

**Calendar Customs and Seasonal Events**  
**A Folklore Society Conference**  
**University of Exeter, Students' Guild, 26-28 June 2015**

**ABSTRACTS**

**Tom and Barbara Brown**

**“Six Actors I’ve brought...”**

This paper compares the English mumming tradition with legitimate drama through the various aspects involved in preparation, performance and style, including: stage, storyline, temporal and geographic location, actors, audience, rehearsal, leadership, management and administration. It concludes that the vernacular tradition was of a style distinct from professional drama, from amateur dramatics and from pantomime, being a form of drama in its own right with its own mores and with its own strengths and weaknesses. It argues that some more recent revival styles of performance do not simply ignore the older style, but by doing so can precipitate the loss of a distinctive vernacular style.

BACKGROUND: Tom Brown holds his Doctorate from the City University (London) Department of Arts Policy and Management. His M.A. dissertation – *Mumming: the Evolution and Continuity of English Vernacular Drama* – from part of which this paper derives, examined the parallel development of legitimate drama and vernacular plays in England from the earliest references to the present day.

His Doctoral thesis – *English Vernacular Performing Arts in the Late Twentieth Century* – researched repertoire, origins, development, motivation and management in over 330 extant performing groups: morris sides, mumming groups, calendar customs (including Hobby Horses, Jack-in-the-greens, feast days, etc) and display dance teams.

He and his wife created the North Devon Mummers in 1970, adapting a local Exmoor play, and were Master Mummers for ten years before handing the tradition on when they moved away from the area. It has been maintained ever since, and they re-joined the team when they returned to North Devon in 1998. Seasonal performances have now continued for forty-five seasons. Tom has also written extensively, including publication in *Folklore*, on the local calendar custom *The Hunting of the Earl of Rone*.

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**Dr Helen Frisby**

**Seasons and the Life Cycle: calendar death portents and divinations in Victorian and slightly later Britain.**

In 1903 Mabel Peacock described St Mark's Eve as 'the day of all days for divination.' On keeping vigil in the church porch, it was supposed that watchers would see the ghostly images of those who were destined to die during the coming twelve months 'passing in grim array one by one into the church' (Henderson 1866, 34-35). The fabric between this world and that of the dead also wore particularly thin at All Hallows' and New

Year. This presentation will discuss the death portents and divinations which attended the seasons in Victorian and slightly later Britain, and what this may tell us about contemporary perceptions of time.

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**Alice Gilbert**

### **English Morris dancing traditions in the South of England.**

Having been affiliated with the Sompting Village Morris from Sussex since the age of two, and recently joining as a full apprentice member this year, I have witnessed numerous repetitions of their annual calendar events. Throughout the years I have observed some of these events altering in both drastic and tiny detail whilst others have kept their form. Using the Sompting Village Morris as an example I will discuss the impact altering elements of traditional calendar events has on their importance and meaning to the dancers, using May Day and the Summer Solstice celebrations as examples.

I am a current MA Dance Studies student at the University of Roehampton focussing on English Morris dancing traditions in the South of England

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**Nick Groom**

### **The Dragon and the Shamrock: From St George's Day Ridings to St Patrick's Day Parades**

In contrast to previous research on the celebration of St George's Day and St Patrick's Day, this paper focuses on the relationship *between* these national saints' days in Britain and Ireland, and abroad. Although the days initially developed with a degree of mutual sympathy, they soon developed a more antagonistic relationship as the celebrations became opportunities to air popular and civic responses to political, social, and cultural changes. National saints' day celebrations can accordingly, I argue, be seen as examples of identity formation through intangible cultural heritage, and the paper will conclude with reflections on the current state of saints' day celebration and the significance of contemporary theories of cultural accounting for folklore studies.

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**Laila and Moni'm Haddad**

### ***Holy Cross Day: Customs And Seasonal Events In The Holy Land***

Holy Cross Day is considered to be the end of all summer agricultural works in the rural parts of the Holy Land, and the beginning of Autumn. Many customs and seasonal events observed and celebrated on this day, before or after it:

- Trying to predict weather forecast for the next twelve months at its night by traditional ways and methods.
- Burning great bonfires at the Day night.
- Taking pomegranates decorated with flowers and perfume plants to the church in the morning to be blessed.
- Splashing or sprinkling Holy water at all houses after the Service at the Church.
- Celebrating weddings during this period.

And many others...

