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The Kirmington Plough-Jags Play

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The text of the Kirmington version of the "Plough Jags" or "Plough Jacks" play was first printed in "The Mummers' Play", by R. J. E. Tiddy (OUP 1923). This particular play seems to have been added to Tiddy's collection by Rupert Thomson, who edited the book for publication after the author was killed in action on August 10th, 1916, and no information as to its origin was included other than "From Kirmington in North Lincolnshire."¹ It was then with considerable surprise and pleasure that, during a song collecting trip in North Lincolnshire, I met Walter Brackenbury of Kirmington who took the part of the Doctor in the team which performed the play immediately before the First World War. Not only did Mr. Brackenbury have a complete version of the play which he had written out some years previously, but he also remembered a wealth of details about the performance, the organisation of the team and the attitudes of both the actors and their audience. We first met in August 1970 at the New Inn, Great Limber, to which Mr. Brackenbury at the age of 73 still occasionally cycled. The following details about the performance of the Kirmington play were recorded subsequently in a most memorable interview in Walter's wood shed and as far as possible are given here in his own words.²

(a) Organisation

The team was organised by the Fool, who at the time was Frank Vessey. He subsequently moved from the village to Barton-on-Humber. Walter joined after he started work at the age of 13 on a local farm. When asked how he came to be a member of the team, Walter commented, "Well, I suppose now, he was the fool, the selected fool, and the picking of the team would revolve round him."

(T)

The composition of the team did not vary drastically from year to year, but there would be gradual changes, often as Walter commented, for financial reasons.

"Well there'd be maybe one drop out . . . even the fool for instance. Some was poor, we was poor. My father died when I was 3. My

¹ Op. cit. p. 254.

² Transcriptions carry the suffix (T).

mother had nine to bring up and even though we was pleased to get a shilling or two, we still enjoyed it. You see a chap like Frank Vessey . . . he was never poor and some of us who were poor'd maybe stop on a year or more, but he got better off you see . . ." (T)

The words of the play were not learned from print, but from the other members of the team during rehearsals which took place for several weeks before Christmas at the Fool's house.

Unlike most of the plough plays in Lincolnshire, which were performed on Plough Monday, the Kirmington play was performed at Christmas time. The performances began, "Oh, a week or ten days before Christmas, when the Christmas spirit was getting on" (T) and the team generally "got done by Christmas . . . except odd ones that'd be having a party." (T) These specially requested performances were not popular with Walter.

"You didn't like it much because you'd all to get clean. It took a devil of a long time to clean your face you know, all that black." (T)

After the team assembled, they would decide which area to visit;

We'd map a piece out, say this street one night; there weren't so many houses then and you nearly knew who'd have you in." (T)

The group did not restrict their visits to the village of Kirmington. They also visited neighbouring Croxton, as well as outlying farms on the hills around the village.

"You see there are those tops up there and I think we used to go to nearly all of them. I remember going to that one up there and it's nearly two miles from the village." (T)

These farms were regarded as being especially worth visiting, because of the relative prosperity of the owners;

"Well, say they'd give you five bob and that was a lot o' money i' them days." (T)

The costumes worn by the team seem to have been determined largely by what was available. The characters and their costumes were as follows:-

Fool

"You'd get an old shirt off somebody or, if you could get it, an old smock what a man has for show, you know, a garthman or a shepherd, a white smock you know, but big shirts were generally the rage . . . some'd be studded wi' pretty ribbon, all colours you know; patches, different variations. Then there was the Fool's hat . . . what we call a proper Fool's hat, it went to a peak, you know, like these

things like the roadmenders have when they're doing the roads." (T)

Sergeant

"The best you can get a man dressed to a soldier. I mean at that time o'day . . . you could borrow a red tunic o' somebody that'd been i' the army. He has a sword." (T)

Indian King

"He was dressed nearly like the fool; a bit more wild looking and a round hat wi' pretty feathers." (T)

Doctor

"You'd get a black coat, a black rain coat, hard hat if you had one and a bottle of cold tea and a stick." (T)

Lady

"Dressed as a lady, ordinary lady. In them days all women had big hats on and long dresses on and big blouses and a veil." (T)

Bold Tom

"He'd want a bigger shirt, stuffed with straw and tied round. It weren't heavy." (T)

Old Lame Jane

"She wants to be a real old pensioner with long clothes, long boots or shoes and an old brush for sweeping the floor."

The Fool, Indian King and Bold Tom all had their faces partially blackened, with moustaches and dots applied with the aid of a burnt cork;

"That'd make you look damn silly." (T)

(b) Performance

The team announced their presence at the kitchen door by knocking and calling "Will you have Plough Jags in please?" If permission was given the team would enter, led by the Fool;

"You stopped outside until it was your turn to come in." (T) When all the team were inside, they would stand in a line, moving only as required by the action of the play.

"You'd no need to shift, only when the Sergeant slew the . . . [Indian King] you see they'd move and then the Fool helps him up when he's down." (T)

TEXT

Fool Good evening ladies and gentlemen,
 We've come to give you a bold call,
 As Christmas is a merry time

We've come to see you all
We hope you'll not be offended
By what we've got to say,
For presently there'll be a few more boys and girls
Come tripping up this way.

Sergeant In comes I the recruiting Sergeant,
Arriving here just now.
My orders are to list all those
Who can follow horse, cart or plough
Tinkers, tailors, pedlars, nailers
Are all at my advance.

Fool Is there anything else at your advance, Sir?

Sergeant Yes, my advance is to see a fool dance, laugh, sing or
play

Or I will quickly march away.

Fool (sings)



One day I tried to stop a pig, sir
And what a lark we had
The pig went (grunting noise)
And away he ran
Right through my stunning legs, sir.

