



# The Prancing Pony

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## May 2021



This month Robin Marshall-Ball continues his journey through the 1970s to the point where he realises his calling. Bob Hill provides a detailed and wide-ranging historical survey of the history of May Day in which he explores the role of the "Old Religion" and weaves



in references to many cultural traditions. Meanwhile preparations for WHM's first dance out at The Bell in Wylde on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> May continued last week in chilly Bishopstrow and were set to resume this week at Fonthill Park CC. We have a draft programme in place but pubs are still waiting till the Government's next announcement with respect to rules on serving indoors and public entertainment.

### Episode 2 from Robin Marshall-Ball

#### Commuting and its Consequences

Durrington Comprehensive School in 1978; headmaster Tom Spruce, famed for encountering a boy waiting outside his office, dragging him in and caning him, only to discover that he was not a miscreant and did not even attend his school, but had been sent as a messenger, delivering a letter from the neighbouring comprehensive school in Amesbury!

For the first eighteen months at the school I rented an officer's married quarters near Bulford – barely a mile away from school, but house prices on that side of Salisbury Plain had a 'military premium' – too expensive for me and my young family. We had to 'look west'. Houses in Trowbridge, Frome, Warminster and Westbury were much more affordable. The prospect of a 40-mile round trip to work each day was daunting, but I then discovered that a group of the younger generation of teachers at Durrington had already settled in the far west and shared transport for the commute – an ideal solution! Nick Pash (modern languages) in Frome, Mike Pratt (English) at Crockerton, Pat McGovern (special needs) in Trowbridge – he then moved to Warminster, and Mike Perry (chemistry) at Bishopstrow, picking up Huw Jenkins (languages) at Chitterne on the way. I bought a house in Westbury and joined the 'Westbound Stage'.

This is when the real 'Morris' indoctrination began! A bit of background needed here – a guitar player and singer in a rock group (we didn't call them 'bands' in those days) from the age of 13 in West Wales, there were so few of us around that by the time I was in sixth-form we had supported the Kinks, Hollies, Billy J Kramer, Manfred Mann and others when they played Aberystwyth. I had often shared the mic with Andy Fairweather-Lowe in our 'sister group' from Swansea – Amen Corner. But then, when in Swansea College I 'went folkie' – you know the scene – wearing the

obligatory fisherman's smock or black polo-necked sweater, with a finger stuck in an ear singing *Wild Rover*, *Liverpool Judies*, *Martin*, and *Byker Hill* etc!



That, I thought after a ten-year break, was well behind me.... until the daily commute with Pat McGovern in the car! We often ran two cars – going in separately if we had an after-school activity, and there were six of us when Val Perry joined the 'syndicate' in the mid 80's. Music was an important part of our commute – cassette tapes of Frank Zappa or Lynyrd Skynyrd in Mike Perry's car, Elvis Presley's Greatest Hits in Mike Pratt's large estate, constant Jethro Tull when it was my turn to drive, and Chieftains/Dubliners/De Danaan in Pat's car. BUT! Whichever car we were in, whenever there was a pause to change tapes, the McGovern harmonica would burst into 'Highland Mary', 'Shooting Adderbury' 'Not for Joe' and others! Just occasionally when space allowed (and very often when it didn't) Pat would produce his bodhran – allegedly made from the stretched skin of the very last Antediluvian Aardvark that survived in a post-glacial Sligo bog! Though a shooter and angler, I had a bit of 'conservation concern', after all, Aardvark never hurt anyone! In the car we all thrilled to the bodhran accompaniment to such folk ditties as *All shook up*, *Jailhouse Rock*,

and even *Freebird*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Locomotive Breath* and others, but he was really stymied by Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* and *Un-square Dance*!

Memorable commuter moments . . . . .

The McGovern Parrot. . . . an unsuspecting kestrel perched on a roadside post was positively identified, with absolute certainty by Pat, as a parrot! Even now, whenever I see this elegant little bird of prey hovering by a roadside, I pronounce to all within hearing that it is a McGovern Parrot!



