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‘PLOUGH BULLOCKS’ AND RELATED PLOUGH MONDAY CUSTOMS IN THE NOTTINGHAM AREA, 1800-1930

by

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Nottinghamshire is well known for its folk plays - particularly those of Plough Monday - thanks largely to Maurice Barley (Barley, 1953). Apart from Barley's collection in Nottingham University Manuscripts Department, there is a wealth of published and unpublished material in Nottingham Local Studies Library, the Nottinghamshire Archives and elsewhere (see Millington, 1980). However, Plough Monday customs *other* than plays have either been neglected or misinterpreted as relics of plays. To help redress the balance, this paper primarily discusses the history and nature of popular *non-play* customs within Nottingham and district.

The earliest references to Plough Monday in Nottingham date from the beginning of the 18th century when a Plough Day Fair was established in 1712, but most meaningful descriptions come from the period between the 1820s and 1920s, during which Plough Monday moved from a rural to an urban setting, although the nature of the traditions altered surprisingly little. Most of the evidence is taken from areas which fall within the borough (created a city in 1897) following the 1877 boundary extension (Figure 1), but Wollaton is included because its villagers travelled to Nottingham with their Plough Monday celebrations. Ruddington is also included for comparison. The record dates are evenly mixed geographically, and there is no evidence of a gradual retreat of the custom away from the town centre.

The Plough Day Fair

The earliest record of Plough Monday in Nottingham is found in the minutes of the common council of the Corporation for 16th January 1709/10 when it was : ‘Ordered that this Corporacions Members of Parliament be wrote to about getting a Grant for two Faires more in the yeare within this town and to know

the charge and difficulty. And 'tis ordered that if the said Faires be obtained the one of them shall be on the Friday before Plow Monday and ye other on Friday before Easter (Guilford, 1914, 47-48). There was no other January fair in Nottinghamshire, and they were sparse in neighbouring counties (*Allen's Nottingham Red Book*, 1914)

Confusion over the date of Plough Monday caused the Corporation to redefine the start day as ‘Fryday imediately preceding the Tuesday next after Epiphany’, which means that they must have regarded Plough Monday as the first Monday after Twelfth Night. A charter was eventually granted by Queen Anne in 1712 using amended wording (Guilford, 1914, 2-7). In later records the fair is usually called either the Plough Day Fair or the Epiphany Fair, although the date appears to have changed again in 1764 (*Creswell's Nottingham Journal*, 1763). References to it in local directories peter out towards the end of the 19th century. Kelly's *Directory of Nottinghamshire* (1864, 500) list a fair on ‘Friday after January 13th, for cattle’. *Allen's Nottingham Red Book* continued to list the fair until its last edition in 1914. Others only mention Goose Fair alone. Although The Fairs Acts of 1871 and 1873 empowered the Secretary of State to abolish fairs and to specify the days on which they were held, it seems more likely that it merged with the Nottingham Cattle Market, as was implied by a press report (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 1879) which talks of ‘the annual Plough-Day Fair’ being held ‘in connection with the Nottingham Cattle Market’. It seems the two institutions amalgamated, especially as more farms became mechanised and the trade in agricultural horses declined.

Unfortunately none of the Plough Day Fair records mention the customs of Plough Monday itself, and vice versa. The only link is the name, and even that is not sacrosanct.

