

Richmond's Christmas Customs



by Julia Smith



THE long dark nights of winter can be very frightening to small children whose imaginations run riot picturing weird and wonderful creatures wandering lonely country lanes. But the horse which might be encountered in lonely lanes around Richmond at Christmas-time, along with its attendant huntsmen and hornblower, is no figment of a fevered imagination but a very substantial six-foot tall man hidden under an alarming horse's head. The real, snapping jaws surround a red plush velvet mouth, while great, black bottle-glass eyes stare out unseeingly at passers-by. Not a pretty sight to encounter on your way to the pub or, even worse, on the way home!

This "poor aud 'oss" is the leading character in a mummers' play which has been performed, more or less continuously, each Christmas for generations. Bill Ward, who takes the part of one of the

huntsmen, is a member of a family which has been deeply involved with it. They have kept the play alive in the family even when it has been impossible to perform outside due to lack of a team. Fortunately "oss" can be seen once again in the town as a team has now been re-established. Alongside Billy are two sets of father and son, two exiles who travel from Darlington and an RAF station in Scotland, and, happily, thirteen-year-old Jonathan, the son of Billy's cousin.

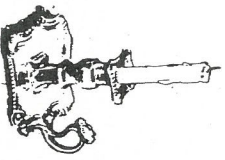
Through dark streets

In 1989, merely as an observer, I joined the group assembled at Billy's house on a dry, mild night in late December. Finishing touches were added to costumes, top hats were decorated with holly and mistletoe and the Christmas roses and poinsettias adorning "t" aud

'oss" were given a final check, before we set off through the dark streets.

The first stop was made at a private house where a Christmas party was in full swing. The hornblower, an ex-trumpeter blowing a horn that once belonged to the famous Quorn hunt, announced the arrival of the players. The musician struck up the opening notes of the song which accompanies the play as the door opened. The song tells the story of "poor old horse", who is carrying out appropriate actions, turned out into the open fields with only short grass to nibble. He remembers being in his prime, having the best corn and hay, and being ridden by his master in the hunting field. He is so weary he would rather die than live and proceeds to do so. As this is a mumming play he rises up again, death and revival being a necessary part of any such performance. The players were warmly applauded, drinks were proffered and accepted and then we were on our way again.

The remaining stops that night were at pubs, some close by and others further afield at Brompton-on-Swale, Skeely and Gilling. It was traditional to visit all the local big houses on the tours but this has tended to die out. Billy remembered, in the not too distant past, performing at one of the local big houses where the guests were seated at a candle-lit dinner table and the staff clustered just inside the green baize door which led to their quarters, while children in pyjamas peeped through the banisters on the



stairs. He was pleased that they were once again being invited to private houses, large or small.

During the early part of the evening, the horse was operated by an energetic eighteen-year-old who managed to prance up and down, even leaping completely off the ground at times, while wearing the top-heavy horse's head. Inside the head it is hot, dark and stuffy, with only a narrow

slit to peer through whilst moving amongst the crowd, snapping open and shut those huge jaws by means of a lever. Young girls screamed and giggled, small children hid behind grown-ups, and even mature adults looked a bit wary as the horse picked off party hats, grabbed glasses of beer or snapped at onlookers. All this is not mere tomfoolery, however, for the horse has been considered a bringer of good luck and a fertility symbol since pagan times, hence the special attention paid to young girls. Later the horse was taken over by an older man and his performance was more subdued, less prancing, but rather more menacing as he stalked through the pubs.

Glasses of beer

From time to time someone would pop an orange or an apple into the horse's mouth. Billy's father never minded this when he was under the head, but he did object when glasses of beer were poured down its throat. Then he tossed the head aside and emerged, soaking wet, fists at the ready to take on the culprit!

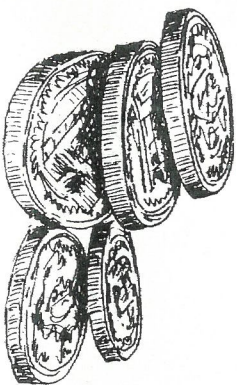
It was 11.30pm when the team arrived back at Billy's for a final drink, but everyone was there next morning ready to tour the town. Disguise played a large part in the mumming tradition: to recognise the players broke the luck they were bringing. As an aid to disguise performers "blacked-up" and before the morning tour the two youngest boys in the team were expertly made-up using professional blacking.

It was the shoppers turn to be menaced that morning, but everyone took it in good part. It is a sign of the times that the fact that no collection was taken confused people; this seemed to stun them as much as the sudden appearance of the colourful horse and its red-coated attendants from behind a market stall! In the evening a further tour was undertaken to surround-ing villages, while "poor old horse" continued to be seen around town during the next few days.

A much more gentle custom which still takes place in December in Richmond is the distribution of the mayor's audit money. This is an up-dated version of a custom that originated in 1576 when a charter, signed by Queen Elizabeth I, permitted the fee farm rent paid to the Crown to be returned to the people of the town, to "the poor decayed Tradesmen

and other indigent persons", in fact. Later, after the institution of the office of mayor in the mid-seventeenth century, the money was paid into the mayor's fund and it is from this fund that it is still paid. In recent years the money amounted to about 50 pence for each senior citizen living in the town. As many of these had to pay a similar amount in bus fares to collect it, it is not surprising that few bothered to do so.

In 1986, however, the town clerk decided to bring the custom up-to-date



and rid it of its charitable image; indeed older residents remembered it as "coal money" they received in the past. Instead of a very small amount of legal tender, it

was decided to commission a "Richmond shilling", something with a collectable value capable of being handed down through the family. There is evidence of this already happening with grandparents saving them for grandchildren. The coin bears the coat-of-arms of the town, together with a Latin inscription which, translated, means "mother of all Richmonds", and Elizabeth Regina 1576 on one side. The other side shows the castle, taken from an old woodcut and the words "Mayor's Audit Money, Richmond, North Yorkshire".

The mayor personally presents the coin to those eligible who can then stay in the town hall for tea and cakes. That the town clerk had made a good decision was shown by the fact that over 500 coins were dispensed in that first year.

Richmond is not only an attractive town well worth a visit at any time of year, it is also a place where these, and other interesting customs, play an important and colourful part in the lives of its inhabitants. Long may they do so. *Julia Smith is the author of Fairs, Feasts and Frolics, published by Smith Settle, 1989, £12.95 hardback, £8.95 paperback.*

Christmas Competition

Folk proud of their general knowledge have long been indebted to *Whitaker's Almanack*, which has just published its 124th edition. Its editor, Hilary Marsden, is a Yorkshirewoman.

Dalesman readers have a chance to test their knowledge by answering the questions below. Send your answers to Triple Choice, Dalesman, Clapham, Lancaster LA2 8EB, by January 5th. A copy of the new edition of the *Almanack* will be sent to readers who submit the first ten correct answers to be opened.

1. What is the highest point of the Pennines?
a. Cross Fell; b. Mickle Fell;
c. Whernside
2. Which county apart from Yorkshire had three administrative divisions before 1974?
a. Devon; b. Lincoln; c. Norfolk
3. Which monastic order built Byland Abbey?
a. Augustinian; b. Benedictine;
c. Cistercian
4. Which literary figure was curate of Coxwold?
a. Bramwell Brontë; b. Andrew Marvell; c. Laurence Sterne
5. Which poet was MP for Hull?
a. Philip Larkin; b. Andrew Marvell; c. John Milton
6. Which Duchess is the Chancellor of the University of Leeds?
a. The Duchess of Gloucester;
b. The Duchess of Kent;
c. The Duchess of York