

4.1 Padstow Mummers

Participatory action research

Background

Following a complaint, the source of which remained unidentified, the police attended the event on Boxing Day 2004 and collected video evidence for submission to the Crown Prosecution Service. The Cornwall Racial Equality Council denied making the complaint but confirmed that concerns had been expressed to the Police previously.¹ This was again picked up by both the local and the national press² and followed by interest in the correspondence columns mostly directed at “political correctness gone mad” and the “Nanny State”. In the event the Crown Prosecution Service decided that no offences had been committed and Devon and Cornwall Police responded with the offer “*Looking ahead to the 2005-06 celebrations, the police would welcome working with organisers of the celebrations and partners in order to continue the positive steps taken already.*”³

Devon and Cornwall Police

Discussion with Devon and Cornwall Police Diversity Officer during cultural diversity conference 23/09/05. The issues were seen as fairly straightforward in that concerns centred on: the use of the name “Darkie” which might have been acceptable 30 years ago but now had connotations that people might find offensive; Costume that could be seen as insulting such as joke shop afro wigs. It was understood that there had been some dialogue with the organisers who had responded positively to this.

Legal Position

The main body of legislation here lies in the 1976 Race Relations Act and the Public Order Act 1986 with some amendments resulting from the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Section 17 of the public Order Act defines Racial Hatred as “hatred against a group of persons defined by reference to colour, race, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origins”. With regard to public performance section 20 describes as an offence the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour with an intention to stir up racial hatred. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Home Office Website www.homeoffice.gov.uk, accessed 27/03/06) defines a racist incident as any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim, or any other person. By these definitions any observer perceiving the blackened faces of the Padstow Mummers as demeaning of black people, and therefore racist, turns it into a “racist incident” whatever the intentions of the mummers themselves. Conversely, if no one is offended by the dress or behaviour then no offence had been committed. This defined both my legal and moral position as a researcher in that if I judged the costume or behaviour to be offensive to anyone, or anyone appeared to be offended then I should disengage with the activity and make clear my reasons for this.

1. Alastair Wreford, *Cornish Guardian* 3rd March 2005

2. De Bruxelles, Simon, *The Times* 25/02/05; Savill, Richard, *The Telegraph* 25/02/05; Allen, Peter, *The Daily Mail* 25/02/05, also local press: *Cornish Guardian* 30/12/04, 3/3/05, *Western Morning News* 15/03/05

3. Story from BBC NEWS: <http://news.bbc.co.uk> Published: 2005/03/10 16:39:58 GMT

Participatory action research

- Invitation to join the Padstow mummers on 26/12/05 accepted.
- Two additional researchers involved on 26/12/05 who did not participate but followed the procession observed, took photographs and audio recordings.
- After the event discussion recorded of observations, impressions and experiences.
- A paper was published (Merv Davey, "Guizing: Ancient Traditions And Modern Sensitivities." *Cornish Studies* (2006) **14**: 229 – 244) which was circulated to stakeholders.
- Triangulated with recollections of previous involvement with event 26/12/1983
- Triangulated with Correspondence / interviews / dialogues were held with stakeholders 2005 – 2006.

Boxing Day 2005

Participation – contemporaneous written notes

Met up at the Padstow Social Club at 10.30. Small number of people present, three blacked up in Dinner Jackets and top or Bowler hats, to whom I was introduced. Some informal discussion – I commented on the Police presence last year accepted the police advice and need to be careful the term “darkie” not to be used, nor wigs as it could get out of hand. Talked about experiences of previous years, this was Padstow’s event and nothing to do with outsiders, it is just harmless fun nothing racist about it except what other people make of it. Actually collecting for a Charity, usually this is local but possibly for Children in Africa this time. If there is going to be hassle then we will just lie low until it all blows over and then carry on. I felt there was an undercurrent of anger or tension with this.

As more people arrived in various costume, mostly blacked up some older people in DJs, Top hats and tails number of younger people – waistcoats quite a lot of jeans and T shirts. Mostly bedecked in tinsel and trappings of Christmas. I had previously decided that, notwithstanding the blackening faces, I would accept the invitation to join the musicians that provided there was no evidence of racism in either dress or behaviour. There was no evidence of any kind so blacked up in the same style as other people - circular black face and unpacked my banjo.

