

**‘Blacking Up’: English Folk Traditions  
and Changing Perceptions about  
Black People in England**

Submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
by

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the custom of white people blacking their faces and its continuation at a time when society is increasingly aware of accusations of racism. To provide a context, an overview of the long history of black people in England is offered, and issues about black stereotypes, including how 'blackness' has been perceived and represented, are considered. The historical use of blackface in England in various situations, including entertainment, social disorder, and tradition, is described in some detail. It is found that nowadays the practice has largely been rejected, but continues in folk activities, notably in some dance styles and in the performance of traditional (folk) drama. Research conducted through participant observation, interview, case study, and examination of web-based resources, drawing on my long familiarity with the folk world, found that participants overwhelmingly believe that blackface is a part of the tradition they are following and is connected to its past use as a disguise. However, although all are aware of the sensitivity of the subject, some performers are fiercely defensive of blackface, while others now question its application and amend their 'disguise' in different ways. Further factors underlying the use, and usefulness, of blacking up are suggested, including tradition, identity, community, and mystery. Reasons why the practice continues despite significant opposition are discussed. It is concluded that there is a long history of blacking up in England and that current blackface practice is not intentionally associated with Victorian 'nigger minstrels'; however, minstrelsy was so popular that its influence cannot be discounted. It is also suggested that the folk process has always absorbed and reflected influences from popular culture, and continues to do so; and that in an area of strong opinion, no definitive answers can be given that will satisfy everyone.

## Acknowledgments

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This thesis would not have been possible without the willing cooperation of many people, and I thank all those who have been interviewed or photographed, or who have taken the time and trouble to share their thoughts with me. I have been unable to use every word, but all the contributions have helped to shape my writing. Particular thanks go to the many people who have so freely shared their own research and ideas.

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## Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background and Context of Study .....	2
1.2 Methodology .....	3
1.2.1 Data Collection .....	5
1.2.2 The researcher’s background and role.....	8
1.2.3 Justification for and issues arising from the research methods.....	9
1.2.4 Ethical Considerations .....	11
1.3 Outline – structure of thesis .....	13
 <b>Chapter 2: The History of Black People in Britain .....</b>	 <b>15</b>
2.1 Before 1713: Exotic Savages .....	15
2.2 1713-1833: "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" .....	20
2.3 1833-1900: Victorian Values?.....	25
2.4 1900-1945: War and Peace .....	29
2.5 1945-1970: The Mother Country?.....	34
2.6 1970-1990: Black Resistance .....	39
2.7 1990 - present: Sea-change .....	44
 <b>Chapter 3: Representations of Blackness.....</b>	 <b>51</b>
3.1 ‘Black’ in Idiom, Proverb and Folklore.....	51
3.2 Portrayals of Black People .....	54
3.2.1 Before Emancipation.....	54
3.2.2 Free, but not equal.....	64
3.2.3 From Second-class to Underclass .....	71
3.2.4 Minstrelsy .....	73
<b>3.3 Terminology .....</b>	<b>77</b>
3.3.1 “Blackamoor” .....	78
3.3.2 “Coon”.....	78
3.3.3 “Nigger” .....	80
3.3.4 “Negro” .....	82
3.3.5 “Black” .....	82
3.3.6 Other terms.....	83
<b>3.4 Racism and Political Correctness .....</b>	<b>84</b>

<b>Chapter 4: Historical References to Blackened Faces in England .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>4.1 Entertainment.....</b>	<b>88</b>
4.1.1 Court entertainments.....	88
4.1.2 Theatre .....	89
4.1.3 Street entertainment.....	98
4.1.4 Practical Joke.....	99
4.2 Criminal activity .....	100
4.3 Social disorder.....	102
4.4 Custom and Tradition .....	110
4.4.1 Folk Drama .....	111
4.4.2 Plough Monday Traditions.....	115
4.4.3 May Day.....	120
4.4.4 Morris dance .....	127
4.4.5 Guy Fawkes .....	131
<b>4.5 Links and crossovers.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Current Practice .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>5.1 Entertainment .....</b>	<b>141</b>
5.1.1 Theatre .....	141
5.1.2 Street entertainment.....	143
5.1.3 Practical Joke and Fancy Dress .....	143
5.2 Criminal activity and social disorder.....	144
5.3 Custom and Tradition .....	145
5.3.1 Mummers.....	145
5.3.2 Morris Dance.....	167
5.3.3 Five Calendar Customs.....	190
<b>Chapter 6: Reactions, Reasons and Responses .....</b>	<b>199</b>
6.1 Sensitivity and censorship .....	199
6.2 Reactions of onlookers .....	205
6.3 What the performers say .....	207
<b>Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions .....</b>	<b>221</b>
7.1 Is 'Folk' Racist? .....	222

7.2 Types of Blackface .....	225
7.3 Is evidence of pre-minstrel blacking sufficiently connected to the context of folk activities nowadays? .....	228
7.4 Reasons for blacking .....	232
7.4.1 Ritual, Paganism, Mystery and Spirituality .....	232
7.4.2 Tradition.....	238
7.4.3 Disguise and group identity .....	244
7.5 Why is blackface tolerated or accepted? .....	246
7.6 Why are changes happening, and accepted?.....	250
7.7 Fakelore, Folklorism, or just Folk?.....	255
7.8 Conclusions.....	257
7.9 Summary and Suggestions for Further Research .....	260
<b>References .....</b>	<b>263</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2005 the Crown Prosecution Service was sent police film of a long-established English folk tradition which had taken place that midwinter, as for countless years previously, in a remote coastal town. The CPS was required to assess whether, by the very nature of the event, an offence had been committed - it was found that there were no grounds for prosecution. Nevertheless, and despite the fact it was agreed that the name and some other contentious features of the occasion would be changed, the following year the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington tabled a Parliamentary Early Day Motion calling for the Government 'to discourage any repeat of this event'.<sup>1</sup> The custom at issue was a parade of local people touring the pubs of Padstow, Cornwall, singing popular songs and collecting for charity. The objection was that, as the occasion was called 'Darkie Day', the participants blackened their faces, and the songs were minstrel songs, the practice was inherently racist and as such had no place in modern England.

This was the catalyst that crystallised many issues I had vaguely been pondering for some time. I was already familiar with the use of 'blacking up' in some folk dance contexts. Why did an obscure local custom raise so strong a reaction in people who had never even witnessed it? Why specifically was it thought to be racist? What was the position regarding other similar activities? Have they too been investigated, disapproved of, curtailed in any way? If so, why do people insist on continuing them? These musings coalesced into a series of more specific questions:

- What is the history of black people in England?
- How has 'blackness' historically been perceived/represented?
- How has blackface been used historically in England?
- When, where, and in what folk traditions is blackface currently used?
- What reasons are given for this continued use of blackface?
- Are changes taking place? If so, what? And why?

This thesis constitutes an attempt to answer these research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2005-06/1317>> [accessed 19 October 2011].

## 1.1 Background and Context

In some forms of English folk activities – Border morris, Molly dancing, mumming, and other more local traditions – some participants black their faces, despite other people regarding this as a racist act.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been no previous academic study of this subject, let alone one which has taken such a wide perspective as this one. Research has focused on more specific aspects of associated subjects. For example, John Forrest traced the early history of morris dancing; Roy Judge, that of Jack-in-the-Green.<sup>2</sup> Peter Millington has studied traditional drama (mummers' plays) extensively.<sup>3</sup> Several authors have pointed out the use of traditional forms of disguise in social disorder which often included blacking faces, without linking this to any current usage. However, various local histories of activities involving blacking up have been investigated by enthusiasts, often at some depth, and these have proved a valuable source of information.<sup>4</sup>

There has been extensive discussion on folk-related forums on the World Wide Web as to whether blacking up is racist or not. The global nature of the internet has meant that the context of opinion and experience is much more international than is strictly relevant to this study. Derek Schofield wrote an article discussing the current use of blacking up in dance traditions;<sup>5</sup> the fact that this was published in a journal with a circulation comprising those who are already interested in English folk dance and music means its dissemination has been limited. On the other hand, the subject of minstrelsy, the most familiar form of blacking up, has attracted much study, mostly in an American context. The work in this field of Michael Pickering and George Rehin especially is more relevant to the situation in England.<sup>6</sup>

The history of black peoples in England was largely overlooked until the balance began to be redressed in the 1970s and 80s, since which time the subject has been examined from a number of viewpoints. Similarly, a number of derogatory stereotypes and negative associations which have become attached to black identity have been acknowledged and challenged.

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<sup>2</sup> John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1999); Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*. 2nd edn (London: FLS Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Peter Thomas Millington, 'The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays', University of Sheffield, 2002). See also <<http://www.mastermummers.org/index.htm>>

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin, *The Return of the Blue Stots* (London: Dockside Studio, 2003); others examples are introduced in relevant chapters.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Schofield, 'A Black and White Issue?', *English Dance and Song* 67.2 (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Pickering, 'John Bull in Blackface', *Popular Music*, 16. 2 (1997), pp. 181-201; G. F. Rehin, 'Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Black-Face Clowning', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9.3 (1975), pp. 682-701; G. F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and Its Resorts: Popular Culture and Its Racial Connotations as Revealed in Polite Opinion', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 19-38.



This research aims to draw together these various strands of enquiry to present readers with an overview of the situation regarding English folk traditions and attitudes regarding black people in the early years of the twenty-first century. Because of the disparate elements of this study, further reference to previous research is interwoven into the relevant chapters in the body of the work.

## 1.2 Methodology

If 'methods' are technical *rules* that define proper procedures, 'methodology' is the broad theoretical and philosophical framework into which these procedural rules fit.<sup>7</sup>

All research is affected by the paradigms which underlie it. Ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, and how we can learn about it, impact on the way research is carried out. A brief consideration of these matters is offered before a more detailed account and discussion of the methodology employed in this study is given.<sup>8</sup>

There are two broad ontological views of the nature of social reality – 'objectivist' and 'constructivist'. The objectivist position is that social phenomena exist independently of social actors, while constructivism asserts that 'social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors.'<sup>9</sup> Similarly contrasting epistemological positions are contained in the paradigms of 'positivism' and 'interpretivism'. The positivist paradigm, closely linked to the natural sciences, suggests that reality consists of a series of events which can be experienced through the human senses, knowledge then consisting of measurements of those events, giving objective data which lead to an understanding of reality. On the other hand, the interpretivist paradigm is linked with the constructivist position, and assumes knowledge is constructed from the subjective views of individuals leading to the creation of a relativistic understanding of reality. Effectively, the understanding of reality is a social or mental construct that can change based on situation or circumstances. A third, post-positivist, paradigm, which Grix refers to as 'critical realism', seeks to bridge the previous extremes by '[combining] the "how" (understanding – which is linked to interpretivism) and the "why" (explanation – which is linked to positivism)'.<sup>10</sup> This third paradigm uses both objective measurements and subjective discourse, the balance being determined by the actual research questions of a particular study. This mixed-method approach is shared by pragmatism, a similarly post-positivist position which emphasises the practical rather than the abstract, and 'operates on the premise that the value of any theory can only be gauged by how well it addresses real practical needs and

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<sup>7</sup> John D. Brewer, *Ethnography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ontology = what's out there to know; epistemology = what and how we can know about it; methodology = how we can go about acquiring that knowledge (Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 66).

<sup>9</sup> Bryman, *Social research methods* 2001, cited in Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 85.

how well it works in practice.<sup>11</sup> Pragmatists are not committed to any particular system of philosophy or theory, and, as the name suggests, draw on whatever method fits the nature of the research problem – ‘Instead of methods being important, the problem is most important, and researchers use all approaches to understand the problem.’<sup>12</sup>

Research may stem from the formation of a hypothesis which is then tested. Deductions are made from the results of investigations, which are biased towards the objective and quantitative in nature – the deductive approach. Conversely, the researcher may not have an initial hypothesis to test, but instead employs a research design in which a series of observations is made and then used to develop abstract ideas, leading to a general theory at the conclusion of the research. This is the inductive approach. However, ‘in reality, most research uses both induction and deduction, as there is a necessary interplay between ideas and evidence in each research process.’<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, the deductive approach is strongly connected with quantitative research methodology, in which many cases are investigated, variables are measured in ways which can be replicated by others, and results are expressed in numerical terms. On the other hand, inductive theories are often formed after qualitative research, which employs in-depth fieldwork techniques such as case studies, participant observation, or interviews. The researcher is not detached in such a study but is more directly involved in the process as both collector and interpreter of data.

This is a very simplistic summary of a complex subject. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to determine that the standpoint most fitting this research is ontologically, a constructivist view; epistemologically, a stance tending towards the interpretivist paradigm with an inductive approach; and methodologically, a qualitative research strategy. This position is encapsulated in the following:

1. Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that participants can express their views.
2. Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective – we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researchers’ own experiences and backgrounds.
3. The basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. The process of qualitative

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<sup>11</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Sage, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ragin, cited in Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.114.

research is largely inductive, with the enquirer generating meaning from the data collected in the field.<sup>14</sup>

Constructivism 'implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision.'<sup>15</sup> The concepts involved in the research questions above – race, blackness, tradition – are obviously human constructs, and the amount of debate they engender, the viewpoints expressed, are strongly influenced by social and cultural positioning. A qualitative-based investigation of these areas allows open-ended enquiry. From this enquiry, explanations can be generated through analysis of the data collected, identifying relationships and becoming aware of patterns and themes.

At an extreme, this is the approach of grounded theory, in which 'theory (or some other broad explanation) becomes the *end point* of the study'.<sup>16</sup> This method sets great store by the systematic coding, cross-referencing, and categorisation of the events, actions, opinions, statements etc. gathered in research, analysing the patterns and themes that are uncovered to arrive at a theory. Although strongly influenced by features of grounded theory, this thesis does not aspire to apply the full rigour of the associated coding, nor to produce one over-arching theory. In this it could be said to show a more pragmatic approach, mindful that 'explanations of events and situations need to be meaningful and relevant to those whose actions and behaviour are involved.'<sup>17</sup> In short, my theoretical stance is situated in the lower half of the schematic on page six.

With the theoretical background established, I shall now discuss the specific methods employed in more detail. With such a diverse and wide-ranging subject, these have necessarily been equally diverse.

### 1.2.1 Data Collection

Without documents there are no traces. Things remain invisible and events remain unrecorded. The only resource is word-of-mouth accounts.<sup>18</sup>

Use has been made of an assortment of data. The section on Black History, offered as essential background information rather than fresh research, draws on existing publications on the topic, while 'Representations of Blackness' likewise utilises secondary sources.

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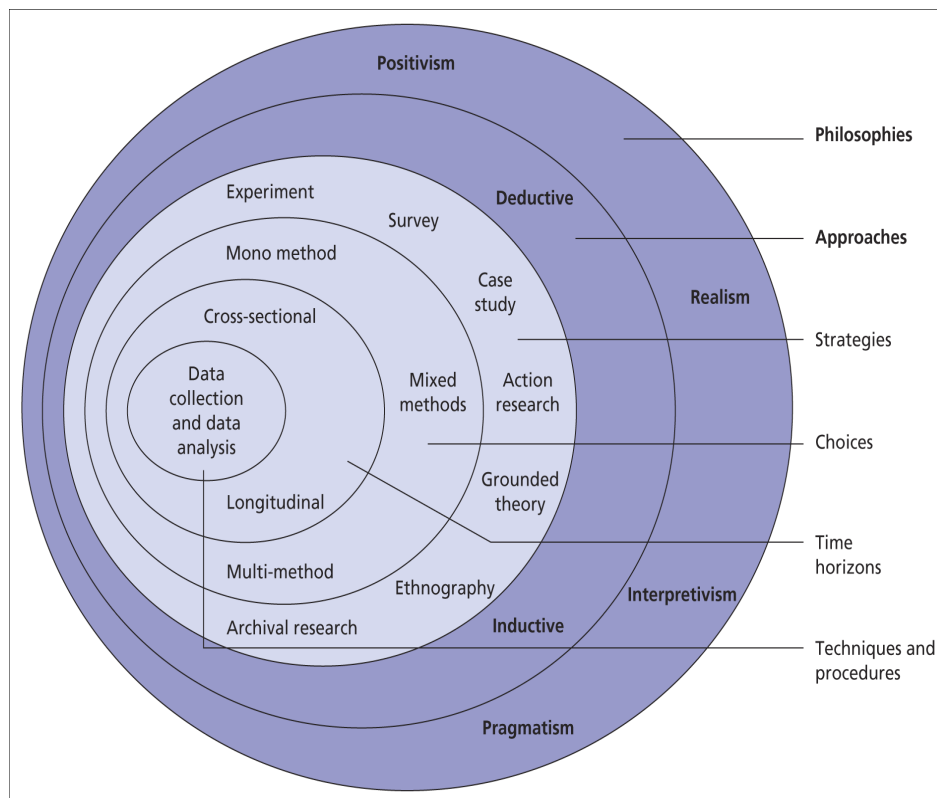
<sup>14</sup> Crotty (1998), cited in John W. Creswell, *Research Design : Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Sage, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Bryman, *Social research methods* 2001, cited in Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 132-3.

<sup>17</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Lindsay Prior, 'Documents', in *Qualitative research practice*, ed. by Clive Seale et al. (London: SAGE, 2004) pp. 375-390 (p. 375).



The Research 'Onion'

© Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis &amp; Adrian Thornhill, 2008.

A large proportion of the history of folk traditions, including the use of blacking up, is resistant to investigation due to lack of documentary evidence: sadly, word-of-mouth accounts have only been systematically collected since the middle of the nineteenth century. Hence the majority of examples in the chapter on historical references to blackface are taken from online newspaper archives, which, although by definition biased towards more outrageously 'newsworthy' incidents, are the closest thing to a widespread contemporary account available. Amateur research and personal collections passed on to me by enthusiasts supplement this information.

Collection of details about current blackface has been much simpler. Most fieldwork has been conducted as 'participant observer', or more accurately, 'observant participant', since I used an existing role to research a familiar setting.<sup>19</sup> Folk customs attended include Padstow Mummings' Day, Haxey Hood, Britannia Coconut Dance, Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, and Bonfire Night in Lewes. Mummings' plays viewed have included Soulcaking, Pace Egging and Christmas performances during 2008-12. Many more groups were seen at the Mummings' Unconvention, a weekend gathering held in Bath in November 2011 consisting of symposium, workshops and performance. Dance displays were observed at Warwick Folk Festival and Whitby Folk Week, specifically in 2009/10/11/12; Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009; Gate to Southwell Festival 2010/12; and the Joint

<sup>19</sup> John D. Brewer, *Ethnography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 61.

Morris Organisations' Day of Dance in Sheffield 2011, as well as individual teams at specific danceouts. Photographs and video were taken in addition to field notes, to remind me of detail and to serve as illustration for those unfamiliar with the variety of costumes and contexts.

