



Beginners' Guide to English Folk Drama

By Steve Roud



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) 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.

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Introduction

From about the middle of the eighteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, there were groups of people who, at the right time of year, would go round the neighbourhood performing their traditional 'Mumming Play'. This was not an isolated, unusual custom, as we know that at least 1500 places in Britain and Ireland had some sort of Mummers.

The plays were found mostly in rural areas, all over England, (except, oddly enough, the eastern counties of Norfolk and Suffolk), and in most of lowland Scotland, and some parts of Wales and Ireland, plus a few in places settled by British migrants, such as America, Canada, and the West Indies.

The Mummers were not 'travelling players' or 'acting troupes', they never extended their repertoire or tried something new. They were ordinary men from the area who performed their local play over and over again at different places during the season, and it was the same each year.

But being handed on from person to person, and down the generations, change is inevitable, and each mumming play is slightly different from all the others, and there is therefore never a *correct* version. And also because the custom was in the hands of local people and was rarely written down or properly documented, the information we have about it is patchy and there is a great deal we do not know. This especially applies to the origin and early history of the custom.

Another aspect of this informal transmission is that mumming plays are 'regional', which means that although there are major similarities across the whole country there are also elements which are characteristic of certain areas. An expert can often look at a text or even a list of characters and work out which part of the country it came from.

Folklorists have identified three basic types of play – the Hero/Combat or St. George play (by far the most common), the Plough or Wooing Play (confined to the East Midlands area of England), and the Sword Dance Play (found in Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland).

By the middle of the twentieth century, the custom in its traditional form, had almost died out completely. A handful of local teams were still active in the 1930s, but very few survived the Second World War. What happened in the 1970s, however, was a widespread re-discovery of the custom, as part of what is termed the Folk Revival. Many new teams were formed, some of which are still going, and other groups who were looking for something simple, local, folkie and dramatic latched onto the play as worth performing.



Background

Folklorists and other writers only started taking a serious interest in mumming plays in the late nineteenth century and they then began systematic collection of material which has continued, on and off, until the present day. Before that time we must rely on local history writers' books and manuscripts, newspaper reports, and so on, which are few and far between and never give the amount of detail that we would like.

A great deal of data has now been collected and is available to the modern folk play enthusiast or researcher, but it is true to say that no one has yet come up with the definite study or history of the subject.

One of our problems is that although we may have a sighting of a local play in a particular village, we rarely know how long it had been there, or how long it lasted afterwards. We must guard against the assumption that each and every version goes back to the eighteenth century, nor that every village's tradition of mumming was long-lasting.

The first thing to understand is that, in common with most parts of folklore, various theories as to the origin and development of the play have been put forward which are now recognised by experts as completely erroneous 'invented traditions' based on wishful thinking rather than historical evidence. Unfortunately, these spurious origin theories have become 'general knowledge' and are so widely believed that they are difficult to counter.

The most pervasive of these ideas is that the mumming plays are a remnant of a pre-Christian fertility ritual, or some other religious ceremony designed to bring back the summer after the bleak winter, or are to promote fertility or luck in the community.

Earliest references

The unromantic fact is that the mumming play cannot be traced back any earlier than the mid-eighteenth century. The earliest known texts are from the 1770s, and less concrete references only pre-date these by a decade or so. It probably evolved from some kind of stage play or perhaps puppet show performed by travelling companies at fairs and other rural gatherings. It seems also to have partly evolved from the speeches of mountebanks or 'quack doctors' who travelled the country selling patent medicines. Their traditional patter not only included the lines commonly spoken by the mumming Doctor but also featured the 'death' of the quack's assistant and his miraculous cure with the medicine or pills on sale.

If the play is little more than 250 years old, and scholars have been looking at it for a century of that time, it may seem strange that the exact origin has not been discovered. But one of the unfortunate results of several generations of 'pagan-origin' assumptions is that those who have been concerned to find evidence about origins and early development have been looking in the wrong place. It is only recently that attention has moved from inventing 'religious' ceremonies of pre-history to seeking clues in the records of the popular and literary cultures of the early eighteenth century. There is much more still to do.

