

St Ives Guizers

At the beginning of the twentieth century Guize dance seems to have been popular but not well received by all parts of the community: "I learn with greatest satisfaction that the worthy Mayor of St Ives, Mr Edward Hain has prohibited Gees Dancing for the year 1900. In this I feel he has the support of every man and woman having any pretensions to moral refinement in the parish.people parade the principle streets many being "dressed up" , shouting, singing, dancing, and an indulgence in a rough kind of play, which sometimes ends in broken heads, broken glass and belabouring one another with anything handy in the form of a cudgel. Some masquerade as animals, some as kings and queens but what seems to create the greatest fun, and is the most enjoyed by the crowd, are men dressed as women and women dressed as men, girls as boys and boys as girls, some of whom under the influence of drink, perform sundry antics which, for vulgarity, would be hard to beat (S. T. Rowe, "Guise *St Ives Weekly Summary*, January 6, 1900)

Guize dancing is occasionally reported in the *St Ives Times* over the next 20 years but popularity would seem to have waned until its revival by the *St Ives Old Cornwall Society* in 1925. It was then framed as "the revival of an ancient custom" and the "sundry antics" were replaced by a more sober "parade of Guizers". In the immediate post-war period children were encouraged to take part and William Barber describes how they enjoyed the novelty of cross dressing. By 1957 the popularity of guizing and New Year edition of the *St Ives times* carries an article going into some detail about the customs chequered history and comments that the streets of St Ives are "quiet enough now , television, radio and cinema having replaced older and more vigorous entertainments" .

In 1979 the custom enjoyed a new lease of life at the instigation of the Mayor, Keith Slocomb with the help of Dave Lobb, a Morris dance enthusiast whose father took part in earlier guize dancing.



Dave Lobb Leading the St Ives Guizers Circa 1979



For the practical reason that it was a quieter time of year for dance enthusiasts, the guizing date was moved from Christmas to the St Ives Feast Day celebrations.

It now took the form of a series of masked processions through the town and adopted greenery in the style of the “green man”. . .



By 1989, guizing was less well supported and the numbers of participants and audience reducing. It is interesting to note that a correspondent in the local paper comments that this was “not surprising as guize dancing should be a spontaneous activity and was never traditionally associated with the feast”.

Participants felt that there was an issue about guizers coming from outside of St Ives and Cornwall and Dave Lobb felt that they had been a bit too rowdy for the people of St Ives who were a bit reserved. Participant observation, however, did not find any evidence to support this, and Will Barber was quite enthusiastic about the guizers of the 1980s, e “they were out to have a bit of fun, it was quite a good thing really we all liked it.” Even if there is little evidence to support any ambivalence in St Ives towards the guizers it is interesting that they were conscious that this might be an issue. It shows that there was an expectation of being perceived as the “other” from outside of St Ives. In practice, encouraged by the influence of an artist’s colony and a high level of commitment to the tourist industry St Ives had an arguably positive relationship with the “other”. Both William Barber and Mary Quick. described being brought up in the “Digey” on Teetotal Street, they witnessed change but neither expressed resentment nor a feeling that St Ives was losing its identity. The demand for properties in the “Digey” encouraged residents to sell up and move to modern, and more comfortable housing, on the outskirts of St Ives.

In 1990 mayor of St Ives invited a local Cornish dance group, Ros Kelttek, to become involved with and lead a Furry dance for the Well procession held on the Feast day. It is significant that the selection and preference was for an expressly Cornish dance group as this is a statement of identity. Ros Kelttek acted as a core group and invited other Cornish dance groups and musicians to join them, especially people from St Ives. They did not use guize costume but elected to remain in the team costume they normally wore for dance displays. Within ten years this had become a largely local performance, with some support from musicians from elsewhere in Cornwall.

In 2007 the St Ives a masked version of the guizers was introduced again drawing from musicians and dancers who had been taking part in the Well procession. The dancers dressed "mock posh", much along the lines of Heaths description (Cornwall and its People A K Hamilton Jenkin, London, Dent and sons, 1945) and toured the streets and harbour side pubs with displays of scoot dancing on the eve of the Feast Day. I



In 2009 the activities of the Guizers were extended to Christmas events as they had been at one time historically.

In September 2010 the Guizers, as Bagas Porthia, lead the local dignatories procession for the Cornish Gorsyth held in St Ives.



These notes are based on participant observation: 1st Sunday in February 2007, 2009, 2010

Interviews: Dave Lobb, 26/07/06 William Barber, Mary Quick 30/10/09

Photographs

Dave Lobb: 1979—1980s

Bagas Porthia: 2007—2010

St Ives Archive

St Ives Times, January 1901 and 1921

St Ives Times January 1929: Successful Revival of Ancient Custom

St Ives Times January 4th 1957 Cyril Noall, "Guize Dancing At St Ives St Ives Feast",

"What's on listings", *Cornish Life*, Feb 1984,;

4th Feb, Dressing of St Ives Well, Porthmeor Beach in the afternoon. Guize Dancing 7.30pm,

5th Feb, Green Morris men from several parts of the country will dance,

6th Feb, Parade of Guizers to Guildhall at 9 am. Hurling of the Silver Ball at 10.45,

The St Ives Times and Echo and Hayle times, February 3rd 1989 :Mary Quick,

"Guizing through the ages",