

Merrie England's Folklore Calendar - Dr Richard Churchley

Richard began his engaging talk by reciting the Doctor's poem from a Medieval Mummers' Play. Having thus secured his audience's attention, he continued by giving the Group a history of Mummers' Plays, the plot and its significance.



Dr Richard Churchley.

There was much humour in the retelling of the story, and this humour became a hallmark of the talk.

Richard continued by going through the year month by month and season by season, highlighting customs and events, some of which are still familiar and practised and some of which have been lost in the mists of time.

He began with the old custom of 'Wassailing' - a blessing of people, crops and livestock, during November, December and January. 'Was hail' meant 'be healthy' or 'good health to you' and was a way to spread good cheer in the leaner months of the year. The custom of 'First Footing' is still practised in some areas of the country in the early hours of the New Year, while 'Plough Monday', some days later, no longer celebrates the mischief and mayhem that occurred many years ago.

As well as folklore traditions there was also the Church Calendar, which brought its own important events and practices through the year and Richard interspersed these religious customs in with the more secular or pagan practices. Shrove Tuesday was a time to clear the pantry of rich food such as eggs, butter and flour before the solemn Christian season of Lent, which began the next day - Ash Wednesday. Hence the practice of making pancakes, to use up these forbidden foods, which is still celebrated today.

'Mothering Sunday' often occurs in March and Richard gave the Group some explanations of why and how this day was celebrated as a Church festival.

In Medieval times there were four important dates that were observed - Lady Day on the 25th March (commemorating the beginning of the Virgin Mary's pregnancy); St John's Day on the 25th June, (commemorating the beginning of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the mother of St John, who was Jesus' cousin); Michaelmas Day on the 25th September and Christmas Day on the 25th December. These 'Quarter Days' were very significant in the life of Medieval communities and marked the continually rolling seasons and years.

Easter often occurred in April and marked the end of a period of solemnity and fasting. Spiced cakes were eaten to celebrate the return of a richer diet - we now eat hot cross buns as part of that tradition. Eggs could also be eaten again - hence the modern custom of giving (and receiving!) chocolate Easter eggs. At this point Richard produced an accordion, and some tambourines and musical bells, and playing the accordion and accompanied by members of the audience playing the other instruments, the Group sang 'It's 1, 2, 3, Jolly Lads' a Victorian Easter song. This was very well received.



A Musical Interlude.

May Day celebrated the coming of late Spring and the onset of summer, and maypoles were erected for dancing round at this joyous season. Cecil Sharp (1859 - 1924) was the founding father of the folk-song and dance revival in England in the early 20th century and much of our folk music today, as well as Morris Dancing, is due to his diligent research. The Group sang and played the 'Helston Floral Dance' with enthusiastic clapping as an accompaniment. Richard also played some lively tunes from Pershore, Redditch, Ilmington and Upton on Severn, which the Group appreciated. 'Oak Apple Day', commemorating King Charles II hiding in an oak tree, is held on 29th May.

Whit Sunday usually occurred in June with parades around the villages. In Kidderminster, it was noted by a member of the audience, the Sunday School Union held their 'Procession' through the local estates annually until the late 1990's. 'Beating the Bounds' is a custom still practised in the nearby village of Rock, and this has its roots in the old tradition of marking Parish boundaries on an annual basis.

The harvest in August and September was celebrated by local 'Harvest Home' events, which have now become Harvest Festivals. The end of October saw the Church calendar remember 'All Hallows Even' as a time of mischief before 'All Hallows/All Saints Day' on November 1st. We now call this day 'Halloween' and mischief is still practised. There were a number of significant dates in November for instance Bonfire Night/ Guy Faulkes night on the 5th; Armistice Day on the 11th; St Clement's Day on the 23rd and St Catherine's Day on the 25th. Some of these dates have lost their importance in recent times.

Christmas was an important time in the calendar and celebrations took place over three days at the end of December. To round off the talk, Richard sang a Wassailing song and the meeting finished with the Group singing 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas'.

It had been a wonderful afternoon, with a blend of humour, music and a lot of information. The Group had certainly learned a lot of new things.

Heidy Hague.