Heyday and Decline

As indicated, our evidence is too patchy to allow us to properly understand how prevalent the custom was at any given time. It seems that its heyday may have been in the second half of the nineteenth century, but this is probably simply a reflection of the amount of 'collecting' and documenting that went on in that period. But by the time of the First World War, the custom was fast dying out. There were many reasons for this. People were gradually becoming more affluent, there was much more entertainment available and simple pleasures were going out of fashion. Young men who might have carried it on were killed in the war. People started asking where the money was going and public opinion started to re-brand performance customs as 'begging'. By the 1930s, the number of traditional teams could be numbered in dozens rather than hundreds, and few survived the Second World War.

A note on names

'Mumming' and 'Mummers' are words used by writers and folklorists to describe the range of performances covered in this presentation, but although these words were often understood by the performers themselves, they usually had their own names for their custom which they would use within their own community. Some of these names are straightforwardly descriptive of the time of year, the 'Christmas Boys', 'Plough jags', or 'Page-Eggers' ('Pace' meaning Easter), or of the costume: 'White Boys', 'Straw Boys', 'Paper Boys', and so on.

They could be named after one of the characters – the 'Johnny Jacks' in Hampshire, for example.

But some names are more obscure, the 'Blue Stots' of Yorkshire presumably derived from 'Plough', which was pronounced 'Ploo' in the locality, plus 'Stots' or the oxen used to pull the plough on pre-tractor farms. Some names, however, such as the 'Tipteerers' of Sussex, remain unexplained.

Further confusion is caused by other generic names which in some areas refer to mummers and in other to different (though sometimes related) customs. 'Guisers', for example, can refer to any custom in which a costume is worn, and local mummers can also be referred to as 'morris dancers' and 'sword dancers'. There were even 'mummers' who simply swept people's hearths while making a humming noise.

Folklorists long ago decided that the names under which a custom appears are too unstable to be of much help in describing, classifying or understanding traditional activities. It is *what happens in the custom* which matters, not its *name*.

Going mumming

Another unromantic fact about the custom is that all the evidence (including interviews with pre-war mummers) points to the fact that the primary motive for participation was *economic*. Mummers expected to be given money, or food and drink, in return for their performances and it is unlikely they would have gone out without this incentive. They may well have had a sense of tradition, taken pride in their work, enjoyed the fun, and so on, but the prime reason was always the money

they could raise, and this went to themselves, not to charity as it would usually nowadays.

But old-time mummers were quick to point out that mumming was hard work. They would regularly walk thirty miles a day, in costume, in all weathers, and perform their play maybe a dozen times. One commented that in the twenty-five years he took part he never once had Christmas dinner at home with his family, and he was given so many mince pies to eat he got heartily sick of them and had not touched one since. But in a good year he could make the equivalent of two or three weeks' wages over Christmas Day and Boxing Day, and he and his wife kitted out the family with new winter shoes with the proceeds.

Time of Year

Mumming plays are classed as 'calendar customs' because they were nearly always performed at a particular time of year, and not normally at any other time. For the majority, it was Christmas, but in Lancashire and surrounding counties it was Easter; in parts of Cheshire it was Hallowe'en, and the 'Plough Plays' of the East Midlands were performed around Plough Monday, or 6th January, when the farmworkers began the new year ploughing. The time of year is often reflected in the words and character names of the local version - Father Christmas would clearly be out of place in an Easter play, so he does not appear there, while most Easter plays state, or imply, that they want to collect eggs, as well as money.

Organisation

Most mummers teams had their set routes to be followed each year, and where neighbouring villages also had teams there was some rivalry, and even violence between them. Typically, they would perform at the 'big houses' in the area, by appointment, for a set fee, and in local pubs and other places where people gathered.

The venues varied with different types of team, of course. Children would go more to friends and family, or have more restricted areas to cover, and some teams performed out-of-doors for the assembled villagers or, in more populous areas, in the street for passers-by.

