

Article for Fortean Times about Abbots Bromley Horn Dance

Round The Horns – Rob Gandy

Introduction

Ever since watching it briefly on local television as a child in the 1950s I have wanted to see the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. The sight of men in costumes performing ritual dances with antlers was captivating. But it was in a different part of Staffordshire to where I lived and difficult to get to. Besides, my Dad worked on a Monday and would not be able to drive the family there. Now in my 60s I determined to achieve my young ambition and set aside 7th September in my 2015 diary.

Geography and History

Abbots Bromley is a village in East Staffordshire situated between Uttoxeter (to the North), Stafford (to the West), Burton-on-Trent (to the East) and Rugeley (to the South-West). It is central to what is, or rather was the Needwood Forest. Historically the Normans introduced a system of royal forests which were areas designated for hunting wild deer (by royalty, nobility and their acolytes) and did not necessarily consist entirely of woodland¹. At one point the forest became commonly associated with Sir Gawain's Green Knight. However, in 1803 an Act of Parliament allowed forestry commissioners to enclose lands and deforest them, and by 1811 Needwood Forest was divided amongst a number of claimants². This was despite a long campaign against plans to cut down and enclose much of the forest which included Francis Mundy's famous 'local' poem "Needwood Forest - The axeman cometh..." published in 1776³. The result was that by 1851 its area was described as forming "one of the most beautiful and highly cultivated territories". The former forest area now encloses some twenty farms, with Bagots Wood claimed as the largest remaining part of the forest².

Two miles from Abbots Bromley is Blithfield (pronounced "Bliffield") Hall which has been with the Bagot family since 1360. In 1953 the Blythe River was dammed to form a reservoir, which is now an attractive lake lying southeast of the house⁴.

Each year on Wakes Monday the famous Horn Dance takes place in the village and its surrounds. The Dance is the oldest traditional dance in England, with its origins set in antiquity. It is believed that the Dance was originally performed at the three-day Barthelmy Fair, granted to the Abbots of Burton by Henry III in 1226, celebrating St Bartholomew's Day, August 24th. The correction of the Julian calendar in 1752 moved the Fair to the beginning of September, and over the years the three days became one. Now the Dance takes place on Wakes Monday, which is the Monday following the first Sunday after the Fourth of September. This means that the date varies from year to year and ranges between 6th and 12th September⁵. Confused? Well you won't be alone as disappointed visitors often turn up on the wrong day. So if you ever plan to attend make sure you check the local website⁶, and book early if you want accommodation!

The Dance Itself

The Horn Dance starts at around 8.00am when the dancers have collected the horns from St Nicholas Church, where they are kept in the Hurst Chapel under the care of the Vicar. The horns are first "danced" in front of the church, then on through the village, round some of the outlying farms, and out to Blithfield Hall for around midday. After refreshments, the horns are danced back again round other farms, returning to the village along the Uttoxeter Road at around tea-time. From then on till dusk the Dance moves slowly through the village, completing the dancing activities at the Market Place, with its ancient Butter Cross. The horns are finally returned to the church⁵ just after 8.00pm. (See box for full route and timetable). The total

distance covered is around 10 miles (16 km). In bygone years the whole route was covered on foot, but more recently the dancers are ferried by car/van for certain stretches.

Traditionally the dancers are a band of twelve, and always male (although girls have sometimes played the junior roles). Six men carry the six sets of antlers, accompanied by Maid Marian, the Hobby Horse, the Jester or Fool, a boy carrying a bow and arrow, another a triangle on which he beats time, and a musician playing a melodeon (although in the past a fiddle was used)⁵. (Nowadays there are usually two musicians, one playing accordion). There is no certainty about the origins of the latter characters but it is thought that historically they were commonly played by entertainers at (medieval) banquets and similar. The dancers are accompanied by some money collectors.

One item that is not removed from the church is a past version of the Hobby Horse which is too fragile – and heavy! – for continuing use; having been replaced by a more manageable, lighter version. It is thought to be about 200 years old and apparently its head is made from an old broom head with the bristles removed before it was painted (see picture).