A couple of ladies Black faces, Top hats and tails, came over – “trying to recognise you, who is this handsome young man with a moustache” I have a ginger moustache which I did not Black up so I did rather stand out. I was introduced with explanation that was from Newquay and played in some of the music sessions in Padstow. All

quite cheerful and welcoming from my perspective, but I felt there was an element of checking out the stranger. As I joined the musicians I was acknowledged by some I knew and greeted by others it was quite a crush.

People gradually arrived up until about midday when there were 40 – 50 people in the club. Instruments May drums, side drums and accordions plus jingle sticks. Young accordionist lead the music shouting either the key or the name of the next song a few bars ahead. Variety of tunes repeated initially including “She’ll be coming around the mountain”, “Trelawney”, “Alabama”, Golden Slippers.

Procession lead off – by same young musician who identified tunes changes and direction. First off to the Church, through Church Yard and then on to Golden Lion where we stayed for 30 – 40 minutes leading singing. Quite a large group of people by now perhaps 50 – 60 actually in some form of costume identifying them as part of the activity and 20 – 30 others either on-looking or joining in.

My attention was drawn to two ladies blacked up with scarves turban style reminiscent of the lady minstrels I have seen in 30s films such as the Marx Brothers or the Black House keeper or maid who occasionally made an appearance in the Tom and Jerry cartoons. This did make me uncomfortable as I felt this was identifying a clear racial stereo type – politically incorrect rather than racist but nevertheless unfortunate in view of concerns expressed by people about the custom.

I took a break – cup of tea with a family of my acquaintance. Interestingly the conversation did run to justification of Padstow’s boxing day / New years day customs or at least criticism that “they” were making an issue of nothing knew a black person living in Padstow who thought it was quite funny and knew we (local people) did not mean any harm by it.

Procession left Golden Lion and proceeded through the town and around the key to the harbour Inn where the customers were serenaded. There were a few exceptions but the majority of the people in the bar were clearly enjoying the music and joining in. I feel there would have been a similar number of exceptions in any similar event. It was increasingly difficult to pick out individual tunes / songs but I could see that people might have been in the same key thanks to the volume of the accordions but they were not necessarily singing the same song. I think that Camptown races, Little brown jug and Polly Wolly Doodle came up. The last is the only song I know to have had an official version of words that would today be felt to be in poor taste I have no idea if those words were sung but I certainly had no evidence that they were.

I joined the procession on a little further and then bade my farewells at about 2pm.

Audio file 261205-2

The music, driven by massed accordions and May Day drums could only be described as “Padstowesque”, a big sound that enabled one to sing along with little fear of being out of tune and still less of not knowing the words. At the point at which I realised the event was underway the band were playing multiple harmonies of “Trelawney” and for the rest of the day they ranged through a wide repertoire of community songs which included “She’ll becoming round the mountain”, “Scotland the Brave”, “Alabama” and “Camptown Races”, all to the same driving May Day rhythm. *See link to mp3 audio clip illustrating this on contents page (appendix 4.1)*

Reflective discussion with other researchers (Audio file 261205-1)

I witnessed nothing that might bring people into conflict with anti-racist legislation nor that could be described as demeaning a racial minority group. I cannot guarantee the language or content of the words sung to any of the music but assuming you were able to hear the words you were singing yourself clearly you were unlikely to pick up much beyond those of your immediate neighbours.

It is, however, the experience of one’s own reactions that provide the action researcher’s insight into activities such as this and provide the lead for greater understanding. For me it was the very ambiguity of feelings that added to their power and started to answer the “why” of traditions such as the Padstow Boxing festivities. My foremost and clearest reaction to the event is that I felt I was being drawn into an expression of community identity and the desire to belong. My self-consciousness at being an outsider, a gatecrasher even, made the welcome I received and the feeling of being part of the event all the more powerful. It is true that I was “checked out” by two, more senior, ladies but it was quite unthreatening and comfortably set the scene. The feeling of identity was strongly augmented by the scattered Cornish symbolism of rugby shirts, flags and tartan.