Transmission

As with most folklore, mumming plays continued by being passed on informally from person to person and down the generations, and a common scenario was when one of the team moved to another village and started a new team. There were also occasions when a new team was deliberately started by a disgruntled member of an existing troupe, or, when others, mindful of the money to be made, started a rival team.

But in some areas - particularly Lancashire and the North West, the words were printed on little paper-covered booklets, called chapbooks, by which anyone with a penny or two to spend could acquire the words and stage-directions, such as they were. This scenario was particularly common in places where the custom had become one for children. Members of a children's team quickly move on, and the groups of friends who made up the teams often performed for a few years only. The printed texts ensured that the custom could survive even if it only existed in fits and starts.

History of Plough Plays

The history of the Plough or Wooing Play is a little different. As it has come down us, this play seems to be a combination of three different customs.

By far the oldest part is the least 'dramatic', and focuses on the plough

In late medieval and early modern times, one of the religious activities of the post-Christmas year in rural areas was the burning of 'plough lights' or candles in the parish church

Only the rich could afford their own plough, and most people relied on the 'common plough' which was kept in the parish church when not in use. The plough was blessed in a special service at the beginning of the main winter ploughing season - starting on Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Night. Special candles, called 'plough lights' were kept burning in the church, and these were paid for by farm-workers going round the village - with the plough - collecting money. As the

years went by, this perambulation with the plough became less to do with the church and more to do with collecting money for the men themselves.

It is likely that the ploughboys danced and sang at people's doors as they went round the parish, but we do not know how or when this entertainment took on the attributes of a mumming play. It is clear that the 'wooing' parts were taken from stage plays and/or pleasure garden routines of the eighteenth century. The Hero/Combat play, which provides the third section, also seems to date from the middle of the eighteenth century, so it seems most likely that this in the time that the seeds of the Plough Play as we know it, were sown.

Revival Teams and Modern Mumming

With the 'folk revival' after the Second World War many new groups became interested in mumming plays, and there were numerous revivals across the country. At first, the impetus mainly came from morris dancers and folk clubs looking for a different kind of performance to learn, but schools, community groups and others soon picked up on the idea and sought out plays to perform.

As is to be expected, the custom was changed dramatically with this new interest. Even if the new team stuck rigidly to an old text, the types of people taking part, their motives for performance, the venues, reactions of the audiences, and so on, were radically different to how it used to be, and had little in common with the previous generations.

It was the style of performance which usually changed most, with the new groups often unconsciously modelling their performance on pantomime, or melodrama, and introducing ad-libbing, audience participation, slapstick and verbal by-play. This is not to criticise these developments, as each team can do whatever it wishes, but to emphasise that this is not how the plays were done in the past and to highlight the scale of the changes which occurred with the Revival.

It is also a warning to those who wish to claim that their custom goes back centuries – it does, but only in the loosest sense and no particular element of modern performance can be used as evidence of origin or past practice.

Many of the post-war revival teams lasted just a few seasons, but some have now been going for decades and, it could be argued, have built up traditions of their own. There is also a handful of teams, such as the Marshfield Paper Boys, the Antrobus Soulcakkers and the Midgley Pace-egggers, who can claim a longer history, and who have not dramatically altered their styles in living memory.

Types of Plays

Because the mumming plays were traditional - handed on from person-to-person and down the generations, they varied considerably, and each version was unique in some way or another. But once a large number had been noted down ready for comparison it became clear that there were three main types which could be distinguished by major differences in the plot or in the structure of the play, by the characters involved and, to a certain extent, the geographical area in which they were found.

The three types are: the **Hero-Combat (or St. George) play**, the **Wooing (or Plough) play**, and the **Sword Dance play**.

These are not watertight definitions as there are overlaps - many 'Wooing Plays' have a 'hero-combat' section in the middle, for example - but the broad categories help us to organise our material into manageable chunks.

There are also sub-divisions within each main type that are explained more fully on the pages devoted to them

Hero-Combat Plays

By far the most common type of play - found in well over a thousand places across Britain - was what folklorists have called the Hero-Combat play or the St. George Play. The first name reflects the fact that the basic action includes two 'heroes' or knights who fight, while the second is because the most common name for the first 'hero' is Saint or King George.