There are two parts to the Dance: one is a winding single file which snakes its way forward making ground gradually as the horn-bearers thread what looks like a figure-of-eight knot; with the other being a stationary dance, formed by the chain winding into a wide circle, then flattening out to make two files facing one another. This latter part brings the three white horns opposite the three brown, while the Fool and Hobby Horse face Marian and the boy with the bow and arrow. The two lines advance and retire and cross sides, the “stags” lurching head-on at one another as if butting⁵. The boy “fires” his arrow into the Hobby Horse’s mouth, in an act that older residents in the past said was to keep out the Devil. The music was played for over 50 years by Doug Fowell, who died in 2006 having been involved in the Horn Dance for 71 years. He played a mixture of “old tunes” and “popular tunes” (e.g. ‘The Isle of Capri’ and ‘Nelly the Elephant’!) which have the necessary rhythm⁵. Unfortunately Doug had not written down the “old tunes” and so current musicians listen to folklorist Doc Rowe’s⁷ recordings of his playing and do their best to copy.

There are lots of stops with food and drink provided at every one. Alcohol is regularly available but not always consumed (allegedly!). What is certain is that the Dance is very physically demanding, particularly for the horn-bearers, given the size and weight of the antlers. They are inevitably of different sizes, and range between 29 and 39 inches across, and between 16¼ lbs and 25¼ lbs in weight. I had the privilege of holding the smallest set and can assure readers that it was not straightforward to hold and carry, and the lower antlers bear heavily and sharply on the shoulders; one reason why the horn-bearers wear shoulder pads under their costumes. The distances covered and the nature of the dancing, often on roadways, takes its toll on the knees and so dancers often have to retire from the Dance around their 60th birthday. But this has not stopped the sprightly Jeff Bradbury, who is still going strong in his mid-sixties, after nearly 50 years of dancing!

The costumes worn by the dancers are comparatively modern. Originally ordinary clothes were worn, with coloured ribbon or cloth attached, but just before Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1887 the daughters of the then vicar of Abbots Bromley (John Manley Lowe Jnr) designed and made the first set of costumes. These were green tunics with brown spotted sleeves, and blue trousers with brown spots, with the boys wearing red velveteen hats. These were replaced and added to in 1904, and in 1948 the then Lord and Lady Bagot provided costumes⁵. The present costumes for the horn-bearers have contrasting shirts and waistcoats: those carrying the white horns wear a rust-coloured oakleaf-patterned shirt with plain sleeves and a light green waistcoat; while those carrying the brown horns wear a light green oakleaf-patterned shirt with plain sleeves and a rust-coloured waistcoat. All wear tan coloured hats, light green trousers with oakleaf pattern,

and long dark green socks. The others wear outfits specifically in line with their characters, with complementary colouring.

Origins of Horns and Dance

It would be natural to presume that the antlers are from deer, given the history of royal forests. Surprisingly they are from domesticated reindeer! Now reindeer have been extinct in England since before Saxon times, and the horns have been carbon-dated to 1065 plus or minus 80 years. Arguably the most likely source is Scandinavia, given that the area was invaded and settled by both Saxons and Danes, and the nearby River Trent would have provided a readily navigable route between Danish settlements and Norway and Denmark, via the Humber estuary⁵. The horns have been painted white and brown, although the latter have been blue at some time in the past. Their heads have every characteristic of 16th century carving⁸.

The horns never leave the village, except for the Dance itself, so when the Horn Dancers are invited to attend events further afield, they use replicas. This is probably fortunate, given one story of their giving a performance at Burton-on-Trent – the home of British brewing – and getting so hopelessly drunk that on the way home the spare horns (believed to be elk horns) ended up in the River Trent and were lost⁵.