The instinctive human desire for continuity in a transient world was encouraged by the setting amongst Padstow’s narrow streets and the comfort of a tradition that seemingly reached back across the generations to a distant past. The contradiction represented by people’s uncertainty about the origins together with some quite modern innovations around the costume and music served only to increase both the sense of mystery and robustness of the tradition.

Dressing up is something that not all of us grow out of, as a few minutes of channel jumping across the digital television entertainment networks will show. However we might rationalise this activity, it is difficult to avoid the sense of the “other” and the escape this provides us from the restrictions of our normal persona. There was a clear presence of “Carnival” at Padstow on Boxing Day and an escape from the midwinter gloom by means of colourful disguise, cheerful music and high calorific intake from a variety of sources.

As well as taking some photographs and tape recordings the two other researchers followed the procession and engaged in conversation with visitors, locals and shopkeepers alike. They felt that at various times there were 60 to 100 people involved but the general festive attire made it difficult to identify how many of these were casual observers and how many true participants.

Their initial reaction to the blacking up of faces was inevitably ambivalent and sensitised them to concerns about racism and the justification expressed for the event. Despite these misgivings, however, they found nothing malicious or malevolent in the actions, language or singing of the people involved. Notwithstanding blackened faces, only two participants were observed in dress that might be associated with caricatures of mid 19th Century Black Americans, two ladies wearing bright coloured headscarves. Like me, they saw no evidence of anything that could be described as “inciting racial hatred” within the meaning of the act.

There was, however, a distinct feeling that media attention had encouraged people, the denizens of the tourist and craft shops in particular, to emphasise justification of the event. Comments made directly to them and the general conversation broadly followed certain themes:

This is a local tradition that has gone on for a long time

The custom has merged with other things over the years and any offensive language associated with minstrel songs has been removed.

It's just face painting and dressing up in funny costume

It is a fertility rite for midwinter.

It is something to do with miners or people black with coal dust from the cargo ships

A slave ship was wrecked off Padstow and the villagers blacked up to confuse the slavers and help the slaves escape.

There was also a deep sense that the people of Padstow were claiming back their own territory from the realm of tourists and second homers. In a way this might be interpreted as exclusivity, but if so it was directed at “outsiders” and at worst the “English majority over the Tamar” rather than any specific ethnic minority group.

Boxing Day 1983: Comparison and Triangulation

I attended Darkie Day during the Christmas of 1983 at which point it was a much more

modest event than that witnessed above. I was there at the invitation of friends and without any kind of research agenda but I can recall the broad details.

There were no more than 15 or 20 people involved and the costume was less extravagant, with a tendency towards waistcoats rather than dinner jackets but the same principle of random festive decoration with ribbons and tinsel applied. Some faces were roughly blacked with burnt cork and some people had taken advantage of grease paint to emulate the BBC's Black and White minstrels. The music was driven by May Day style percussion and massed accordions playing with some songs that I could not identify and some that I would associate with Minstrel Music.

Social mores and views about what language is and is not acceptable have changed substantially in 23 years but if one discounts the act of blacking up faces, I can recall no behaviour that would be seen as inciting racial hatred and nothing intentionally demeaning of another race by today's standards let alone those of 1983.

The outstanding insight which I now clearly recall was gained from a conversation with one reveller who clearly perceived "Minstrel Music" as derived from the culture of black people and something to be engaged with and enjoyed in carnival fashion. The link between minstrel music and African American culture is complex to say the least and a distance is now, quite understandably maintained by modern Black culture. The important issue for me, however, is that for this person the event was about enjoying and celebrating a genre of music, not mocking it or the culture he believed it to have come from.

Interview notes: John Buckingham 20/03/06 audio file 200306-1

Now seventy, remembers having faced "blacked" with burnt cork or something and being sent to sing a song to granny when 10 years old. Putting Darkie Day back to at least 1940s. Established tradition then so at least a generation back – 1910s? earlier than that you are really relying on links to May Day. Small event – local party – not an occasion for media attention

Words recalled were a mix of bits from a variety of songs "Old Daddy Fox" "Uncle Ned" Sawnee River Written by Stephen Collin Foster. Sung the Padstow Ram – The Derby Ram - considered a "Darkie Song" did not know of "Begone from the Window" (Described as a Darkie Day song in the Old Cornwall Society Magazines)

Darkie Day and May Day mixed up. The Bible Christians – Trevaskis family – wished to discourage the beast (Obby Oss) and intemperance. Description of Migrants on boat out of Padstow to America suddenly celebrating May Day part way across the Atlantic. Blacking faces and smudging girls faces part of tradition

Padstow museum: posters and pictures of Minstrels – Mississippi Minstrels, early 1900s picture in National Paper not necessarily of Darkie Day but of one of these concert parties. Actually some doubt that any of these early pictures are of Darkie Day, perhaps some of the same people, perhaps some cross influence of music.

