

## Polperro Mock Mayor

Notes based on participant observation: 3rd Saturday in June 2005 – 2010

### Summary

The procession involves the Mock Mayor sitting on an improvised throne on a cart that is pushed and accompanied by the Merry Men and a Green Man. The mayor dressed in mock finery and the merry men in fishing smocks and black hats decorated with Cornish flags. At 2pm The Mayor from the previous year is processed down from the top of the Polperro to what is described as the village green—

an open area in the centre. Here the new mayor is introduced having been selected by the organisers secretly before hand. The Mayor makes a speech usually guaranteeing fine weather and free beer and the party then proceeds to visit



each pub in the village. On entering the premises the party ceremonially test and approve the beer give, out free money especially printed for the occasion and then proceed to the next venue. By approximately 4pm the tour is complete and the party proceed to the outer harbour where the mayor is tipped in to the

sea.

### 17/06/06

Ted Pilchur (mock mayor 2005, owner of local gift store), conversation with author; Ted explained that the tourist industry in Polperro held a very precarious position in terms of the weather and it was hoped that festival would bring more consistent trade into the village. He felt it was important to retain some Cornish identity with the event through the Mock Mayor as much of the rest of the festival was Morris dancing and general entertainment that was not particularly linked to Cornwall. Ted Pilchur explained that this was why he had purposely booked a Cornish piper and Cornish dancers when he was Festival organiser in 2000. The piper was expressly to play Cornish music for the procession



**16/06/07**

Some tension but entered into in reasonably good spirit between the Mock Mayor procession and the Morris teams providing displays in the streets on the route. The Merry Men felt that they had right of “ownership” and should not wait for the dance displays.



The musician was

encouraged to continue leading the procession on through the Morris teams display by the Lord Mayor and Merry Men but asked to wait until the performance had finished by the festival organiser responsible for booking the Morris sides. There was a clear distinction between the activities and ownership of the Mock Mayoral procession who were mostly local fishermen and the visiting dance teams who were seen as outsiders.



**21/06/08**

Polperro Mock Mayor 2008, the route of the procession avoided a particular pub because it had declined to take part in a money raising event earlier in the year. This had been alluded to in the mayors speech but the implication was not apparent until the change in route was commented upon by the author and an explanation provided by one of the “Merry Men”. An interesting example of natural local politics embedded in a folk custom.

**19/06/09**

Marked change in Merry Men personnel this year and a largely tee-total event as most of them were fishermen due to sail out on the evening tide. The offending pub of the previous year was visited but only cursorily.



Quotes from the Histories of Polperro by the Couch family:

**Jonathon Couch**, *An Historical Account of the Village of Polperro in Cornwall and Its Neighbourhood 1815*, (Truro, Lake, unidentified date 1815? )

*"In days gone by, Polperro held its festival on the 10th July to celebrate its Patron Saint, St Peter; this was known as 'Peter's-tide'. On the eve of the festival a bonfire was built on the beach and amid much cheering from the assembled throng the men and boys would dance around it, waiting for the fire to burn low enough for them to leap through. A very dangerous thing to do! This was the Solstice fire, originally held on mid-summers night, but changed when the calendar was altered in 1751.*

*For the next few days a fair took place, followed by the mayor-choosing; which was never any great honour for the person chosen as he was generally some half-wit or drunk. Clothed in some mock finery, he then chose his companions who wheeled him from pub to pub in a cart decked out in greenery. At each pub, as he judged the ale, he would make a fine speech promising full employment, better wages, free beer and all the good things in life. He was then taken to the harbour to 'meet the tide'.*

To bring this tradition up to date, the mayor is now a well-known local character of village life, rather than the inebriate of old!"

**Couch, Jonathan, and Thomas Q. Couch.** *The History of Polperro, a Fishing Town on the South Coast of Cornwall; Being a Description of the Place, Its People, Their Manners, Customs, Modes of Industry, &C.* (Truro: Lake, 1871).

*"On the eve of the fair is the prefatory ceremony of a bonfire. The young fishermen go from house to house and beg money to defray expenses. At night -fall a large pile of faggots and tar-barrels is built on the beach, and amid cheers of a congregated crowd, the pile is lighted. Men and boys dance merrily around it, till the fire burns low enough, then they venturously leap through the flames."*

*"The next day the fair begins; Stalls, laden with fairings, sweetmeats and toys, line the lower part of Lansallos street, near the strand. There are besides, strolling thespians; fellows who draw unwary youths into games of hazard; ballad singers; penny-peep men, who show and describe to wondering boys the most horrid scenes of the latest murder; jugglers and tumblers to display their skill."*

*"The second day is much livelier than the first, and has for it's great event a wrestling match on the strand, or perhaps a boat race."*

*On the third day we have the mayor-choosing, never a valid ceremony, but a broad burlesque. The person chosen to this post of mimic dignity is generally some half-witted or drunken fellow who, tricked out in tinsel finery is wheeled through the town, stopping at each inn. He then demands a quart of the landlord's ale, which is gauged with mock ceremony. His attendants often made some facetious end to the pageant by wheeling the mayor with some impetus into the tide."*