The hero/combat play is not only the most common form of mumming in its own right, but it also regularly appears as a section within versions of the Plough Play and Sword Dance Play. Some writers take this as evidence that the Hero/Combat is therefore the oldest of the three types, but this is, at present, unproven.

The characters who appear in the play go under a bewildering variety of names, which is why folklorists are often more interested in the roles they play, such as 'Presenter', 'Hero', and so on, rather than their names.

Synopsis

The Presenter introduces the team by declaring that they are about to perform, often calling for 'room' to act, and he calls on the first Hero character, often described as a knight of some sort. This knight boasts of his bravery and military prowess and challenges anyone to come and fight him. Another knight appears to take up the challenge and after some boasting and counter-boasting they have a sword fight and one falls to the ground. In some versions other knights appear one by one and are similarly dispatched by the 'hero'. The Presenter laments the death of the knight, who he sometimes claims is his son, and calls for a doctor to come and heal him. The Doctor appears and there is usually some humorous byplay and haggling between him and the Presenter. The Doctor boasts of his prowess (often in topsy-turvy nonsensical language). The Doctor often has an Assistant who clowns about a little. The Doctor administers a pill or some medicine from a bottle and the 'dead' knight gets up. There often follows a series of characters who do little but recite a rhyme and ask for money, food or drink. This last sequence is called the Quete or Collection by folklorists.

The performance would usually end with a song and sometimes some other entertainment would follow, such as a dance, some humorous sketches, comic songs, Christmas carols, and so on.

Hero-Combat Sub-Divisions

Plays performed at Easter

These are often called 'Pace-Egging' or 'Peace-egging' - usually had the same structure as other Hero/Combat plays but had different character-names. The Heroes were often given names of real historical people, Lord Nelson, for example, and there was a Bessy Brownbags with eggs in her basket and a 'fool' character called Tossopot.

The Soul-cakers of the Cheshire

Performed around Hallowe'en (All Souls) and they often had a Wild Horse character who entertained near the end of the play. A real horse's skull, or a wooden replica, was mounted on a broomstick or other pole. A man, hidden under a blanket, or other cloth cover, bent forward and grasped the pole, and became the Horse. Another man, his Driver, led him in on a piece of rope and in a rhymed speech described the horse and its antics, while the latter neighed, misbehaved and cavorted on cue.

Robin Hood plays

Quite rare in the tradition were the Robin Hood plays, which not only included characters like Robin Hood and Little John but they also incorporated verses from Robin Hood ballads in their texts.

Plough Or Wooing Plays

Traditionally found only in the East Midlands – Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Rutland.

The Plough Play is so named because it usually took place around Plough Monday and the teams often took a plough round with them, but it can also be called the Wooing Play or Recruiting Sergeant Play, reflecting the action and the characters. Of the three types of Mumming Play, the Plough Play is in many ways the most complex, and the most like a conventional theatrical 'play', although the custom as performed around the villages still bore little resemblance to a stage play.

The basic plot is: A young man courts a Lady but is rejected and he is persuaded to join the army by a Recruiting Sergeant. The Lady then accepts the hand of a Clown or Fool. An older female appears and accuses the Clown of being the father of her illegitimate baby, which he denies. The next sequence is the same as the basic Hero/Combat play in which two characters fight, one is killed and he is revived by a doctor.

The wooing section of the play is often sung, and the female parts were all played by men.

Sword Dance Plays

The Sword Dance plays are the most difficult to grasp nowadays. The texts and descriptions which have come down to us are clearly fragmentary, and we don't even know basic things like whether the 'play' and the 'dance' were originally separate customs or whether they had always been combined. Many of the sword dances documented around the turn of the twentieth century did not have a play attached and we don't know if they had lost them, or never had them.

Sword dances often have a 'calling-on song' that introduces and names each dancer, which implies that they will all take individual part in some storyline, but this does not usually happen, although they do sometimes have a verse of text to recite before, or after dancing.