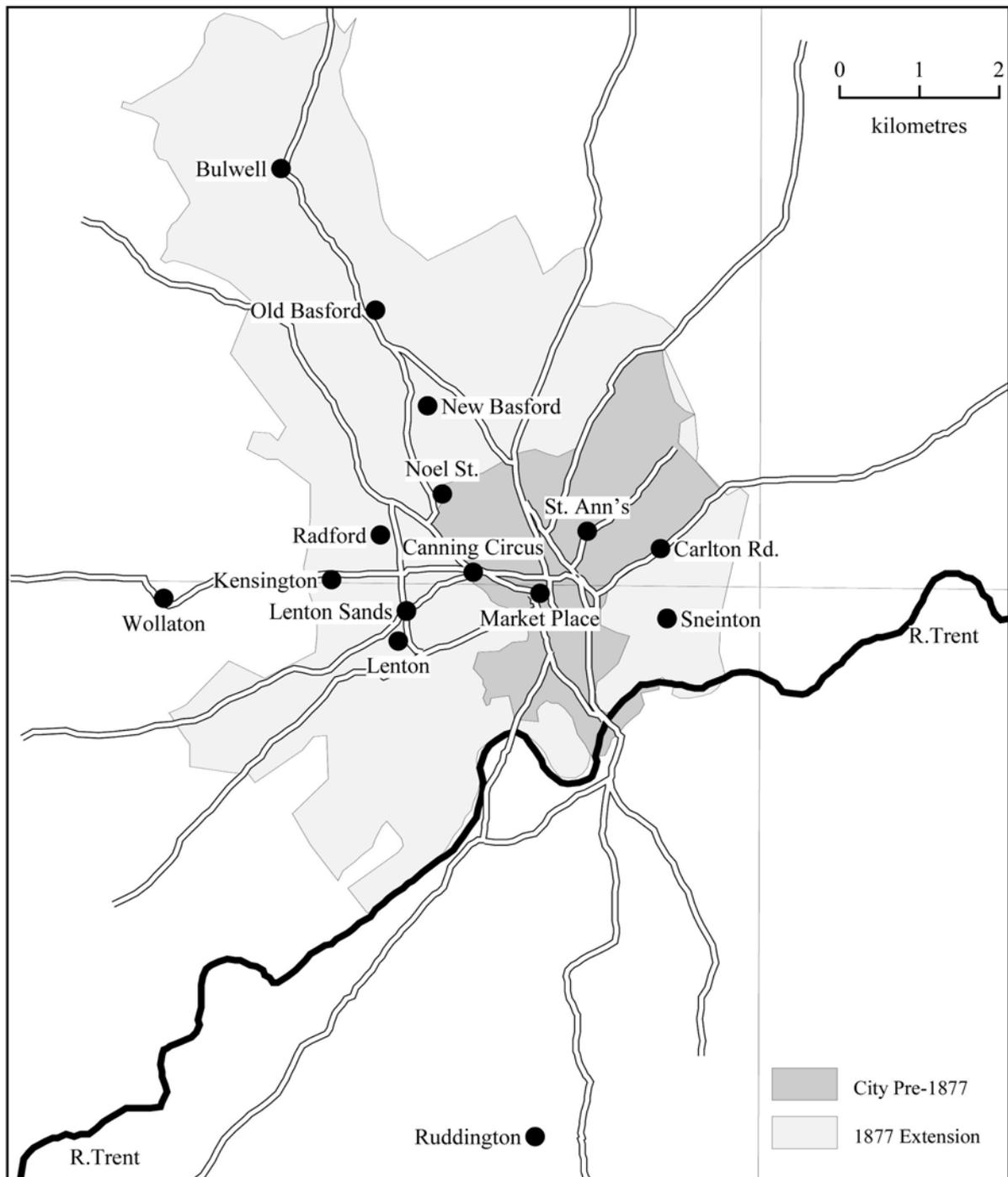


FIGURE 1. Map of Nottingham showing location of Plough Monday activities.

Plough Monday Celebrations

The earliest alleged reference to a Plough Monday custom *per se* in Nottingham is mentioned by Professor Granger (*Nottinghamshire Weekly Express*, 1912). Apparently dated 1822, the original unfortunately cannot be located but the next definite record is only a year later, being an extensive letter of complaint to the press ('Observer', 1823). About eight references occur relatively evenly distributed throughout the rest of the 19th century and then, after a gap, the last in 1924 and 1926. The city custom must have died out shortly after this, although Plough Monday survived until the 1950s in some Nottinghamshire villages.

