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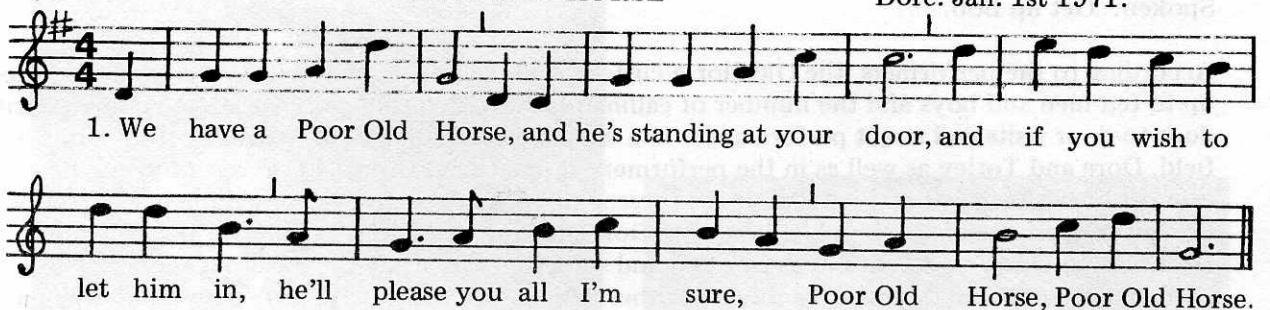
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# We have a poor old horse

Rory Greig

Of the two animal-disguise customs documented in the Sheffield area, “the Old Tup” and “the Old Horse”, the latter appears to have been far less commonly reported. It was all the more pleasing therefore to discover in 1970 an example still being performed in the area. The custom takes the form of a house-visit; a song, “Poor Old Horse” is sung by two men, Chris and Billy, whilst the third member of the team, Reg, operates the horse-figure, following the text of the song and miming appropriate actions.

I/M POOR OLD HORSE W Palmer and C Ralphy,  
Dore. Jan. 1st 1971.



1. We have a Poor Old Horse, and he's standing at your door, and if you wish to let him in, he'll please you all I'm sure, Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.

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|---|---|
| <p>1. We have a poor Old Horse,<br/>And he's standing at your door,<br/>And if you wish to let him in,<br/>He'll please you all I'm sure.<br/>    Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.</p> | <p>Snaps jaws and rears head in rhythm, banging the base of the pole on the ground.</p> |
| <p>2. He once was a young horse,<br/>And in his youthful prime,<br/>His master used to ride on him,<br/>And he thought him very fine.<br/>    Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.</p>     | <p>As verse 1.</p>  |
| <p>3. But now he's getting old,<br/>And his nature doth decay,<br/>He's forced to nab yon short grass,<br/>That grows beneath yon way.<br/>    Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.</p>    | <p>Head is lowered and eating is mimed.</p>   |
| <p>4. He's eaten all my hay<br/>And he spoiled all my straw,<br/>He's neither fit to ride upon,<br/>Nor e'en attempt to draw.<br/>    Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.</p>             |   |

5. We'll whip him, cut him, slash him,  
And a-hunting let him go  
Over hedges, over ditches,  
Over fancy gates and stiles.

Horse mimes jumping by raising and lowering head in a circular movement.

Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.

6. I'll ride him to the huntsman,  
So freely I will give  
My body to the hounds then,  
I'd rather die than live.

Operator bends down, lowering the head to the ground.

Poor Old Horse, Poor Old Horse.

7. Thy poor old bones,  
They shall lie beneath yon ground  
And never more be thought of  
By all the hunting round.

Poor Old Horse, Thou must die.

Spoken: Get up Bob.

Horse gets up.

According to the performers, the Old Horse custom is in decline. In the past the team has included up to ten men and boys and the number of calling places was considerably larger, including casual door-to-door visits and street performances in a wide area including Coal Aston, Norton, Holmesfield, Dore and Totley as well as in the performers' home town, Dronfield. In recent years the number of performers has dwindled to the present three, and the number of calling places to the present two private and two public houses in Dore on New Year's Day. The team travels from Dronfield to Dore, sometimes by car or taxi and sometimes by using the local bus service. The performers commented on the reactions of other people on the bus who were often more than a little surprised to see the strange black creature which accompanied them on their journey!