The puppy. . . . . One of our westbound stage team, Nick, had acquired a 7-seater Peugeot estate which would accommodate us all. At the same time he also gained a 'Staffie' puppy which couldn't be left at home all day – both Nick and his French wife Annie were working full-time. Thus the puppy came with us on the commute to Durrington. Over the course of about four weeks, the little and bored canine systematically ate the car from the inside! Beginning with the carpets, then the upholstered seats and even the headlining – I can remember sitting on the metal frame and coil springs of a rear passenger seat for a journey home – all the coverings were either shredded or in the dog's stomach 'Three wheels on my wagon'. . . . mine was always the most ancient of the cars we had. On one homeward journey, just as I had turned onto the Chitterne road out of Shrewton, the car gave a gentle lurch and came to a stop. . . . but heroically, the nearside front wheel continued on its journey! Val was astute in her observations – "You've lost a wheel Robin!" . . . . we got home, eventually!

After all the indoctrination I was guardedly curious as to what this 'Morris dancing' was all about. Pat lived in Trowbridge, and to get to the weekly Morris practice in Warminster he passed through Westbury. He frequently offered to pick me up on his way through, and finally I succumbed.

In a small dimly-lit hall in the back streets of Warminster I was introduced to the leader (Squire in Morris parlance) Alan Harrison – at first meeting, a somewhat taciturn and thoughtful individual who seemed to dedicate his life to 'the dance', and his second-in-command, the Bagman, Richard 'Cannonball' Baker. . . . his opening and challenging greeting to me was, " 'ere, you're a teacher, what's the

last thing that goes through a bumble bee's brain when he hits your windscreen?" . . . "His arse!" I replied. He smiled and offered his hand in greeting "You'll be OK, welcome!"



Knotty Ash / Brian Dempsey / Graham Lever / Richard Baker (Bagman) / 'Old' Lord Bath? / Alan Harrison (Squire) / John Allard / Peter Pike / Colin Shaw / Pat McGovern Seated, Robin Marshall-Ball and John Wippell. . . . .  
 .missing from photo - Ian Petts / Pete Hewitt / Bob Burgess / Calvin Eales / A N Other?

I was taken aside to be taught the standard steps while the rest assembled to practise a dance – a handkerchief dance called 'Highland Mary' in the Bampton tradition (whatever that was!). The reader of these lines will perhaps forgive me for becoming a little emotional / mystical here – up till that moment my vision of Morris dancing was summed up by a 'bunch of effete middle-class folkies waving hankies around as an excuse to drink beer'.

I watched the team dance Highland Mary, and I was awe-struck. With Calvin Eales and Colin Shaw as the front two, there was a sheer power and masculinity in the dance that I had only ever witnessed before on a rugby pitch! This wasn't just 'waving hankies around' – this was harnessing the human spirit and the power of raw Nature.



(Calvin Eales back left, crouching, Pat McGovern back right standing, Colin Shaw airborne right in The Mighty WHMM show dance at the 1990 Ring Meeting).

I wanted to be a Morris Dancer!

Robin Marshall-Ball

[This sounds like a cue for "to be continued".]



## May Day – by Bob Hill

May Day, as with so much of the folklore, myth and legend of this country as we know it today, is an amalgam of ages, differing cultures, travel and in more recent times the romanticism of presumed lost rural innocence. What we now have is a remnant of something that some claim could be founded in a seasonal festivals of the Celtic world or even its precursors, but is now a mish-mash resulting from centuries of cultural interpretation and social change.



What we now think we know of May Day in England, if not the rest of the UK, is what is probably the remnant of a pan-cultural festival. It can be suggested that it is a fusion of a sun worship festival and one of tree worship or general crop fertility. The first was brought here by the early European migration of peoples probably in the late Neolithic that were pushed into the extremities of these Islands to become what we know as the proto-Gaels by a later migration of tribes from central and eastern Europe in the early Bronze Age. Those peoples later were influenced by the migrations at around the start of the Iron Age with more emphatic Celtic cultural intervention to become what are now referred to as the Brittonic tribes.

Many associate May Day with Beltane / Beltane / Beltaine, which is also said to be one of the major ceremonial days within the calendar of Witches / Wiccans and other followers of branches of the Old Religion that some label as Pagan. Depending on your beliefs the image of this can range from old hags with pointed hats riding broomsticks or stirring smoking cauldrons, through remembered lines from a Shakespeare play, to a holy ceremony that can be experienced as part of any other religion.

Beltaine – which roughly translates as “bright fire” – was a tradition celebrated in various forms across the northern and western parts of the British Isles as the starting point of summer. It was one of four seasonal festivals, along with Samhuinn, Imbolc and Lughnasadh, and was a chance for communities to come together to mark the changing of the seasons. In more recent decades there has been much corruption of this through the induced fear and images coming from cinema and fiction that it has almost become a

resurrection of the ‘Witch Hunts’ of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.