William Howitt (1838) gives an excellent overview of how Plough Monday is likely to have been celebrated in and around Nottingham:

Plough-Monday, here and there, in the thoroughly agricultural districts, [still] sends out its motley team. This consists of the farm-servants and labourers. They are dressed in harlequin guise, with wooden swords, plenty of ribbons, faces daubed with white-lead, red-ochre, and lamp-black. One is always dressed in woman's clothes and armed with a besom, a sort of burlesque mixture of Witch and Columbine. Another drives the team of men-horses with a long wand, at the end of which is tied a bladder instead of a lash; so that blows are given without pain, but plenty of noise. The insolence of these Plough-bullocks, as they are called, which might accord with ancient license, but does not at all suit modern habits, has contributed more than anything else to put them down. They visited every house of any account, and solicited a contribution in no very humble terms. If refused, it was their practice to plough up the garden walk, or do some other mischief. One band ploughed up the palisades of a widow lady of our acquaintance, and having to appear before a magistrate for it, and to pay damages, never afterwards visited that neighbourhood. In some places I have known them to enter houses, whence they could only be ejected by the main power of the collected neighbours; for they extended their excursions often to a distance of ten miles or more, and where they were most unknown they practised the greatest insolence. Nobody regrets the discontinuance of this usage.

Howitt (1792-1879) was born in Heanor, Derbyshire, and in 1823 took up residence near Nottingham Market Place as a pharmacist, eventually becoming a borough Alderman. He moved to Esher,

Surrey in 1836, where he wrote his popular book *The Rural Life of England* (1838). His description is unlocated, but his Nottingham experiences would surely have been freshest in his mind when he wrote the book. He identifies the principal features of the custom, and these are all confirmed by records relating to named locations in and around Nottingham. A key feature was that financial contributions were demanded from the public under duress, and if nothing was forthcoming, retribution was inflicted on the non-givers (in this respect it resembles 21st century 'trick or treat' customs prevalent at Halloween in Britain and the USA). The level of animosity that the custom could generate is exemplified particularly well by the following letter dating from 1823:

PLOUGH MONDAY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NOTTINGHAM
REVIEW

SIR - The revolving year has again brought us to that period of time called Plough Monday, and if you, or some of your intelligent Correspondents, would favour the public with some account of its origin, I think it would have a good effect, particularly in the country villages; for I am confident it never was intended to be a public nuisance, at it now is. I cannot but think, if the religious part of the community would seriously consider the bad effects it must produce on the morals of youth, they would, by all the means in their power, endeavour to stop so pernicious a custom. It is a well authenticated fact, that the Sabbath day and evening, previous to Plough Monday, are mostly spent in decking and besmearing the annual vagrants* (for they certainly are no better,) called Plough Bullocks. The individuals, who thus disgrace themselves, generally sally forth, before day-light on the morning in question, amongst the peaceable inhabitants of the neighbourhood where they reside, and, in many instances, demand money with as little ceremony as the tax-gatherer. This year, there have been no less than five or six parties of these idle and disorderly persons in this village, who, not being satisfied with wasting Monday for such a bad purpose, have also included Tuesday; nor does the evil end here. For the money, which has been collected, is spent during the remaining part of the week in gluttony and drunkenness, and in nightly revelry and dancing. In fact, it is impossible to pass along the street when what is called the fool and witch are about, without being grossly insulted; and I have seen persons knocked down with a besom, besmeared with dirt, and even lamed by these impudent beggars; yet it is said by the supporters of the system, there is no harm in it, it is all

joking, and it must not be noticed at such a time of merrymaking as this ; but let any prudent person think of the indecorous and disgusting practices which take place in our streets, and see the number of young people, boys, and girls, (and women too, to their shame be it spoken) following and admiring the persons who are the authors of these disgraceful scenes, and if such person does not see the impropriety of encouraging such wickedness, I really do not know what will convince him of it ; and I cannot but think, if our Magistrates have the power to stop this baneful custom, they would render an essential service to the community at large. Should these imperfect remarks be in the least way conducive to stop such a growing evil, it will give me both satisfaction and pleasure. Sunday School Teachers would do well in exposing to the children the evil tendency of the custom, for though it may appear to be harmless in children, it will be found an increasing evil.

I am, Sir, Your's &c AN OBSERVER
Basford, January 14, 1823.

* We believe they are all liable to be taken up under the new Vagrant Act. - ED.

Note that neither Howitt nor 'Observer' mention folk plays in their Plough Monday descriptions. This is no accidental omission (see below).