Of course, the age of the horns does not necessarily mean that the Dance is of the same age. Unfortunately, the details of a country dance in a small Midlands village would not necessarily be seen as something of great historical import, but there is a reference to the Dance in 1686 which sets it as being performed “within memory” around Christmas-time, and being called the Hobby-horse dance. The quotation “within memory” is significant because it means that the Dance had been discontinued during the second half of the 17th century, due to the imposition of the post English Civil War, Puritan-inspired Commonwealth, when dancing and music were forbidden⁵. That it existed before this period, between 1620 and 1630, is evidenced by the testimony of a distinguished judge, with a less reliable source suggesting that the Dance collected money for the needy “until the monasteries were suppressed in 1540”⁵. It is noteworthy that an 1125 Burton Abbey source tells of five Abbots Bromley men being given grazing rights in Needwood Forest for an annual rent of ten shillings. The importance of this cannot be understated, given how it would enable forage for domestic animals, and access to winter fuel, fruits and small game. Anyone caught inside the forest boundary, without right of access, would be accused of poaching, which was punishable by mutilation or even death. In the Middle Ages a parade or demonstration was a recognised way of asserting or keeping alive privileges and customs, and therefore it is arguable that the Horn Dance served this purpose for the descendents of these men⁵. Such an interpretation would take the Dance back to Norman times.

Whilst the Dance is local and specific to Abbots Bromley, the nature of this type of dance is universal, with some comparisons being made with the buffalo dance of North American tribes, and the deer dance of the Navajo Indians⁵. In his book *Mysteries*, Colin Wilson draws parallels with the Floral Dance in Helston, and the Festival of the Hobby Horse in Padstow (both Cornwall), which he describes as fertility ceremonies involving men dressed as animals. The former includes a song concerning Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and Wilson quotes folklorist Lord Raglan as showing Robin Hood to be a Celtic horned god⁹. Others believe that the Dance stems from Druidic fertility rituals and refer to similar festivals in rural France where men wear the horns of cattle and pursue the village girls⁵! Suffice to say that if the origins of the Dance *do* relate to wild fertility rituals then its modern incarnation is far more conservative; and after a full day’s dancing and drinking I doubt if any of the performers would have the energy to indulge in chasing local wenches, even if they wanted to.

The local historical interpretation from farmers is that the Dance celebrates the gathering of the corn, and in light of its timing this seems very plausible. However, as nothing definitive has ever been written the true meaning and origin will always be a mystery.

Family Tradition

The Dance has long been led by the Bentley and Fowell families, going back to at least 1800, and quite likely earlier. In recent years the local 'Nostalgia Team' historical group has investigated source documents and established that the two families inter-married in 1858, when William Bentley married Anne Fowell. Their eldest son, also named William, was born in 1857 and on Anne's early death he adopted her maiden name. William jnr married Lucy Rock in 1882, producing seven sons and two daughters (more about four of the sons below). Since then the involvement of the family has reduced with now only Carl Fowell and his son Michael participating. This is partly due to families being smaller nowadays and the fact that Doug Fowell had six daughters and no sons! Consequently there is now a more diverse membership. Only four of the dancers live in Abbots Bromley itself, although the others all live in neighbouring towns and villages.

The Horn Dancers conduct their affairs themselves, with as little formality as possible, although the legal ownership of the horns was transferred to the local parish council in 1981, thereby assuming responsibility for all future maintenance and repairs. The Co-ordinator is Terry Bailey, one of the Abbots Bromley locals, who has been playing the Fool – so to speak – since 1979, when only three dancers were *not* Fowells. He explained that he only joined by accident, when he had accompanied his friends amongst the dancers to go and watch, and found himself press-ganged into covering for the person who was usually the Fool, who had failed to turn up. "They told me to get the costume on and get on with it!" and Terry has been admirably "getting on with it" ever since! So although the traditional familial ties of the Dance have loosened over the years, they have been replaced by extremely strong community-based bonds.