Research on Web also produced Zwart Piet – Dutch Black Peter. A Santa Claus with a black face. Bacup Coconut dancers – quite a long description with story about Miners bring the tradition with them from Cornwall but local census does not support

this.

Memory of 1980s – a small group of people – maybe a dozen people involved. Yes this is how it probably always was. The May day was regularly mentioned in the local papers because this was a renowned event – Darkie day was much smaller (until recently) thus the lack of coverage – just a few people taking part in Christmas activities.

Feeling that North Americans more sensitive to this than other cultures e.g. Jamaican.

Feeling of the vulnerability of Padstonians who do not have the experience or insight to appreciate the impact of what they are doing – the variety in the costume – the difference between a Bow tie and the black mama head scarves.

The student film crew that came into conflict with the locals- took confrontational approach – prodding people in chest until they responded angrily - not seen film but expect it to present in a poor light.

Done some research on the Padstow mummers play – The Turkish knight – life , death and resurrection only fragments no real connection with Darkie Day. Also aware of Wassail but only fragments left in Padstow.

Charlie Bate, of Colonel Bate family, started out on melodeon and then piano accordion, came to attention of Peter Kennedy and some recordings – pass around the grog Veteran Music -; Sing Christmas The Alan Lomax Collection. Pictures of Charlie Bate with a group of people some of whom blacked up at Christmas circa 1950s - one person carrying a board for step dancing. Charlie Bates – Blue Oss. Influenced by Folk Song revivalist – some left wing –

Charlie Bate was into a Carnival atmosphere lots of noise and atmosphere it also seems likely that this was the aim in earlier times playing with tin pans and triangles you cannot play a tune with a Triangle just make a noise.

Correspondence: Dan Rogerson MP ref DR/SAS/Dave001, 27/01/06

[Davey : Diane Abbot](#)

Letter to Diane Abbot MP

Houses of Parliament

Westminster

London

Dear Ms Abbot

Re Padstow Mummers Day

I am currently working towards a PhD in Cornish Studies at Exeter University with specific reference to folk traditions and their relevance to modern society. I attended the above event as part of my research and note the concerns you have expressed through the media recently. I hope that I may be able to provide some insight and background that will help to inform discussion in what is a very sensitive area.

It is the nature of folk traditions to modify with time, reflecting a communities cultural experience as part of natural evolution. Various interpretations of the meaning of the tradition are also accumulated by much the same process.

Padstow mummers day is a custom dating back to medieval times where people blacked up their faces as a form of disguise thus the term darking / darkie.

There were probably always class tensions but at some stage in the late 19th century top hats, bowlers and dress suits became part of the traditional disguise enabling revellers to mock the “gentry” and beg for money food or drink whilst remaining anonymous.

Minstrel music was globally popular in the first half of the 20th century and it was perhaps inevitable that some of the songs would be adopted as part of this tradition along with other popular tunes and community songs.

When I attended the event on 26th December there were 50 to 60 people involved in the informal procession around the town most of whom were dressed as I describe above together with a variety of tinsel and Christmas decorations.

The music was provided by Drums and accordions playing a variety of popular songs and tunes from “Scotland the Brave” to “Trelawney”. There were some songs like “Camptown Races” which have Minstrel origins but these are hard to distinguish from others like “Coming around the Mountain”.

There is little formal organisation but talking to people as they gathered it was clear that there had been some discussion with the Diversity Officer of Devon and Cornwall Police and advice about changing the name and taking care not to offend people with the costume was by and large being respected.

The police observed the event in 2004 and would seem to have found nothing that contravened the Race Relations legislation.