It is worth pointing out that the festival was specifically called 'Plough Monday' in Nottingham. Elsewhere in Nottinghamshire names such as 'Plough Bullock Night' were also used, based on names for the participants (Millington, 1980). Only 'Old Robin Hood' (1918) provides a definition : 'the first Monday after Twelfth Day'. Where named, the participants were universally called 'Plough Bullocks' and they went 'Plough Bullocking'. This name was common throughout Nottinghamshire and parts of Leicestershire (Barley, 1953, 80), and was used for all activities, whether play or non-play in nature. 'Ploughboys' was the other common term, but this is not mentioned in any Nottingham accounts.

According to 'Observer', the Basford Plough Bullocks set out before daybreak, and presumably continued well into the evening. If Howitt's Plough Bullocks were travelling as much as ten miles with a hand-drawn plough, it must have been an all-day affair. Other references do not indicate the time of day, except in the St. Ann's Well Road district in about 1884 when the custom took place in the evening (*Nottingham Guardian*, 1909).

'Observer' also complained that the Basford Plough Bullocks had extended their activities to the Tuesday, and that preparations started on the Sunday. No other references to the Nottingham district suggest that the celebrations took place on additional days around Plough Monday. Elsewhere, when folk plays were performed, they were often taken to surrounding villages over several days, ending in the home village on Plough Monday itself. Several detailed itineraries illustrate this, for instance at Blidworth (Nottinghamshire Archives, 1960, DD121/1/9).

The participants were primarily men and boys, to the extent that men dressed in women's clothes where necessary. Howitt mentions one female character, unnamed, but likened to Witch and Columbine (a pantomime character). 'Observer' when referring to 'the fool and the witch' also implies that there was a single female character in each party. However F.M.E.W. (1923) mentions four 'plough' men and four men dressed as women at Bulwell Kilnyards in 1870. The number of men-women may therefore have been variable. However women probably helped with costumes and makeup, and also 'Observer' was outraged that girls and women were admiringly following the Plough Bullocks around.

Only Howitt gives a clear indication the participants' occupations (i.e. farm servants), apart from mentions of schoolchildren in other accounts. Where a plough was trailed, it is likely that they were farm workers, if not actual ploughmen, in order to have access to a plough.

The Plough Bullocks' Costume and Dress

Unfortunately, there are no surviving illustrations of Nottingham Plough Bullocks, so we have to rely totally on verbal descriptions and parallels from elsewhere. Facial make-up is most commonly mentioned - usually black, although Howitt (1838) and Herring (1926) say red ochre was an alternative, and Howitt also mentions the use of white lead. Black faces were also common elsewhere in the county. Howitt mentions 'Harlequin guise' - presumably meaning some sort of patchwork - and makes comparisons with Columbine's pantomime costumes. The use of 'plenty of ribbons' (corroborated by F.M.E.W. (1923)) is consistent with this style. Otherwise costume is only described in general terms, using adjectives such as 'strange' and 'grotesque' (eg. Mottershaw, 1924).

Wooden swords or sticks are mentioned by Howitt and by Race when describing the boys' custom around 1924 (S.R., 1924). Race took these to have derived from folk drama, but they could equally have come from pantomime. Harlequin's key accoutrement was a wooden bat, and some other characters also carried swords.

According to his biographer William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who grew up in Sneinton in the 1830s 'entered into the fun of Plough Mondays, when men dressed up in ox-skins with horns on their heads went about the town thrusting their faces into doorways and windows demanding money...' (Begbie, 1920, 33). This is the only local reference to animal hides and horns, but as they are mentioned in popular general accounts (e.g. Hone, 1825 and Chambers, 1864), they may have been added by Begbie as fanciful detail.

The overall picture drawn from contemporary descriptions is not unlike the engraving of Plough Monday in Hone's *Everyday Book* first published in 1825 (Plate 1). This hackneyed picture is of course

contemporary with 'Observer's' letter. The lack of images is equally true of non-play customs throughout Nottinghamshire. There are numerous photographs of folk plays, showing the actors dressed according to character, but there is only one photograph from 1926 of a group of non-play Plough Bullocks from Southwell who had been seen on Burgage Hill the previous evening (Plate 2).

