

## The May Fair of 1603



This piece came about in response to a query regarding the Morris Dancing Side in Milborne Port in and around the year 1603 when a May Game or Fair was held to raise funds to repair the Milborne Port church bell. This same Morris Dancing Side danced at Poyntington Manor at the request of Sir Edward Parham, a close friend of Sir Walter Raleigh.

There was a mention of this event in Michael Heaney's book 'The Ancient English Morris Dance':

At Milborne Port in Somerset in 1603 the parish decided to hold a May game to raise funds to repair the church bell, and went with 'flagges gunnes and weapons in merriment and in the fashion of a May game' to the neighbouring parish of Poyntington. This was said to be at the instigation of Sir Edward Parham, who with his brother John 'have procured and Caused ... many great Bulbaytinges, Morishdaunces, the said Sir Edward beinge one of the Morishdauncers the better to gette the love and affection of the common people'; but a bill of complaint was laid against them that they were Popish recusants and encouraged riotous assembly. So although the parish was supportive and had aristocratic backing and even participation, the accusation not just of disorder but of religious dissent from the established church was raised in opposition.<sup>43</sup>

It should be remembered that bells were the only way for most people to know the time, since clocks were expensive and comparatively rare instruments. The church would certainly have had a bell from when it was built by the Anglo Saxons. A peel of three bells was installed in 1736.

An unusual entry in the 1781 survey refers to a 'Bell Coney' on the site of *Something Else Fishy* and might have been a market bell.

The following article<sup>1</sup> throws an interesting light on life at the time. When James I came to the throne in 1603, he did not feel safe on the throne and this

---

<sup>1</sup> from Stokes, James, ed. Records of Early English Drama: Somerset. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, pp.167-170

insecurity led to many complaints being laid as people used the uncertainty to get their neighbours into trouble.

*In Somerset most of these traditional entertainments – whether in city, town, or village, whether Robin Hood or May game, guild pageant, morris or long dance – involved some form of civic and religious play, variously incorporating elements of processional movement, acting, ritual, music and/or dance, with involvement by different social classes and of civic and religious officials of the community, as sponsors and/or participants. What are often called ‘games’ in a Somerset village or market town seem to have been no different in structure and purpose from what are called ‘shows’ in the city of Wells. Their purposes, depending on the specific activity, were to raise funds for the parish, to celebrate religious holidays, to express civic pride and communal harmony, or to punish offenders against social norms. They did so by patterned, theatrically conceived movement over the landscape of the parish. In that sense all traditional entertainment in Somerset was ‘parish’ entertainment, the only significant difference being the size and resources of the sponsoring community, which in turn determined the scope and configuration of similar events in different places.*

*This form of entertainment invariably included a leader reflecting the ever-more-contentious social environment in the decades leading up to the Civil War, opponents of these games increasingly tended to describe them as a military manoeuvre, attempting thereby to redefine them as a kind of insurrection or riotous and unlawful assembly. For example, in 1606 William Walton of Cannington brought a suit in the court of Star Chamber accusing John Parham of Poyntington and his son, Sir Edward Parham of Milborne Port, with procuring 300 ‘Rioutous and Routous’ men – their friends, tenants, popish recusants, and Papists – armed with muskets, calivers, pikes, long staffs with blades, and armour in Milborne Port, where they marched and skirmished in ‘tumultious and warlicke order’ with trumpets, drums, and ensigns, to the house of John Parham two miles distant in Poyntington, and skirmished again. It caused, Walton said, great terror to see such popish recusants exercised and trained in such martial manner. The men, he said, were then entertained and feasted by John Parham, and they shouted that they would live and die with Sir Edward Parham. The Parhams, it was further charged, had similarly assembled 200 or 300 – sometimes 5,000 persons – sundry other times and places as well,*

*including at South Cadbury where they had 'vttered, vndecent speches agaynst the grave preachers in these partes'. Further they had procured bull baitings and morris dances, at which Sir Edward had been one of the dancers. These events, Walton charged, revealed the Parhams' 'inward purpose of chaunge' and their wish to win the love and affection of the common people at the expense of the preachers.*

*In contrast, John and Edward Parham and their compatriots in the games described the event not as a military manoeuvre but as a traditional church feast or ale, held on Monday of Whitsun week to raise funds to repair the parish church and bell at Milborne Port. John Parham estimated the number at sixty to eighty substantial householders (yeomen and gentlemen), plus diverse boys and youths, marching in merriment 'after the fashion of a Maye game'.*

*The further purpose, he said, was to nourish love and familiarity among neighbours, and he further said that after the event occurred,*



*the participants returned to their parish church for morning prayer (so it occurred early in the morning). According to other witnesses, Sir Edward and men of Poyntington, a few days later, similarly skirmished 'in merry & sportfull manner' on the downs with the men of Milborne Port, then went to an ale in that parish.*

*Clearly the spectacle of mock skirmishes and alarums in the fields near Milborne Port caused concern on the part of the complainant, who saw them as threatening political statements about control of the land. He sought to describe them as a military riot, thus a form of insurrection. All his description is in military terms, from muster to marching to battle. Yet the event could hardly have been perceived as a threat by the Crown: King James knighted Edward Parham less than two months later. For their part, the participants themselves described the event in distinctly unmilitary terms as a traditional ale (in purpose) and May game (in form), though held in mid-June.*

*However, the fact that speeches at a similar event were made against preachers at South Cadbury (where several influential members of the puritan gentry lived) indicates the presence of an element of political conflict that makes the protestations of the participants seem a little disingenuous. The Parhams and Waltons were themselves local gentry linked by marriage and property. In their divergent descriptions of the event can be seen two factions using a traditional fund-raising game in a way that turned it from a form of mock conflict and reconciliation into a vehicle for expressing literal political and religious conflict played out upon the land itself.*

Lesley Wray February 2024