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## **Maureen James**

### **'May Garlands, Dolls and Bushes' exploring some of the May Day customs once found in Cambridgeshire\***

This paper will explore some of the varied May Day customs once found in the modern county of Cambridgeshire. It will look back to the time when people would gather wild flowers to make May Garlands, commonly with a doll fixed into the centre. In some places these garlands would be strung across the road and balls thrown over them. The paper will also theorise as to the origins of a custom carried out in the Ramsey district in which a line was strung across the road, a rag doll pegged to it and "little sawdust balls" thrown at it.

\*Note: This builds on a paper on Children's Calendar Customs presented to the Folklore Society AGM and Conference in 2011.

Dr. Maureen James B.Ed. M.A., Ph.D

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## **Deborah Kelley-Galin**

### **Ancient Time and Symbols of Ceremony in the American Southwest**

Deeply embedded in the stone formations of the American Southwest, evidence of the creatures that roamed millions of years ago can still be found. Today, ancient creatures and giants continue to flourish in the Native American creation stories and myths they have inspired. This uniquely illustrated presentation examines how geology is indelibly intertwined with the Hopi Snake and Antelope ceremony, a closed event precisely timed by the position of the sun on the towering eastern cliffs. The presentation reveals how similar annual events preserve ancient natural history and continue on in the enduring oral traditions of serpents, snakes, and *bogeys*.

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## **Sharron Kraus**

### **Old Traditions and New?**

What is a tradition? Would anything become a tradition if repeated for long enough? Can we create new traditions? In this paper I'll compare an old, traditional ceremony - 'The Ancient Castleton Garland Ceremony' - with a new, invented one - the burning of the sin-eating hare at Sin-Eater Festival in Shropshire - and ask what the differences are between them that make one spellbinding and moving and the other much less so. I hope to circle in on what gives meaning to our traditional rituals, ceremonies and customs.

I'm a musician/songwriter and my work has always been influenced by folk music and folk traditions. Among other projects, I've written and recorded an album of songs drawing on seasonal lore and customs - 'Right Wantonly A-Mumming' - together with a host of folk singers including Jon Boden and John Spiers of Bellowhead and Fay Hield. My next solo album is a collection of songs inspired by the Mabinogion. I've recently started speaking at conferences and running workshops on music-related (and other) subjects.

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## **Tommy Kuusela**

### **Year walk, an old Swedish divination technique**

In pre-industrial and rural Sweden, important calendar days were integrated with numerous and varied folk beliefs. The period that started with the preparations for Christmas and ended with New Year was considered an important, as well as the most dangerous, time of the year. During this time, it was believed that the supernatural was particularly active, magic formulas worked best and omens and portents became observable. Closely related are notions of omens and portents, as well as techniques to see what is hidden. In Sweden, one oracular method was a ritual known as year walk, and those who ventured on this perilous journey were known as year walkers. In this paper I will present this forgotten tradition. My source material consists of hundreds of accounts from the Swedish folklore archives.

My research on this topic will appear later this year as a chapter in a book on folk belief and the supernatural (based on a conference in Shetland, 2014). Below, you will find my abstract.

Tommy Kuusela, PhD-Candidate, History of Religions, Stockholm University

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## **Christine Kydd**

### **The Boys' Ploughing Match and Festival of the Horse, St Margaret's Hope, South Ronaldsay, Orkney.**

This paper explores The Boys' Ploughing Match and Festival of the Horse, an annual calendar custom and competition occurring on Orkney, Scotland. Boys plough on sand using custom-built miniature ploughs, and children parade dressed in dedicated costumes which emulate the horse dress harness seen at agricultural shows. After describing the text of this complex event, I reflect beyond performance, on significant aspects of meaning, function, gender and identity. Finally, I offer some thoughts on the custom, within and outwith the community, not just on the day, but throughout the year, and make recommendations for future research. Christine Kydd is one of Scotland's respected traditional singers and recording artistes. Through workshop and masterclasses, her work on tradition and culture includes song arrangements for community choirs and creative placemaking projects through songwriting, in schools and community. Christine began singing folk songs at primary school and since performing from the age of ten has sung and performed internationally. She holds a postgraduate ADVS in Voice from Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Christine recently co-wrote a handbook for Community Choir leaders, contributed to a European singing in schools initiative and trained with British Council. She has recently completed an MLitt in Ethnology and Folklore at the University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute. As well as having given a number of presentations on kists, her main interests are song, dance, artefact and calendar customs.