More detailed studies were conducted of groups chosen because they represent certain aspects of the subject – seminal dance teams for border and molly, together with influential or striking sides demonstrating a contrast. Mummers were chosen for their geographical accessibility, making repeat visits feasible. In these cases, members were interviewed, some personally but most by email communication after initial contact had been made in a performance situation. My position as an 'insider' gave me a level of access which may not have been available to those unfamiliar with the field. In the majority of cases I was a recognised face; in those situations where I was unknown, it did not take long to establish common acquaintances. I found that trying to interview performers 'on site' was not always possible. (Short interviews were conducted *in situ* with the few black spectators I encountered at folk events - see Chapter 6). Although Folk Festivals etc. are very informal affairs and participants are very approachable, they are obviously concerned with the logistics of display, while in turn, perhaps over familiar with the context, I often found it difficult to dissociate myself from my own recreational guise and take on the researcher's role. My solution was to introduce myself and my subject and to establish contact details, covering issues of consent, following this up later by email for specific enquiries. This combination - personal introduction and later correspondence via email - was found to be the most successful way of eliciting information. A tester 'blind' email sent to groups on the Morris Federation Contact list of teams who were cited as Border or Molly dancers had brought a little useful information, but mostly produced general comments which added nothing to my existing knowledge.

The use of email raises another aspect of this thesis, which is the extensive use made of the internet. As well as email interviews and searching online newspaper archives this has included trawling team websites for an overview of the information they disseminate regarding the use of blackface. Some use has been made of discussion forums to evaluate the range of feeling that the topic arouses. Finally, the thesis itself will be available on the internet, which brings its likely audience into consideration – almost all the people who have contributed to the study have expressed an interest in the outcome. It should be acknowledged that this too has a possible influence, having an effect on the content, structure and style of writing employed. 'On one hand, we must respect and honor our relationships with participants; on the other, we owe readers an account that is as comprehensive and complex as possible.'<sup>20</sup> As researcher, it is incumbent upon me to offer my interpretations and discussions openly and to represent results as accurately as I am able, regardless of personal feeling.

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa M Tillmann-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', in *Emergent Methods in Social Research*, ed. by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (London: Sage, 2006), pp. 273-94 (p. 286).

### 1.2.2 The researcher's background and role

Our attitudes affect what we choose to study, what we concentrate on, who we hang around with or interview, our interpretation of events, and even our investment of time and effort in the field.<sup>21</sup>

In qualitative research the researcher holds a much more central position, and, as stated above, interpretation of results is inevitably shaped by the researcher's own experiences and culture. Therefore, some biographical details may be helpful in allowing readers to position this research against my own background.

I am a white British (English!) woman 'of a certain age'. The fourth daughter of a manual worker, my childhood was working class, but as a beneficiary of the 1944 Education Act I had a grammar school education and was the first in the family to attend university. Like many others I later trained as a teacher, and as such might now be regarded as middle-class, insofar as such categorisation is still relevant. My teenage years saw the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA; at university I joined in protests against apartheid in South Africa; as a teacher, I worked in a special school for maladjusted boys (later described as having 'emotional and behavioural difficulties'), an area in which black pupils were and still are over-represented.<sup>22</sup> Thus I became very aware of issues like racism and black identity. Politically, I remain 'pink' but largely inactive.

I was a child at the time of the second folk revival in the 1950s; my much elder sisters participated in folk dance events, and it seemed logical for me to accompany them occasionally, progressing to attending folk clubs in my own right. Years later, when I was married and had children, my husband became a morris dancer, and I continued to go to 'dance outs' as general supporter and bag carrier. Over the last three decades I have regularly attended Days of Dance, Folk Festivals and other seasonal events, and my chief social contact is with other people involved in the 'folk scene'. This period has seen a resurgence of interest in folk, as well as the revival or reinvention of two dance styles which often use blackened faces – Border and Molly. I myself have been a performer successively of North-west, Border and rapper dance for over twenty years.

My professional career provided me with insight into a black view of society; my leisure interests have given a longitudinal perspective and in-depth experience of many contemporary folk events from the standpoints of both spectator and participant. They have also enabled easy entry into fieldwork contexts. As such I believe my familiarity with both aspects has enabled me to approach this research with a balanced perspective.

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<sup>21</sup> Sherryl Kleinman, 'Field-Workers' Feelings: What We Feel, Who We Are, How We Analyse', in William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins, eds., *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park; London: Sage, 1991), pp.184-195 (p. 185).

<sup>22</sup> The school's catchment was boys who had been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. 'Black pupils are permanently excluded at over twice (and specifically those of Caribbean origin about three times) the rate of white pupils.' Commission for Racial Equality, *A Lot Done, a Lot to Do: Our Vision for an Integrated Britain* (London, 2007).

### 1.2.3 Justification for and issues arising from the research methods

The choice of research methods is appropriate for the wide scope of the subject being explored. It would have been ideal to search individual archives for references to blacking up in the past, but this was not feasible given the time allowed. I believe, given this limitation, it has been investigated as thoroughly as possible. Regarding investigation of current practice, the number of events attended and teams observed have produced data I believe to be representative and reliable; this is confirmed by the fact that I am no longer uncovering new material. There may have been geographical restrictions – the bulk of my research took place in the North and Midlands, with forays into East Anglia, Sussex and Cornwall for specific events. However, this limitation is to a great extent mitigated by the use of the internet to examine websites of dance and mumming groups throughout the country, and by the fact that no new material emerged from this. Also, of course, dance teams travel considerable distances to attend festivals and, notwithstanding my northern base, in the course of fieldwork I have met teams from as far afield as Dartmoor and Kent.

Other issues relate to the research methods in general, not specifically to their use here. These are threefold: the validity of information acquired through qualitative methods, considerations linked to the use of the internet, and the place of the self in research.

Being present is one hurdle, but ‘access’ also involves being trusted with insights and insider knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

The possibility must be faced that some subjects, when in the researcher’s presence, will not be candid in their behaviour and conversations for fear that their actions and statements, which may be unacceptable to certain people, will become available to those persons.<sup>24</sup>

Our informants tell and show us what they do because they are in a research situation with us as individuals; this encounter and the knowledge produced through it can never be objective.<sup>25</sup>

These quotations sum up the basic predicament – are informants telling researchers the truth, and is that truth the whole truth? The comment about unacceptable statements is particularly pertinent to the subject of this thesis (though in a more generalised sense than the fear of awkwardness within a peer group). How, then, can any conclusions be drawn from such material? Validity can be achieved through several strategies. Those employed here include triangulation - collecting data from various sources. In this instance these comprise observation, interview, and examination of statements on the internet. Another strategy is the use of ‘thick description’ to give as much information as possible about the context of the findings. This involves presenting discrepant information when it is found. A

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<sup>23</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins, eds., *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park; London: Sage, 1991), pp. 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Pink, ‘Visual Methods’, in *Qualitative research practice*, ed. by Clive Seale et al. (London: SAGE, 2004) pp. 391-406 (p. 397).

further method is to determine the accuracy of information by checking it with participants on later occasions. The opinions given, although necessarily individual, were expressed by more than one person, leading me to trust they are honest reflections of the area discussed. Finally, the length of time spent 'in the field', both before and during this research, encourages me to believe I am able to give a credible representation of the area under discussion.

The use of information from the internet has been a means to minimize constraints of time and space, particularly valuable given the scope of this study. However, it raises similar concerns about validity.<sup>26</sup> How can we be sure people are who they say they are? This is not a concern when using group web pages or email, but is a factor when discussion forums are involved. Nowadays the internet is so widely used that early concerns about low technical skills can be largely discounted. There is a possibility that some people may not be able to 'express themselves well, truly, or fully in text,'<sup>27</sup> but I believe this to be minimal in those involved in this study. The difficulty of developing rapport has been overcome by the practice of first making personal contact, or by mentioning my long involvement with the folk world if this is not possible.

This introduces the third issue, the place of the self in research. In studying a familiar context, I might have expected to face some of the difficulties encountered by others working from the status of 'insider'.<sup>28</sup> Like Stoeltje, 'I conducted my first interviews among people who were familiar to me, recorded my first field notes on a subject known to me, and encountered my first difficulties where I spoke the native language and dialect and was expected to know the answers to my questions...'.<sup>29</sup> However, unlike her interlocutors, I found my informants were not only familiar with the idea of research, but that a considerable number of them had undertaken some local investigations themselves, which made my task easier in a number of ways. My experience also differed from that of Chou, who found it difficult to withdraw at the end of the research period; as a performing participant, she carried a dual identity, and faced questions about resuming her role within the group whereas an 'outside' researcher would have had no such difficulty. My position was that of a member of a much larger subculture: although an 'insider' in that respect, I was not sufficiently involved with any particular group for this to be a problem.

A greater difficulty is one which affects all ethnographic study: 'Participant observation is very much a social exercise; and as such it is impossible to separate what one obtains as objective structural data from personal experiential factors, the

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<sup>26</sup> See Chris Mann, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online* (London: SAGE, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Annette N. Markham, 'The Internet as research context', in *Qualitative research practice*, ed. by Clive Seale et al. (London: SAGE, 2004) pp. 358-374 (p. 367).

<sup>28</sup> See Beverly J. Stoeltje, Christie L. Fox, and Stephen Olbrys, 'The Self In "Fieldwork": A Methodological Concern', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 112 (1999), 158-82; Chou Chiener, 'Experience and Fieldwork: A Native Researcher's View', *Ethnomusicology*, 46 (2002), 456-86.

<sup>29</sup> Beverly J. Stoeltje, Christie L. Fox, and Stephen Olbrys, 'The Self In "Fieldwork": A Methodological Concern', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 112 (1999), 158-82 (p.160).



life experiences one has in the field.<sup>30</sup> This difficulty is ameliorated by the inclusion of data from the other sources mentioned above. Hopefully, the addition of information about my background will help to place my 'life experiences' in context. Additionally, I have endeavoured to take a reflexive stance:

...a critical attitude towards data, and recognition of the influence on the research of such factors as the location of the setting, the sensitivity of the topic, power relations in the field and the nature of the social interaction between the researcher and researched...<sup>31</sup>

The reader must judge to what extent I have been successful in this. My conclusions are my own: the results may well be open to other interpretations, and this is to be welcomed. As stated above, my aim is not to produce a definitive theory but to give a description of the situation regarding blackface in England today set against a context of black history and experience in this country. 'The principle here is to present an accurate description of what is being studied, though not necessarily all of the data that have been studied.'<sup>32</sup> To that end, data collected are presented as a mixture of narrative, direct quotation, summary, and illustration. Interpretation and discussion is contained in clearly marked sections and in the concluding chapter. In this way I hope to allow readers the space in which to form their own impressions before I offer my own.

#### **1.2.4 Ethical Considerations**

This research has been approved via the University of Sheffield Ethics Procedure. It is considered to be low-risk, in so far as the participants are not vulnerable, but given the subject, the feelings involved have to be treated with sensitivity. Special consideration has been given to the issue of identification, as discussed below.

##### ***Informants: Privacy, Confidentiality and Consent***

The persons featuring in the majority of this research do so as amateur performers acting in groups in public places. By the nature of their actions, they not only welcome attention but actively encourage it. They are aware that they will be photographed or videoed, and that images may subsequently appear on the internet via, e.g., Facebook or YouTube. Given this, it seemed superfluous to ask permission of teams to take photographs for use in this thesis. Nevertheless I made teams aware of my research, and left my details with a member of the group, usually the group contact. I also obtained generic consent on behalf of a team, and individual consent in cases of interviews and, where possible, 'portrait' photographs.

The issue of identification is also complex. Much of my research has depended on being able to follow up named sources, enthusiasts who have devoted much of their time investigating aspects of their own particular interest, some but not all of

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel R. Wolf, 'High-Risk Methodology: Reflections on Leaving an Outlaw Society', in William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins, eds., *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park; London: Sage, 1991), pp. 211-223 (p. 212).

<sup>31</sup> John D. Brewer, *Ethnography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> Anselm L. Strauss, and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (London: Sage, 1990), p. 22.

whom have made their results more widely available within the folk world. It would do these people a disservice not to acknowledge their contribution, and would restrict anyone who may wish to expand on some of the ideas introduced here were I to omit similar recognition. Therefore, I have kept original names where relevant. I have been encouraged to do so by the fact that only one correspondent has taken up the option to remain anonymous – this has of course been respected. Even so, to avoid a plethora of unnecessary names, and to retain some feeling of a group identity, in places informants are identified only by team ('member of xxx') although obviously, as most were anxious to emphasise, they speak as individuals; this is reflected in comments, which are presented without attribution. It was assumed at the outset, maybe erroneously, that team members would associate with broadly like-minded people, and results seem to confirm this.

A further consideration in obtaining informed consent has been the fact that many of the activities are associated with the consumption of alcohol, and the question must at least be raised whether this might have affected judgement, either in behaviour displayed or in remarks made, and that consent was agreed to haphazardly, without careful thought. The first of these has been discounted by the awareness that participants were knowingly and willingly on public display; the second, mainly by my strategy of making introductions but obtaining actual statements later, when subjects had time to consider their words, and also in some cases by confirming on subsequent visits what had been said.

### ***Effects on the future***

It is naïve to imagine that research findings, or the very act of conducting research, have no repercussions on the subject under consideration. This is evident from my own MA study,<sup>33</sup> which directly, though unintentionally, resulted in a change of venue for an emerging tradition. Similar influences on existing practices have arisen, albeit more knowingly, from the work of Ian Russell.<sup>34</sup> Regarding this research, it may be that questioning the practice of blacking up causes some people to reconsider their position. Nevertheless, I believe its actual impact on future practice will be minimal; in some cases it may accelerate a change already considered, but, as Chapter 6 will show, the decision of individual groups to black up has not been made unthinkingly, but as a result of their specific understanding and point of view, and as such will be resistant to change.

### ***A Note on Terminology***

Acceptable ways of referring to people with dark skin have changed drastically even over my lifetime. Inevitably, given the historical nature of some sources, older terms now deemed objectionable are used - for example, 'nigger minstrels'. These are discussed in Chapter 3.3 below. In fieldwork, I faced the possibility of 'incorrect' terminology being used in comments. I decided to take all comments at face value, without condoning or challenging their use. In practice, this occurred naturally, as I found comments were not made deliberately to offend. On the contrary, several people

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<sup>33</sup> P. Bater, 'The Harvest Sing, Sheffield', (unpublished MA dissertation: University of Sheffield, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Ian Russell, 'Working with Tradition: Towards a Partnership Model of Fieldwork', *Folklore* 117 (2006), pp.15-32.

seemed to take care to search for a word they thought would be polite, acceptable usage (not always successfully). With such a subject it is easy to fall into being chronocentric. My approach in writing has been to use the terms appropriate for the historical context. In my own writing the current idiom 'black' is employed, but it has been more difficult to decide when to capitalise the word. I have followed the example of the old Commission for Racial Equality in using the lower-case 'black' as an adjective, but have sometimes capitalised 'Blacks' as a shortened form of referring to black people. In the interests of equality, the same principle has been applied to w/White.<sup>35</sup>

### **1.3 Outline – structure of thesis**

The structure of the thesis closely follows the research questions. This introduction has provided the background to the study and a discussion of the methodology employed. Chapter 2 comprises a history of black people in Britain from Roman times to the present, detailing the rise and eventual abolition of slavery, the place of Blacks in Victorian society, increasing tension and immigration in the twentieth century, events leading to official recognition of racism, and the current situation of black Britons. Chapter 3, 'Representations of Blackness', covers associations of the word 'black' in idiomatic language and folklore as well as the ways in which black people themselves have been represented, demonstrating how stereotypes have been created. A section on minstrelsy – the first image for many when blacking up is mentioned – precedes a discussion of some of the historical terminology used which is no longer acceptable. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of racism and 'political correctness'. Chapter 4 gives an account of historical use of blackened faces in England under the subheadings Entertainment, Criminal activity, Social disorder, and Custom and Tradition, identifying links and crossovers between practices in these categories. Chapter 5 reveals how the use of blackface has largely died out except in certain folk contexts: numerous examples of this are illustrated with photographs. Information is also given showing how in some cases practice is changing. Chapter 6 considers 'official' reaction to blacking up and the responses of people I have interviewed as well as the reasons given for its continued use (or otherwise), together with some other aspects of the practice. Chapter 7 discusses various issues raised in those responses and places them in a wider folkloric context before suggesting ways in which study of the subject could be extended.

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 3.3.5 for discussion of this problem.



## Chapter 2: The History of Black People in Britain

It is not reasonable to examine current attitudes towards blacking up in England without also taking into consideration the history and experiences of black people in this country which have been instrumental in shaping those attitudes. Over the last thirty years or so there has been increasing attention given to Black British history, itself an indication of changing perceptions.<sup>36</sup> Therefore I propose to draw on some of these studies to outline what is now known of the history of black people in Britain.

### 2.1 Before 1713: Exotic Savages

Although there was a 'division of Moors' defending Hadrian's wall in the years 253-258 AD, the mention of the earliest black man in Britain is of an African soldier some years previously who had also arrived with the Roman Imperial army. In the year 210 the emperor Septimius Severus was returning from inspecting Hadrian's wall, when 'an Ethiopian soldier, who was famous among buffoons and always a notable jester, met him with a garland of cypress-boughs'.<sup>37</sup> Severus was disturbed by the man's 'ominous colour',<sup>38</sup> and the garland likewise was an ill omen, being sacred to Pluto, the god of the underworld. Things were made worse when Severus, wishing to make a sacrifice, was mistakenly offered black victims who then were allowed to follow him to the doors of his palace when he abandoned the sacrifice in disgust. He died in York shortly after these portents.

It is possible that African soldiers remained in Britain when the Romans withdrew (in which case they would have pre-dated the white Anglo-Saxon invaders – an irony also noted by Paul Edwards<sup>39</sup>), but the next attested record of Africans in Britain is in Tudor times. A small group was included in the court of King James IV of Scotland. The Portuguese had begun importing African slaves into Europe in 1444, and it may have been that these Africans had been seized from Portuguese ships by Scottish privateers authorised by James. They included a drummer and

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain 1555-1833* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984); Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987); Marika Sherwood, 'Black People in Tudor England', *History Today*, 53 (2003) 40-42; Imtiaz H. Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot: Ashgate, c.2008).

<sup>37</sup> <[Historia Augusta](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Septimius_Severus*.html)>, trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library, p. 425, on Bill Thayer, (2007).

<[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Septimius\\_Severus\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Septimius_Severus*.html)> [accessed 5 December 2008].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> David Killingray 'Africans in the United Kingdom: an Introduction', in *Africans in Britain*, ed. by David Killingray, pp. 2-27 (pp. 3-4).

several young women, one of whom featured with the king in the entertainment 'Tournament of the Wild Knight and the Black Lady'.<sup>40</sup>

Africans had been included in the entourage of Catherine of Aragon when she arrived from Spain in 1501,<sup>41</sup> and by 1507 Henry VII employed at least one black man, ironically named John Blanke,<sup>42</sup> who played the trumpet. He is thought to be the man pictured in the painted roll of the Westminster Tournament of 1511.



