

Clay Country Customs (Rescorla Festival)



These notes are from a project commissioned by the Rescorla Festival to research the folk dance customs of Cornwall's clay country. The core work took place between April 2007 and June 2008 and comprised a series of presentations to local organisations and open workshops. The outcome of these events was the identification of six folk dance items that were recalled as popular in the Clay Country area in the 1930s / 1940s together with some musicians who could remember some of the music associated with this. The information obtained was triangulated with other folk dance research undertaken in this area and photographic archives. A series of performances were set up as part of the festival, where possible using musicians who were involved in, or remembered their parents being involved in these dances, in particular the Snail Creep. A CD / Booklet pack describing these customs was published both for the festival and to support a continuing programme of workshops for schools and adult interest groups such as the Women's Institutes and Old Cornwall Societies. This activity fed this research back into the community and resulted in still further information, anecdotes and recollections about these customs coming to light.

Snail Creep

Mrs Gwen Millet of Withiel was interviewed on 5th August 2007 and described her recollections of the Snail Creep and tea treats:

"I can remember the Snail Creep when I was at School and as a teenager and we finished off each festivity with this, and Mr Brewer used to grab a branch from the tree and grab a lady and start marching and all the young folk used to follow on with partnerslead by a brass band. We used to have hospital fetes and things like that then and a nursing association – St Wenn and Withiel and one year it would be at St Wenn and the next Withiel and they'd have sports for everybody, sheaf pitching and things like that and then this was the final bit there was masses of people anybody older than me had boyfriends even perhaps married people..... they just grabbed it and away you'd go..... anywhere there was room like as if there were tables you would get between the tables ..well it made fun of it really..." Mrs Gwen Millet Interview no 050807-1

"During my boyhood, feast days were great events. These were well arranged so as not to take place on the same day—this enabled people to travel from one village to another. It was the one great event of the year, sometimes there would be a competition between various places in matter of teas games and other amusements. Weather permitting tables would be lavishly spread in the open air consisting of splits and cream, home baked bread and saffron cakes. In the fading light the fife and drum band could be heard in the distance . Presently it would march on to the field and this was the summons for all young people to choose a member of the opposite sex. Then linking arms the stage was set for the 'Creep'" REL Collins,. "An Old Cornish Custom—The Snail Creep". Cornish Magazine August 1958.



Mollinnis Fife and Drum Band.

When the dance was performed at the Wheal Martyn Visitors Centre Mike Jenkins lead the processional band. He could recall his father playing for the Rescorla Snail Creep in the 1930s and using "Tavern in the Town" as an additional tune to the original Snail Creep.

Mike Jenkin



Snail Creep at Wheal Martyn 19/09/07.

The Snail Creep Tune

3 As remembered by Jean Harris

Cock in Britches / Weedin Paddle



'Crying the Neck' is a custom that takes place when the last crop of corn has been harvested.

Observed at Withiel 14th September 2007: The harvester cries "I ave'm, I ave'm, I ave'm," which was answered by "what ave ee, what ave ee, what ave ee?" , harvester responded " 'a neck, a neck, a neck'." (Audio file 140906-4). The neck was a corn dolly made from the last of the corn to be harvested. It was kept until the following year as a fertility symbol to encourage the next year's crops.

A solo dance called the "Weedin' Paddle" was recalled by people involved in the Clay Country customs project. A version of this dance had been collected complete by the author from a Mrs Rowse some years previously. Mrs Alberta Rowse, Treesmill was interviewed in December 1983 when she was 92. Mrs Rowse had lived in the area all of her life. She explained that although the 'Cock in Britches' dance was often performed on festive occasions, it was essentially associated with the Goldheys (Harvest Festival) and the ceremony of 'Crying the Neck'. The name 'Cock in Britches' alludes to the fact that if you do not keep the weeds down they will handicap the corn, much as a winning fighting cock might be handicapped by wearing a special hobble to even the odds.

