely the night for taking the Mummers out. What a time we all had, this was a time when a 'blind eye' was turned on underage drinking. I remember taking a slightly inebriated 14 year old Robin Hood back to his parents at the end of the evening and as his Father was the Village policeman I was a little worried. Certainly by the time we got to the last Pub, most of the players were totally inebriated, unable to say their words and being heckled mercilessly by one and all, so much so, that it was impossible to maintain the script. At the end of the night we would all walk home to Ted's house and the soberest one would have the job of sharing all the takings out, perhaps that is why I have never drunk.

I recall in 1952 there were some Americans living in the North Wing of Bampton House who were desperate to see the Mummers, so Ted agreed to visit them on the Boxing Day before we started the Pubs, as we all know American hospitality was second to none. So when the lads were offered Whisky and Coke, they did not refuse, but a Whisky to the Americans was half a Tumbler full, with just a dash of Coke. What better way to get a group of teenagers in the mood for a hard night's work? So out into the cold we stepped and off to the Swan.

The Swan was full of noisy locals who were in the mood for a bit of fun and determined to give us a hard time. I remember 'Perky' Radband was the first person inside the door to give us a hard time, so we had to be very assertive when we made our entrance. David Brown, who played the part of Robin Hood went to show off his prowess as an Archer and how good his bow was, but he did not make allowances for his intake of American hospitality, so that when he went to show how much his 'bended bow of Yew Tree Wood' would bend, he broke it clean in half! It absolutely threw us all into hysterics. We had a very difficult time that evening to keep to the script. David also had a problem that night

when we got to the Horse Shoe Pub. As he was on a 'high' he quite fancied his chances with the local Milk Maid called Eileen, after several unsuccessful attempts to kiss her and being turned down due to the amount of Soot on his face, he decided to wash it off using the Soda water Siphon from the bar. But it was all to no avail as with Soda water, Sweat and Soot running down his face, she still did not fancy him. The Horse Shoe has provided me with some of the funniest moments. During the 1960s when Mini Skirts were all the craze, one of the Knights had been slain and before our Quack Doctor could get to him, so that he could administer his potent medicine allowing the combatant to 'rise up thy 'ead and fight once more', a rather nubile young woman danced with one leg either side of him claiming that she could make him 'Rise'. She was right too.

On another occasion I was rendered absolutely speechless with the quickness of the repartee from the barmaid. Part of my spiel is that I can cure "The Itch, The Stitch, the Paulsy, the Gout" turning to the barmaid called Sharon, I enquired if she 'had ever had it?' To which she quickly replied, yes twice! Once with your Brother and once with you, and your Brother was much better. What's more I still haven't been paid!! So you can see that the show can become quite 'Bawdy' at times.

These bawdy Pub performances, once caused even me, great embarrassment. Two well respected Ladies who lived in Bampton were Miss Thomson and Miss Wylie; they came to Bampton when I was a nine year old and ran a small Market Garden at the Beam, we supplied them with Milk and Manure from our Farm. Miss Thomson was a local Councillor and the Chairwoman of the School Governors, Miss Wylie's brother was part of the successful team that climbed Mount Everest in 1953. I always had the greatest respect for them and even though when I was in my sixties, they would invite me to call them by their Christian names, I couldn't, so strong was the respect that I had for them. They were always our first stop with the Mummers. One year they had an American staying with them who wanted to record us throughout the evening, following us from house to house, we had no problems with this. As the evening went on we forgot all about him. The next year as we trooped into their house Miss Thomson said "Now tell me Don, are we going to have the conventional version, or are we going to have the Pub version?" I was a little perplexed to start with, then she pointed out to me that the American had returned to their house the previous year and had played them the Tape with all the bawdy behaviour from the Pubs. Wow, was I embarrassed!!

Should you take the time to look up the references to the Bampton Mummers on 'Google', you will see that in America there are quite a few groups using the Bampton Mummers Play; I wonder if it was him that took it over? It is quite common for Writers and Photographers to follow us around and several books have been written that include the Bampton Mummers in their Tales. In the late 1960s Bampton's Vicar of the day a Revd Tabourne brought me a magazine with the intriguing title of 'Man, Myth and Mythology' and in there were pictures taken in the Morris Clown with an accompanying write up. Several Books published around that time incorporate the Bampton Mummers.

Even on my last year, there was an author called Homer Sykes who had written a book in the 1970s, and the photos that you can see on Google were taken by him from this year's performances. I think he was going to use them to update his previous rendition of the Bampton Mummers.

They say you should never act with Animals and Children, after sixty years of Mumming I can vouch for that. Dogs do not like people shouting in their house, so they have to bark even louder, creating pure bedlam, they have been known to go up to the 'fallen Knight' and sniff all around him, on one occasion a dog actually cocked his leg upon him. Little children can be quite daunted by us and get upset, but the beauty of doing it for sixty years is that these children grow up to be parents and indeed in some cases Grand Parents, giving me great fun reminding them of how frightened they used to be when they were small.

One of our more daunting performances was in front of Sir Richard Todd the famous Actor who lived at the Grange in Bampton a few years ago, it was well received and he asked us a lot of questions about the Mummers. Though he was not the first famous actor to see us, a previous occupant of the Grange was a Lord Downshire whose son was the actor who played The Baron on Television many years ago.