The overwhelming impact of the event is provided by the volume of drums and accor-dions in narrow streets and confined areas but taken out of context I can understand why some people might identify a “minstrels” feel about the event. If so, my experi-ence of the event would suggest that this lies in the realm of naiveté and political cor-rectness rather than deliberate intention to offend.

My research is primarily about how folk traditions are perceived and why, in this con-text I would also be grateful if you could clarify something for me. Traditions of this kind take place all over the U.K. and I am curious to know why you have focussed on this particularly event and how you would respond to criticism that in selecting Padstow you were guilty of “provincial” stereotyping?

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I hope that I have provided at last some new information.

Yours Sincerely

Mervyn Davey

Cc Daniel Rogerson MP North Cornwall

(Response to copy of letter sent to Diane Abbott MP which received no reply)

Dear Merv

Thank you for your letter on the subject of Mummers Day

I completely agree with what you have to say and was pleased to air my displeasure that Ms Abbott chose to criticise local people without taking the trouble to investigate the reality.

Sadly this issue will be periodically raised by someone in search of publicity no doubt.

Dan Rogerson

Correspondence: Malcolm McCarthy: MMcM 06/04/2006Taclowcoth@aol.com

Hi Merv

I believe the origins to be from the mummers plays. I have the words of the play and the people who played various characters written down. I believe that the mummers went from house to house performing their play and got fed up with the same old lines and tried out the new at that time foster music hall songs. This was enjoyed and response probably favourable and the tradition took off in place of the mumming. The time of the year is right. This is only a suggestion I put forward I don't know if truly honest. There is definitely NO connection to slavery as we only ever had one slave ship come in to Padstow. The Sally, and only because she was damaged. I have copies of the paper work and the slaves would have been in no condition to sing and dance no matter how happy they were!!!

The early photo you have seen, which I own, is NOT a troupe of travelling minstrels as on the mount of the photo are the names of the people and they are local people. Treator where the photo is taken is one of the main places the Obby Oss went to on May Day at that time though we no longer go out there. It seems feasible that the same route would have been taken. I have newspaper cuttings of minstrel groups playing at Padstow in the 1930's but not at this time of year and indoors.

I am 48, and I remember as a boy the children of my age being dressed in pyjamas and blacked up by Mrs Mary Magor who ran the shop at the top of Glynn Road, she then took the children darkying. I was not one of those children. I believe this helped revive the custom My niece who is now about 26 was taught the darky songs at Padstow school, I still have the zeroxed sheet with her name on it. How times change. I have a picture with my grt gran blacked up with the Mummers in 1936 for the coronation celebrations. I also have a photo of the darkies in the 1940's or 50's

I have some pictures of locals blacked up to an extreme in the 20's or 30's though I don't know the occasion or time of year

To me and my children it is keeping a tradition going that the family has been involved in. When you look at the darkies many are related to me from one branch of the family. I don't know if you are aware of the families but Marlene Freeman, Alecia Humphries, Brenda Picton, Susan Williams, my two boys Chris and Greg and various of the above's grandchildren and nieces take part. All of the above are descended from Susan Rawlings Hicks my grt grt grandmother. I have no idea if she participated. I have NO racial feelings about the day I just go out and have a great day with my family and try and raise a bit of cash for a local charity. No one thought about the implications that the songs or costumes may have had on immigrant communities, why they cannot just come to our country and integrate and their naturalised offspring embrace our customs is beyond me, it's part of our culture. I have no problem with immigrants, but I wouldn't dream of emigrating to another country and then complain about their customs being offensive. Live and let live I say. We as a group are not going out to intimidate or offend anyone. I personally, if I see a coloured person go and speak to them to put them at ease, not that they seem worried, and have never had any problems or complaints. It seems the complaints come from people that have not attended. and don't understand the good spirits that the festival is conducted in. You

have seen it, it is just a happy festival where we all have a lot to drink and a bloody good time. Long may it continue.