In itself Beltane is predominantly a festival that was practised within the areas of the ancient Irish and the Gaels as can be suggested where

the remnants of the events that survived to be recorded as late as the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It is based around the old sun god Bel who was often associated with an image of a wheel to reflect the perceived solar cycle. However, if one searches for Beltane Fire on the web the dominant response is another version of the Edinburgh Fringe with little akin to the festival from which it takes its name.

Traditionally all the fires in the hearths of houses were extinguished on May Eve across Eire, the Scottish Isles, most of the Scottish mainland and even down into some parts of northern England. Then during that day large bonfires were assembled on high hills or other prominent spots and were then lit either that night or just before dawn on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. This was to welcome back Bel now that the deity was well above the horizon for most of the day. Often two fires were built side by side and cattle and other livestock, which had overwintered in sheds or longhouses, were driven between as a purification ritual before then being put out onto the early spring pastures.

This was associated with much feasting and jollification by the people who would also use the event to open their houses and let the smoke from the fires enter into them as part of the spring purification. In some parts of the country portions of the fires were paraded through the streets or held on high on pitch-forks in a similar manner to some mid-winter fire festivals. Generally each household took embers from the ritual fire as it died down back to their homes where they used them to rekindle the fires that were maintained for the rest of the year.

At the same time the doors of the houses were draped around with garlands of flowers and newly-cut branches to show that they were now clean and to celebrate the coming of Spring.

This is possibly a later introduction as it is more redolent of the customs further south in this island.





In some areas a wooden wheel that was put into the Betanien fire towards the end of the ceremony to be set ablaze before it was taken out and then rolled down a hill into the sea or a river depending on the location. This was seen as helping the sun

run through the heavens till it is extinguished by water the counter to fire as night is to day.

Other traditional customs found with the Gaelic culture, as well as elsewhere in England on *Latha Buidhe Bealltainn* was for young girls to wash their faces in the very early morning May Day dew to preserve youthfulness and attractiveness. Another common



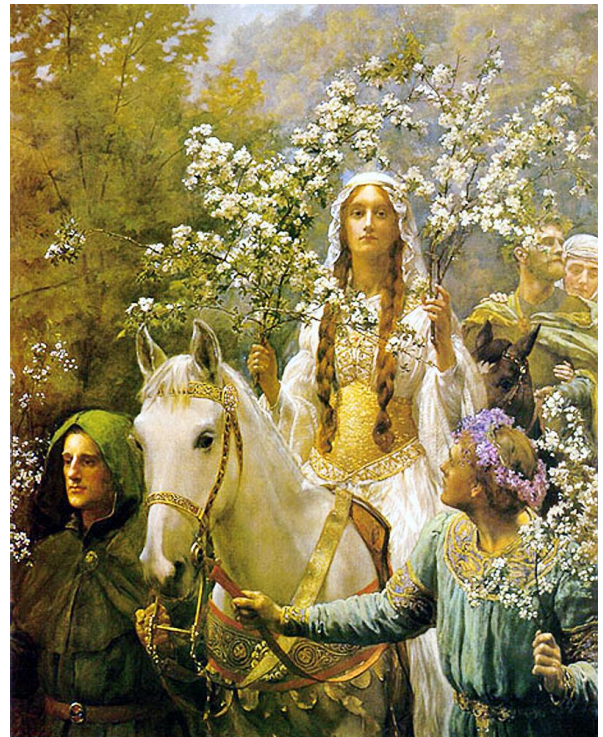
tradition on this day was to leave offerings such as dumplings or coins in exchange for good health by the side of wells.

In its simplest form this fire ritual, as well as welcoming

back the sun, may have been a means of cleansing livestock of insects that they had accumulated from living in their cramped and dirty accommodation since the end of the previous autumn that were then thought to be the evil spirits and the like that caused disease and harm. However, subtle changes took place to this form of ceremony from about the early to mid-14<sup>th</sup> century when there was greater influence of the Christian church in the more remote parts of these lands. This was also a time of great climate change when temperatures across the northern hemisphere dropped by about 2°C over a period of about 20 years leading to colder, wetter weather with widespread crop failures, famine and years of plague and the end of days was foretold. It now became a tool to drive out witches and demonise others who folk had grudges against or were perceived as not being God-fearing enough and may be the origins of the phrase to *smoke somebody out*.