This was published on Tuesday 12th January 1926 (the day after Plough Monday) in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*. The newspaper's weekly edition published a feature article on 'Plough Monday Revels in the Midlands' by P. Herring, which auspiciously appeared the previous Friday (Herring, 1926). Herring says this about the Nottingham custom:

Young fellows calling themselves 'plough bullocks,' their faces either blackened or covered with red ochre, went about the streets and yards of old Nottingham collecting money for drink and spending it at public houses as they received it. Their only claim to be ploughmen rested in the collector, who wore an old smock-frock and carried a waggoner's lantern at night.



Plough Monday

PLATE 1. A Regency view of Plough Monday celebrations. Source : Hone (1825)



PLATE 2. A non-play Plough Monday Custom : Plough Bullocks from Southwell.

Source: *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1926)

The photograph shows four men of uncertain age dressed in agricultural fashion with pitchforks, slouch hats and clay pipes, etc. At least three appear to have beards, although they may be artificial, and one or perhaps two seem to have darkened faces. Two are carrying old waggoners' lanterns, one of whom appears to be wearing a smock-frock and the other a dairyman's white coat. Two of the pitchforks bear objects that look like swedes or mangels which are probably face lanterns, for which there is a precedent at Ruddington. (Nottinghamshire Archives, 1960, DD121/58).

This photograph could not have been available to Herring when preparing his article, but the similarities between the picture and his description seem too close to ignore. He does not refer to Southwell in his article, so how can we explain the striking similarities? Although Herring could not have seen the photograph, he must have encountered this group on their perambulations the previous week, possibly even in

Nottingham's suburbs. Mutual awareness could then have led to the photograph being taken in Southwell on Plough Monday? Whatever the explanation, the Southwell Bullocks closely resemble the latter day Plough Bullocks of Nottingham.

Ploughs

The plough is a key motif in most accounts of the Nottingham custom. As well as being the symbolic focus of the festival it was used to punish non-contributors. Several accounts mention the 'ploughing up' of doorsteps, which presumably refers to levering the stone out of place, and Howitt cites a specific case of palisades being ploughed up. On the other hand, 'Observer's' roughly contemporaneous account makes no mention of ploughs which is surprising bearing in mind the degree of detail in the rest of his tirade. Two other accounts are explicit about ploughs not being taken round, even though the participants were

threatening to plough up people's doorsteps. The first relates to the early 1880s ('Old Timer', 1925): 'men with blackened faces calling themselves 'Plough Bullocks' went from yard to yard threatening to plough up doorsteps, although they had no plough, and demanding money for ale'. This is similar to an undated account from 'Old Robin Hood' (1918):

In all agricultural districts the labourers used to drag the plough about and plough up your 'doorstep' if you did not give them money. I remember 'plough bullocks,' or lads with blackened faces, marching about St. Ann's Well road and singing doggerel for money on Plough Monday. They had no plough, although there were plenty of green fields about in those days.

F.M.E.W. (1923) says the last time he had seen Plough Bullocks with a plough was at Bullwell Kilnyards in 1870, when it was specially decorated for the occasion. It thus seems that plough trailing probably ceased in the Nottingham area in the early 1870s. The real threat of ploughing up a non-contributor's doorstep was replaced by a symbolic threat, which in practice translated into some other form of mischief. 'Observer' mentions various forms of personal assault - knocking down with a besom, besmearing with dirt, and laming.

Soliciting Money

The principal reason for Plough Bullocking was to collect money, which several sources say was used to purchase ale more or less immediately. 'Observer' also mentions gluttony and dancing, which suggests more general partying. The custom commonly involved house visiting, with the appeals for money taking place in doorways and windows. However, it was also considered fair game to accost people in the street - one of 'Observer's' complaints. Mottershaw (1924), writing of Old Radford and Kensington [sic] in 1849-50 described this as 'appealing to the onlookers for money.' E.B. (1921) on the other hand says that the Plough Bullocks 'used to come round like carol singers and collect money in Nottingham streets' Outside Nottingham, the non-play customs nearly all entailed house visiting rather than solicitation in the street. In all cases the custom took place out of doors.