Cheers

Malcolm Mc Carthy

Correspondence Ray Delf RD16/12/05:Padstow Mummers

From: RayDelf@flg.co.uk Sent: 16 December 2005 03:47 To: Merv Davey

As you know, Padstow's traditions are only a part of the traditions of Cornwall as a whole, and not exclusively 'Our' property, although we feel very strong ownership. If Helston, Newlyn, Liskeard and other towns were as blinkered as some, then we would not have saved what we have from the past. What we have needs to be explained, and recorded, for the future - What if our critics manage to kill our traditions? where is our record? simply having a "folk memory" is not enough should a future revivalist wish to reconstruct that which we might lose.

On the basis of the overall aspect of Cornish traditions, then of course I will give whatever help I am able to give you. Apart from a questionnaire, would a written deposition from me, quoting what I learnt of things local at my mother's / Grandmother's knee? along with the odd items that I have learnt from various local "folk memories", most of the people that I learnt from are now dead and gone, so unfortunately there is no background support, but my mother is still alive, and I may be able to persuade some of the older inhabitants to talk to you as well.

The quotes given in the paper were all from the same source / family for the greater part, a family that I believe has "got it totally wrong" and has possibly done more harm than good. They were, I believe trying to justify their tradition because it was under threat, but having no knowledge of overall traditions they did it in the only way they could, only having the folk memory to support them, which could not be substantiated.

I am sure that with the right research, certain elements can be brought to light to substantiate the beliefs and understanding that I personally hold about our traditions, so if you are willing to have me not only give you personal knowledge / beliefs, but personal help with research also then you shall have it. After all, some solid background can only be helpful to the people of Padstow.

As a result of your query, I have also come up with the idea that for political purposes, and to show that there is nothing racial in our make-up, it may well be an idea for the "Darkies" to collect, not for local charities as they do, but for the starving children of Africa, and to have the monies raised reported in the media, being handed over to some relevant celebrity on conclusion. I shall have to put it to everyone to see what the overall consensus is, but think that they may go along with the idea. But I suppose that it could still be misconstrued as 'propaganda' by those who wish to cause us problems. It still needs further thought

Rgds. Ray

Correspondence with Jim Pengelly 18/03/06

1 What do you understand to be the origins of Darkie Day in Padstow?

As with any custom, it becomes associated with many myths and there is rarely any real knowledge about how, or when, it may have started. What is certain, is that there is a strong tradition in Padstow of community music whether this is the singing of the Padstow Carols, May Day, or the existence of enthusiastic groups like the Melody Makers and which have existed over the years in their many guises. Darkie Day, in my opinion, is part of this same evolving tradition.

Without the benefit of hindsight, or any proper detailed analysis of whatever historical reference material there might be, the fixed link with the time of the year must have a bearing on its origins and a link to that of guising. My opinion is that there was at some point folk memory, or knowledge, of guising for which the specific details (or historic context) may not have been known, other than the tendency to blacken the faces. The allusion to 'Darkies' may well suggest an attempted revival (or deliberate change) of this custom at a time coincidental with the slave trade. There can be no doubt that this 'coincidence' is a sympathetic identification with these victims of man's inhumanity to man. At no time over the years have I ever seen anything to suggest otherwise. The decision to refer to it as 'Mummers' may not be correct because this is usually associated with acting out a play,

Over the years there has been no attempt by me to think about its origins. It was something that just happened. I have only ever participated in it a small number of occasions (I am not one for dressing (or blacking) up!) but I do feel that latterly a greater emphasis on the sophistication of the 'dressing-up' may have been a bit OTT and overstated what it was all about. Consequently, it drew the wrong sort of attention to the whole proceedings and the even more grotesquely OTT reaction to it.

2 What is your earliest recollection of the event in Padstow?

As I have said above it was something that was there and happened and no identifiable point of suddenly being aware of its existence

3 What do you think this tradition means to people who participate today?

I would like to think that there was some symbolism still attached to the tradition but in the absence of any symbolic gestures, possibly it is doing things because they have always been done. Possibly overtaken a bit by the desire 'to party'?

4 Do you feel it is important for this tradition to continue today, if so why? Whether we know of the origins or not, and others may be more qualified and better informed than myself on this, its continuation is important for the very same reasons that it is done today and why it was done in the past. I would suggest that this, taken with all the other similar activities, is a part of what makes Padstow such a unique place.

Lowena dhys

Jim Pengelly

Saturday 18th March 2006

Padstow Mummers Day Images 2005 / 2006