"They danced it an t Crying the neck and any little little festivities the old woman do come to dance if it ad been my birthday and she would come down to dance Old Jane would come down and dance the Cock in Britches well if you did'nt have the sickle or a weedin paddle you'd use the yard broom

There was swing to the left and swing to the right and two backwards and two forwards then swing im round the paddle and after you- v'e doen the weedin paddle you have to do the thrashelthe wind do blow and the dowst do go so keep the thrashel goin.....no more barley bread and gertie grey". Mrs Alberta Rowse, Treesmill in December 1983



Snake or Serpent Dance

The snake dance was well known at tea treats and village parties in the Clay Country from the latter part of the 19th century through until the 1940s and remains a popular dance to finish off the evening at Cornish Troys / barn dances. It has its origin in a medieval dance called the Farandole and whilst it is a very simple dance in form it becomes hypnotic and exciting when large numbers of people are involved and constantly passing each other in convoluted spirals .

Broom Dance

Broom Dances are well remembered tradition in the Clay Country, at a presentation by the authors to the St Dennis WI as part of the Rescorla Project, for example, several members could remember people dancing over the broom and Noreen Hewett recalled that her uncle, George Truscott of Drummers Hill, Ruddle Moor was still performing this in the 1970s. The clearest description we have is from Mrs Bill Glanville of St Columb following a meeting of the local Old Cornwall Society. She remembers her mother dancing the broom dance to the tune of 'The Cats Got the Measles' describing, "...the broom laid on the ground, dancing over the handle and head and returning, picking up the broom and passing it beneath the knees". Broom dances mark the overlap between a game and a competitive dance with performers trying to outdo each other.

Millers Dance

Gwen Millet (Audio File 140408-1) remembered a dance game called the Miller's Song. Andrew Chapman of Belowda and founder member of the Cornish Dance group "Cam Kernewek" recorded this dance in 1984. Together with the accompanying song, it had been described to him by his Uncle and Aunt who could remember doing it at Sunday School treats some sixty years before. During the course of the Rescorla Project 2007 / 2008 this dance was also recalled by the members of Withiel WI as having been done in the Parish Tea Treats of the 1930s.

Furry Dances

Although the most celebrated Furry Dance is that performed at Helston on 8th May other furry dances are recorded throughout Cornwall. For example Cecil Sharp collected information about the Grampound Furry during his visit to Cornwall in May 1913. His informants were a Mr Phillip Luke (82) his son, and a lady called Mary



Goodman (86). They described the dance much as it was done in Helston except that couples held hands across when they danced forward. They also explained that the procession would stop every so often and the dancers would reform in a ring , going first clockwise then anticlockwise around the circle. Furry Dances were and are popular at feast days in the Clay Country and a new dance was composed as recently as the 1980s by Oscar Yelland to celebrate St Austell's White Gold Festival

Norman Mannel had a picture of himself playing in the band for the furry aged 11 in 1935

"The main day of the year was Whit Tuesday..... all the school children and I suppose the councillors and people like that attended this thing – they all accumulated at Hillside which was the home of Mr Croggan who owned the tannery. We all played games and had little races and in the end they were given this big saffron bun the furry was done at the end of the day. We had another day – the peace day which was done after the first world war – that's when danced the furry, more so that on Whit Tuesday, from the recreation field right up through the village and down again....."

Norman Mannel (Audio file no 121009-1)

Anita Dunstan (Nee Richards) recalled the Furry which she called the Flora

"I was a Polruan maid In Polruan we always did the Flora dance for our bank holiday – which was the end of August that was our day and we always had a flora dance up and down the village we started up West Street and down Fore street cos no-one could dance up Fore Street, too steep. This was probably why when we danced we danced sideways because if you danced forwards you'd go so bloomin

fast. But when we did the circle bit I always remember going around twice and then back again and then sideways again. I suppose I was 16 or 17 when I last seen it done, well after the war, I was born 1945" Anita Dunstan
(Audio file no 030109-1)



Carrie' of St Blazey

From an old postcard dated 1905.