A recurring theme is that the Plough Bullocks were intimidating. Both 'Observer' and Howitt complain that the demands for money were abrupt. Unfortunately

there is no evidence of a common form of words used for solicitations in Nottingham (with the possible exception of a speech in the Race Collection borrowed from a folk play). 'Old Robin Hood' (1918) mentions 'singing doggerel for money' but gives no further details. Elsewhere in Nottinghamshire a begging formula or rhyme was commonly used. For instance, at Kinoulton (Nottinghamshire Archives, 1960, DD121/1/39), they asked 'Please to remember the Plough Boys', which is typical. At Ruddington, four miles south of the town centre, they sang the following (Nottinghamshire Archives, 1960, DD121/1/58) and it seems likely that the Nottingham solicitations followed this pattern:

Plough Bullock night,
The stars are bright,
Two little angels dressed in white,
Can you eat a biscuit,
Can you smoke a pipe,
Can you go a courting at 10/oclock at night.

A hole in my stocking,
A hole in my shoe,
Please can you spare me a copper or two
If you haven't a penny a ha'penny will do.
If you haven't a ha'penny, God bless you.

Boys of the Carlton Road district of Nottingham had their own special technique that appears to be unique among Plough Monday customs (*Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1909):

Bands of boys, the number immaterial, would black their faces and equip themselves with old tin-pans, or anything else calculated to create a din, and, with the impromptu instruments in full operation, would solicit contributions at shop-doors. This they probably did as much for their own amusement as from any expectation of gain. At least I do not remember the clamour being other than unwelcomely received, and peremptorily dismissed, though the boys may have been, in some cases, bribed to pass on. No doubt they also found it essential to keep a sharp look for the police, who would be unlikely to favour the sentimental aspect of the business.

This pan clashing has obvious parallels with 'rough music', which in Nottinghamshire was called 'tin panning' (Brown, 1874 and 1891; Hole, 1892; Scott, 1960/61; Howat, 1991; Nottinghamshire Archives, 1960, DD121/1/20 and DD121/1/4; National Federation of Women's Institutes, 1989). Tin panning was

normally a communal rite for stigmatising the perpetrators of marital and extra-marital misdemeanours (Thompson, 1991 and 1992) and so maybe was also employed on Plough Monday as a particularly devious species of intimidation.

Attitudes and Repression

One would expect that the Plough Bullocks' intimidation, vengeful acts and general unruly behaviour would not have won them many friends. Nonetheless there was evidently a degree of support for the custom. The presence of five or six groups in Basford alone shows it was popular, and 'Observer' remarks that they could expect a large number of followers, including women and children.

However, opposition built up during the early 19th century, especially among the better off and influential. National legislation was also on their side. The Vagrant Act 1824 allowed the authorities to apply penalties primarily intended for habitual beggars; this may have added stigma to any punishment. Religious activists took up 'Observer's' call to ban the custom. Antliff (1885) describes a mission to Leicestershire by the Primitive Methodists which led to the abandonment of Plough Bullocking there (Jones, 1980). By 1851 the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* was able to report that the campaign of repression was having some effect:

We are pleased to learn that this vulgar and demoralising festival of the lower grades of our community has, through the exertions of the police, supported by the magistrates and influential private individuals, passed over this year in the villages round about us generally, with fewer outrages on public decency than on almost any former occasion.

However, despite all these efforts, the later records testify that the custom survived and that the campaign was not totally successful.

Folk Plays in Nottingham

Although the main theme of this paper is with non-play customs, there are a few references which clearly relate to folk plays being performed on Plough Monday, but were they common practice in Nottingham?

After having given information about Plough Monday in 1870, F.M.E.W. (1923) states that 'the last time I saw the guisers was at Christmas, 1872. They came to our house in Bulwell Kilnyards, and acted St. George. There was the Doctor, and Beelzebub, and Bess and Jack. It was all great fun'.

Both 'Observer' and Howitt's descriptions have such a wealth of detail that surely if plays had been performed they would have mentioned them? This is particularly so for Howitt, because his book refers to folk plays elsewhere in England. Therefore both were almost certainly talking about purely non-play customs. F.M.E.W.'s description explicitly distinguishes between a non-play plough trailing custom on Plough Monday and a 'guisers' play performed at Christmas. His description of guisers (ie. persons dressed in disguise) is consistent with Christmas plays still performed in western Nottinghamshire.

