

MAYPOLE MUSINGS

Researchers think that from very earliest times folk honoured and even worshipped what we now recognize as the first Maypoles. These were probably just simply trees cut down and re-erected in the centre of a village green. Local folk would gather round and dance and sing and generally celebrate the better weather. As Anglo Saxon customs became established Maypoles began to feature in the Anglo Saxon celebrations marking Beltane (bright fire) - the beginning of the growing season, which of course can easily be settled as May 1st. We know that by the 16th century Maypoles were often very tall as we have paintings showing people dancing around them.

There is a quotation from what is supposed to be the 'Tablette Book' of Lady Mary Keyes that one May 1st before she and her sister Lady Jane Grey "had left our warme Bedds" in Bradgate Park, their tirewoman (as they would have called their maid) reported that she had gone down to watch 'the merrie May Pole and alle the painted Morris dancers with Pipe and Tabor'.

That would have been in the middle of the 16th century but gradually Puritan influence came down so strongly against such festivities that in 1599 a Leicester man Richard Woodshawe was accused of speaking in favour of May Day activities. To add to his 'disgrace' he then re-erected the Maypole that had been taken down by the mayor eager to find favour with local Puritan leaders. Four years later the authorities again tried to ban May Day celebrations in Leicester, particularly as May 1st fell on the Sabbath that year, and some reports speak of 'riots in the streets' as a result.

After the Restoration of the Monarchy, many Maypoles were re-instated. One very large one was put up in London and it remained in use each year until it was removed by Isaac Newton to become the support for his telescope! Some of the maypoles from that period survive in villages around the country, though still none had ribbons as we know them. The dances were probably any circular dances that were popular at the time, and of those especially recorded from these times, we still regularly dance Sellenger's Round and Gathering Peascods in their original form, though Packington Pound is less popular now.

After his election victory in 1768 it seems the local MP liberally rewarded the men of Countesthorpe for their support by presenting them with a May-pole and arranging that enough ale was made to 'last four days drinking' – so effectively there was a long weekend holiday with dances every afternoon. We are told one farmer, Mr Mastin, was with a Miss Polly Jordan, though it is not actually recorded how the young lady felt –or her family.

There are paintings showing Maypoles with Ribbons at Vauxhall Gardens, just south of the Thames in London, in the 18th century and Maypole Dancing as we know it today developed from John Ruskin's introduction of it at Whitelands College in 1881. Teachers learnt all about the dances and found them useful in their schools as a means of distracting the children from absenting themselves to go off to the woods to find their own poles and smaller branches to use as garlands. Maypole Dancing as we know it today quickly became a popular tradition, especially in villages, and books of instructions together with notation for suitable tunes were soon available.

Tradition tells us that in the 1890s Loughborough men stole the 30ft permanent Maypole from nearby Belton. They were followed by the Belton youth and a fight ensued by Carr Lane Brook resulting in the Maypole being reinstated in Belton!

Traditional dances such as Barber's Pole, Single and Double Plait and Spider's Web are included in copies that still exist of early instruction books, and now new dances are being created for Maypole Dancing and popular Country Dances adapted, so the repertoire is increasing steadily.

The Maypoles used locally are often portable ones and the Leicestershire and Rutland Folk Committee would be pleased to hear from anyone interested in more details – please look up our web site via your search engine!