My wife Alvina and I first recorded the Old Horse at Dore on the 1st January 1971 in the "Devonshire Arms". The following year, thanks to the courtesy of a Sheffield businessman, we were able to record and photograph the team at his home, one of the private houses which they still visit. The team announced their arrival by singing part of the song outside the front door of the large stone-built house which stands back from the road into the village, and then by knocking at the door. The door was then opened and the three men entered. They did not wear disguises or "dress up" except in so far as they were not wearing working clothes. All three wore normal dress of jacket and trousers, collar and tie, and each wore a raincoat, which they continued to wear throughout the performance. The only disguise is the horse itself; it consists of a pony's skull about eighteen inches long, painted a shiny black, with convex glass bottle ends for eyes, painted white with red centres. The skull is mounted on a pole by means of a U-shaped iron bracket. A black cloth of heavy cotton is fastened to the back of the skull and covers both the operator and the wooden handle which raises and lowers the hinged upper jaw. The handle is connected to an iron rod in the skull and when it is pulled downwards the upper jaw is raised. The top of the skull is decorated with small multicoloured woollen balls and plaits, and has two "ears" consisting of stuffed cone-shapes made from white cotton.

Once in the house, the team were offered drinks, whisky in particular, or beer. After a few minutes of general conversation and polite enquiries about health, work and family from both householders and team, the performance was given. The song was now sung in full whilst the horse performed appropriate dramatic actions as indicated in the song transcription, which require considerable



“He’s forced to nab yon short grass,  
That grows beneath yon way.”  
Chris and Billy singing while Reg  
operates the horse.

“Hare & Hounds”, Dore, Sheffield.  
January 1st 1972.



The Old Horse House Visiting  
Dore, Sheffield. January 1st 1972.



strength and dexterity because of the weight and the cumbersome nature of the horse disguise. The horse finally "dies" by sinking to the ground, to be revived by one of the singers, Chris, with the words "Get up Bob" — (Bob, it was later explained to us, is the horse's name). The team then made their farewells and left the house, after receiving several pounds from the householder. He has in the past kept teeth from the horse, which fell out during the performance, "for luck" he says. When both the private houses had been visited, the team moved on to the two public houses in the village centre, the "Devonshire Arms" and the "Hare and Hounds", where they performed the song and accompanying action in both the public bar and the lounge of each. They collected money in an unpainted rectangular wooden collecting-box with a slot in the top, and a handle projecting from the underside at one end. Amounts given were generally small, ranging from pennies up to 50p.

The team's reception in the public houses has varied considerably. On the first occasion that we recorded them in both public houses, they were subjected to a certain amount of verbal ridicule by some of the younger people in the lounge bar of the first public house in which they performed. However, the considerable enthusiasm of the new landlady seemed to make their visit on 1st January 1973 much more enjoyable, and the team discussed, for the first time, extending their round to take in another call, a local club. Generally, their visit is regarded with pleasant anticipation by the local people in both public houses. Reactions to the collecting-box vary, from straightforward refusal, to ready and generous contribution. The collectors sometimes encourage gifts by humour, for example by suggesting that the collection is for the Old Horse's winter feed. They are quick to point out that during the second World War they collected money for charity.

The performance is of some social significance, both to performers and audience. A number of comments have been recorded to the effect that the horse brings good luck. One performer's wife made a particular remark to this effect, saying that when the team returned home, they would perform at their own homes "for luck".

There is also some evidence from people's reactions and comments to suggest that the Old Horse has been to some extent a frightening figure, particularly for children. The most commonly expressed feeling, however, has been that for the local people the visit of the Old Horse forms an integral part of their Christmas and New Year celebrations, and it is this feeling which seems to have contributed most to the survival of this unusual custom. The performers have often said during the many visits we have made to their homes, and to see them at Dore, that the main reason they go is that it is expected of them to make their annual rounds. How long they will continue to do so is a matter for conjecture. One particular family has been the main force in preserving this fascinating old custom on the southern fringe of the city of Sheffield over the years, but there unfortunately seems to be no definite prospect for the continuity of this long-established tradition after the members of the present team cease to make their yearly rounds.

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