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Do you recognise this costume?

Peter Millington considers a mummer's costume that has turned up in New York.

In September 2008, I was approached for an opinion on an old English mummer's costume by Cora Ginsburg LLC of New York, a gallery specialising in antique fashion and textiles. I was sent a set of photographs and their textile historian's report. There is no information on provenance, other than it was probably acquired in England in the 1960s by the gallery's founder, most likely from a dealer or auction house, but possibly privately.

The costume comprises a jacket, trousers and a pointed cap, all made of natural linen decorated with coloured felt appliqué motifs, fringes and woollen braids. The motifs cover a fascinating range of subjects. There are devils, farm animals, heads smoking clay pipes, circles, hearts, diamonds, and most curiously of all, a man standing on one leg on the back of a galloping horse

waving a pair of red flags. It is evidently the costume of a fool or clown.

The cap bears the date 1829 and the initials 'TF', presumably standing for Tom Fool. One should be circumspect about the date. It might not be the date it was made. It could be the year the group was founded, or the costume could have been made for an anniversary of that date. If so, who knows what period had elapsed between times? What was the date's significance?

The textile historian's report supports an early nineteenth century date of fabrication, with more recent running repairs. For instance, the costume is entirely hand sewn, except for machine stitching securing some of the wool braid trim, which could be a repair. Also, the construction of the trousers is typical of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Where did the costume come from? It resembles plough play costumes from the East Midlands. For instance, a costume dated 1893 from Cropwell, Nottinghamshire has similar cut-outs of animals and human figures. However, the current consensus is that it is a clown's costume from a north Yorkshire sword dance or sword dance play. In particular, the spotlight has been on the Bellerby sword dance play, thanks to a

photograph dated circa 1872.

In the detail shown here, the costume of the clown on the right looks very similar to the newly discovered costume, especially the trousers. However, it is not identical. Tom Chambers probably knows more than anybody about the Bellerby costumes as they have evolved over the past 140 years, and he has not been able to find a closer match in his records. Consequently, he is not yet convinced that the costume came from there.

If the costume did not come from Bellerby, it seems likely that it came from a similar Yorkshire tradition. Sleights, for example, also had costumes with cut-out figures. Perhaps the date could help. Was 1829 especially significant for a particular location? But then



we have the strange equestrian with the red flags. Could the costume have belonged to a circus clown?

As you can see, there are many questions to be answered, and we are still investigating. If you feel you have something to contribute, please get in touch.
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The costume is due to go on sale at the end of 2008. Further details will appear in the gallery's catalogue in December – see www.coraginsburg.com A more detailed report is also planned for www.mastermummers.org in January 2009.

Sides who currently perform the Bellerby sword dance include Claro Sword & Morris Men, Lord Conyers Morris Men and Wype Doles.



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their help and wise counsel.

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