Extract from Westminster Tournament Roll (1511) © College of Arms.<sup>43</sup>

However, it was during the reign of Mary, in 1555, that the first group of Africans was brought to England, specifically with trade in mind. English seamen had begun to explore the West African coast to trade in the gold, pepper and ivory previously monopolised by the Portuguese. A group of five Africans was brought from Ghana to England by John Lok so they could learn the language and return as interpreters.

Increasing numbers of Blacks were brought to England during the reign of Elizabeth I, largely due to the activities of her privateer seamen. In 1562 Sir John Hawkins was the first Englishman to transport African slaves, again plundered from the Portuguese, across the Atlantic. (The expedition was so profitable that the queen supported a second voyage two years later.) Sir Francis Drake had a black manservant, and Sir Walter Raleigh's black pageboy was baptised in 1597. Sherwood has identified twenty burial records and eleven baptism records of black people between 1553 and 1603,<sup>44</sup> almost half of which are from Devon, an obvious

<sup>40</sup> Joyce Green MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed discussion of this, see Imtiaz H. Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot: Ashgate, c2008), pp. 21-7.

<sup>42</sup> The name itself is a play on words; 'Blanke' (Blanc) meaning 'white'.

<sup>43</sup> <<http://www.westminster.gov.uk/libraries/archives/blackpresence/01.cfm>> [accessed 5 December 2008]. Image used with permission.

<sup>44</sup> Marika Sherwood, 'Black People in Tudor England', *History Today*, 53 (2003) pp. 40-42 (p. 41). Habib presents 448 records identified in *Black Lives in the English Archives*.

link with Hawkins, Drake and Raleigh, who were all born there. The blacks were described as 'Egyptian', 'Negro', 'Ethiopian', 'Blacke', 'Neyger', 'Neger', 'Blackmore', 'Morian', 'Indian', and 'Mullato'. As well as exotic household servants, they were mostly employed as court entertainers or prostitutes.<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth herself had a 'lytle Blackamore' whom she provided with a splendid coat in 1577: in 1594 the Christmas revels included one Lucy Negro playing the 'Abbess' (brothel-keeper) of Clerkenwell, a district where there were many such brothels. Some believe Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' was an African, possibly even Lucy Negro herself.<sup>46</sup> And, of course, Shakespeare's audience had to be familiar with dark-skinned people for 'Othello' to have meaning, notwithstanding subsequent debate about the Moor's actual racial origin.

Even though Blacks played a part in domestic households and entertainments, it seems their presence was tolerated by Elizabeth only as long as was expedient. In 1596 the view was expressed that 'there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kind of people there are allready here too many',<sup>47</sup> and public officers were instructed to give assistance to a Lubeck merchant, Casper von Senden, who had offered to take eighty-nine such 'blackamoores' and exchange them for English prisoners in Spain and Portugal. They were to be confiscated from their owners, 'who we doubt not, considering her Majesty's good pleasure to have those kind of people sent out of the lande'.<sup>48</sup> A further attempt to remove 'the said kind of people' was made in 1601. In fact, the size of London's black community in that year is estimated at 15,000–20,000.<sup>49</sup> Both attempts were ultimately unsuccessful. As Fryer notes, 'From that day to this, there has been a continuous black presence in Britain'.<sup>50</sup>

The legal status of that presence remained unclear for many years.<sup>51</sup> Although there were some free Blacks, most were to all intents and purposes slaves to their employers. Treated as chattels, eventually they were bought and sold as such. 'The first instance of blacks as articles of commerce in Britain, if we may trust such authenticated evidence as we have, occurred in 1621'.<sup>52</sup> This evidence is in the form of the *Petition of William Bragge to the Honourable Sir Thomas Smith, Knight, and all the Company of the East India and Sommer Islands*, in which Bragge asks

<sup>45</sup> See Duncan Salkeld, 'Black Luce and the "curtizans" of Shakespeare's London', *Signatures* 2 (2000) <<http://www.chiuni.ac.uk/info/Signatures.cfm>> [accessed 5 December 2008].

<sup>46</sup> See Edward Scobie, 'African Women in Early Europe', in *Black Women in Antiquity* ed. by Ivan van Sertima, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1988), pp. 135-154 (pp. 139-40).

<sup>47</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, n.s. XXVI, 1596-7, pp. 16-17, cited in Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, n.s. XXVI, 20-1, cited in Fryer, *Staying Power*, p.11.

<sup>49</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. by David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p 146. However, other contributors to the same volume maintain 'No attempt can be made to quantify the number of Blacks in Renaissance Britain.' (p. 402).

<sup>50</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> See Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 114-132 for discussion of the law pertaining to slaves in England.

<sup>52</sup> Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, p. 6.

that 'thirteen negroes [...] are not to be vallowed at anie price. The cause why, I will shewe unto you, because the Lord Jesus hath suffered Death as well for them as for all you, for in time the Lord may call them to be true Christians.'<sup>53</sup> This refusal to profit from the sale of fellow-humans was an attitude obviously in the minority, as dealing in slaves continued and increased.

Nevertheless, the black population remained small until the development of British colonies in the West Indies. British influence in the area grew as that of Spain declined. Cromwell was 'the first Englishman who had both the will and the power to pursue an imperial policy', and the 'most promising field for the expansion of English colonies seemed to lie in the West Indies'.<sup>54</sup> Barbados had been settled in 1627, and in 1654 an expedition set sail for Jamaica, which was captured completely by 1660. By 1666 the English 'were possest of Barbados the better halfe of St Christophers, Mevis, Mountserat, Antigua, and Sarenam'.<sup>55</sup> The introduction of tea, coffee, and chocolate, naturally bitter beverages, had increased the demand for sugar. This was provided by the Caribbean colonies, and the planters there insisted they needed 'negro slaves' for the work involved, a need that merchant traders were only too ready to fill.<sup>56</sup> Here lay the real foundations of English slaving. Ships' captains took 'perks' from each cargo of Africans, selling them either in the West Indies or when they returned to England, and offspring of rich West Indian planters arriving in England for their education brought with them their black household slaves. Royal approval for this trade was granted following the Restoration: Charles II's brother James, Duke of York, led the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading in Africa (later the Royal African Company), a slaving company which transported around 90,000-100,000 slaves between 1672 and 1689.<sup>57</sup> In 1689 it lost its monopoly, and 'free trade in black slaves was recognized as a fundamental and natural right of Englishmen.'<sup>58</sup>

In England the fashion for black servants had continued to grow, and the number of Blacks in Britain increased. Samuel Pepys noted that in 1662 Lord Sandwich arranged for 'a little Turke and a negroe, which are intended for pages to the two young ladies' along with 'many birds and other pretty noveltyes' to be presents for his family,<sup>59</sup> and Pepys himself had a black cook.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as the fashion for acquiring exotic animals grew, black children became just another pet, to be discarded when they outgrew their charm. However, not all these

<sup>53</sup> William Bragge, 'Petition of William Bragge to the Honourable Sir Thomas Smith, Knight, and all the Company of the East India and Sommer Islands', (1621), quoted in letter from W. Pinkerton, *Notes and Queries* Vol. 2 3rd S. (44) (1862) pp. 345-6 (p. 345).

<sup>54</sup> Godfrey Davies, *Oxford History of England: The Early Stuarts 1603-1660*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 348.

<sup>55</sup> Parliamentary Archives HL/PO/JO/10/1/348, on *Parliament and the British Slave Trade, 1600-1807*, <<http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade/assetviews/documents/stateofthecaseofthesugarplantationsofamerica1671.html?ref=true>> [accessed 9 December 2008].

<sup>56</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal\\_African\\_Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_African_Company)> [accessed 5 December 2008].

<sup>58</sup> Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 30 May 1662, <<http://www.pepysdiary.com/archive/1662/05/30/>> [accessed 8 December 2008].

<sup>60</sup> Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, pp. 10-11.



pet/servant/slaves were content with their position. As newspapers began to appear so did advertisements telling of 'lost' or runaway slaves, many of them young children or teenagers. The printed notices show that the slaves were marked property and, like dogs, had to wear collars inscribed with the names or coat-of-arms of their owners.<sup>61</sup>

The legal position of Blacks continued to be confused. There was widespread belief that baptism could free a slave, and hence it was much opposed by owners, one even demanding of a minister whether he would 'baptize his horse'.<sup>62</sup> Yet as shown above, several were baptised, and not all servants were treated badly. As symbols of wealth and good taste, aristocrats dressed their slaves in finery, attested by the many portraits in which they feature, and endowed them with grand classical names such as 'Scipio' or 'Pompey',<sup>63</sup> in an attempt to demonstrate the 'civility, politeness, and Christian virtue that slave owners hoped to convey by affiliating themselves with the fashioning of an exotic black savage into a domestic servant'.<sup>64</sup>

The exoticism of Blacks was underlined by their appearances in pageants and entertainments as tumblers or musicians. Fryer cites many instances, with the black performers often accompanying wild beasts - riding leopards in 1656 and 1663, panthers in 1671, camels in 1673, 1678, 1681, and 1693, lions in 1675, 1680 and 1691 - though, disappointingly, the beasts seem to have been carved representations rather than actual animals.<sup>65</sup> He also writes of "Black and Tawny Inhabitants [...] Drolling, Piping, Dancing and Singing" to the accompaniment of three pipes, tongs, a key, a frying-pan, a gridiron, and a salt-box,<sup>66</sup> and of one woman who 'was a rope dancer, half acrobat, half posture girl'.<sup>67</sup>

Exotic servant, entertainer, prostitute: this then was the position of most Blacks in Britain before 1713, the year in which a treaty was made which was to propel England into becoming the foremost slaving trader and lay the foundations of her wealth for generations.

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<sup>61</sup> For examples see Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, pp. 11-15, and Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>62</sup> Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Some regard this as robbing Blacks of their identity. However, white servants also were often re-named by their employers, but were given more mundane names such as 'James'. ['English liveried servants, known by names given by their employers rather than their own names...'] Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), p. 104].

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Molineux, 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London', *ELH*, 72 (2005) pp. 495-520 (p. 497).

<sup>65</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 25-30.

<sup>66</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 29. Fryer argues that these 'were black musicians using the best available local substitutes for African vernacular instruments'. I am struck by the similarity to instruments used in 'rough music' (see Ch. 4.3).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

## 2.2 1713-1833: "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"



Patch box with abolitionist motif.<sup>68</sup>

For twelve years most of Western Europe and parts of North America had been embroiled in the War of Spanish Succession when, in 1713, negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Utrecht. Among the benefits granted to Britain was the *asiento* – a thirty-year monopoly on providing slaves to Spanish colonies, ‘one privilege estimated to be worth millions a year’.<sup>69</sup> London and Bristol, ports already thriving from the slave trade, were joined by Liverpool, where slave ships were also built. (Liverpool was to overtake Bristol as Britain’s busiest slave trading port in 1747.) The manufacturing towns of Britain were all to benefit too. The triangular trade from Britain to West Africa, the Americas, and back to England, is well-known, but it is worth quoting Fryer at length to demonstrate the range of goods involved:

Ships left London, Bristol and Liverpool loaded with textiles made in Lancashire; muskets, brass rods and cutlery made in Birmingham; copper rods and manilas (bronze rings used as a medium of exchange) made in Glamorgan, Bristol, Warrington, St. Helens, and Flintshire. Cargoes also included gunpowder, felt hats, silk pieces, sailcloth, green glass, beads, spirits, tobacco, and beer brewed by Samuel Whitbread and Sir Benjamin Truman. On the African coast these were bartered for slaves, who were shipped across the Atlantic in the notorious middle passage. In Barbados, the Leeward Islands, Jamaica and Surinam

<sup>68</sup> < [http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/legacies/patch\\_box.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/legacies/patch_box.aspx) [accessed 10 March 2011].

<sup>69</sup> Sir George Clark, *Oxford History of England: The Later Stuarts 1660-1714*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (Oxford: Clarendon) 1956, p. 231.

these young Africans were exchanged for sugar, spices, molasses, rum, and tobacco, which were carried back to Britain and sold. With a proportion of the profit more manufactured goods were bought, and the cycle began afresh.<sup>70</sup>

The immense earnings generated by this trade led to the demand for new banking facilities and services such as insurance. Among the financial institutions linked with the trade were Lloyd's, Barclays Bank, Barings Bank, and the Bank of England. 'The finance and insurance, the complicated flow of money, letters of credit, and insurance and trading instructions, all passed through trading houses and banking facilities primarily in London.'<sup>71</sup> 250 years later London is still the world's most influential financial centre.<sup>72</sup> Provincial banks also prospered, and had close links with slave merchants. Ten such merchants 'played a role' in founding ten of fourteen of the major banks in Liverpool listed after 1750, and in 1789 six Bristol bankers joined a committee to oppose abolition.<sup>73</sup>

Manufacturers, merchants, ship-owners, planters, bankers, were all powerful men with strong influence in local and national government. But whilst the slave trade flourished, slavery within Britain itself gradually declined, largely through the slaves' own actions in escaping their employers. 'Individual acts of resistance, multiplied many times over, became self-emancipation: a gradual, cumulative, and irreversible achievement which constituted the first victory of the abolitionist movement in Britain.'<sup>74</sup> The position of slaves in Britain was clarified in 1772, when in the case of runaway slave Somerset, Lord Mansfield 'effectively decided that a slave could not forcibly be taken abroad by his master against his wishes.'<sup>75</sup>

Public opinion was becoming increasingly opposed to the slave trade. In 1781 the captain of the slave ship *Zong* told his crew to throw sick slaves overboard so the cost of their loss would be borne by underwriters, not the ships' officers, as would be the case if they died on board. The resulting court case related only to a dispute between shipowners and insurers. Granville Sharp, a prominent abolitionist, did attempt to bring a case of mass murder. Although his campaign was unsuccessful, it did lead to the inspection of a slave ship lying in the Thames by group of MPs, who were horrified by the conditions they found, and brought action to regulate the transportation of slaves.

The Quakers were the first religious denomination to oppose slavery, but as a dissident group their influence was limited until the founding of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. Nine out of the twelve committee members were Quakers, but 'for reasons of political expediency, two Anglicans, Granville

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<sup>70</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> James Walvin, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. by David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 448.

<sup>72</sup> Gill Montia, *Banking Times*, June 11 2008, <<http://www.bankingtimes.co.uk/11062008-london-remains-worlds-most-influential-financial-centre/>> [accessed 16 December 2008].

<sup>73</sup> Erin D. Somerville, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 38.

<sup>74</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 202.

<sup>75</sup> Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987), p. 9.

Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, were chosen to represent the committee'.<sup>76</sup> Thomas Clarkson spent seven years travelling England, writing and distributing books, leaflets and pamphlets and seeking out information that could be used to support abolition. His finding that the mortality rate of crew on slavers was as high as that of slaves was influential in disproving the argument that the trade was good for training seamen. Josiah Wedgwood designed his famous seal for the Society, depicting a naked African kneeling in supplication, with the slogan 'Am I not a man and a brother?' Hundreds of cameos of the design donated to the Society by Wedgwood became fashionable accessories. This medallion and the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* were to become the most enduring images associated with the slave trade. 7,000 posters of the *Brookes* were printed and circulated by the Abolitionists.

In Parliament, William Wilberforce was the leading spokesman for abolition, but political awareness was also developing amongst the disenfranchised working class. The spread of radical ideas led to frequent petitioning of Parliament, a hundred petitions in favour of abolition being presented in 1788, and 519, a record number for a single session, in 1792. 'It has been estimated that around 400,000 people, roughly 13% of the adult male population of the time, had put their names to them.'<sup>77</sup> Every major town, including those in areas where prosperity depended on the slave trade, had a local abolition committee. There was even a boycott of slave-grown sugar.

In 1791 an attempt by Wilberforce to abolish the slave trade was defeated by the powerful pro-slavery network, but the campaign continued. 'The unity in struggle of black and white working people found practical expression on the streets of British provincial centres in the 1790s.'<sup>78</sup> A mass meeting in Sheffield in 1794 called for the end of slavery as well as abolition of the slave trade. The government became increasingly alarmed at the rise in radicalism, a feeling strengthened by the news of slave revolts in the French West Indies (1791) and war with newly-republican France, whose government abolished slavery in the French Caribbean colonies in 1794. Acts prohibiting public meetings were passed in 1795. However, when Napoleon proposed restoring slavery, abolitionists were able to portray their cause as the patriotic duty of resisting him.

With a new and sympathetic prime minister, Lord Grenville, a bill outlawing the participation of British ships in the slave trade was finally passed in 1807. Just twenty years after the formation of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the 'first mass-based political pressure movement in British history' achieved success.<sup>79</sup>

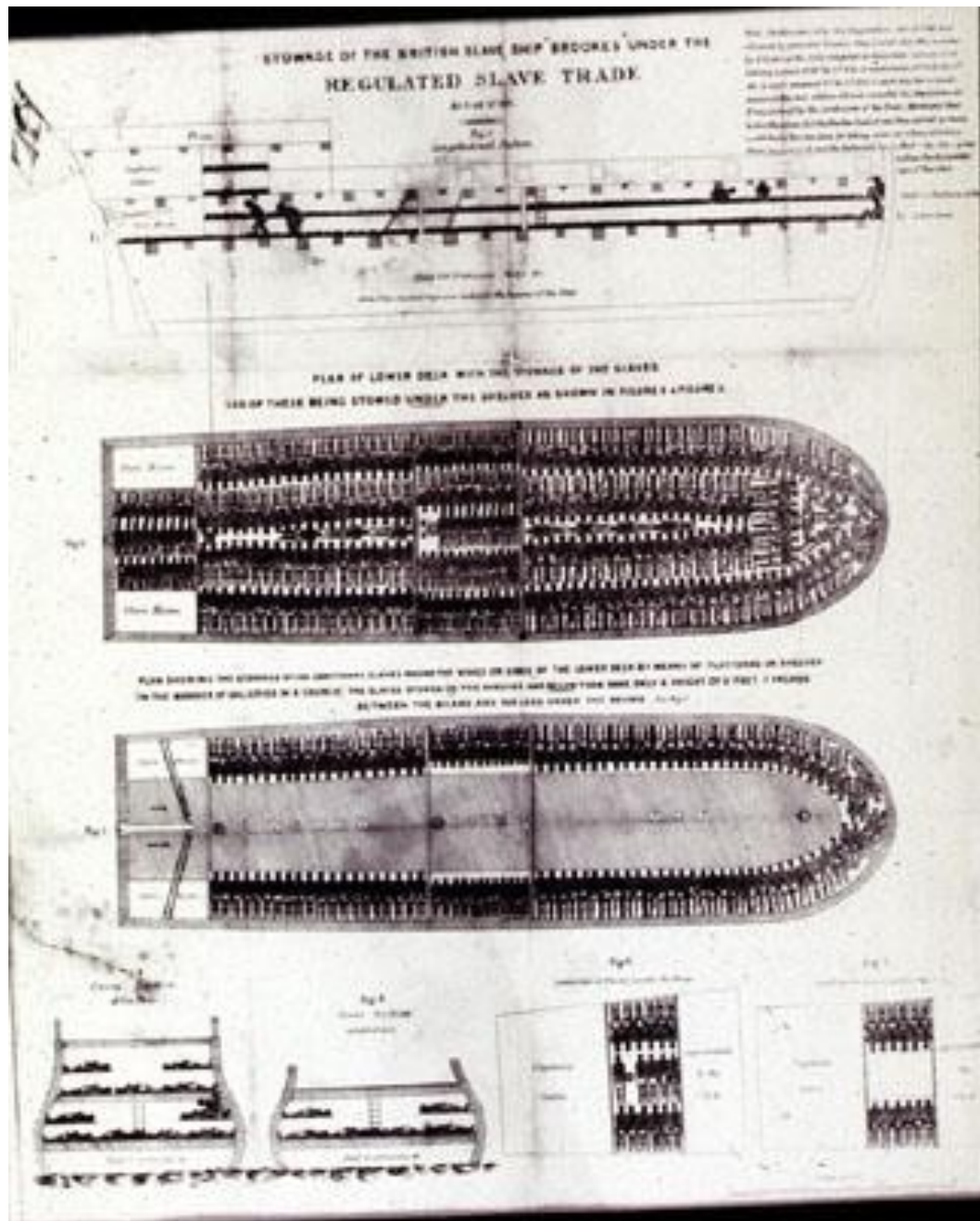
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<sup>76</sup> Adam Hochschild, 'The Unsung Heroes of Abolition', *British History: Abolition of the Slave Trade 1807*, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition\\_tools\\_gallery\\_02.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition_tools_gallery_02.shtml)> [accessed 17 December 2008].