Sergeant Do you call that singing? I can sing better than that
myself.
(sings)



- Come my lads it's time for listing.
 Listing, do not be afraid.
 You shall have all kinds of liquor
 Likewise kiss the pretty fair maids.
- Indian King Ware out my lads let me come in,
 For I'm the chap called Indian King.
 They have been seeking me to slay,
 And I am here this very same day.
 I fought the fiery dragon,
 And brought it to the slaughter,
 And by these means I won King George's daughter.
- Sergeant Slaughter, slaughter, no more to be said
 For in one instant I'll fetch off thine head.
- Indian King How canst thou fetch off mine head?
 Mine head is of iron, my body of steel.
 My limbs of knuckle bone,
 I challenge thee to feel.
- Sergeant Slaughter! (Draws sword across Indian King's throat,
 who falls)
- Fool Five pounds for a Doctor!
 Sergeant Ten pounds to stop away!
 Fool Fifteen to come in on a case like this!
 Doctor In comes I the doctor.
 Fool How camest thou to be a doctor?
 Doctor I travelled for it from bedside to fireside,
 From fireside to my mother's cupboard
 That's where I got all my pork pies and sausages from.
- Fool What diseases can you cure?
 Doctor Ipsy, pipsy, palsy, gout
 Pains within and pains without,
 Heal all wounds and cleanse your blood
 And do your body a lot of good.
- Fool Can you cure this man?
 Doctor Yes certainly, take hold of my bottle and stick while I
 feel o' this man's pulse.
 (The fool takes the bottle and stick and the Doctor feels
 the Indian King's thigh)
- Fool Is that where a man's pulse lie?
 Doctor Yes, the strongest part of a man's body.
 He's not dead but in a trance.

He's swallowed a horse and cart
And can't get shut of the wheels.
Jump up, Jack and lets have a dance.
(Indian King is helped up)

Lady (sings)



I am a lady bright and fair
My fortune is my charm
It's true that I've been torn away
From my dear lover's arms
He promised for to marry me
And that you'll understand,
He listed for a soldier,
And went to foreign land.

Bold Tom

In comes I Bold Tom
A brisk and nimble fellow
Forty gallons of your best ale
Will make me nice and mellow
And a slice of your pork pie
For, believe me, we're all hungry
As well as dry.

Lame Jane

In comes I old Lame Jane
With a neck as long as a crane
A wig behind and a wig before
Look out my lads,
And I'll sweep the floor.

Fool (sings)



Madam I've got gold and silver,
Madam I've got house and land,
Madam, I've got wealth and treasure
Everything at your command.

Lady (sings)

What care I for your gold and silver,
What care I for your house and land,
What care I for your wealth and treasure,
All I want is a nice young man.

Fool

(links arms with the Lady)

Friends, I've come to invite you to me and my wife's
wedding. What you like best you'd better bring wi' you,
for we're going to have the leg of a louse and a lop fry,
a barley chaff dumpling buttered with wool. Them as
can't nag it'll have it to pull; tail chine of a cockerel also
and eighteen gallons of your best buttermilk to rinse all
down. Sing about lads while I draw stakes.

(Fool collects while the rest of the cast sing)



All

Good master and good mistress
As you sit round the fire
Remember us poor plough boys
Who plough the muck and mire.

The muck it is so nasty,
The mire it is so strong,
Remember us poor plough boys
Who plough the furrows along.

We thank you for civility
For what you've given us here
We wish you a Merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year.

(The fool leads the way out)

Good master and good mistress

You see our Fool's gone out
We make it our ability
To follow him about.

Two dialect words used in the Fool's last speech may require explanation: a "lop" is a flea and "to nag" in this context means to gnaw or to chew at something.

The team collected money from the audience, and were sometimes offered hospitality in the form of food and beer.

(c) *Attitudes*

The attitudes of performers and audience towards the play are undoubtedly of considerable importance. Only rarely have comments on and opinions of such customs been recorded from local people, upon whom their survival ultimately depends. From the expression of attitudes towards the play, much may be learned about its importance to the community which fostered it, and the social function which it fulfilled.

Walter Brackenbury, when asked what he regarded as the reason for performing the play commented:

"Fun more than anything, entertainment. I don't think for one minute that the money you got was the compelling factor for going round, even though we was all poor." (T)

In the days when the Plough plays were flourishing, for large numbers of young men, farming was the only available occupation, and such Christmas activities offered the opportunity for welcome relief from everyday concerns, as well as a chance to supplement small wages. In some villages, the Plough Jags outings were also an excuse for violence, threatening householders who refused to contribute with ploughing up doorsteps, or lawns, or fighting rival gangs. The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury noted on 31/1/1865 that at Barton-on-Humber ". . . the usual gangs of Plough Jacks went through their uncouth performances in the streets, which are now of such a nature as to hardly gratify the most rigid stickler for adherence to old customs."

However in Kirmington the performers did not seem to be of a violent disposition;

"There was no animosity in them days, no silly devils." (T) Despite their peaceful nature, they still inspired a certain amount of respect in young children.

"Oh well, some children was frightened you know . . . some were really frightened . . . when the Indian King come . . . if he were a good un, if he was well made up see." (T)

The young performers must have got some satisfaction through becoming such powerful, frightening figures.

Obviously, as a performer, Walter Brackenbury could not give a great deal of information about the attitudes of his audience, but the act of giving hospitality or money might have acted in some small way as an affirmation of status for the donor. No mention of bringing luck was remembered, but if not as bringers of luck, the Plough Jags were greeted with pleasure as an integral element in the annual celebrations.

"They took it for granted, see. Christmas was Christmas, and Christmas was Plough Jags." (T)