



Revels in the Rain

by Lis Garnish

As the rain poured down on the Wantage Feast one Whit Monday I wondered whether our Elizabethan forebears had the same problems with the weather at their "Whitsontyde Revell". They may not have done, as their calendar ran a little later than ours and the extra few days may have taken them into drier weather. Even if the elements were kinder I'm sure that the organisational problems must have been very like those of their modern descendants, and their relief when the whole thing was over must have been the same.

We first hear of the "Revells" in the Wantage Churchwardens' Accounts for 1565, the second year for which they survive, although I'm sure that the custom must be much older than that. These Revels, or Church Ales, have been described as "like a rather drunken Church Bazaar". They were one of the main ways of fund-raising in Tudor times. The churchwardens asked for donations of malt, or bought some if donations were scant, and brewed ale with it, which was then sold in the churchyard at Whitsun. The ale was often spiked with wine to make it more potent, and all sorts of other merry-making accompanied the sale.

The Wantage churchwardens had an irritating habit of noting only the profit made without listing the expenses, but even so a few odd payments slip through, from which we can gain an idea of the scene. We find payments for "a dasson of morrys belles - 1s 4d" so there must have been Morris Men performing. Another year we find "payd to Thomas Chefe for matches for their gonnes and for nayles at whytsontyde - 4d", which would suggest a shooting gallery for the local bravos to exhibit their skills. In 1580 we find "for one pond of hoppes - 8d", so the new drink, beer, was replacing ale at the festivities, and in the same year we find 'Item to our Minstrelles - 12s", so there was music of a more refined type that year. In 1590 they paid "to the vice for the Revell time - 4s" but that is not so depraved as it sounds, a vice being a stage jester or buffoon. That year they also paid "to John Rowland taberer - 17s 6d", which was a huge sum of money so I rather think that John must have played his drum at more than one event.

In 1591 they made "of the sommer pole - 4s 3d", which shows that Maypoles weren't for May Day alone. They also made "of bowerrye - 1s 6d", which leaves me wondering - did they sell spare greenery, make bowers for people to rent for the day, have an archery contest or what? John Rowland turns up several times, usually receiving one or two shillings for his drumming, and the Maypole also receives occasional mentions until 1610, when they sold it for 3s 8d. This seems odd as that year had been particularly successful, raising £9 10s which was partly spent on two dozen leather fire buckets and three new flagons for "the more convenient service of the Holly Communion".

After 1610 their "Whitson sportes" seem to have been intermittent, with as many as five or six years passing before another was held. So how did they raise money? Inevitably – taxes! Clearly the churchwardens found it much less tiring and more profitable. Everyone paid according to his land holding and wealth, but I wonder how many people regretted the passing of the much more exciting, rumbustious Church Ale? I'm sure some thought longingly of the Maypole in the churchyard, the noise of the guns being discharged in the shooting gallery, the rather drunken queue at the ale stall, the morris men dancing and jingling whilst their Fool capered through the crowd and John Rowland drumming away

like mad and drowning all attempts by the more serious minded to make pompous speeches or denounce the disgraceful goings-on. I'm sure our present vicar would be very reluctant to revive such scenes in our peaceful churchyard, but there may be the occasional muffled, ghostly drum roll to encourage our modern fund-raisers.

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Summer 1985 (revised October 2000).

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com