On the other hand Sydney Race, writing in 1924 and influenced by a recent book on folk drama (Tiddy, 1923), describes Plough Monday customs then current which he interpreted as vestiges of folk plays (S.R., 1924):

The relics of [the play] will be seen in the suburbs of Nottingham on Plough Monday in the bands of youngsters who parade the streets in strange attire. Their blacked faces or masks are a survival from some primitive religious custom, and are found all over the Continent among the actors in the counterpart of the English play. So also the wooden swords or sticks which the boys carry, and the oddities of their dress are unwittingly an attempt to get near to the special garb worn by their predecessors of long ago. Sometimes the town boys repeat a few lines of the old rhymes, but the effort is usually a feeble one.

Race's manuscripts include a scrap of paper bearing the lines of a Beelzebub speech that is found in plays elsewhere in Nottinghamshire. This is his only unattributed manuscript, and may possibly be his note of the lines referred to above. He lived in Noel Street, overlooking the Forest on the edge of Hyson Green, so possibly the boys came from this area? It reads:

In comes I old Belsebub
Upon my shoulder I carry a club
In my hand a frying pan

Gentlemen and ladies do
 yo not think me a clever man
 The story done we must be gone
 We cannot tarry here
 But if you please before we go
 We will taste of your Christmas pie

It is possible that odd performances of Plough Monday plays took place within Nottingham town, especially considering the influx of population from rural areas where they were performed and the willingness of rural teams to travel. However the evidence is slight and it seems likely that the indigenous Plough Monday customs of Nottingham did not include folk drama.

Comparisons

If this conclusion is accepted it is worthwhile comparing the play and non-play customs because this may help to distinguish them elsewhere in Nottinghamshire. The customs share certain features. Both are perambulatory and involve the collecting of money. They occur on the same date, and may even coexist. Plough Monday participants use the same collective names. Both have facial disguise, and possibly similar costumes, although the actors tended to dress in part, whereas the non-play participants dressed more anonymously. In both cases, female roles were played by men.

The differences are few, but significant. Obviously, the plays possessed dialogue, whereas the non-play

customs did not. Less obviously, the non-play customs took place outdoors whereas the folk plays were always performed indoors. Most play accounts are explicit about this, often specifying the kitchen as the room of choice. The scripts themselves reinforce this, eg.: 'Here I come, who's never been before; There's four more actors outside the door'. Lastly, the actors generally had a reputation for better behaviour than the non-play participants, probably because they had to be better organised, and often performed by invitation. Conversely non-play participants were more opportunistic.

It seems likely that the plays were a relatively late addition to Plough Monday celebrations. Howkins and Merricks (1991) also argue persuasively that Recruiting Sergeant plays did not appear until the early 19th century, when they were added to existing customs, initially in Lincolnshire. The oldest Nottinghamshire play is an unlocated 'South Notts' play of the hero-combat type, published by Brown in 1874. The next plays appear as an explosion of Recruiting Sergeant plays in the late 1880s and 1890s (Millington, 1980). Although absence of evidence is not a safe foundation for an argument, it does lend support to the view that the plays were a late addition. As their peak of popularity coincides with the decline of the non-play customs, they could have been deliberately introduced in an attempt to calm Plough Monday down. If so, by whom, or was it just a change of fashion?

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- Notes:1** Another folk play record comes from the collection of the Lincolnshire folklorist Ethel Rudkin in 1954 from Basford, Notts ('pronounced Baseford'):
- Story of the Doctor's bottle.* The team got to a house and the Doctor had not remembered his bottle - he borrowed one from the farmer's wife, which he thought was empty - but it wasn't - it still had some Worcester Sauce in it. He said that he had never seen a man restored to life so quickly!
- This anecdote relates to a specific performance, but crucially does not indicate the time of year. As Christmas and Plough Monday plays both have Doctors, we therefore, regrettably, have to eliminate this account from our discussion.
- Notes:2** If Granger's putative 1822 report is genuine it claimed that 'the mummers at Wollaton so frightened two horses that they ran away and killed two persons', and that as they came up Lenton Sands they 'kissed nursemaids, and made babies cry'. He claims that following the 1822 deaths a bylaw was passed so that they 'should never come quite to the top of Derby road', but again neither this, nor any primary sources relating to the alleged fatalities, have been traced. (*Nottinghamshire Weekly Express*, 1912).

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