In comparison with the celebrations of northern and western parts of these islands, there was a very different form in most of what we now consider England where it was the trees that were worshipped. With them we also have their spirits and that of nature in general brought into a character as the Green Man, Jack in the Green, or their female counterpart as the May Queen and in some places her Christianised alter ego The Virgin Mary. This was a pure festival of fertility, birth

and re-growth that accompanied the outward signs of the start of the vernal year. Because this is where most of the readers of *PP* live this is the form of the celebration that we are probably more commonly bring



to mind at this time of year with its associations with the phallic May Pole.

Celebrations for this branch of the festival (pun intended) started at sunset on May Eve when the inhabitants of a community would go out into the woods and commune with nature for the night. Depending on whose writings one reads these all have the implication that there was a great level of sexual activity involved such as one tract from a writer in 1538 which relates ‘...that of fortie, threescore or a hundred maides going to the wood overnight, there have scarcely a third part of them returned home againe undefiled.’ From that we still have the old ditty oft recited by a certain member of White Horse – ‘*The first of May, the first of May, outdoor s\*\*\*\*\*g starts today.*’

In the morning the people returned to their villages and towns bringing with them flowers, branches with leaves and all forms of woodland garlands to bedeck their houses, their doors and more importantly the may pole. This was accompanied by what was often a parade of twenty or more oxen or horses that were decorated with flowers and these would draw a freshly-cut tree that had been stripped of its branches, painted with stripes and decorated with flowers and herbs bound around it with string from top to bottom and was to become their May Pole. Following on behind was most of the community who, when they got the tree to the right spot, would hoist the tree / pole up and into position. Stalls and tents were then assembled around the area and dancing, feasting and general merriment then proceeded for the rest of the day and into the night.



Through the east Midlands and out into the Wolds and East Anglia houses in villages were individually decorated with a tree, often 2-3m high, cut from the woods and erected in front of each one and then strewn with flowers 'so as it would appear to be in blossom.' This was in addition to the other foliage and flowers that were used to dress the doors and houses both inside and out. It is worth noting that hawthorn was never brought into the home except on May Day, as at other times it was considered unlucky.

In some locations little girls went from door to door with garlands of two hooped branches that meet at right angles in the middle and were decorated with fresh leaves and flowers with a doll in the middle. Depending on where they were this doll was called the goddess. In Bampton in the Bush it was Mithras, but in most places by the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century it had been Holy Mary. At Islip on Otmoor there was a church-led procession carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary, a deity often associated with water source holy sites, which had all the trappings of a pre-Christian celebration.

One of the key members of the May Day celebrations was a man within a wicker frame that was covered with



green-leaved branches as well as flowers. His head was covered with what was often a conical shaped hat,

also clad with leaves and flowers, which extended down to the shoulders so that he had to be led around on a rope as otherwise he could not see. This was the recreation of the spirit of the Green Man – the spirit of the woods and the fields.

As he was paraded through the streets people made offerings in the form of coins that would contribute to paying for the food and drink for the day. In earlier times it would have been a way of paying priests to propitiate the spirits of nature, the woods and fields, so that they would look kindly on the farmers and allow for a good crop in the following season and a bountiful harvest.

In a different context the green man sculptures that are seen in many churches as roof bosses and corbel brackets are a continuation of this belief. In such positions they often form key distinct structural elements within



the buildings of which they form part. Most frequently they are found on the south sides of churches which would correspond with the sunny side of the wood and not the shaded north. This could almost be seen as an aesthetic joke by the medieval masons who carved these pieces to show that the Christian church was being supported by the spirits of the wild, the woods and fertility from the Old Religion.

It is notable that the bulk of the historically carved Green Men seen within Christian buildings can be considered as being part of an earlier belief as they were produced between the middle to end of the 13<sup>th</sup> through to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> or very early 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was a



time when there were great changes in the climate happening across Europe and most of the then known World. Such things also brought about doubt in the thinking of many in the philosophical and artistic fields as to the authority of the Church and is displayed in a wide range of material ranging from the Doom Painting over the crossing arch of St Thomas in Salisbury to the works of Bosch and Breughel.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a revival and almost an enhancement of the consideration of the Green Man and his female equivalent with its incorporation within architectural motif and decoration. Then as the enlightenment developed through the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries this figure had developed in its decorative use and was accompanied by several revivals, including that in poetry and literature. Perhaps a final flourish for the prominence of the Green Man in



architecture was in the very early 20<sup>th</sup> century with its connection to back to nature movement towards the end of the Arts & Crafts period, only to be blown away by the bombs and gases of what became known as the Great War.

