

RICHMOND POOR OLD HORSE

'The most exciting Christmas custom was that of the 'Poor Old Horse' which perambulated the town from one public house to another', wrote William Wise, whose newspaper articles of 1888 have been collected into a book edited by Leslie P Wenham.

'Poor aud 'os', as it is called locally, is a mummers' play which I first heard about in South Yorkshire but which has since ceased there, so I was especially pleased to hear that it was alive and kicking at Richmond in North Yorkshire. My original informant remembered how she had been frightened when she came upon this 'horse' prancing through the streets when she was a child. She thought it had been connected with one family, and she was right, as I discovered when I found Mr Bill Ward. Mr Ward's maternal grandfather, Edward Peirse, went out with the play in the late nineteenth century and various members of the family have been involved with it over the last 100 years. The custom has never died out completely, though as Mr Ward says, 'the horse may have remained stabled for short periods due to lack of a team'. Four men are considered to constitute a good team with one of them under the cloak of the horse, but more join for an outdoor performance when a couple of singers may also be added.

The performances, which begin the week before Christmas and continue until New Year's Eve, take place in the pubs of villages near Richmond and at any large parties. The 'horse' has also been invited to perform at the rising of the council, when the mayor invites guests for drinks after the last council meeting before Christmas. On Christmas Eve it is traditionally in the town itself, visiting pubs and performing in the market place, or entertaining the dinner guests at Aske Hall and other large private houses.

After the Second World War, when Mr Ward first became involved, he and his cousin visited a horse slaughterer to obtain a horse's skull which was boiled for them. They then fitted the skull with eyes of black glass, painstakingly chipped from the bottom of old wine bottles and rounded on the inside. The skull was wired together so that the jaws could be opened and closed, while the inside of the mouth was lined with red plush velvet. The whole skull was then covered with

material to represent the skin. As a child, Mr Ward was also frightened by its appearance when his grandfather, thus disguised, bounded into the room with his red-coated attendant huntsmen. Their hats were decorated with holly and mistletoe, as was the 'horse', which was also adorned with artificial Christmas roses and poinsettias.

Since Richmond is a town with a great hunting and racing tradition, the play, with its references to the hunt and the hunting season, always had a special appeal and it is still very popular and appreciated by the people. Mr Ward was taught the words by his grandmother, who also sang a few verses to remind him of the tune. His grandfather's team never had any musical accompaniment, but Mr Ward's group occasionally take a melodion along. During the play 'poor old horse' performs a number of actions: at the appropriate points he nuzzles up to the huntsman; gallops and leaps 'over hedges, over ditches, over valleys, gates and stiles'; he champs the 'best of corn and hay', but then is 'forced to nibble the short grass'; as he is turned out in the winter weather he trembles with cold until he is finally beaten down and dies when 'he's neither fit to ride upon nor any teams to draw'. In true mumming tradition he rises again, the ritual 'death and revival' (which we saw in the pace-egg plays and which survives in the Christmas sword-dances) having taken place.

The horse has been looked upon as bringer of luck and a fertility symbol from pagan times, as shown by its prancing, rearing and the special attention paid to young women. This aspect is not ignored by modern mummers; 'old hoss' generally causes mayhem wherever he goes, especially amongst teenage girls.

Richmond also had a poor old ram, 'poor aud tewp' (or tup), as well as the 'old horse'. This was a similar custom, in which some of Mr Ward's relatives were once involved. One of the performers wore a sheep's head with horns and had a sheepskin on his back. 'Tup' has now died out, except when it enjoyed a brief revival by Mr Ward and Mr Mick Sheehan who gave one performance for the Richmond Civic Society after 'old horse' in 1986. It was welcomed as a long-lost friend but there are no plans for its continued revival. Huntsmen and horses keep Mr Ward and his fellow performers quite busy enough.

PUB CAROL *Worrall, St*

Carol singing is not something new. A version of 'I have a little hope of sorrow' in South Yorkshire is known as 'Christmas local carols'. The Crown is where the s

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These local carols have a background with their characteristic *Watched*, a was written thought by of the nation not appropriate wrote tunes *those Angel* considered the fligid part be why the church