<sup>77</sup> <<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/projects/abolition/>> [accessed 17 December 2008].

<sup>78</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 210.

<sup>79</sup> John Gilmore, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 526.



Plan of the British Slave Ship *Brookes*, 1789.<sup>80</sup>

It had been hoped that the end of trading in slaves would lead to the natural withering away of slavery itself, but that was not to prove the case. It took further public pressure, further exhortation by Thomas Clarkson, further local societies (this time with a largely female membership), and further slave rebellion before the Abolition of Slavery Bill in 1833 led to the emancipation of British slaves the following year. Given the violence associated with slavery, planters were fearful of revenge, but their fears were unfounded.

<sup>80</sup> Image Reference E014, as shown on <[www.slaveryimages.org](http://www.slaveryimages.org)>, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library, [accessed 17 December 2008].

Freed slaves made their way to celebrate freedom in parades, public meetings, but above all in crowded churches. It was a staggering turn of events [...] Although slavery had been ended in Haiti by the volcanic slave revolt in the 1790s and, although slavery in the United States was to end in the bloodshed of the Civil War, the British system ended peacefully. And both the slave trade and slavery itself had been ended by Acts of Parliament.<sup>81</sup>

One estimate puts the number of black Londoners in 1770 as approximately 3% of the population.<sup>82</sup> Aside from the struggle over slavery, how were Blacks regarded in everyday life in Georgian Britain? 'In eighteenth-century England, encounters with racial bigotry were occasional, and were the product of the prejudiced outbursts of individuals, rather than a consequence of institutionalized discrimination.'<sup>83</sup> Africans were depicted as noble savages by many writers, including Aphra Behn, Blake, Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth. African kings sent their sons to be educated in Britain, and there were several Africans distinguished in their own right. Names frequently mentioned in this context include Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano. Sancho wrote poetry and plays, and composed songs and music for a number of instruments. He kept a shop which became 'a meeting place for artists, musicians, writers, and politicians'.<sup>84</sup> Cuguano, a pious Christian, was also an author, publishing *Thoughts and Sentiments* in 1787. Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, was 'the most important and one of the most widely published authors in the English-speaking world of the 18th century'.<sup>85</sup> His autobiography, detailing his capture, life as a slave, purchase of his freedom and subsequent adventures as a sailor, appeared in 1789 and was influential in exposing slave conditions. Recently, it has been suggested that Equiano was actually born in South Carolina and so may have invented much of his early experience, but the work remains 'a true classic of world literature, as well as a primary historical document'.<sup>86</sup> Equiano married an Englishwoman, as did Samuel Johnson's servant, Francis Barber. Barber was educated at Johnson's expense and was treated more like an equal. He inherited the residue of Johnson's estate.

However, life was hard for the black poor, as it was for their white counterparts. London's working people 'saw black people as fellow-victims of their own enemies, fellow-fighters against a system that degraded poor whites and poor blacks alike'.<sup>87</sup> Runaways trained as domestics found themselves unable to find other employment. 'Few had the artisan skills which would help them to gain entry to a profession, but even the skilled runaways had to face the obstacles laid down by

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<sup>81</sup> James Walvin, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 154.

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Molineux, 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London', *ELH*, 72 (2005), pp. 495-520 (p. 497).

<sup>83</sup> Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), p. 26.

<sup>84</sup> David Dabydeen, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 428.

<sup>85</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 156.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>87</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 72.

guilds and unions.<sup>88</sup> Many American slaves, promised freedom in return for fighting for Britain in the American War of Independence, found themselves destitute. There was a scheme to resettle black poor in Sierra Leone, but it was beset by poor organisation, bad weather, and disease, and after four years, only sixty were left of the 374 who had arrived.<sup>89</sup>

Some Blacks still found a place on the fringes of society. Black musicians were prominent in military bands. Others worked as actors, or boxers, or more disturbingly began to feature in fairs and freak shows. Amongst these latter were an albino 'White Negro Woman', a 'Spotted Negro Boy', and Saartjie Baartman, exhibited as 'The Hottentot Venus'. 'This unfortunate female was shewn as any beast, and as a bear led by a chain. Her keeper ordered her to place herself in any position he desired, and she was obliged to obey.'<sup>90</sup>

Despite widespread, successful opposition to slavery, there were 'signs of racial tension on a wider social level'.<sup>91</sup> The African presence was highly visible. Racial hatred was fuelled by general mistrust, by the fear of miscegenation, by the burden of destitute beggars on the parish, and by the propaganda of the pro-slavery lobby. In London, Blacks had begun to respond to their situation by forming communities of self-help: nevertheless, the English 'were distrustful when the Blacks kept to themselves and led a distinct community life, and yet were equally alarmed, for different reasons, when they saw them absorbed into white society.'<sup>92</sup> Although slavery had been ended, it left a legacy in that 'the ideas and values that underpinned that transformation of black humanity to the level of non-human survived long after slavery itself had vanished from memory.'<sup>93</sup>

## 2.3 1833-1900: Victorian Values?

In the first years of the nineteenth century in London, black society had been vibrant and organic, even if depressed. Within the space of two generations it had ceased to exist. Black freedom in the colonies, the collapse of the sugar economy and the absorption of the predominantly male population, cumulatively led to the rapid disintegration of black society, and to the resultant view that black society had never existed in England.<sup>94</sup>

After emancipation, the number of Blacks in Britain gradually decreased. At first planters, unable to import new labour after 1807, found their black servants too valuable in the West Indies to be brought to England. Also, as sugar production

<sup>88</sup> James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 56.

<sup>89</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 201.

<sup>90</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Monday, November 26, 1810; Issue 12963, through <<http://find.galegroup.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/bncn/>> [accessed 18 December 2008].

<sup>91</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 60.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>93</sup> James Walvin, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 456.

<sup>94</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 199.

declined so did the planters' wealth. This was compounded mid-century by the end of protective duties on foreign sugar. 'Negroes no longer had to escape from the islands to seek freedom', being able to make a living as squatters on the increasing number of abandoned plantations.<sup>95</sup> Despite the warnings of those who had opposed the abolition of slavery, there was no influx of freed black slaves to prove a burden on the poor rates. Also, as society was changed by industrialisation, the old households were replaced by a more individualistic world. 'The paternal protection and close-knit circle of the aristocratic or wealthy household ceased to provide black residents with avenues for assimilation and advance.'<sup>96</sup> Instead, those Blacks already in England became more isolated, moving into the cities. Predominantly male, they married into the class most closely associated with them, and as their lighter-skinned descendants were less conspicuous, the black population was gradually absorbed: 'The grandchildren of such unions [...] no longer thought of themselves as constituting a distinct black community. They were part of the British poor.'<sup>97</sup> The result was that 'by the mid-century England's once lively black minority had disintegrated.'<sup>98</sup>

The end of slavery, together with the rise of inter-racial communities,<sup>99</sup> meant Blacks were no longer regarded as a special group. 'Instead, with the rise of radicalism, parallels were increasingly drawn between the situation of slaves in America and the poor in England. Within English society [George M. Reynolds] pointed to the suffering of factory operatives, needlewomen, and governesses, to the whipping of soldiers and sailors, to the separation of husband and wife in the workhouses, and to the need for landlord's consent before agricultural labourers could marry.'<sup>100</sup> Some even regarded the pauper class as itself a race apart,<sup>101</sup> one which was 'a constant reminder to wealthier mid-Victorians that savagery, violence, and brutality still lurked in the lowest depths of the population.'<sup>102</sup>

By the 1850s and 1860s the humanitarian attitude of the emancipationists was changing. The economic difficulties of tropical colonies were blamed on the indolent nature of black labourers.<sup>103</sup> Despite the existence of prominent Blacks such as Ira Aldridge<sup>104</sup> and Mary Seacole<sup>105</sup> there was in general less contact between Blacks and wealthy, literate opinion-formers. Abolitionists were an ageing group, and the new philanthropists, particularly non-conformists, viewed abolition as part of 'a broader moral crusade' which included 'free trade, temperance, peace,

<sup>95</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 197.

<sup>96</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 235.

<sup>98</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 190.

<sup>99</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>101</sup> Saturday Review, XVII (16 Jan 1864), 72a. Cited by Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 101.

<sup>102</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 110.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-8.

<sup>104</sup> Shakespearian actor

<sup>105</sup> Daughter of a Jamaican nurse, who when rejected by Florence Nightingale funded her own trip to the Crimea to supply and care for soldiers in her 'British Hotel'.

See <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/seacole\\_mary.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/seacole_mary.shtml)> [accessed 8 January 2009].



parliamentary reform, foreign and home missions, anti-church establishment, and women's rights.<sup>106</sup> A new upper middle class embraced the sons and grandsons of those who had made their money in manufacturing or trade. They began to be regarded as 'gentlemen', their origins forgotten. On the other hand, 'physical features identified even the most refined of black gentlemen with a savage heritage and a slave past.'<sup>107</sup>

With the change in mid-Victorian attitudes, the colour of a man's skin rather than his social accomplishments began to weigh heavier in the English assessment of individual blacks [...] Once the assumption was made that blacks could only perform labouring tasks and never approach gentlemanly status, respectable Victorians simply applied to all men with black skins the same judgments, manner and bearing that they adopted toward all their social inferiors.<sup>108</sup>

This attitude was reinforced by the new science of anthropology and the rise of scientific racism. In 1760 Linnaeus had categorised men into six types. The Anthropological Society was founded by James Hunt and the explorer Richard Burton in 1863 as a breakaway group from the more liberally-inclined Ethnological Society. The society's position can be judged by this extract from Hunt's paper, published in its second journal: 'A comparison was drawn between the anatomical differences existing between the Negro and the ape on the one hand, and between the European and the Negro on the other [...] there appeared a nearer approach to the ape than was seen in the European.'<sup>109</sup> The society included in its members Governor Eyre of Jamaica. Eyre had brutally suppressed a rebellion in Jamaica in 1865. In his presidential address the following year, Hunt declared (with no sense of irony) 'Such revolutions will occur wherever the Negro is placed in unnatural relations with Europeans'.<sup>110</sup> He continued, demonstrating what he believed to be 'natural relations':

Statesmen have yet to be taught the true practical value of race-distinctions, and the absolute impossibility of applying the civilisation and laws of one race to another race of man essentially distinct [...] They may continue to plead that race-subordination forms no part of nature's laws; but this will not alter the facts.<sup>111</sup>

Eyre was supported by fellow members of the society, including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Charles Kingsley, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. On the other hand, opponents included Charles Darwin, J. S. Mill, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. These men were dismissed by Carlyle as 'Nigger-Philanthropists, barking furiously in the gutter'.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 115.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

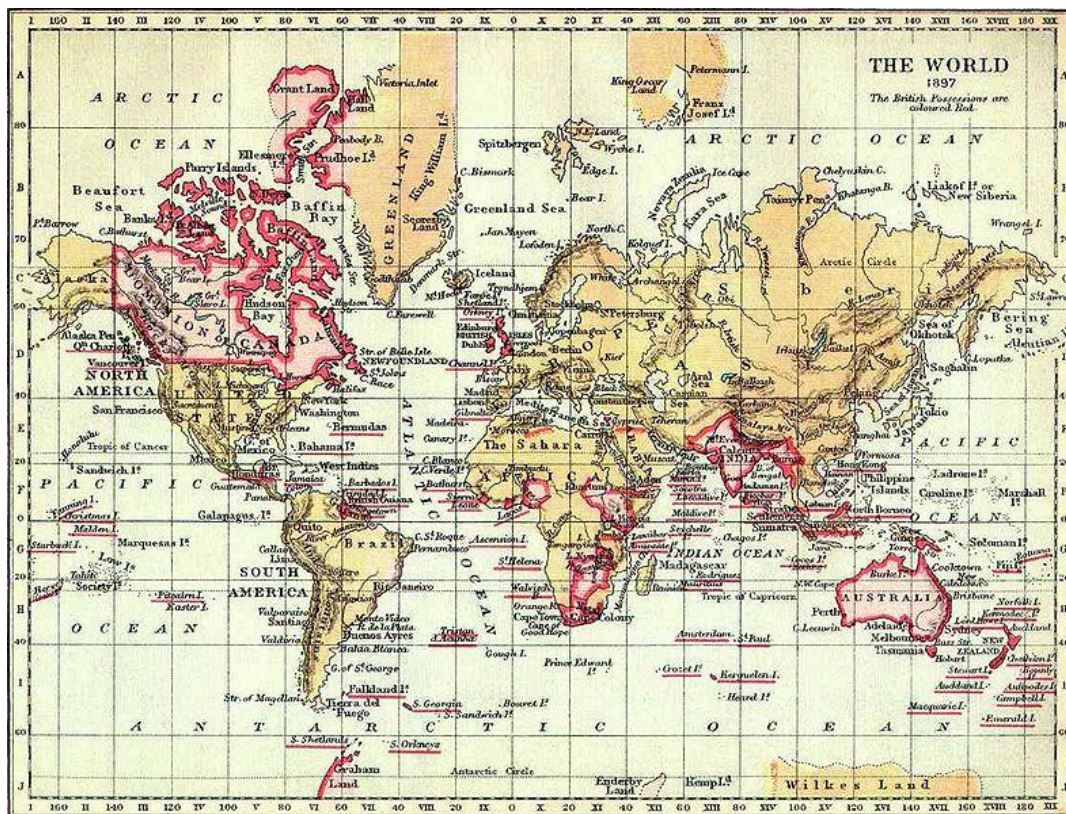
<sup>109</sup> James Hunt, 'On the Negro's Place in Nature', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, 2 (1864), xv-lvi, p. xv.

<sup>110</sup> James Hunt, 'Address Delivered at the Third Anniversary Meeting of the Anthropological Society of London', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, 4 (1866), pp. lix-lxxxii (p. lxxviii).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> See Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 175-9, and *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, pp. 26-7.

Many famous Victorian thinkers, like Carlyle, supported the idea that the darker races were inferior to white Europeans, and that the English especially were a people chosen to rule over them. 'Ideas of Teutonic destiny developed by philologists and German nationalists mingled with ideas of inherent white superiority developed by phrenologists and anthropologists to swamp common sense in a flood of racial arrogance.'<sup>113</sup> As Britain expanded her colonies throughout the century until she held sway in Canada, the West Indies, much of Africa, India, Australia, and other islands around the world, becoming the British Empire 'on which the sun never sets', the British came to regard themselves as trustees, taking up 'the white man's burden' for the good of lesser races.



The British Empire in 1897.<sup>114</sup>

Missionary societies, anxious to attract supporters, issued periodicals to publicise their work, but fell back upon stereotypes to attract their readership.

The tendency to simplify and exaggerate racial characteristics appeared most clearly in children's missionary literature. Sunday School children read juvenile versions of missionary journals, and in their formative years gained ideas and attitudes which helped to form the more rigid racial attitudes of the later century.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 181.

<sup>114</sup> Image <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:British\\_Empire\\_1897.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:British_Empire_1897.jpg)> [accessed 8 January 2009].

<sup>115</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 75.

These stereotypes, of natives as black, naked and sinful, were further reinforced by the experiences of explorers and missionaries in the new colonies, which in turn fed into the new genre of exotic adventure stories. Cheap magazines featured stories of 'slave life in the American South and the Caribbean, as well as the customary tales of African safaris and cowboy-and-Indian thrillers'.<sup>116</sup> Popular fiction included novels by authors such as R.M. Ballantyne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. Rider Haggard.

A different set of stereotypes, but one which was to prove long-lasting was provided by Harriet Beecher-Stowe's anti-slavery book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This rapidly became a best-seller, second only to the Bible. 'The extraordinary enthusiasm for Uncle Tom could not be satisfied by simple reading of the novel.'<sup>117</sup> Wallpaper, mementos, ornaments, curios, dolls, songbooks, were manufactured,<sup>118</sup> and many plays followed which used the same, or similar, characters.

However, it [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] was no longer seen as a moral assault on slavery; instead it was a stock melodrama with villains in black capes, breathtaking pursuit and rescue, innocent maidens in distress, and all the rest. Indeed, producers began to add new characters, situations, and devices to increase the melodramatic qualities of the play.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, although drawn sympathetically and with the best intentions, Beecher-Stowe's characters became consolidated as stereotypes which were to linger well into the twentieth century in cinema and cartoon. This will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

All these representations fed prevailing feelings about Blacks. 'Whenever the Victorians considered the position of blacks, they could conjure up an image of a patient, suffering slave, a comic minstrel, or a cruel, lustful savage to fit the particular situation.'<sup>120</sup> This mind-set fed into the more overt racism of the twentieth century.

## 2.4 1900-1945: War and Peace

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seamen formed the largest occupational group amongst Blacks. Many of them were in Cardiff, where they took advantage of the large market for casual labour needed to man the tramp steamers carrying coal. Liverpool too had a long-established community of black seamen. White seamen and dockers refused to work alongside them, and they found it hard to get work. The Colonial Office financed repatriation schemes, but some West Indian islands refused to let men back in. 'Consequently bands of Negroes in

<sup>116</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 82.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>118</sup> For some examples, see <<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/tomituds/tohp.html>> [accessed 8 January 2009].