What is clear is that there is a lot written about the Horn Dance which is simply wrong! I found this out by sending Terry a copy of a magazine article from 1987, in good faith, to save me asking him lots of questions he had already answered many times. His response was that no-one had seen it before or heard of the authors, and much of it was incorrect! I won't name names but there is local frustration when people have evidently not attended the Dance, or spoken to relevant personnel, and have copied or quoted inaccurate publications out of context. Television is not necessarily much better with three minutes in Penelope Keith's *Hidden Villages*¹⁰ doing the Dance little justice. Doc Rowe⁷ has been photographing and recording the Horn Dance since 1973, and annually notes variations in personality and performance associated with this living tradition. What he, Terry and Tom Wheeldon, of 'Nostalgia Team', stress is the need to respect the traditions and to go back to original sources wherever possible.

Horn Dance 2015

7th September 2015 was a glorious sunny day in Abbots Bromley, which was a surprise given the awful weather that has swept across England the previous week. I got down to St Nicholas Church in time for the collection of the horns, as everyone prepared themselves for what Terry had told me was a special "one-off" version of the Horn Dance. This was because it was 100 years since the 1915 Horn Dance when four of the seven Fowell brothers – Alfred, Arthur, David and John - were given special dispensation from the Lincolnshire Regiment of the British Army to go and do the Dance prior to embarkation for the Western Front. They performed the Dance in military uniform and then left for France. Within the month Arthur died of his wounds at the Battle of Loos (aged 25), and David was killed in action in April 1917 (aged 24), with Alfred and John surviving the War. So it was decided that four of the current dancers would wear 1915-replica Lincolnshire Regiment uniforms for the 2015 Horn Dance, in honour of their predecessors. This

gave the opportunity to recreate photos from the 1915 Horn Dance in the same locations from the same viewpoints. *[Footnote: Because of the weight and constraints of the uniforms the four horn-bearers reverted to their normal costumes for parts of the route]*

In order to be as consistent as possible, the 1915 photographs were scrutinised to establish exactly which sets of horns were carried by which brothers. This was possible due to the specific characteristics of the horns. The uniforms and individualised badges bearing the name and photo of each brother were then assigned to those current dancers who carried the corresponding sets of horns. There is a hierarchy for the horn-bearers associated to their seniority and dance position; what was really fortetean was that Carl and Michael Fowell – the only family links to the four brothers from within the existing dancers – were found to be carrying the same horns carried by Arthur and David in 1915 respectively!

After watching the initial dances on the village green in front of the Buttercross, and up Bagot Street, I went for breakfast, while the dancers set off on their route. I am not fit enough to follow the Dance for its whole course, and so my wife and I met up with the dancers across Blithfield reservoir in the village of Admaston, before walking to Blithfield Hall where the Dance took place on the lawn in front of the Hall, with the dancers being presented to Mr J Hyde, the current owner, and his party. After lunch we left the dancers as they set off to an outlying farm, and re-joined them when they came back into the village, slowly moving between pubs and the Indian Restaurant, where each provided refreshments after the dance; with the landlords, pub staff and spectators joining in to carry some of the horns in informal dancing, and generally have some fun. With one more trip around the outskirts of the village the dancers returned to the village green at dusk for their final dances. Morris Men and other traditional dance groups had been providing some interim evening entertainment for the large crowd gathered around the two pubs and the fete stalls. The total attendance has been up to 3,000 some years, although it was probably nearer 2,000 this year. Finally everyone returned to St Nicholas Church to return the horns and receive a blessing. Tom Wheeldon again told the story about 1915, as he had done at every stop. All in all a great day and a great tribute to the 1915 dancers!

Other Local Fortetean

Set in rolling countryside Abbots Bromley is a lovely place to visit even when the Horn Dance is not taking place. It has no less than four pubs: The Bagot Arms, The Coach and Horses, The Crown and The Goat's Head. Nearby Blithfield Hall, with the main house joined by battlement walls and a turreted gateway, is one of the oldest castles in England¹¹, and Blithfield Reservoir is very scenic. So if you have turned up on the wrong day, or are just passing nearby, what is there for a fortetean to look for in the area?