Christine Kydd / MLitt ADVS

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## **Mark Lewis**

### **The Preachers Challenge – Annual Commemorative Sermons and their associated Customs**

This paper will explore the origins and social meanings of the Protestant phenomenon of the annual sermon that was found in many parishes from the Reformation and invariably accompanied by processions and bread or monetary doles. Each sermon was endowed by a benefactor and occurred on various occasions, including holy and saint's days, major festivals and anniversaries. Given mainly for moral benefits, themes could sometimes be eccentric or bizarre, from surviving drowning or being mauled by a lion to condemning duelling or pondering that 'Life is but a bubble'. A number of these sermons and doles have continued into the present and other churches have seen revivals.

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## **Peter Millington**

### **"False faces so they can't tell you": Old Year's Night on the island of Tristan da Cunha**

Old Year's Night - 31st December - is an important date in the calendar of the tiny British island of Tristan da Cunha in the middle of the South Atlantic. Men disguise themselves in strange costumes and masks so that even their families cannot recognise them. These "Okalolies" then go round the island houses and receive hospitality. The tradition has changed during the 100 years for which there are records, and it changes still. This illustrated paper will aim to give a definitive description of the custom, outline the changes that have taken place, and discuss the reasons for them.

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## **Mark Norman**

### **The Running Of The Black Dog: The 'Obby 'Oss That Came And Went**

For almost a millennium, the United Kingdom has been awash with traditions and sightings of ghostly Black Dogs. Whilst the phenomenon is most certainly global, the highest concentration and most variations of type of this particular apparition are found in Britain. The hound has appeared in various forms in literature, film and television and many hundreds of sightings have been, and continue to be reported. Yet this motif is relatively under-represented in "well-known" or celebrated folklore tradition, in comparison to, say, the Green Man who features in many local customs and traditions.

For a short-time at the end of the twentieth-century, however, there was a little known 'Obby 'Oss tradition which drew on the folklore of the Black Dog. The ceremony took place in Devon and, furthermore, used part of the route of one of the best recorded "travelling" Black Dog apparitions, that of the Black Dog of Torrington which was studied and plotted by Barbara Carbonell.

This talk goes back to the original archive of paperwork and photographs of this ceremony, recently acquired by the author, to present a discussion of the roots of this ceremony and a look through audio visual presentation at some aspects of this festival, which came and went before most people probably got to see it.

Mark Norman, the author of this paper, is one of the few folklorists actively researching and recording the Black Dog phenomena in the UK. He holds what might be the country's most extensive archive of traditions and eyewitness accounts of Black Dog sightings and his book examining the field of Black Dog folklore is due to be published in 2015 by Troy Books.

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## **Bob and Jacqueline Patten**

## **Mummers' Father**

A look at the possibility that Andrew Brice of Exeter (1692 – 1773) was the father of the modern-era hero-combat mummers' play. Brice was a writer, printer, theatre enthusiast, satirist and humorist who owned a library large enough to be auctioned after his death. He also founded the first printing press in Cornwall, at Truro.

No mummers' play with Brice's imprint has been found, however we find the circumstantial evidence compelling. Brice makes the earliest quotation from a mummers' play and had all the skills and resources to write a play and produce it.

*Bob & Jacqueline Patten*

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## **Steve Patterson**

### **“The Wheel of the Year” and the reimagining of the folk-year**

From the 1960s onwards there emerged from the growing neo-pagan movement in Britain a glyph known as “The Wheel of the year”, which sought to mythologise and systematise the folk calendar customs of the year in to a framework for a system of “Wiccan” magico/religious practice. In this presentation I would like to explore how much the idea of “The wheel of the year” has become embedded in the way in which perceive and participate in traditional folk calendar customs.

Biography

Steve Patterson is a Woodcarver and a folklorist who lives and works in west Cornwall. His main area of interest is The Folklore and the magical tradition of the West Country. He is a published author, his most recent book being an enquiry in to the magical history of the Boscastle Museum of witchcraft - “The Cecil Williamsons book of witchcraft” (Troy 2015). He is co-organising the 21, Feb, 2015 “South west folklore symposium” at the Eden Project and has worked as a volunteer at the Boscastle Museum of witchcraft since 1996. A recent workshop he ran in Boscastle received a rave review in the Guardian (Tom Cox 21,1, 2015) . In it I was quoted as saying – “Folklore is the unwritten history of the people” which “Exists in the liminal space between history and fiction.” ...a sentiment most pertinent to my presentation before your learned society!