<sup>119</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, 'Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920', *American Quarterly*, 29.1 (1977), pp.102-16 (p. 105).

<sup>120</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 90.

England were suspended in a state of limbo. Desperate black sailors tramped the length of the country seeking work.<sup>121</sup> This changed with the outbreak of the First World War. The war was 'widely seen as an opportunity for Imperial subjects to support the Empire with the expectation of post-war political, economic, and social progress.'<sup>122</sup> Blacks were welcomed as seamen, as labourers in munitions factories, and in the forces, but not as equals. The War Office actively resisted the integration of black troops into existing regiments. Instead, the British West Indies Regiment was formed to accommodate colonial volunteers and, as seen below, some Black British:

Francis, a coloured man who worked in the shipyard at Liverpool, volunteered under the Derby Scheme and, because "great difficulty was found in posting men of colour to ordinary British units", he was posted to the B.W.I.R., which had been set up expressly to cater for his and similar cases. Upon his being invalided out after the loss of an arm, he was granted a pension considerably lower than that to which he would have been entitled had he been assigned to an ordinary British line regiment.<sup>123</sup>

The regiment's battalions saw service in East Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, France and Italy. Two battalions were involved in fighting against the Turks in Palestine and Jordan in 1918, but the War Office considered that colonial troops could not fight against Europeans. Consequently the remaining battalions were employed as "native labour" battalions - carrying ammunition, digging trenches and gun emplacements in France (often under heavy German bombardment).<sup>124</sup>

Many of the wounded were treated in hospitals in Britain, and after the war many soldiers were demobilised there, with the result that at the end of the war there were about 20,000 black people in Britain.<sup>125</sup>

The experiences and treatment of Blacks during the war led to increasing opposition to colonialism and the radicalisation of many. One such man was John Richard Archer, who in 1918 declared in his inaugural speech as President of the African Progress Union:

The people in this country are sadly ignorant with reference to the darker races, and our object is to show to them that we have given up the idea of becoming hewers of wood and drawers of water, that we claim our rightful place within this Empire. That if we are good enough to be brought to fight the wars of the country we are good enough to receive the benefits of the country.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 203.

<sup>122</sup> Richard Smith, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 175.

<sup>123</sup> Frank Goodwill, *Regiments of the British West Indies* (1999) on <[http://website.lineone.net/~bwir/bwi\\_regt.htm](http://website.lineone.net/~bwir/bwi_regt.htm)> [accessed 19 January 2009].

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> F. Shyllon, cited in Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 296.

<sup>126</sup> *West Africa* II/101 (4 January 1919), 842, cited in Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 294.

In fact the benefits of the country continued to be denied. Despite heavy losses during the war, ‘the war-time boom for black labour fizzled out as quickly as it had begun’.<sup>127</sup>

In 1919, ‘the social and racial tensions which had long simmered below the surface erupted into the open under the pressure of economic unrest’,<sup>128</sup> leading to race riots in Glasgow, London, Liverpool, Hull, Manchester, and the Welsh ports of Cardiff, Barry, and Newton. Although unemployment was a key factor in these troubles, miscegenation was again not far below the surface and comments were once more made about relationships between black men and white women. ‘To almost every white man and woman who has lived a life among coloured races, intimate association between black or coloured men and white women is a thing of horror...It is an instinctive certainty that sexual relations between white women and coloured men revolt our very nature.’<sup>129</sup> The situation had been exacerbated by the absence of black women in Britain, meaning black men again looked to white women for their partners.

During the riots ‘five people (two black and three white) were killed, dozens more were injured, and hundreds arrested’ over eight months of rioting.<sup>130</sup> ‘The police forces of nine large towns and cities were kept occupied for weeks with the riots and their fallout.’<sup>131</sup> Nor was treatment of the rioters even-handed. ‘All neutral observers agreed that the black community was on the defensive and yet its members, in trying to defend themselves, were arrested and prosecuted for their attempts at self-defence, while all but a handful of their white aggressors went unchallenged.’<sup>132</sup> The riots of 1919 were ‘some of the most serious and sustained incidents of public disorder in 20th-century Britain’,<sup>133</sup> yet four years later ‘they had been expunged from white memories.’<sup>134</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s a generation of black British children grew up whose fathers, faced with ‘discrimination on the part of management, unions, local authorities and even the government and opposition’<sup>135</sup> were unable to find work. ‘Since most of these obstacles to black equality were hidden from white society, it was widely believed [...] that such discrimination did not exist.’<sup>136</sup> So extreme was this discrimination in Cardiff that in 1925 police required all ‘coloured’ seamen to register, and classed as aliens all those black British who could not prove citizenship. In 1935 the League of Coloured Peoples discovered ‘that the zealous Cardiff force had registered *all* local “coloureds” as aliens.’<sup>137</sup> Nineteen of these

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<sup>127</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 298-9.

<sup>128</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 206.

<sup>129</sup> *The Times* no. 42,126 (14 June 1919), 8, cited in Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 311.

<sup>130</sup> Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 386.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>132</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 207.

<sup>133</sup> Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*. ed. by David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 386.

<sup>134</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 316.

<sup>135</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 211.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>137</sup> *Op.cit.*

men had lived in Britain for more than ten years, three of them for thirty years or more.<sup>138</sup>

However, there were also black intellectuals in Britain, a 'group which was to exercise a political influence out of all proportion to its numbers in the years after 1945'.<sup>139</sup> Africans still came to Britain for education, and different associations of students from different areas were formed. Most influential of these groups was the West African Students' Union, formed in 1925 by 'students who afterwards became famous in West Africa as judges, magistrates, barristers and politicians.'<sup>140</sup> One of these was Yoruba law student Solanke, who had been 'outraged at the wholly degrading way in which Africans were presented as curiosities'<sup>141</sup> at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924. 'For the next quarter of a century [WASU] provided a social and political centre for its members, articulating their criticisms of British colonial rule and the discrimination they suffered in Britain, and reflecting their aspirations for West Africa's future.'<sup>142</sup>

Another society, the League of Coloured Peoples, was formed in 1931 by Dr Harold Moody, who had come to London in 1904 to study medicine. Shocked by the colour bar in Edwardian England, he used his contacts 'to give practical help to the stream of black people who came to him in distress'.<sup>143</sup> A humanitarian organisation, the League was criticised by more radical groups, but was influential in its own way. It was instrumental in the Colonial Office agreeing to army commissions for British and colonial subjects of non-European descent during the Second World War. Another example of Moody's influence was reported in 1940. Moody had challenged the BBC after an announcer had used the word 'nigger', prompting an apology.<sup>144</sup>

The more radical leaders, Pan-Africanists who worked for an end to colonialism, included C. L. R. James, a socialist theorist from Trinidad, friend of Learie Constantine, communist, prolific author, creator of a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture<sup>145</sup> (which was staged in the West End in 1936 and starred Paul Robeson), and cricketer, 'a man whose stature simply bursts any category a writer tries to squeeze him into,'<sup>146</sup> who spent just six and a half years in Britain, from 1932-1938. His friends and colleagues included George Padmore, a left-wing journalist who settled in London in 1935, Kwame Nkrumah (later leader of Ghana), Jomo Kenyatta (President of Kenya 1964–1978), fundraiser Ras Makonnen, (who owned a chain of restaurants in Manchester and was later to be influential in the Pan-African Congress held there in 1945), and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson. Britain had 'a Pan-Africanist centre linked by a thousand threads to the anti-imperialist

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<sup>138</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 357.

<sup>139</sup> Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 211.

<sup>140</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 324.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331-2.

<sup>145</sup> Slave-born leader of history's largest slave revolt, which in the 1790s transformed the French colony of St Domingue into the independent country of Haiti.

<sup>146</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 336.

mass movement in Africa and the West Indies'.<sup>147</sup> These men were influential in the International African Service Bureau, formed in 1937, which itself joined with other black associations in 1944 to form the Pan-African Federation.

The outbreak of the Second World War again led to an influx of Blacks to aid the war effort, in industry as well as the forces (this time black commissions were allowed). However, the arrival of the US Army in 1942, along with its segregationist regulations, exposed difficulties regarding feelings towards black Britons. 'On the one hand, there were many British people who did not and would not accept the American view; on the other hand, the British Government did not want to offend its ally.'<sup>148</sup> English servicemen and women, civilians, and West Indian troops were discouraged from mixing, and were all affected by American attitudes. A black official from the Colonial Office was barred from his usual restaurant because American officers ate there.<sup>149</sup> A black British woman who volunteered for the Women's Land Army was rejected because of her colour. And the cricketer Learie Constantine, captaining the West Indies at a Lord's test, was refused pre-booked accommodation at a London hotel, for which he brought a successful action for breach of contract. 'Increasingly, despite the loyal commitment of black troops and the wartime rhetoric of a united Empire, black Britons continued to be regarded as third-class citizens, denied access to both opportunities and services.'<sup>150</sup>

After the war, this was no longer to be tolerated. 'The Pan-Africanism of 1945 no longer asked modestly for some form of recognition or for favours from on high: it demanded political and social rights.'<sup>151</sup> Twenty weeks after VE day, 'the most important and influential of all the Pan-African congresses'<sup>152</sup> was held in Manchester, with delegates representing West, East, and South Africa, the West Indies, trades unions and political parties as well as black British organisations. The resolutions passed included the demand that 'discrimination on account of race, creed or colour be made a criminal offence by law', an affirmation of 'the right of all colonial peoples to control their own destiny [...] free from foreign imperialist control, whether political or economic', and the warning that 'if the Western world is still determined to rule mankind by force, then Africans, as a last resort, may have to appeal to force in the effort to achieve freedom, even if force destroys them and the world'.<sup>153</sup> This was to anticipate the agenda for future generations of black people in Britain, who were to witness possibly the greatest changes in status since emancipation.

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<sup>147</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 343.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>150</sup> Richard Smith, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 437.

<sup>151</sup> Imanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa*, trans. Ann Keep, (New York, Africana, 1974), p. 404.

<<http://books.google.co.uk/books>> [accessed 26 January 2009].

<sup>152</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 346.

<sup>153</sup> <<http://www.law.emory.edu/wandl/Literature/Documents/africa/Pan%20African/20.htm>> [accessed 26 January 2009].

## 2.5 1945-1970: The Mother Country?

In spite of facing discrimination during their service, many former Black Caribbean servicemen and women and civilian war workers returned to settle in Britain during the era of mass immigration in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>154</sup> The Nationality Act of 1948 granted British passports and the right to settle in Britain to all citizens of British colonies and former colonies. On June 22, 1948, the troopship *SS Empire Windrush*, returning from Australia via the West Indies, docked at Tilbury, bringing 492 Jamaican and Trinidadian immigrants who had taken advantage of a cheap passage (£28 10s) to the UK.

We were going to England. Despite the aftermath of slavery, there was still a respect for England and a sense of belonging. We knew that in England, you could continue education while you worked, you could go to evening school. But England was also the home of the slave masters, and we retained a general distrust of the white man. However, England was the nearest thing we had to a mother country; we saw in it some aspect of hope.<sup>155</sup>

The arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, and the image of the passengers filing off the gangplank, has become an important landmark in modern Britain, generally taken as symbolising the start of mass migration from the Caribbean and the beginning of modern multicultural relations in British society.

Most of the immigrants were young, skilled workers who quickly found work due to a labour shortage. However, accommodation was at first in short supply, and many were housed temporarily in an old air-raid shelter at Clapham South, near Brixton, which was to become one of the first black communities in London.

When we arrived in England we were well received. There had been a war and there was a tremendous drive to rebuild the country and clear up the mess, so there was no trouble in finding work. We frequently encountered fairness and humanitarianism among the English. But we would also encounter racism and prejudice, the difficulty of finding lodging, the difficulty of being seen as an ordinary decent young man, just because you had a black skin. To be a black person in the British way of life has sometimes been a wearying experience; coping with white people's inward dread of a black face is a daily business.<sup>156</sup>

One facet of that 'wearying experience' was demonstrated only weeks after the *Windrush* docked. There was an historic community of black seamen and dock workers in Liverpool, which had swelled to 8,000 during the war. The National Union of Seamen was determined to keep black seamen off British ships, and it was against this background that violence broke out in August 1948. The behaviour of the police during this period was, to say the least, unrestrained:

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<sup>154</sup> For a fictional account which reflects the Caribbean experience of immigration, see Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Review, 2004).

<sup>155</sup> James Berry, 'Coming to England', *Black History* 365 2.1 (2008), <[http://www.black-history-month.co.uk/bh365/bhm365\\_no2/bh21.pdf](http://www.black-history-month.co.uk/bh365/bhm365_no2/bh21.pdf)> [accessed 26 January 2009].

<sup>156</sup> Loc. cit.





Passengers disembarking from the *SS Empire Windrush*.<sup>157</sup>

About 60 blacks and about 10 whites were arrested — and most of the latter were subsequently acquitted. Police raided a seamen's hostel and a dance-hall, and attacked the black people they found there. Black people were even beaten in their own homes. The police raided a club used by black seamen, batoning many on the head and forcing those they hauled out to run the gauntlet between two lines of police, who kicked their victims as well as belabouring them with truncheons.<sup>158</sup>

This episode signifies the poor state of relations between police and the black community which was to continue for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond.

Many West Indians had chosen to migrate to the USA, but in 1952 entry there was restricted, leading to an increase in immigration to Britain. 'Before the 1952 Act, immigration to Britain from the Caribbean was measured annually in the high hundreds. By 1953 it had reached 2,200, jumping to 10,000 the following year and reaching 27,550 in 1955.'<sup>159</sup> But the British welcome was far from wholehearted. 'Although most had had no occasion to act out their prejudice, and many would

<sup>157</sup> Image

from <<http://www.enfield.gov.uk/press%20releases/2008/aprjun/Museum%20to%20commemorate%2060th%20Anniversary%20of%20Empire%20Windrush.htm>> [accessed 26 January 2009].

<sup>158</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 368.

<sup>159</sup> <[http://www.smallislandread.com/windrush\\_generation.htm](http://www.smallislandread.com/windrush_generation.htm)> [accessed 26Jan 2009].

have denied it, there can be no question that a racist climate obtained in the United Kingdom before the postwar wave of colored immigration.<sup>160</sup> The arrival of increasing numbers exacerbated that latent hostility.

Mass migration allowed West Indians and whites to interact in a less circumscribed and artificial manner than had been the case either in wartime or the colonial Caribbean. Here, for the first time, West Indian men were exposed on a daily basis to what whites thought of them [...]. The result was conflict.<sup>161</sup>

Arriving with unrealistic expectations, immigrants found themselves placed in menial jobs below their abilities, discriminated against in finding accommodation, at once accused of stealing jobs and 'sponging' off the state; unsurprisingly, 'during the 1950s relations between Blacks and Whites were distinctly uneasy'.<sup>162</sup>

Resentment and enmity broke out into violence in August 1958, with 'race riots' taking place firstly in Nottingham then, more seriously, in Notting Hill. Far-right organizers Oswald Mosley and Colin Jordan were active in the area, but it was groups of 'teddy boys' who carried out the attacks. 'Over a wide area, gangs of white teenagers armed with iron bars, sticks, and knives went, as they put it, "nigger-hunting".'<sup>163</sup> In London rioting continued day and night, with petrol bombs being thrown into houses where black people lived. Stimulated by sensationalist newspaper reports, sightseers and others flocked to the borough. Although most Blacks obeyed the police and stayed indoors, some militants organised to defend themselves, in turn attacking 'a local fascist headquarters and a club where white men were known to be planning racist attacks'.<sup>164</sup> Events peaked at the beginning of September, and then gradually returned to 'what passed as a "normal" incidence of racist violence'.<sup>165</sup>

The consequences of the rioting were wide-ranging. The British public was shocked out of its complacency; Blacks began to form community organizations and forge a distinct black political identity; the Notting Hill Carnival was initiated; and politicians of all parties began to call for restrictions on immigration. In 1962, an Act was passed restricting entry to those holding work permits and, crucially, dependents of existing immigrants. Not only did this lead to thousands arriving in Britain before the act took effect - 'Between the beginning of 1961 and the middle of 1962 [...] 98,000 people migrated to Britain from the West Indies'<sup>166</sup> - but it also led to a change in the social dynamics of the immigrant community. Whereas previous arrivals had been predominantly young males, many intending to stay only temporarily, now 'ongoing debates about the number of non-white immigrants

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<sup>160</sup> Louis F. Claiborne, 'Law and Race in Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 407 (1973), pp. 167-78 (p. 169).

<sup>161</sup> Marcus Collins, 'Pride and Prejudice: West Indian Men in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 391-418 (p. 399).

<sup>162</sup> Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987), p. 200.

<sup>163</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 379-80.

<sup>164</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 379.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>166</sup> Muhammad Anwar, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 218.

and immigration controls forced migrants to bring over their wives and children before losing their right of entry',<sup>167</sup> turning a transient, working population into a settled, domestic one. Patrick Gordon Walker, Labour MP for Smethwick, opposed the 1962 Immigration Act, but this proved unpopular with his constituents. Although a Labour government was elected in 1964, Gordon Walker lost his seat after a racist campaign by his opponents. 'The Tory candidate, Peter Griffiths, refused to condemn the slogan "If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour" and called for a complete ban on coloured immigration. This was the first major eruption of racism in modern British politics, and many considered the election result to be a major national scandal.'<sup>168</sup>

Following a visit to London by Martin Luther King, black organizations came together to form the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, with the aims of eliminating racial discrimination and opposing the racist immigration laws. A more militant Black organization, the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS) was founded by Michael X in 1965. Whilst both organizations drew widespread support and reflected the more militant mood in the Black community, RAAS took a more radical position whereas CARD was a mixture of radicalism and liberalism.

Whites and Blacks held different cultural expectations and perceptions in employment, family life, sexual relations, and ideas of citizenship.<sup>169</sup> Writers in the new subject of 'Race Relations' studied migrant communities, 'often focus[ing] on the behaviour of the "stranger," studying the manners of the "dark stranger" and mapping them against those of their white counterparts', with the effect that 'whiteness was equated with a number of "civilized" virtues, against which Blacks were measured and found wanting'.<sup>170</sup> An American's account of the opinion of many Britons in the 1960s was provided by Claiborne in 1973:

In an important sense, the colored in Britain today are intruding foreigners, so viewed by their hosts and, in the end, by themselves. And, because of their color, they are not only immediately identifiable as aliens, but also as immigrants from recently emancipated colonies. This very much complicates the British race-relations picture. Among other things, it raises issues that cannot seriously arise in America—where blacks are bona fide natives. What have they come for? Only to take and give nothing in return? For how long? If they want to be treated like Englishmen, why shouldn't they be expected to shed their foreign ways? Why must we welcome this disagreeable—or simply unfamiliar—horde? Why not close the gates to further entry? Why not encourage them to return whence they came?<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>168</sup> Robert Pearce, 'Walker, Patrick Chrestien Gordon, Baron Gordon-Walker (1907–1980)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31161>, accessed 29 Jan 2009].