What has probably affected May Day as we see it now is the suppression it suffered firstly during the period of the Commonwealth and Parliamentary Protectorate (1649 – 61) as well as in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century while the UK establishment was under the influence of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England.

In the first period the celebration was outlawed until the Restoration of Charles II and after such a length of time it would have resulted in a general loss of impetus as well as knowledge of why, what and how things happened. So when customs could re-start, as a result they would have been a shadow of their former exuberance. However, it was probably the second period of repression that has had the biggest impact on the day due to it being curtailed more by social pressure combined with ridicule from persons who were then considered as of status within local communities.

There was some revival of May Day along with other activities such as Morris Dancing from the end of the



first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but much of that can be viewed as a renewal of cultural

nationalism rather than an urge to truly celebrate the day for what it was. These were people of influence who were under the influence of the Church where for the main body it was seen as a resurgence of Paganism at a time when there was a fall- off in attendance combined with an aging congregation. For those who may have seen themselves as somewhat more liberal-minded it was a quaint custom with great overtones of Merry England as promoted by the rustic poets, but by then it had been cleaned-up / sanitised to fit neatly within the minds of the middle class who liked to spectate at such *jolly rural* customs.

So when we consider May Day as we experience it today, it is a simple and almost Disneyesque version of what it was originally in its various forms in the parts of the country where it was celebrated. Few realise its origins and even fewer want to know for one reason or another. It is another attraction in the calendar of events that goes along with village fetes and schools sports days - all nicely package and pasteurised so as not to worry anybody.

Bob Hill

### News from Liz

Latest Pike member (Alice's first baby) delivered safely May 4 at 6pm. A little girl 6lbs 8 oz called Izra Elizabeth to be known as Issy. Just a shame Peter not here to see his first grandchild. Hopefully will make next week unless needed in Kingstone

Liz

**All items for the next *Prancing Pony* to Mike Perry by Friday 12 June and preferably sooner.**

### Limited letters Crossword (from PP27) VIDEO killed the radio star

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### Ioan Jenkins on fiddle

Ioan Jenkins, possibly in a pub in Warminster – in the days when pubs had pianos and men wore ties and jackets to go to the pub. Mari Booker thinks it was probably taken in the early 1950s. She says, “It shows Molly Dale playing the piano and Doug Lakey singing.



“Molly Dale and her husband Bert ran the bike, pram and toy shop on Silver Street in Warminster. Doug Lakey ran the newsagent, also on Silver Street. At first I thought the photograph was taken in our house, but on closer inspection, our piano did not have candle sticks. I wish I knew what they were playing and singing.

“On a slightly different note, I remember Bob Burgess recording dad playing Morris tunes on a reel to reel tape recorder. He once told me they were somewhere safe in his home. I think that when I gave him dad’s waistcoat and top hat that he wore when playing for the Morris.”

### White Horse Returns!!

White Horse Morris plans to dance outside The Bell, in Wylve on Wednesday 19 May. This will be WHM’s first visit since the pub has been under new management.



[info@bellinnwylve.co.uk](mailto:info@bellinnwylve.co.uk)



**Does anyone recognise the location in this picture?**

Dear White Horse

I am a former bagman of the Martlet Sword & Morris Men and am currently custodian of some of the club's archive material. When I discovered the attached unlabelled photo of William Kimber and Kenworthy Schofield, I first assumed that it had been taken at the Headington Ring Meeting of 1959. However, despite extensive enquiries I have been unable to identify the location. More recently I discovered that both the above characters had attended the Salisbury Ring Meeting of 1954 (hosted by White Horse), hence the thought occurred to me that the photo might be of that event. I wonder if you or any of your members might recognise the location as being somewhere in the South Wiltshire area?



The sound recordist in the picture is a particular point of interest, the tape recorder has been identified as an EMI model which was used by the BBC. I would be pleased to hear any suggestions as to his identity.

Good luck with the anniversary celebrations. Best Regards,

Steve Matcham

**If anyone can shed any light on this mystery, please let Helen know and she will put you in touch.**