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## **Jennifer Reid**

### **“We will to the merry green wood to hunt the buck and hare-O”: Sixteenth-Century Maying and the Hunt**

As Peter Stallybrass has noted in his exploration of the carnivalesque in Robin Hood May Games, the early modern forest was a contested space, site of the struggle between aristocratic and village interests, and the tensions occasioned by this struggle often found an outlet in the unruly and subversive potential of the May Games. Interestingly, early modern accounts of Mayday, both literary and non-literary, exhibit a shared thematic emphasis on the traditionally aristocratic activity of the hunt, an emphasis still apparent today in, for example, the Hal-an-Tow sung at the Helston Furry Dance every May. My paper will examine the hunt, in its festive incarnation in the May Games, as a potential site for subversion and protest.

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## **Rachel Rose Reid**

### **The Willesden Green Wassail: Urban Adaptation of an Ancient Celebration**

Willesden Green Wassail was created out of the frost of the credit crunch and a fruitless search for inner-London wassails by its founder, Rachel Rose Reid.

Ofcourse, it's no surprise that there wasn't much a-wassailing, since it's a rural tradition celebrated in English apple orchards and nearby towns.

However, I felt that in the cities, our 'apple trees' are the struggling independent local shops. 100-200 participants walk down the High Street, stopping to cheer local shopkeepers, and then loudly wassail them with a new version of a traditional chant ("Oh Abdul's Halal Butcher's We Wassail thee..!", etc).

Folk and hip hop performers pronounce from soapboxes, and, when we reach our apple trees (planted in 2010), the whole crowd recreates the traditional Wassail rituals around them.

*The paper will discuss the creation of the event, how the elements of traditional Wassail have been sensitively re-appropriated to enfold an ethnically diverse community, and the effect on passersby and participants of experiencing a 'recycled' traditional custom, one which takes over public space and invites interaction.*

More pictures: <http://mylondon diary.co.uk/2014/02/feb02-01.htm>

The Willesden Green Wassail also features in *Wassailing*, by Colin and Karen Cater, published by Hedingham Fair [http://www.hedinghamfair.co.uk/wasswailing\\_new.htm](http://www.hedinghamfair.co.uk/wasswailing_new.htm)

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## **William Roberts**

### **Is there an urban ritual year in the twenty-first century?**

The paper considers the range of regular public ceremonies and events in Cardiff, throughout the year, and the extent to which direct and indirect popular participation could present a valid case for their being a present-day urban ritual year. Formal activities considered include those of the state, e.g. Armed Forces Day, and the nation, e.g. the National St. David's Day Parade. Organised social events include processions, e.g. Pride Cymru, and a range of food and drink-based fairs. Non-organised activities include the crowds for regular sporting fixtures.

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## **Peter Robson**

### **One Hundred and Seventy Seven Years of Abbotsbury Garland Day**

Abbotsbury Garland Day was a children's May Day custom associated with the mackerel fishing industry on Dorset's Chesil Coast. The last of a number of such customs in the Chesil Coast villages, it was first described in 1836 although it is likely to have existed from at least the mid-eighteenth century. It has not taken place since 2012.

This presentation outlines the history of the custom throughout the period of its recorded existence, with particular reference to its changing form and function and to the possible reasons for its demise.

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## **Derek Schofield**

### **'And From Misfortune Free': The Custom of Sanding at Knutsford Royal May Day**

The May Day celebrations in Knutsford, Cheshire, date from 1864. With its emphasis on children, and featuring a procession, maypole, crowning of a May Queen and dancing it was a classic example of nineteenth-century Merrie Englandism. In the 150 years since then – and now still including all these features - it has become an important feature of Knutsford town life, deeply embedded in the community. Older than the town's May Day

celebrations is the custom of sanding. Once a feature of weddings and special occasions (and therefore not a seasonal custom) it has been grafted onto May Day. This paper will explore the earlier occurrences of sanding, its incorporation into the May Day celebrations, the changing 'origin' stories, the changing nature of the custom and its present-day execution.

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**Murray Stewart**

**"Monuments and Merriment: Calendar Customs of the Prehistoric Sites of Orkney"**

Abstract: Orkney is renowned for its quality and quantity of archaeological remains, but also for its rich folkloric traditions. Many prehistoric monuments in the archipelago have acted as a focal point for celebrations and rituals at seminal times of the year, the records of which persist in shaping our perceptions and interpretations of past communities. This discussion will summarise the range of past calendar customs associated with archaeological monuments on Orkney, and suggest that the "dig season" within the practice of field archaeology may be interpreted as a contemporary calendar custom within its own right.

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