<sup>169</sup> See Marcus Collins, 'Pride and Prejudice: West Indian Men in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 391-418.

<sup>170</sup> Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers" In Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963', *The Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), pp. 207-38 (pp. 224-5).

<sup>171</sup> Louis F. Claiborne, 'Law and Race in Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 407 (1973), pp. 167-78 (p. 170).

Against this background, the Labour government tightened immigration controls still further. On the other hand, a Race Relations Act was published in 1965, forbidding discrimination in public places on the grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origins, but even at the time it was criticised as being too limited, since employers, local authorities, private boarding houses and shops were all excluded. A Race Relations Board was also set up to monitor complaints, but 'the philosophy of the law was to resolve claims of discrimination [...] by amicable persuasion, not coercion.'<sup>172</sup>

Meanwhile, immigration, and by implication race relations, continued to be the subject of heated discussion. 'The percentage of Britons favoring unlimited entry for "new Commonwealth" workers declined from 37 per cent in 1956 to 10 per cent in 1964 and to 1 percent in 1968.'<sup>173</sup> Amendments to strengthen the Race Relations Act were being debated when on 20 April 1968 Enoch Powell, Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South-west, who as minister had himself encouraged Commonwealth subjects to come to work in the National Health Service, gave a speech decrying immigration and anti-discrimination legislation in the United Kingdom. He recounted the story of an elderly constituent afraid to leave her own home as evidence that Britain's white population was being marginalised, and his use of the phrase 'I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood" ' led to the speech subsequently being referred to as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech.<sup>174</sup> Powell 'was clearly speaking a popular view. He no doubt influenced the public mood. But "Powellism" was a very strong movement only because it revealed the existing feelings of a very substantial part of the British population.'<sup>175</sup> However, Powell's stance was decried by an equally substantial number of people. It was also contrary to party policy, and he was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet.

All this was played out at a time when the British public, through the now widespread medium of television, was becoming aware of the position of Blacks elsewhere in the world: of the American civil rights movement, and of apartheid in South Africa. While many congratulated themselves that the situation in Britain was not so extreme, others began to question Britain's treatment of her own black population. As well as images of conflict, television brought more positive images of Blacks, albeit in the traditionally stereotypical fields of sport and entertainment. Learie Constantine, cricketer and activist for racial equality, was knighted in 1962. In 1964 Cassius Clay (who later took the name Muhammad Ali) became a popular boxing champion, and American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously performed the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and similar British pop groups dominating world music had been strongly influenced by Black American music, and black artists themselves achieved fame,

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>173</sup> Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers' In Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963', *The Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), pp. 207-38 (p. 234).

<sup>174</sup> The full speech can be found on <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powell%27s-%27Rivers-of-Blood%27-speech.html>> [accessed 29 January 2009].

<sup>175</sup> Louis F. Claiborne, 'Law and Race in Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 407 (1973), pp. 167-78 (p. 174).

the 'Motown' sound being especially popular. African-American Jimi Hendrix was himself to influence a generation of guitarists.

Thus Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was a nation of divided opinions. Powell's speech, coming only days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, acted to further galvanise opposition to 'racialism', as it was then called, and advanced the emerging radicalisation of the black community.

## 2.6 1970-1990: Black Resistance

By the mid-1970s two out of every five black people in Britain had been born here.<sup>176</sup> Claiborne wrote in 1973 of

...the growing impatience of the colored community with its predicament. Whereas the original immigrants [...] were inclined to be grateful for the relative improvement in their circumstances and willing to suffer some discrimination silently, the second generation is not so easily satisfied. Younger and native-born, these people see discrimination more quickly—often where there is none—and accept it less philosophically.<sup>177</sup>

Despite the complacent beliefs of many white Britons, discrimination continued in employment, housing, education, and, particularly, in dealings with the police.

In 1972 a select parliamentary committee on relations between black people and the police was surprised to receive from the West Indian Standing Conference a memorandum that sought to expose what was going on and to warn of the consequences if police racism were allowed to go unchecked [...] Hardly anybody outside the black communities was prepared to listen, let alone believe.<sup>178</sup>

Marginalised from mainstream society as 'second-generation immigrants', disadvantaged socially and educationally (black children were more likely to be classed as 'remedial' or 'maladjusted'), unable to find employment, frequently the target of police action, many alienated Black youths looked to their cultural roots for a sense of identity, following Bob Marley in turning to Rastafari, and through music, dress, and language openly rejecting the British society they felt had rejected them. This in turn caused further conflict with the police: the use of marijuana, an illegal drug, is central to Rastafari. 'The failure of the police force to protect black people from racist attacks, combined with what many regarded as excessive police harassment and brutality, was a key source of tension throughout the 1970s.'<sup>179</sup>

The Notting Hill Carnival became one focus of that tension. It had begun following the riots of 1958, and moved onto the streets in the 1960s. By 1975 the event had a distinctly Caribbean flavour, and the introduction of sound systems attracted many more young people to the event. Minor skirmishes that year meant the police

<sup>176</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 387.

<sup>177</sup> Louis F. Claiborne, 'Law and Race in Britain', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 407 (1973), pp. 167-78 (p. 177).

<sup>178</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 392.

<sup>179</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 347.

presence was increased in 1976 to over 1,500 officers. When some attempted to arrest a pickpocket 'Crowds of carnival-goers went to his aid, and within minutes one of the most serious disturbances of the 1970s had erupted'.<sup>180</sup> Over a hundred police and sixty carnival-goers were injured, but although sixty-six people were arrested only two were later convicted. Professor Chris Mullard, long-term activist and current chairman of London Notting Hill Carnival Ltd, reflected in 2006: 'It became very difficult. Carnival was always seen by the state and the establishment as something that they wanted to stop, because they saw it for what it was - a form of cultural resistance.'<sup>181</sup>

Meanwhile, agitation by far-right factions continued. The National Front had been formed in 1967 holding the 'fundamental principles: that Britain and the British people have a right to determine their own future; that multi-racialism and mass immigration was a tragic mistake; that patriotism is laudable and that Capitalism, Communism and Internationalism take power away from the individual.'<sup>182</sup> Although the party did particularly well in local elections, and even came third in three parliamentary by-elections, it never won mainstream support and was vigorously opposed by left-wing organizations such as the Anti-Nazi League<sup>183</sup> and Rock Against Racism, as well as by more moderate groups. In 1976 the TUC Congress 'put forward a clear denunciation of racialism and the racist activities of the National Front and the National Party'<sup>184</sup> which was carried unanimously. One feature of the opposition to the National Front was that Blacks and Whites stood side-by-side in what they considered a moral matter.

In 1977 Lewisham was chosen for a National Front march. The atmosphere in the area was already uneasy, as police had raided houses and arrested several black youths on suspicion of street crime. A demonstration in their support had been attacked by NF supporters. As opposition groups decided on their tactics, calls for the NF march to be banned were refused. On 13 August a peaceful protest march in the morning was followed by violent clashes as police escorted National Front marchers through the streets in the afternoon.

When we got there, the area was already heaving with anti-fascists and local young Black people. It may look a bit invidious to make the last distinction. But it is important. Though the 'professional' anti-fascists tried to claim the local youth as their supporters, as it were, the truth of the matter was that these Black youths - mostly male - would never have stood for having white racists on their patch in any event, and they hated the police. Now there were 5,000 of them on their doorstep. And they weren't in cars, but on the streets. The reaction was to be

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<sup>180</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, pp. 347-8.

<sup>181</sup> Emma Griffiths, *Remembering the Notting Hill riot* (2006),

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/5275542.stm>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>182</sup> <<http://www.natfront.com/history.html>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>183</sup> A founder member of the Anti-Nazi League was anti-apartheid campaigner Peter Hain, later to become cabinet minister in a Labour government.

<sup>184</sup> Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987), p. 356.

something similar to what had happened in Notting Hill at the carnival a year before.<sup>185</sup>

Under attack, police used riot shields for the first time on the English mainland. 'The most frightening thing on that Saturday was not the NF, but a police force completely out of control. That level of violence was unknown outside Northern Ireland.'<sup>186</sup>

Two years later, a similar situation led to the death of Blair Peach, activist and teacher. In a demonstration against a National Front St. George's Day election meeting in Southall (the heart of the Indian community), 'Peach was hit by officers from the Metropolitan Police's Special Patrol Group as he was attempting to escape the troubled scene.'<sup>187</sup> He died the following day. In connection with a different but related incident, 'Jack Dromey a full-time official of the Transport and General Workers' Union, told a later inquiry, "I have never seen such unrestrained violence against demonstrators...The Special Patrol Group were just running wild".<sup>188</sup>

In the days that followed, it slowly became clear that the police had gone too far. It became clear that the vast majority of Southall residents felt a great sympathy for Blair Peach, the man who had died for them. The Metropolitan Police's victory crumbled. The murder of Blair Peach became a symbol of the unjustified use of police violence. Fifteen thousand people marched the following Saturday, in honour of Blair Peach.<sup>189</sup>

Ten days after Southall, Margaret Thatcher led the Tories to victory in a general election, marking a change in government which would persist for eighteen years until the Labour victory of 1997. Whilst attacks on Blacks did not diminish, harassment of Blacks by the police under the new government continued. The introduction of the 'sus' law (a law which allowed police to stop, search and even arrest anyone they chose, purely on the basis of suspicion) was especially resented. 'Afro-Caribbeans accounted for 44% of arrests under SUS while they made up only 6% of the London population. In some boroughs such as Lambeth, 77% of arrests for SUS were Black people.'<sup>190</sup> Use of this law further embittered relations between black communities and police for many years.

Further incidents did nothing to engender trust. In January 1981 thirteen black youths attending a birthday party died in a house fire in New Cross Road, South London. Suspicions that the fire had been started deliberately were quickly rejected by the police, and the community was outraged by the dismissive attitude of the police and press. A 'Black People's Day of Action' was organised, which 'mobilized

<sup>185</sup> Jenny Bourne, *Lewisham '77: success or failure?* (2007), <<http://www.irr.org.uk/2007/september/ha000019.html>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> David Dabydeen and Shivani Sivagurunathan, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 361.

<sup>188</sup> <<http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/anl/southall.htm>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>189</sup> <<http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/anl/southall.htm>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>190</sup> Lorraine White, *The History of Blacks in Britain* (1994), <<http://www.socialistalternative.org/literature/panther/>> [accessed 30 January 2009].

20,000 black people to march through the streets of London to Downing Street, where they presented a petition demanding a full and proper investigation into the fire'.<sup>191</sup> The subsequent inquest brought an open verdict.

Brixton 'had become one of the largest and most important sites of Caribbean settlement in the United Kingdom', but by the late 1970s 'was synonymous with urban decline and deprivation, sub-standard housing stock, few social amenities, high levels of unemployment—especially among young black people—and one of the highest crime rates in London'.<sup>192</sup> In response to an increase in street robbery, police in Brixton began a plainclothes operation, 'Operation Swamp 81' in April 1981. The local community had not been consulted. Using the 'sus' law, over five days almost a thousand black youths were stopped and searched. When police approached to help a youth who had been stabbed, it was thought he was being arrested, and he was hustled away by a crowd of black youths. In the subsequent disturbance, six policemen were injured. 'In the meantime, false rumours spread that the police officers had refused to help the injured young man, that they had tried to prevent him from being taken for treatment, and even that they had inflicted his injuries themselves.'<sup>193</sup> Crucially, Operation Swamp was continued with an even heavier police presence, and when police stopped and searched a minicab driver the following day violence again broke out. 'When the riots were finally quelled, after three days in which police struggled to maintain authority on the streets, hundreds of people had been injured and millions of pounds' worth of damage to property caused.'<sup>194</sup> Similar riots took place that summer in Handsworth (Birmingham), Southall (West London), Toxteth (Liverpool), and Moss Side (Manchester), with smaller disturbances in other cities including Leeds, Leicester, Bristol, and Edinburgh.

Lord Scarman was commissioned to investigate the causes of the Brixton riots. His report found that the disturbances were a spontaneous reaction to perceived police harassment, caused by breakdown in confidence between the police and the coloured community against a background of urban deprivation and racial disadvantage. He recommended more ethnic minorities should be recruited into the police force, changes made in training and law enforcement, and action taken to eradicate racial disadvantage. 'It explicitly advised the government to tackle inner-city problems, with particular attention to the areas of housing, education, and employment, and to create ethnic-minority opportunities in all sectors.'<sup>195</sup>

Improvements were far from immediate. On 28 September 1985, during an armed police raid on a house in Brixton, the mother of the suspect was accidentally shot and seriously injured. The following week Cynthia Jarrett, who had a weak heart, died during a police search of her home on the Broadwater Farm estate, Tottenham. This triggered further rioting during which PC Keith Blakelock was hacked to death. Although three youths were convicted of his murder in 1987, the

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<sup>191</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, pp. 341-2.

<sup>192</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 69.

<sup>193</sup> <[http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton\\_riots.htm](http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton_riots.htm)> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>194</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 70.

<sup>195</sup> Letizia Gramaglia, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 431.





Brixton, April 1981.<sup>196</sup>

conviction was overturned on appeal in 1991, and the killers have never been identified.

However, more positive role models were becoming available as throughout the 1970s and 1980s Blacks were seen in increasingly public positions. The first black head teacher had been appointed in London in 1968; Trevor McDonald joined the ITN news team in 1973; Lenny Henry made his TV debut in 1975; the first black British footballer to play for England appeared in 1978; decathlete Daley Thompson was successful in competitions at every international level from 1978 to 1986; Moira Anderson became the first black woman newsreader in 1981; Bernie Grant and Diane Abbott became MPs in 1987; Naomi Campbell appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine in 1987; and in 1989 Hackney appointed the first black director of a local authority. On the other hand, many took their image of black culture from the 1970s 'Blaxploitation' films such as *Shaft*. These films, whilst targeting an urban black audience, merely entrenched stereotypes with their 'outrageous gallery of hunky pimps and pushers, knockout whores, and corrupt cops snorting, shooting, and screwing everything in sight [...] colorful ghetto garb, lurid, approving drug and sex scenes, extreme (if often cartoonlike) violence, classic soulful scores (Curtis Mayfield, Willie Hutch, Isaac Hayes), and touches of

<sup>196</sup> Image used with permission from <[http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton\\_riots.htm](http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton_riots.htm)> [accessed 31 January 2009].

A Carlton TV documentary made by in 2001, showing footage of the riots and interviews with some participants, including police and a fireman, can be viewed via YouTube, *Battle 4 Brixton parts 1-6*, <<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=cCjZEZt3QKc>> [accessed 29 January 2009].

black nationalism'.<sup>197</sup> These had at least an equal effect, particularly influencing the style of the rap and hip-hop artists who began to emerge in the 1980s.

## 2.7 1990 - present: Sea-change

The 1990s may come to be viewed as a watershed in Black British history. The decade began with the release of Nelson Mandela (leading to an end to apartheid in South Africa and his election as President), and ended with publication of the MacPherson Report, which 'went further than any previous inquiry into race relations in the United Kingdom'.<sup>198</sup> The death of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent police investigation which ultimately led to the MacPherson Inquiry was to stimulate a national debate on racism in British society and eventually mark a change in underlying attitudes towards Blacks in Britain.

Stephen Lawrence was an 18-year-old A-level student preparing for a career as an architect. He and a friend, Duwayne Brooks, were waiting for a bus when they were attacked by a group of white youths, and Lawrence was fatally stabbed. It was the third time in two years a racist stabbing had occurred in south-east London and within hours five suspects from a known racist gang were named to the police. Nevertheless, police did not follow up the information and the suspects were not arrested until weeks later. The two identified by Brooks were brought to court but the case was dropped for lack of evidence. Police were also criticised for their attitude during the investigation. The Lawrence family refused to accept the situation and continued campaigning, launching a private prosecution in 1994 (which also collapsed two years later). However, at the inquest in February 1997 the verdict was that Lawrence had been unlawfully killed, the jury indicating that they wished to say it was 'in a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths'.<sup>199</sup>

The media were broadly sympathetic to the Lawrence family. The *Daily Mail* famously printed pictures of the five suspects under the headline 'Murderers' and challenged them to sue for libel, an option which has never yet been taken up. A change of government when New Labour won the election in May 1997 ensured a more sympathetic reception in Westminster, and in July Home Secretary Jack Straw ordered an enquiry into 'matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence, in order particularly to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes'.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Gary Morris, 'Blaxploitation: A Sketch', *Bright Lights Film Journal* 18 (1997), <[http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18\\_blax.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18_blax.html)> [accessed 30 January 2009].

<sup>198</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 254.

<sup>199</sup> <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-42.htm>> [accessed 3 February 2009].

<sup>200</sup> Sir Wm. MacPherson, letter to the Home Secretary 15 February 1999, <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-pre.htm>> [accessed 3 February 2009].

Sir William MacPherson was appointed to lead the inquiry. He was advised by others, including John Sentamu (then Bishop of Stepney but later to become the first black Archbishop of York). A comprehensive report was published on 24 February 1999. In it MacPherson 'set out in distressing detail the collective and individual failure of the Metropolitan Police Service and its officers to investigate the murder thoroughly and to treat the victim's family with the due degree of sensitivity and respect'.<sup>201</sup> It was unremitting in tone:

We believe that the immediate impact of the Inquiry, as it developed, has brought forcibly before the public the justifiable complaints of Mr & Mrs Lawrence, and the hitherto underplayed dissatisfaction and unhappiness of minority ethnic communities, both locally and all over the country, in connection with this and other cases, as to their treatment by police.<sup>202</sup>

Given the central nature of the issue we feel that it is important at once to state our conclusion that institutional racism, within the terms of its description set out in Paragraph 6.34 above, exists both in the Metropolitan Police Service and in other Police Services and other institutions countrywide.<sup>203</sup>

The very existence of a sub-culture of obsessive violence, fuelled by racist prejudice and hatred against black people, such as is exemplified in the 1994 video films of the five prime suspects is a condemnation of them and also of our society [...] A high priority must be for society to purge itself of such racist prejudice and violence which infected those who committed this crime for no other reason than that Stephen Lawrence was black.<sup>204</sup>

The Report made over seventy wide-ranging recommendations. The government accepted these, together with its definition of institutional racism:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.<sup>205</sup>

Much has been made of the influence of the Lawrence family and friends in this episode, not merely in their pursuit of justice, but in their status and demeanour. Their image

shifted the visual volatile/dangerous framing of the black body which was so ubiquitously deployed in 1981 and has remained a regular feature of media representations of racialised bodies [...] Black bodies in February 1999 were inscribed with dignity, courage, restraint and perhaps most significantly *lawfulness*, and it was white bodies - the five

<sup>201</sup> Cecily Jones & Ian Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 281.

