

Village Traditions: Past, Present, Future

Local tradition is an important part of what makes a community and, hopefully, the recently revived scarecrow festival will become a regular event .



One tradition many people will know about is the Molly Dancing every January. A centuries old tradition revived by the Mepal Molly Dancers in 1977. Molly dancing is a form of English Morris dance, traditionally done by out-of-work ploughboys in midwinter. It died out during the early 1930s, the last dancers seen dancing in Little Downham in 1933. On this occasion the dances performed

included a tango, performed by two male dancers, one dressed as a woman. The term molly itself was used since at least 1754 for 'a milksop, an effeminate man';

Another long standing tradition in many villages was the village feast. The Little Downham feast started with a parade through the village and finished with a communal meal on Harrison's field, next to the church. This came to an end with declining interest and development on the field. A feast was held in Coveney in 1940 as part of a wider programme of fun and games.

Witchford is well known for the World Pea Shooting Championships which has been held since 1971. The inaugural team competition was won by Pymoor. It was captain Graham Lark, who gave Pymoor the title with a score of eight off his last two shots after some disappointing scores from the rest of the team.

After the match the four members of the team clubbed together to buy the peashooter, which they had borrowed and all used for £2.50.



The team champions from Pymoor (from left): Ken Rogers, Brian Taylor, Graham Lark and Eddie Stearman. (Pictures: Camfoto).

MAYPOLE DANCERS AT LITTLE DOWNHAM FETE.



Photo] This smiling group of girls was taken at the Little Downham Church "encore" fete on Tuesday afternoon, after they had given one of two brilliant displays of Maypole dancing which proved to be very attractive. In the centre, seated on the throne, are seen the two Queens, the new Queen, Maud Curtis, being on the left, and on the right the old Queen, Joan Yardy.

[Starr & Rignall, Ely.

The earliest recorded use of a maypole in Britain is in a 14th century welsh poem. Maypoles became communal symbols that brought the local community together - in some cases, poorer parishes would join up

with neighbouring ones in order to obtain and erect one, whilst in other cases, such as in Hertfordshire in 1602 and Warwickshire in 1639, people stole the poles of neighbouring communities, leading to violence. In some cases the wood for the pole was obtained illegally, for instance in 1603, the earl of Huntingdon was angered when trees were removed from his estates for use as maypoles without his permission. The rise of Protestantism led to a decline in maypole dancing and at one time it was banned. Maypole dancing regained popularity in the 19th century as people regained an interest in rural traditions.

Ploughing matches have been a popular tradition in farming communities and still remain today, sometimes still including the use of horses. A wider expression of the farming community is the agricultural show. These have often morphed into a "country show" to attract a wider audience, but Pymoor was well known for its traditional show which was a true agricultural show with a widespread reputation. However the effort required to organise such event proved too much for such a small community and this well loved event is no longer held,

THE ISLE OF ELY GAZETTE, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1874.

LITTLE DOWNHAM.

Ploughing Match.—The Downham Agricultural Association held the ploughing match and annual dinner, on Wednesday last. The competition was well sustained, and the work creditably done. The prize for farmers sons for ploughing half an acre of land was won by J. C. Wilkin, son of Mr. M. Wilkin, Mr. W. Pearson's son being second and highly commended. The prize for implement making was won by Messrs. Hornaby's ploughman. The other winners of prizes: Mr. E. Parson, J. Hitch, L. Barber, W. Grandfield, J. Gill, S. Jordan, W. Hall, W. Iythe, R. Harrison, J. Jefferson, J. Nunn, M. Heap, B. South, and J. Read. The dinner was rich, served by Mr. Batchelor, of the Lamb Hotel, Ely. There was a large attendance. Mr. M. Cook was chairman and Mr. J. H. Martin vice-chairman.



The first recorded game of conkers is believed to have taken place in the Isle of Wight in 1848, the World Conker Championships started in Ashton, Northamptonshire in 1965. Qualifying rounds for the finals were held in Little Downham with entrants competing for the Rowell-Adams Shield. There was controversy in 1977 when the Little Downham competition was won by a woman, Christine Nunn of Bishop's Close. Women were not allowed to compete in the finals and the runner up, Bunny Bowring of the RAF hospital was put forward instead but he did not compete. The finals

in Ashton still continue but it has died out in Little Downham.

In 1973 Little Downham held its first pancake race. To balance out the conkers controversy it was only open to women. There were 21 entrants with six inch pancakes in ten inch pans. Runners were required to perform a double toss at each of six stages on the route. Early fallers were Christine Garner came to grief at the second toss and Mrs D Fletcher who was brought down by a small boy on a bicycle. The winner over the 500 yard course was Christine Percival of Coveney. Second was Debbie Missen and third was Susan Glover. This did not become an annual event but the third competition in 1977 was more enlightened and won by a man, David Lely.

PANCAKE LEAD FOR DOWNHAM

Warning notices of greasy roads will probably have to be erected in Little Downham on Saturday, March 3rd, when the village holds its first pancake race in preparation for the Ely 13th centenary event. The first six home will compete in the Shrove Tuesday race at Ely.

It is open to all girls under 95, who will be required to run a course from the Plough Inn to the Anchor — and toss their pancakes 12 times in the process.

Sports days have always been popular and this one was revived in 1920

PYMOOR AND OXLODE SPORTS.

Successful Post-War Revival.

In common with similar events, during the war Pymoor and Oxlode sports were left in abeyance, but the resuscitation this year, after a lapse of five years, was heralded with delight by the inhabitants of the fen districts, culminating on Tuesday an attendance almost on par with those of previous years. The sports are recognised as one of the best village meetings in the district, and in the Fen; everybody looks forward with considerable pleasure to this day. Although in the heart of the fen country, and almost isolated from the Market towns,—it is six miles from Ely, and three to the nearest village—the distance

in no way lessens enthusiasm, and the venue in Pymoor Lane, kindly placed at the disposal of the Committee by Mr. George Darby, was peopled by nearly 1,000 visitors.

Pymoor and Oxlode athletic sports have been in existence about 25 years, and Tuesday's crowd was quite up to the expectations of the Committee.

From a racing point of view, Pymoor is noted for its bicycle races, and in this direction the reputation of the sports was easily maintained. Flat racing was hardly so good, but there was a large number of entries, and individual runners created a better impression than they did collectively.

1972 saw the first National Stiltwalking championship held in Little Downham. It was the brainchild of of the local rector, Rev Martin Suter, after he read fenmen using stilts to get around the fens before they were drained. The course was 500 yards around the playing field and the race was won by a sixteen year old Fraser Gilbert, with brother Stephen second and father Wally third. They had been training for moths and used stilts specially made by Wally.



Fraser won again in 1973 and Stephen was third. The event continued in 1974 and 1975 but is not reported after that.

Paul and Patti Quant initiated the Little Downham scarecrow festival in 2008 which ran for a few years until they moved away from the village. This wonderful event is now to be revived and I hope that people will be writing articles on this old village tradition a hundred years from now.

Robin Pearl