In addition to the dancers, a team usually includes a Captain, a Fool of some sort, and often a Bessy or man/woman character. The play usually involves a death and revival, like the other types of mumming play, but the crucial difference is that the death is not caused by individuals fighting but by the dancers placing their swords around the neck of one of the characters and 'hanging' or decapitating him. With the wooden swords of the Long Sword type of dance, this can be done relatively safely, but with the shorter metal swords of the Rapper teams this is impossible to carry out in reality and usually there is a symbolic killing by knocking his hat off.

Characters and Roles

The character-names vary widely across the country and are often less important than the *roles* which the characters fulfilled.

Where the play was performed at Christmas, Father Christmas was almost always included, usually as the Presenter. Incidentally, the name 'Santa Claus' was virtually unknown in Britain till late Victorian times, so its appearance in a play signals a relatively recent addition.

By far the most common name for the first hero or knight is King or St. George, but others were often found, such as 'Galoshans' in Scotland, or other Kings, such as King William. It is clear that St. George was the original, as whatever the name his lines almost always include a reference to killing a dragon.

Contrary to general belief, however, it was extremely rare to find a play in which a Dragon appeared as a character, and where such a version was found it had invariably been taken from a book rather than from the local tradition.

The name of George's first combatant varies widely, although 'Turkish Knight' (or 'Turkey Snipe', etc.) is common, but he can be 'Bold Slasher', 'the King of Egypt', 'the Noble (or Bold) Captain', and so on.

The Doctor is almost invariably just 'the Doctor' or something simple like 'Doctor Brown' or 'Doctor Dodd'. It is often assumed that this was a satirical reference to a real local doctor, but it is more likely that the rhyme of his speech dictated it – 'In comes I Doctor Brown / The best quack doctor in thus town..', and so on.

Little Johnny Jack (with his 'wife and family on his back')

Beelezeb ('and on my should I carry my club..')

Little Devil Doubt ('with my shirt tail hanging out..')

In all traditional customs there are great areas of similarity between teams, but also major areas of difference. Character names, for example, could change a great deal, but the *roles* that they played in the performance remained constant. So, for example, the main 'hero' or 'knight' might be St. George, King George, King William, Galoshans, and so on, but what he did was exactly the same.

Folklorists have therefore identified this as the basic structure:



Introduction

Presenter – The one who announces the team and says that they will soon be performing. He often asks for 'room' or a space to perform.

Hero 1 – The first of the heroes or knights who boasts of his own exploits, brags of his bravery, and challenges others to fight.

Hero 2 – The knight who takes up the challenge

The Fight

There can be more Heroes and more fights

The Lament

The character who laments the death/wounding of Hero 2 and who calls for the Doctor. The Lamentor is often the same character as the Presenter.

The Cure

The Doctor who performs the Cure, often after some haggling with the Lamentor

The Doctor often has an Assistant who helps/hinders in the Cure

The Quête

Other characters who take no real part in the action but who ask for money, food, drink, and so on.

The Entertainment

Most teams rounded off the performance with songs, dances, other skits, and so on.

The above is the basic country-wide action, but in some places there were extras. For example, in some there was a Wild Horse and his Driver, in others one of the characters was dressed and acted as an 'old woman' and so on.

Performance Style

In trying to understand how the mummers performed their custom, it is important to remember that in many respects they were not really 'plays' as we think of them nowadays. There was no stage, no scenery, few props, no curtains or wings, no lights and music, no real characterisation, and, in the earlier style especially, a costume which did not differentiate the characters.

Where opportunity arose, such as in a pub, the performers might stand outside a doorway and 'enter' and 'exit', but in most cases the men would stand at the back, or to one side of the room, in a line, and simply step forward into the centre with their words 'In comes I..' in response to the previous speaker's cue, 'Step in --- and clear the way'.

The performance style of the old traditional teams varied with each type of play, but also by region and over time. As with the costume, there was a discernible drift from the earlier 'stylized' action to a more 'representational' style, in which the 'acting' was more life-like and more like what one would expect from a 'play'. This was especially true when people who came from an 'amateur dramatics' background began to get involved.