<sup>202</sup> Sir William MacPherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (1999), <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm>> [accessed 3 February 2009] (para. 2.15).

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, (para. 6.39).

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, (para. 2.18).

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, (para. 6.34).

suspects and the named police officers - that signified lawlessness, danger and incompetence.<sup>206</sup>

Whilst sympathetic to the Lawrences, media coverage has also been seen as an attempt to deny that racism is endemic in wider society:

In highlighting the treatment of the Lawrence family, the *Mail* was drawing a boundary between ordinary, decent Britons—white and black—and the racist ‘savages’ from south London who killed Stephen Lawrence. The pathologization of the five suspects and the area of Eltham has enabled both the *Mail* and the *Telegraph*, and indeed every other newspaper, to associate white racism with a group of young, uneducated, foul-mouthed men who, despite almost never having worked, wear ‘smart clothes’ and drive ‘smart cars’ [...] The key achievement of this focus on the five suspects is the way in which racism is distanced from mainstream society.<sup>207</sup>

Nevertheless, the report ‘had an enormous impact on the race relations debate, from criminal justice through to the role of the public authorities.’<sup>208</sup> Not least of its effects was its vindication of the black community’s long-standing complaints about their treatment by the police. However, one other recommendation in the report which is pertinent to this thesis, that a ‘racist incident is any incident which is *perceived to be racist* by the victim or any other person’ [my emphasis] should be noted.<sup>209</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

So, what is the position of Blacks in Britain in the twenty-first century? They still make up an ethnic minority, though as in the nineteenth century, they are becoming increasingly integrated both by residence and by marriage. Ceri Peach found that although there are concentrations of population, Britain does not have ghettos comparable to those in the USA.<sup>210</sup> Also, the employment situation may be improving. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recognized ‘There was some improvement in the distribution of occupational attainment (or social class) by ethnicity over the period 1991-2001. The proportion of employees with managerial jobs increased for all ethnic groups, with the biggest increases for Black Caribbean, Black African and Indian men as well as Indian women. Statistical analysis suggests that these increases were due to increased levels of education among these groups.’<sup>211</sup> On the other hand, the same report warns ‘However, once age, education and other characteristics had been controlled for, persistent differences remained in social class as measured by occupational status between the white group and other ethnic groups in 2001. There was also evidence that

<sup>206</sup> Sarah Neal, ‘The Scarman Report, the Macpherson Report and the Media: How Newspapers Respond to Race-Centred Social Policy Interventions’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 32 (2003), pp. 55-74 (p. 68).

<sup>207</sup> Eugene McLaughlin, and Karim Murji, ‘After the Stephen Lawrence Report’, *Critical Social Policy*, 19 (1999), pp. 371-85 (p. 377).

<sup>208</sup> Cecily Jones, *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, p. 254.

<sup>209</sup> Sir William MacPherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (1999), <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm>> [accessed 3 February 2009] (Recommendation 12).

<sup>210</sup> Ceri Peach, ‘Does Britain Have Ghettos?’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21 (1996), pp. 216-35 (p. 233).

<sup>211</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Findings*, April 2007, <<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2010.pdf>> [accessed 1 February 2009].

ethnic minority graduates were finding it increasingly difficult to obtain high-status jobs.<sup>212</sup> Nationwide, black boys are six times more likely than whites to be expelled from school.<sup>213</sup> Rates of psychiatric admission for psychosis are higher in the British African-Caribbean population compared with whites, with patients more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act.<sup>214</sup> Many are still amongst the poor:

The poverty rate for Britain's minority ethnic groups stands at 40%, double the 20% found amongst white British people, according to new research published today (30 April) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The research highlights the differences between minority ethnic groups with 65% of Bangladeshis living in poverty compared to 55% of Pakistanis, 45% of Black Africans and 30% of Indians and Black Caribbeans.<sup>215</sup>

This last statistic highlights another factor in the position of Blacks in Britain. Many immigrants have arrived from the Indian subcontinent, especially since the 1960s (although I have not documented their position here, considering 'blacking up' is more related to Afro-Caribbean issues). In the 2001 census, the number of Asian or Asian British residents was 2,331,423 (4 per cent of the total population of 58,789,194), whereas the number of Black or Black British was 1,148,738.<sup>216</sup> Equally a target for racism, it seems that since the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism, the events of 11 September 2001, the 7/7 London bombings and fear of associated terrorist attacks, the Asian community now attracts the more extreme suspicion and resentment previously shown towards Afro-Caribbeans.

Nevertheless, the current prevalence of gun and knife crime is regarded as predominantly a 'black-on black' problem fuelled by hip-hop and gangsta rap culture.<sup>217</sup> Youth worker Paul Kassman wrote in 2008:

While hip-hop fans 20 years ago were inspired to try to breakdance by the emerging music scene, an unreported crack epidemic, as well as an influx of guns from eastern Europe, make the gangsta rap fantasy that much easier to aspire to in the housing estates of 2007 London [...] Most of the boys I worked with wanted jobs or training but simply lacked the self-belief and support to help them move forward [...] For some young black boys, the misguided sense of status coming from living a

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<sup>212</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Findings*, April 2007, <<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2010.pdf>> [accessed 1 February 2009].

<sup>213</sup> 'African-American Scholar Tackles the Educational Problems of Young Black Males in British Schools', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2002), pp. 49-50 (p. 49).

<sup>214</sup> J. Tolmac, and M. Hodes, 'Ethnic Variation among Adolescent Psychiatric in-Patients with Psychotic Disorders', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 184 (2004), pp. 428-31.

<sup>215</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2007 <<http://www.jrf.org.uk/node/694>> [accessed 1 February 2009].

<sup>216</sup> 'UK immigration: Factfile' *The Observer*, Sunday 6 April 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/apr/06/immigration.britishidentity1>> [accessed 3 February 2009].

<sup>217</sup> See Dianne Abbott, (2009) *Fighting gun and knife crime in Hackney*, <<http://www.dianeabbott.org.uk/campaigns/crime.aspx>> [accessed 3 February 2009]; Patrick Wintour and Vikram Dodd, 'Blair blames spate of murders on black culture', *Guardian*, 12 April 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/apr/12/ukcrime.race>> [accessed 3 February 2009].

"thug's life" outweighs what they, rightly or wrongly, see as a future of limited options and low wages.<sup>218</sup>

This seems a more extreme version of the circumstances and attitude of the previous generation:

We chose not to engage with the institutionally racist institutions that made up British society. We decided that since our parents, many of whom came here qualified as doctors, nurses and police officers, could not get proper jobs then the same would happen to us. In response we either joined the black voluntary sector or took to the streets and created an informal economy. We became "hustlers" instead of fodder for the factories our parents had been forced to work in. We made these sacrifices when we were too young to know better. Now, 20 years on, many of my peers want to engage but do not know how. They want to work but haven't developed the skills. Many of them are almost unemployable [...] Our young are refighting the battles we fought two decades ago, and my generation is unable to give the guidance that might enable them to be more successful.<sup>219</sup>

Stafford Scott was a youth worker on the Broadwater Farm estate at the time of the riot there. Twenty years later, his words reflect the recurring nature of the experience of Blacks in England, many features of which - marginalisation, poverty, discrimination - can be traced throughout their history here.

The release of a Metropolitan Police Report in 2010 revealed that Blair Peach was almost certainly killed by a police officer, a member of the Special Patrol Group, but that there was insufficient evidence to charge any individual officer.<sup>220</sup> In January 2012, eighteen years after Stephen Lawrence's death and following a change in the law allowing a second prosecution for a crime if "new and compelling" evidence became available, Gary Dobson and David Norris were convicted of his murder and received prison sentences of a minimum of over 15 years and 14 years respectively. The judge acknowledged that others were involved:

The crime was committed for no other reason than racial hatred ... at least one of your group was armed with a lethal knife that night. I am sure you were aware of that. The evidence does not prove, so that I could be sure, that either of you had a knife, but the person who used it did so with your knowledge and approval.<sup>221</sup>

In the same month other events in the football world, in which both players and fans were accused of racist behaviour despite almost twenty years of the campaign

<sup>218</sup> Paul Kassman, 'In the hood', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/may/23/youthjustice.law>> [accessed 3 February 2009].

<sup>219</sup> Stafford Scott, 'Sacrifice of a generation' *The Guardian*, Friday 7 October 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/oct/07/ukcrime.race>> [accessed 31 January 2009].

<sup>220</sup> Paul Lewis, 'Blair Peach killed by police at 1979 protest, Met report finds', *Guardian*, Tuesday 27 April 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/apr/27/blair-peach-killed-police-met-report>> [accessed 16 October 2012].

<sup>221</sup> Sandra Laville, 'Stephen Lawrence murder: judge says other killers are still at large', *Guardian*, Wednesday 4 January 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/jan/04/stephen-lawrence-murder-judge-killers-free>> [accessed 30 January 2012].

to 'Kick Racism out of Football', make it apparent that, no matter how enlightened current opinions of racial matters may be, generations of attitudes and behaviours on both sides cannot be changed by policies alone.<sup>222</sup>

This chapter has recounted the lengthy and often troubled history of black people in Britain from Roman times to the present, showing how they have persistently been regarded as 'Other'. The following chapter provides examples of how associations of the very word 'black' in idiomatic language and folklore may have supported and sustained that 'Othering'. It then identifies many ways in which black people themselves have been represented, demonstrating how demeaning stereotypes have been created.

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<sup>222</sup> See <<http://www.kickitout.org/1.php>> [accessed 30 January 2012].





## Chapter 3: Representations of Blackness

Underlying the formation of attitudes for generations have been the representations of Blacks in popular culture, and the conscious and subconscious effects of these depictions. This chapter begins by considering some of the uses and connotations of the word 'black' in idiom and folklore. It will then go on to give examples of how dark-skinned people in particular have been depicted over the centuries. Minstrelsy, the first thought of most people when the term 'blacking up' is mentioned, is considered at length in a section of its own. That is followed by a reflection on how the terminology referring to black people has changed over the years, leading to a final brief section about racism and 'political correctness'.

### 3.1 'Black' in Idiom, Proverb and Folklore

From Biblical times, associations of the word 'black' have been predominantly negative, whilst 'white' stands for all that is pure and innocent. The first act of the Judaeo-Christian God was to create light; the opposite of light is darkness, blackness. Among his sufferings, Job mourns, 'My skin is become black upon me, and my bones are dried up with heat', while the Lord threatens Jeremiah, 'The whole land shall be desolate. For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above are black'.<sup>223</sup> On the other hand, Psalm 51 implores, 'Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow'.<sup>224</sup> When Jesus was transfigured, 'his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow', and the angels seen by Mary at the site of the Resurrection were clothed in white.<sup>225</sup> The Bible also contains the question, 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?'<sup>226</sup> which entered folklore as a proverbial expression of folly, 'to try to wash an Ethiopian white'. (Other links between blackness and folly are presented in Chapter 4.)

The inauspicious connotations of black are also evident in classical literature. The River Styx was black, as were the horses which drew the chariot of Hades, god of the underworld. In Ovid's tale of Phebus and Cornide, a bird tells Phebus of Cornide's unfaithfulness. Phebus killed his love and cursed the bird, which, previously whiter than any swan, turned black and became a raven.<sup>227</sup> This story was reworked by Chaucer, in the *Maunciple's Tale*:

And to the crowe, 'o false theef!' seyde he,  
 'I wol thee quyte anon thy false tale!  
 Thou songe whylom lyk a nightingale;  
 Now shaltow, false theef, thy song forgon,

<sup>223</sup> Job, Ch. 30 v. 30; Jeremiah, Ch. 4 vv. 27-28.

<sup>224</sup> Psalm 51, vv. 2 & 7.

<sup>225</sup> Mark, Ch. 9 v. 3; John, Ch. 20 v. 12.

<sup>226</sup> Jeremiah, Ch. 13 v. 23.

<sup>227</sup> The Tale of Apollo and Coronis in *Metamorphoses*, Bk II.

And eek thy whyte fetheres everichon,  
 Ne never in al thy lyf ne shaltou speke.  
 Thus shal men on a traitour been awreke;  
 Thou and thyn of-spring ever shul be blake,  
 Ne never swete noise shul ye make,  
 But ever crye agayn tempest and rayn,  
 In tokeninge that thurgh thee my wyf is slayn.<sup>7</sup>  
 And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,  
 And pulled his whyte fetheres everichon,  
 And made him blak, and refte him al his song,  
 And eek his speche, and out at dore him slong  
 Un-to the devel, which I him bitake;  
 And for this caas ben alle crowes blake.<sup>228</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many sayings and connections have arisen with similar dismal associations, some of which are listed below in categories of ascending order of severity.

***Difficulty, inconvenience:***

- black clouds bring rain
- things look black – things look ominous
- Black Monday is a name for Easter Monday; ‘the common notion that rejoicing is naturally followed by calamity may have caused the day after Easter day to be regarded as even more perilous than other Mondays’.<sup>229</sup>  
 19 October 1987 saw the largest one-day percentage decline in recorded stock market history and became known as ‘Black Monday’

***Deviance or undesirability:***

- black mark – a point against someone
- to be in someone’s black books – to have done something to offend them
- black sheep of the family – the family outcast, deviant
- blackballed – rejected; club members would hold a secret ballot on the admission of a new member; white ball for approval, black for rejection
- blacklist – people not to be considered for some position, deemed to be disloyal or untrustworthy
- blackleg – someone who goes against group solidarity by working when others are on strike
- blacken his character – harm his reputation
- blackguard – a contemptible person
- black-hearted – wicked

***Criminality:***

- black economy – economic activity unknown to the government, and so technically illegal
- black market – illegal buying and selling of controlled or rationed goods

<sup>228</sup> Chaucer, Maunciple’s Tale, lines 198-204.

<sup>229</sup> OED online [accessed 10 February 2011].

- black hat – in a genre of cowboy films, the villains always wore black hats; nowadays the term is used for malicious computer hackers<sup>230</sup>
- blackmail – extorting money or influencing action by threatening to expose discreditable information
- Black Maria – police van
- black cap worn by a judge to pronounce a death sentence

**Danger:**

- black ice – more dangerous because invisible
- blackspot – site of many accidents; also 'black spot', used as a warning in Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Treasure Island'
- blackout – loss of consciousness, loss of electric power, or associated with wartime and air raids
- disappearing into a black hole – irretrievably lost

**Violence:**

- black & blue – bruised
- black eye – a bruised eye

**Sickness and death:**

- black dog – a term for depression, famously used by Sir Winston Churchill
- black dogs – solitary, supernatural or spectral black dogs occurring frequently in folklore, often associated with churchyards or gallows sites, as omens of death, or as a form taken on by the devil.<sup>231</sup>
- black, the colour of mourning; in Chaucer 'Merchant's Tale' the merchant expected his wife to live as 'as widwe in clothes blake', so it is obvious that in England the link between black, death and mourning was made at an early stage
- Black Death – bubonic plague
- the black ace of spades in a pack of playing cards has become known as the death card<sup>232</sup>
- black corvids like the crow and raven – regarded as birds of ill-omen and even death.<sup>233</sup>

**Evil:**

- black cat – widely thought of as a witches' familiar, so much so that nowadays it is an indispensable part of Hallowe'en decorations along with spiders and pumpkins
- black magic – used to ill purposes, as opposed to good 'white' magic

<sup>230</sup> OED online [accessed 10 February 2011].

<sup>231</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, and Steve Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 25. For an overview see Bob Trubshaw, 'Black dogs in folklore' <<http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogfl.htm>> [accessed 10 February 2011].

<sup>232</sup> For its use by American soldiers in the Vietnam war, see <<http://www.newtsgames.com/world-of-cards/death-card-history.html>> [accessed 11 February 2011].

<sup>233</sup> When my sister was dangerously ill in hospital, in 1971, a crow would come and sit on the garden hut in the morning. My mother told me she would say to it, "Go away, you're not having her."

- Black Annis – a Leicestershire bogey figure, ironically, with a blue face
- the Wild Hunt – an omen of disaster, thought to be demons or damned souls, were described thus in 1127: 'The hunters were big and black and loathsome, and their hounds all black and wide-eyed and loathsome and they rode on black horses and black goats.'<sup>234</sup>

There are examples of black signifying good fortune, but these are far fewer. To be 'in the black' is to be solvent, and first-footers at New Year should be dark, if not actually black-haired. Black cats in superstition are ambiguous, being counted as lucky rather than unlucky in some areas. A black-faced chimney sweep is also lucky, especially at a wedding, and many sweeps hire out their services for that purpose. However, these cases are overwhelmingly outnumbered by the negative instances above, widespread in England both geographically and temporally.

## 3.2 Portrayals of Black People

At a time when ordinary people did not travel far, nor have much acquaintance beyond their immediate circle, for most people impressions of black people could only have been formed from the images available to them. From earliest times until the present, such images have been presented in the same ways – through writing; in pictorial images; in entertainment; (at first processions, fairs and theatre, music, sport; later in film, TV, and more recently media such as video games); and finally, through personal experience.

### 3.2.1 Before Emancipation

It has been shown in the previous chapter how the first black people in England were treated as curiosities, as exotic creatures, an attitude that persisted into Victorian times. Much of this stems from early literature, such as the 'Travels of Sir John Mandeville', which tells of the journey in 1322 of a knight through lands 'where dwell many diverse folks, and of diverse manners and laws, and of diverse shapes of men'.<sup>235</sup> Mandeville describes men 'black as the Moors for great heat of the sun' and 'black women foul and hideous' alongside those who 'drink gladliest man's blood', and tales of men who have no heads but have eyes in their shoulders, men with but one foot, a race of half-men half-women, and other such fantastic creatures.

Contemporary with Mandeville, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Northumbrian poem 'Cursor Mundi', declares:

On returning home, David met four Saracens, black and blue as lead.  
They were misshapen creatures, their mouth was in their breast, and  
their long brows hung about their ears. Unlovely were their features, "in  
their forehead stood their sight," but they were unable to look upright.

<sup>234</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, and Steve Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 390.

<sup>235</sup> Preface, 'The Travels of Sir John Mandeville', Transcribed from the 1900 Macmillan and Co. edition. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext97/tosjm10h.htm>> [accessed 2 March 2011].

Their hairy arms, with wrinkled skin, "were set to the elbows in their side." They had crumpled knees and humped backs. None could forbear laughing who saw them. They asked David to show them "the saving tree"; and when these Ethiopians saw it, they did reverence to it, and then they became quite white and handsome.<sup>236</sup>



Illustrations from a 1499 edition of the Travels of Sir John Mandeville.<sup>237</sup>

This passage reinforces the idea of white being a physical manifestation of a spiritual condition. The same can be seen in illustrations of the Queen of Sheba: 'Although the Queen is sometimes portrayed as black ... she is often portrayed in Western tradition as *white* because of her allegorical interpretation: her white skin illustrates the effects of her receiving the wisdom of Solomon and the throwing off of the spiritual darkness of paganism.'<sup>238</sup>

Indeed, the earliest use of blackness in entertainment was as representations of the devil in mystery plays. The use of blackness in theatre is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter; here, it is sufficient to mention the significance of a few examples.