A lovely story that Ted recalled to me, was that in the early 1900s the Bampton Mummers walked all the way into Witney to perform, hopefully to get some free beer and a bit of pocket money. In the dimly lit Pubs of Corn Street they were amazed at the generosity of the Witney people, noting that several half crowns (12½ pence) had been put in the box. By the end of the hard worked evening, finishing in the Market Square, they felt that they had earned enough to be able to catch the train back to Bampton, being very tired this was happily agreed by all. When they got to the bright lights of the Station on opening the box, they realised to their horror what terrible tricksters the Witney people were. All those coins that they thought were half crowns were in fact Pennies which were the same size, wrapped in silver paper to look like half crowns! Not having enough to be able to afford the Train, they had to walk from the furthest part of Witney to Bampton.

Everything changed in the late 1950s early 60s; People were having a lot more free time and more money, decorations were being put up in early December, everyone was having a party on Christmas Eve and the Pubs were heaving with people. Our group of mummers were all by then married and wanted to spend some time with their families. We were now giving all of our collections to the local Charity known as the SPAJERS, The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Junketing which provided treats for the Senior citizens of Bampton. When Arnold Woodley joined, he really set about getting us better organised. He arranged for us to be on Television, Michael Parkinson's wife Mary, who was a television producer, came to Bampton and arranged for us to be filmed and interviewed in the Talbot. We also appeared on a television programme called Good Afternoon.

Included in the raising of our profile were trips to the studios of Radio Oxford and Fox FM. The follow-up from this increased publicity, resulted in many Journalists and Photographers wanting to know all about us.

Arnold also came up with the idea, that if we were to go around in Cars, we could visit a lot more places, so with his old Austin car and my battered Morris 1000 van, we set about getting the 'Show on the road'. The following Christmas saw us visiting Pubs and big houses in Clanfield, Carterton, Brize Norton, Aston and finishing up at the Trout down Buckland Road. Quite an achievement for one night's work. That particular night gave us our only ever 'Brush with the Law'. After splitting up with our colleagues at the Trout just after Midnight, I left with my passengers Ted Hunt and Frank Purslow, and I stopped at the entrance to Cheyne Lane to let Frank out; unbeknown to me hidden in the shadows of the shops was PC Radburn. "Do you know it is against the law to be on the highway with a Blackened Face after Sundown?" he yelled. "Oh come off it Officer" I meekly replied, hoping to appeal to his better sense of nature. "We are doing it for Charity." "And tell me" he said quite sternly, "Have you got a Licence for collecting for Charity?" Beating a hasty retreat, I climbed back into my van saying "Goodnight Roy. Have a happy Christmas." I am pleased to say that we never heard any more on the subject. What a shame that he moved to Brize Norton before he could benefit from the Mummers Charity work. Or was it?

With Policemen in mind, in 1975 Arnold arranged for us to perform at the Radcliffe Infirmary Hospital on a Sunday between Christmas and New Year's Day. After successful performances in three of the Wards, we started to perform in the fourth when a voice from one of the beds said "I know him" and immediately I recognised the Voice and it put the fear of God into me. It was our Village Policeman from the war years. We used to call him 'Whisper in the Grass' because of his distinctive voice. His name was PC Hutchins. Remember, in those days you were in big trouble if you rode two on a bike or

if your lights were not functioning correctly, so the sound of his voice made you either hide or 'leg it' as fast as you could! It was incredible the effect that it still had over me, yet at that time I was 38 years of age.

Another Patient in the Hospital during this visit stopped me dead in my tracks. When I was relating all that I could do as a 'Quack Doctor.' He interrupted by asking me if I could give him another couple of Legs; looking over at him I could see that they had both been amputated. Quite a sobering moment.

Working with two cars meant that Arnold, as one of the drivers could not have a drink and as we were doing so well, we felt that we would hire a 'Self drive' Mini Bus, make appointments with our Clients to perform and work to a strict Time Table, all very good in theory, but as the hospitality of our clientele is always so great, it was almost impossible to adhere to. I should mention how good local people have been to us. One Mini Bus operator, Horace Holifield, used to let us have the use of the bus for nothing. On other occasions people with access to a Mini Bus offered to drive us around for no charge. Tommy Papworth our News Agent being one of them. Nowadays with what is called MPVs that can carry up to 7 people the job is so much easier.

Talking about the Hospitality, we all feel that we would love to take more time and enjoy the hospitality that is offered to us, but due to the big demand for a visit on Christmas Eve we can allow only, on average, just over 20 minutes between bookings. In that time we have to get to the venue, do the performance, make the collection, eat piping hot Mince Pies and Sausage Rolls, have a drink, talk to the hosts about the history of the Mummers and wish them all a very happy Christmas before checking just how far we are behind our schedule and heading for next house! Where we are usually greeted by "We knew you would be late."

People really are very kind and generous. One person once paid us £50 not to visit him! Sounds good but in actual fact he was going to be away, but he still wanted to help us with our work for Bampton's senior citizens.!

Our collections in recent years has exceeded £1,000.00. The first year that we surpassed the £1,000 figure we were assisted by a friend making up the 'short fall' to ensure that we got there. But now we are achieving it on our own.

I must mention my sixtieth year's performance. The Thursday before, Mary my wife with the help of friends and family arranged a surprise party for me with about sixty guests. All the Mummers showed what wonderful troopers they all are, by giving up their time for a Private Show. It was a wonderful opportunity for my friends to see how we get prepared for our performances and to talk through a bit of our History. My final private house performance was at the Milne-Day's in Broad Street. What a wonderful surprise was in store for me; the local News Papers had published a story with photographs relating to my sixty years Mumming, so when my queue line 'Is there a Doctor in the land' was called, my entrance into the room was met with about thirty people sat down, all dressed as Doctors with Top Hats and with make-up on to match mine perfectly! It was pure Magic and very touching. The last two Pub performances were also very touching with some very nice things being said. The final score - £1,200.00