To take the Hero/Combat or St. George play first, these were not performed like pantomime, nor played for laughs, or like melodrama. There was no ad libbing, chasing around, or appeals to the audience, and even the sword fight and death were underplayed. Gestures were minimal and stylised - as one old mummer said, 'There's no *acting* in it'. They walked up and down a lot - as the two knights were challenging each other, for example, they would counter-march across the room, clashing swords as they passed. Visually, they were upright, stiff, formal.

There were two exceptions to this rule. The Father Christmas character, who often introduced the play and lamented the death of this son the 'hero' of the play, was often played as an old man leaning on a stick. He also had some humorous verbal interplay with the Doctor.

The Doctor (and his assistant, where there was one) were usually the only ones with overt comic lines and actions. But even here, the humour was usually underplayed, subtly done, and of the 'topsy-turvy' verbal kind - 'I knocked at the dog, and the door bit me'. The one thing that singles out modern performances from the traditional is the inclusion in the former of *physical* humour in the cure section. In the past, it was primarily verbal.

Except for the sequences with the Doctor, the rest of the text was loudly and rhythmically *declaimed* without emotion, or characterisation.

There is some evidence from the later periods that the men would act more 'robustly' in the pub than in a posh person's house, and even moderated the play's text a little to suit the company.

The Plough or Wooing Plays were somewhat different. The Hero/Combat section was done relatively straightforward and seriously, but the wooing parts were often in dialogue between two characters and were either sung, or recited in a sing-song style and the 'female' characters, being men dressed up, were burlesqued, and the actors would put on high-pitched voices and flounce about.

Costume

In conventional plays we are used to having characters identified by their dress, but in the mumming play this was not so. Admittedly, later teams started dressing 'in character', but in the earlier tradition the performers dressed the same. A common style, especially in the south of England, was in long strips of rag or wallpaper sewn on their clothes, with tall hats (made of cardboard) with strips coming down over the face, completely disguising them. Other teams had shorter shreds and patches but they were likewise anonymous to the onlooker.



Marshfield Mummers 2000 (Doc Rowe Collection)

It is interesting to note that even in later teams where 'dressing in character' was the norm, some of the performers wore patches, ribbons or streamers. This was particularly true of characters who did not have an easily identifiable persona – everyone knows what Father Christmas or a Doctor should dress like, but someone called 'Twing Twang' or 'Hind Before' is less obvious.

It is often stated, quite confidently, that the origin of the mummers' costume is that it was a *disguise* to prevent breaking the magic of ancient fertility rituals or luck-bringing ceremonies. However, this is a modern invented explanation based on romantic wishful thinking rather than evidence. There is no evidence to support any notion of ritual origin, or that the play is older than the 18th century, and precious little that any of the mummers thought they should be anonymous.

Indeed, throughout the recorded history of the custom, although the performers themselves were working-class one of their key places of performance was at the houses of people from a higher (and richer) social status e.g. the gentry, the squire, the farmers, the parson, the local magistrate, and so on. The idea that the mummers were in some way counter-cultural, subversive, or secret is completely untenable.

Some teams blackened their faces, and this also is confidently asserted to be a form of disguise. The germ of this comes from the fact that participants in social protest movements such as the Captain Swing riots of the 1830s, did disguise themselves in this way (whilst operating at night), but again there is no tradition of anonymity being thought necessary in the Mummers. The origin of the black faces in the Mummers is more likely borrowed from the craze for blackface minstrels, which emanated from America in the 1830s and a hugely popular form of entertainment for the rest of the century, and beyond.

Most of the participants wore some kind of hat that could be decorated with a few ribbons or colourful patches. In later times, this was an approximation of the character – top hat for the Doctor, fez for the Turkish Knight, military cap for George. In its most ornate form – as in Hampshire – the hat was a tall cardboard construction covered in tinsel, rosettes, and ribbons, with streamers hanging down over the face.