Inevitably there is an array of ghost stories. The Goat's Head is supposed to have had Dick Turpin stay there, with a room being named after him. It is claimed that he stole Black Bess from Rugeley Market during his stay. Legend has it that a man sold his soul to the Devil in return for riches, and that Satan came and violently claimed it while he was in this pub; apparently this man can sometimes be heard shouting and swearing in the night, with black shapes often seen in corridors¹². Blithfield Hall itself has a whole battalion of spectres including a grey lady, a lady wearing dark clothes and a cap, a male looking out of a first floor window twisting a ring on his right hand, and a small, spectral boy who fell down a well who can be heard to issue anguished screams¹³.

One story that I was told when I was a child visiting Blithfield Reservoir for a family picnic, was that the church bells from the sunken village could sometimes be heard ringing from under its waters. Imagine my disappointment, when researching this article, to find that there were only two buildings within the area that was flooded: a small thatched cottage and an old mill¹⁴. No church (or village for that matter)! A

perfect illustration of how stories can be handed down in good faith, when there is actually no basis in fact. The legend of sunken churches and the ghostly ringing of their bells is quite ubiquitous, and appears to have attached itself to even a newly created area of water.

FT favourite Nick Redfern tells a story about Bagots Wood, which is a short distance from the excellent Marsh Farm where we stayed. In 1937, a 10-year old local lad named Alfred Tipton was playing there with four friends when they were disturbed by a shrill screeching sound and saw a large black beast sitting on its haunches in a particularly large and very old tree. It was “shaking the branch up and down with its claws tightened around it”. The creature peered at them for a few moments and then opened up large and shiny wings that were at least 12 feet across. It then flew away from them in a part-flying/ part-gliding fashion, before disappearing from view after 15 or 20 seconds. When shown pictures, photographs and drawings of a wide variety of large-winged creatures that either roam the skies, or did so in the past, the one that Alfred said most closely resembled the creature he and his friends had seen was a pterodactyl!! Nick links the vision to the Mothman sightings in the USA and draws attention to strange and ominous animal mutilations in Bagots Wood in 1978¹⁵.

Just down the road from Abbots Bromley is Rugeley which is famous for William Palmer, known as 'The Rugeley Poisoner' and 'The Prince of Poisoners'. It was alleged that Palmer had been responsible for as many as fifteen murders, including those of his wife, four of his children, his brother and his mother-in-law. When he was hanged outside Stafford Prison on 14th June 1856 (specifically for the murder of John Parsons Cook) 35,000 spectators crammed the streets of the town to witness the grisly spectacle – some spending the whole night in pouring rain to secure their place¹⁶.

To the other side of Rugeley lies Cannock Chase, with its long history of fortean goings-on, including alien big cats, black dogs, bigfoot-type creatures¹⁷ and even werewolves¹⁸. So the Abbots Bromley area is definitely one for the Fortean tourist map!

Conclusions

Terry and his fellow dancers should be very proud of what they do every year and particularly the 1915 remembrance tribute. They and the people of Abbots Bromley appreciate that the Horn Dance reaches back into the far-distant past, and are determined to ensure that it will continue long into the future. It provides a unique occasion for the expression of communal spirit and pride, and a recollection of a thousand or more years of village life⁵. I recommend it for every fortean's “bucket-list”.

Acknowledgements

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3,949 words exc Acknowledgements

3,986 words inc Acknowledgements

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Abbots Bromley Horn Dance Timetable (Timings are approximate)

- 0.700 Service of Holy Communion, St Nicholas Church
- 07.45 Collect Horns from Church
- 08.15 Dance on Village Green
Goose Lane
Yeatsall
- 11.00 Admaston Village (across reservoir)
- 12.00 Blithfield Hall
- 13.45 Little Dunstal Farm, Uttoxeter Road
- 14.15 Rugeley Turn
- 15.30 The Bagot Arms
- 16.15 The Ruchi Indian Restaurant
- 16.50 The Goat's Head
- 17.30 The Crown Inn
- 18.30 Schoolhouse Lane
Bagots View/ Swan Lane
Radmore Lane
Lichfield Road
- 19.15 The Coach and Horses
High Street and Village Green
- 20.15 Horns returned to Church
- 20.13 Ancient Service of Compline, St Nicholas Church