Props were few and simple (they had to be carried from place to place). The 'heroes' had something to fight with; The Doctor usually had a bag and bottle or box of pills, and others might carry something mentioned in their speech e.g. Beelzebub's frying pan or Johnny Jack's dolls on his back.

The Performers

In the vast majority of cases, the performers were adult working-class males, often, but not always, the young men of the village. Boys were sometimes brought into the team to 'learn the ropes' with a minor part and gradually worked their way up as older ones dropped out, and at times 'youth teams' were formed, specifically to ensure that the tradition continued. But in some areas – particularly Lancashire and the North-West – the tradition was, as far as we know, always a children's one. A later development, probably only dating from the inter-war years, was for local schools to take over the tradition and to ensure its continuance. The team at Midgley in Yorkshire is one of these 'school-based' traditions.

As the custom was primarily rural, most of the participants were farm-workers, and this was especially true of the Plough Plays of the East Midlands, but where another industry or sector prevailed, such as in a mining area, the mummers would mainly be drawn from that occupation. Where we have detailed information about participants, it is often the case that particular families were involved – brothers and brothers-in-law were often in the same team and fathers brought their sons in. There is some evidence that because the mummers could make a significant amount of money, some of them jealously guarded the words of their play and tried to discourage others from forming a new team. Nevertheless, there were sometimes rival teams in the same area.

There are occasional references to women participating in performances, but this was clearly highly unusual. The exception, again, is in the children's pace-egging of the North West, where references to girls are found, but it was still not common. Women were, of course, heavily involved in support roles such as making and repairing costumes, and when someone was needed to remember a text from years before – either for revival or to be noted down for posterity – it was often the women in the community who could provide the necessary knowledge.

Finding out more

Books

Only a handful of book-length studies have been published over the years, but much more material was made available in journal articles and ephemeral booklets. Many of the latter can be consulted at the Vaughan Williams Library or the Library of the Folklore Society. Full listings of publications can be found on the two Mumming websites listed below.

[NB: anything published before about 1985 may contain useful material, but will certainly include theories of origin and history which are now discredited]

- R.J.E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1923)
- E.K. Chambers, *The English Folk Play* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1933)
- Alex Helm, *The English Mummers' Play* (D.S. Brewer, 1981)
- Cawte Helm & Peacock, *English Ritual Drama* (Folklore Society, 1967)
- Eddie Cass & Steve Roud, *Room Room Ladies and Gentlemen: an Introduction to the English Mummers' Play* (EFDSS, 2002).
- Eddie Cass, *The Lancashire Pace-Egg Play: A Social History* (Folklore Society, 2001)

Mumming in Scotland and Ireland

- Alan Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama* (Mercier Press, 1969)
- Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1975)
- Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: The Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1992)
- Emily Lyle, *Galoshins Remembered* (NMS Enterprises, 2011)

Online resources

- The Ordish Collection, formed around the turn of the twentieth century and housed in the Folklore Society's archives, is available online on the *Full English* project website: www.vwml.org

- *The Master Mummers* website, compiled by Peter Millington:
<http://www.mastermummers.org/>
- *Traditional Drama Research Group* website: <http://www.folkplay.info/>

These two websites include a wealth of material on the subject, and are nowadays the most effective ways of finding a play from a particular area.

Sample texts

When thinking of performing or publishing a play, thought must nowadays be given to some of the content, because ethical standards have changed since the time when they were first performed. This is particularly pertinent if the plays are to be used with children.

A close inspection of the text will show that these problems are usually easily fixed. The most common example is that derogatory terms are used in the argument between St. George and the Turkish Knight or King of Egypt, such as when he calls him 'you Black Morocco dog'.

In a different potential problem area, the themes may be a little too adult. In the Plough or Wooing plays, for example, one of the regular minor motifs is that a female character accuses the Fool of being the father of her bastard baby.

Various sample texts are available for download from the EFDSS Resource Bank (www.efdss.org/resourcebank). The texts are given as originally noted down. It is up to you to alter whatever you think might nowadays be regarded as offensive.



Explore The Full English digital archive

www.vwml.org/thefullenglishproject

Discover more learning resources

www.efdss.org/resourcebank