'The Merchant of Venice' includes a direct reference to colour. The Prince of Morocco pleads 'Mislike me not for my complexion, The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun, To whom I am a neighbour and near bred', but Portia has already declared her position: '...if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.'<sup>239</sup> Although she politely tells him, 'Yourself, renowned prince, then stood as fair As any comer I have look'd on yet', this is but damning with faint praise; the audience knows she and her maid have just dissected the others' faults with great amusement.

The most famous of Shakespeare's black characters, the Moor Othello, reinforces the connection of black skin with the exotic as portrayed in Mandeville, when 'the thicklips' himself speaks of the tales he told of 'Cannibals that each other eat, The

<sup>236</sup> Cursor Mundi  
<[http://www.archive.org/stream/cursormundicutp600morruoft/cursormundicutp600morruoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/cursormundicutp600morruoft/cursormundicutp600morruoft_djvu.txt)> [accessed 2 March 2011].

<sup>237</sup> Images from EEBO:  
<[http://gateway.proquest.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:citation:99844022](http://gateway.proquest.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99844022)> [accessed 2 March 2011].

<sup>238</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, 'The Sultana and Her Sisters: Black Women in the British Isles before 1530', *Women's History Review*, 10 (2001), pp. 187-210 (p. 194).

<sup>239</sup> Wm Shakespeare, 'Merchant of Venice', 2.1.1-3 & 1.2.123-5.

Anthropophagi, and men whose heads Do grow beneath their shoulders'.<sup>240</sup> In this play, Desdemona's father regards the relationship between a black man and a white woman as unnatural, unthinkable. Desdemona is described as being stolen away, a victim of magic:

If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy...  
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight.  
Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense  
That thou hast practised on her with foul charms,

There is an undertone of sexual appetite and miscegenation:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tuppung your white ewe.  
Arise, arise; Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,  
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you<sup>241</sup>

This link between black skin, heat and sexual appetite was an old theme. One of the oldest myths about Blacks, and one that is still current (as any perusal of certain areas of the internet would testify), concerns the size of their sexual organs. 'By the middle of the sixteenth century [...] some people took it for granted that every male African had an enormous penis; the tiny naked figures of Africans on more than one fifteenth-century map attest to the antiquity of that belief.'<sup>242</sup> 'Medical treatises related also how black women in particular were highly sexed because of their colour. Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) argues that "since Black women are hotter and more swarthy ... [they] are the sweetest for mounting, as the pimps say".'<sup>243</sup> It was shown in the last chapter that black women were employed as prostitutes.

This sub-text of sexual appetite and fecundity may even have played a part in Jonson's 'Masque of Blackness' commissioned by James 1's consort, Queen Anne. She desired to appear as 'a blackamore', and was six months pregnant when she featured in the masque, on Twelfth Night, 1605. In this courtly entertainment, Anne and her attendants appeared in black makeup as Niger's twelve dark daughters who, wishing to be fair, sought an island ending in -Tania 'lit by another and greater light than that Sun which darkened their skin' (i.e. King James).<sup>244</sup> Their sexuality was emphasised in the remarks of one courtier, who

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<sup>240</sup> 'Othello' 1.3.488-490.

<sup>241</sup> 'Othello' 1.1.94-7.

<sup>242</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 7.

<sup>243</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, 'The Sultana and Her Sisters: Black Women in the British Isles before 1530', *Women's History Review*, 10 (2001), pp. 187-210 (p.197).  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612020100200287>>

<sup>244</sup> D. J. Gordon, 'The Imagery of Ben Jonson's the Masque of Blacknesse and the Masque of Beautie', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 6 (1943), pp. 122-41 (p.124).

described the ladies' costume as 'courtesan-like'.<sup>245</sup> In the masque, Niger defends the beauty of blackness:

...these my daughters, my most loved birth :  
 Who, though they were the first form'd dames of earth,<sup>3</sup>  
 And in whose sparkling and refulgent eyes,  
 The glorious sun did still delight to rise;  
 Though he, the best judge, and most formal cause  
 Of all dames beauties, in their firm hues, draws  
 Signs of his fervent'st love; and thereby shows  
 That in their black, the perfect'st beauty grows;  
 No cares, no age can change ; or there display  
 The fearful tincture of abhorred gray ;  
 Since death herself (herself being pale and blue)  
 Can never alter their most faithful hue ;  
 All which are arguments, to prove how far  
 Their beauties conquer in great beauty's war ;  
 And more, how near divinity they be,  
 That stand from passion, or decay so free.<sup>246</sup>



Inigo Jones's costume design for the Daughter of Niger  
 from 'The Masque of Blackness'.<sup>247</sup>

<sup>245</sup> Hardin Aasand, "'To Blanch an Ethiop, and Revive a Corse': Queen Anne and the Masque of Blackness", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32 (1992), pp. 271-85 (p. 273).

<sup>246</sup> Ben Jonson, 'The Masque of Blackness', from  
 <<http://www.luminarium.org/editions/maskblack.htm>> [accessed 2 March 2011].

<sup>247</sup> Image from <<http://www.wikigallery.org/>> [accessed 2 March 2011].

Despite Niger's protestations, the whole theme of 'The Masque of Blackness' and its sequel, 'The Masque of Beauty', is that white is superior to black, and that in the newly-formed Britain is a sun, in the shape of the monarch, who can achieve the impossible:

For were the world, with all his wealth, a ring,  
 Britannia, whose new name makes all tongues sing,  
 Might be a diamant worthy to inchase it,  
 Ruled by a sun, that to this height doth grace it :  
 Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force  
 To blanch an Æthiop, and revive a corse.

Added to these manifestations, we can make inferences from how black figures were represented in art. Erikson notes, 'not until the second half of the seventeenth century do images of blacks appear in British painting. ...However, the absence of blacks in painting until after the mid-1600s does not mean that images of blacks were absent from British culture prior to that point.'<sup>248</sup> He describes 'five lines of development of the black male figure in visual art' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the black Magus, continuing from an earlier religious tradition; the inversion of the Magus, in which 'worship is redirected toward a classical figure of Saturnalian disorder'; as the subject of independent but fragmented studies, which do not consider the whole person, such as Rubens's Four Heads of a Negro; as servants; and as deferential gift-givers.<sup>249</sup> Black women additionally feature as attendants in classical scenes, but although they may be physically closer to the main, white, subject, these black attendants are subservient, there to act as a contrast. From this, we can see that in visual art the black person is again portrayed as an exotic being to be enlightened by Christianity, a satanic heathen, an interesting specimen, or as a deferential body at the beck and call of white superiors.

As will be shown in the next chapter, Blacks were frequently represented on stage, as were other racial stereotypes. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Charles Dibdin performed one-man shows which 'included burlesques of Irishmen, Italian singers, and Jewish old-clothes men' as well as 'Negro impersonations'.<sup>250</sup> These impersonations predated the rise of American minstrelsy, but like that genre, the portrayal was mediated through white eyes. Even though Dibdin attempted use of dialect in his speeches, his 'Negro' songs were basically English in style, and were a simplistic representation.

While it was the rich who would have access to culture, the wider public was not isolated from depictions of Blacks. As well as pageants and fairs, popular ballads were a widespread form available to all in oral, printed or manuscript form. One such ballad perpetuated the deviant, vengeful, untrustworthy nature of the black

<sup>248</sup> Peter Erikson, 'Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance', *Criticism*, 35:4 (1993), pp. 499-527 (pp. 515-516).

<sup>249</sup> Peter Erikson, 'Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance', *Criticism*, 35:4 (1993), pp. 499-527 (p.505).

<sup>250</sup> Hans Nathan, 'Negro Impersonation in Eighteenth Century England', *Notes, Second Series*, 2 (1945), pp. 245-54 (p. 245).



man. *The Lamentable Ballad of the Tragical End of a gallant Lord and Virtuous Lady: Together with the untimely Death of their two Children, wickedly performed by a Heathenish and Blood-thirsty Blackamoor, their Servant; the like of which Cruelty and Murder was never before heard of* told the tale of a nobleman who, out hunting one day, chastised the black servant who had offended him. The following day the lord went hunting again despite the pleas of his wife and two children, who went to the tower to see him off. The servant, hearing this, vowed revenge on his master. He bolted the gates, pulled up the drawbridge across the moat, and followed them to the tower:

This wretch unto the lady went  
And her with speed did will  
His lust forthwith to satisfy  
His mind for to fulfil.

Needless to say, the lady resisted, and townspeople, hearing her cries, sent for her husband to return. In vain:

With that the rogue ran to the wall,  
He having had his will,  
And brought one child under his arm  
His dearest blood to spill.  
...this vile wretch the little child  
By both the heels did take  
And dash'd his brains against the wall  
While parents' hearts did ache  
That being done away he run  
The other child to fetch  
And pluck'd it from the mother's breast  
Most like a cruel wretch.  
With that he cut the throat of it  
Then to the father he did call  
To look how he the same did cut  
Then down the head did fall.

The grieving father pleaded for his wife's life, and a bargain was struck:

Cut off thy nose and not one drop  
Of her blood shall be spilt.  
With that the lord presently took  
A knife within his hand,  
And then his nose he quite cut off  
In place where he did stand.

But the Moor was not to be trusted:

Now I have bought my lady's life,  
Then to the Moor did call  
Then take her, quoth this wicked rogue  
And down he let her fall.

mentable **BALLAD** of the Tragical End of a Gallant Lord and Virtuous Lady with the untimely Death of their two Children, wickedly performed by a Heathenish and Blackamoor, their Servant; the like of which Cruelty and Murder was never before heard of.



Illustration of the ballad from an imprint dated ?1792.<sup>251</sup>

Overcome with grief, the lord could not be saved, and fell dead. The servant was unrepentant, and taunted the townspeople:

Quoth he, I know you'll torture me  
 If that you can me get,  
 But all your threats I do not fear  
 Nor yet regard one whit.  
 Wild horses will my body tear,  
 I know it to be true;  
 But I'll prevent you of that pain,  
 And down himself he threw.

By committing the ultimate sin of suicide, the Moor was confirmed not only as lascivious, heartless, violent, and mendacious, but as a heathen whose deeds were as devilish as his colour.

Blacks also appeared in caricatures and cartoons, in which 'a more extreme manifestation of racism emerged'.<sup>252</sup> Among the most famous cartoonists was George Cruikshank. His brother Robert drew this ambiguous cartoon in 1820. According to the commentary on the National Archives website, this caricature 'portrays the African as a devil with thick lips'. However, the horns, cloven feet and

<sup>251</sup> From EBO

<[http://find.galegroup.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW114081038&source=gale&userGroupName=su\\_uk&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE](http://find.galegroup.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW114081038&source=gale&userGroupName=su_uk&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE)>.

<sup>252</sup> <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/culture/representing.htm>> [accessed 21 February 2011].

snake hair do not seem to me particularly African. Given the long history of black devils in English popular culture, I wonder if this is more an instance of limited background knowledge leading to current misinterpretation, and a poor choice of example; still, it is impossible to judge without knowing more of the context of this cartoon.



Robert Cruikshank, 'The Devil's Ball'.<sup>253</sup>

Nevertheless, the continuing demonization of Blacks made it easier to treat them as chattels, and the previous chapter has shown how they were not only sold as slaves, but kept in England as tokens of prosperity and fashion, as exotic pets as well as servants. However, personal acquaintance in some cases seems to have reinforced the idea of the 'noble savage' as portrayed by Aphra Behn and William Blake. Captain James Cook, returning from his second voyage around the world, brought a Tahitian named Omai to England in 1774. 'With his dark skin and striking tattoos, Omai was described as "an exotic spectacle". But he was also said to have charm and "natural" good manners, and was an object of admiration as well as curiosity.'<sup>254</sup> Similarly, some individuals, whether distinguished like Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano, or more humble, were well-regarded and treated well. In Devon is a memorial stone to one such servant buried in 1784:

Deposited Here  
Are the Remains of Philip Scipio  
Servant to the Duke of Wharton

<sup>253</sup>

<[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/culture/docs/devils\\_ball.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/culture/docs/devils_ball.htm)> [accessed 21 February 2011].

<sup>254</sup> <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/culture/curiosities.htm>> [accessed 21 February 2011].

Afterwards to Sir William Morice  
 An African Whose Quality might have done Honour  
 To any Nation or Climate  
 And Give Us to See  
 That Virtue is Confined  
 To no Country or Complexion...

A more run-of-the-mill representation, and so maybe more telling of how Blacks were encountered in everyday life, is given in another Cruikshank cartoon not ostensibly concerned with issues of colour. The cartoon depicts an expedition returning from the North Pole. A bystander comments, 'I think we have Bears, Gulls, Savages, Chump wood, Stones & puppies enough without going to the North pole for them.' Following the expedition is a savage carrying a lance made from the 'horn of a unicorn used in common as a walking stick', along with a portfolio of some kind. Three ahead of him in the procession a negro, dressed in servants' livery, is being addressed by the man in front of him: 'I say Snowball, mind you don't tread on my heels,' to which he replies, 'No; No Massa Billy! & mind you no tread my toes!' Closer examination reveals the man has no toes at all but is walking on two peg legs. Another black man with a wooden leg and a fiddle is greeting the procession with a song and 'How you do sir; hope see you well sir?!'



George Cruikshank, 'Landing the Treasures, or Results of the Polar Expedition.' 1819.<sup>255</sup>

The fiddler in the cartoon is Billy Waters, a well-known busker outside the Adelphi Theatre who was popular with the London public. Formerly a sailor, Waters was forced to make his living by begging. Even that was taken from him when he was featured in a stage adaptation of Pierce Egan's 'Life in London, or Days and Nights of Jerry Hawthorne and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom'. Not only did the stage representation of Waters take the place of the man himself in the public's affection, the production made Waters appear better off than he was. Thus he was no longer able to make a living and he ended his days, known as 'King of the Beggars', in the workhouse.

Waters was a popular figure immortalised, as many others, in pottery. Thousands of cheap pottery figures were made to adorn the mantelpieces of the new middle classes, and offer a snapshot of popular subjects and concerns of the day.

<sup>255</sup> <[http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/cruikshank.htm](http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/cruikshank.htm)> [accessed 3 March 2011].



Derby figure of Billy Waters © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.<sup>256</sup>



Staffordshire figures: freed slave c.1810;<sup>257</sup>  
Boxers Thomas Cribb and Thomas Molineux.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>256</sup> < <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O68688/billy-waters-figure-keys-edward/> > [accessed 7 February 2013].

<sup>257</sup> Image of slave by Myrna Schkolne, used with permission.  
<<http://www.mystaffordshirefigures.com/figures.html>> [accessed 1 March 2011].

<sup>258</sup> Boxers from Ian Grosvenor (7/301) *Connecting Histories*

They are thus useful reflections of popular culture and attitudes. The emancipated slave was a fashionable item, as were sporting figures. Three other figures are also shown. One is of an ex-slave who is depicted kneeling with an open book, which reads 'Bless god thank Britton me no slave'. His posture mimics that of the famous Wedgewood design shown in Chapter 2.2. The boxers are Thomas Cribb and Thomas Molineux, who fought in a famous bare-knuckle match for the international heavyweight title in 1810. Molineux, a freed slave, had apparently won the fight when Cribb was unable to continue, but Molineux was accused of hiding lead shot in his fists. In the confusion, his opponent came up to the mark ready to continue, and eventually won when after thirty-nine rounds Molineux collapsed unconscious.<sup>259</sup>

One theme runs through all the representations introduced thus far, and that is that Blacks were 'other': other than European, other than Christian, sometimes even possibly other than human. Anti-slavery activists did not choose their slogan lightly: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' After slavery was outlawed in 1833, the supporters of emancipation must have hoped for this to be recognised. Instead, a different form of 'othering' took hold in Victorian times.

### 3.2.2 Free, but not equal

Although successful in ending slavery, abolitionists never eradicated the underlying prejudices which had grown over centuries, largely because society always benefited from the subjugation of those conveniently thought of as inferior:

European colonialists created sharp divisions of prestige, power, and economic status between the rulers and the ruled in the Victorian Age. Because these divisions coincided with differences in color and other physical attributes between whites and the peoples of Asia and Africa, racism provided a powerful legitimization of imperialism.<sup>260</sup>

Foremost among the opinion-formers as far as race was concerned were the scientists, explorers, geographers, anthropologists and missionaries, whose reports, although sometimes subject to sensationalism, carried great weight in Victorian intellectual circles. Thus the image of Africa, already formed by the 1850s, was self-perpetuating:

It was found in children's books, in Sunday School tracts, in the popular press. Its major affirmations were the 'common knowledge' of the educated classes. Thereafter, when new generations went to Africa,

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<<http://www.search.connectinghistories.org.uk/engine/resource/exhibition/htrbh2/default.asp?resource=301>>[accessed 3 March 2011].

<sup>259</sup>

<[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Tom\\_Cribb\\_vs.\\_Tom\\_Molineux\\_%281st\\_meeting%29](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Tom_Cribb_vs._Tom_Molineux_%281st_meeting%29)>[accessed 3 March 2011]. Interestingly, a similar claim was to arise 150 years later, when it was rumoured the manager of black boxer Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) exaggerated a tear in his glove to give his fighter extra time to recover after being knocked down by popular local hero Henry Cooper.

<<http://www.eastsideboxing.com/boxing-news/day1411.php>> [accessed 10 May 2011].

<sup>260</sup> Charles Hirschman, 'The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race', *Population and Development Review*, 30 (2004), pp. 385-415 (p. 395).

they went with a prior impression of what they would find. Most often they found it, and in their writings in turn confirmed the older image-or at most altered it only slightly.<sup>261</sup>

That image was of a backward continent, which had no written language, no literature, no art, architecture, music or religion, and whose inhabitants, who were not merely backward but savage, could for their own good only be redeemed by subjugation to white domination:

...the negro must be driven up the ladder of civilisation, at the foot of which he will always lie naked and starving if left to himself. ...We have almost destroyed the old slave trade and slave labour system which tilled the New World and assisted so greatly the progress of the age, but the abuses of which have disgraced humanity. And we have not yet constructed that new system by means of which the negro shall be made a useful instrument in our hands, and by means of which also his happiness and advancement shall be secured.<sup>262</sup>

It seems ... impossible to eradicate the original savageness of the African blood. As long as the black man has a strong white Government and a numerous white population to control him he is capable of living as a respectable member of society. He can be made quiet and even industrious by the fear of the supreme power, and by the example of those to whom he necessarily looks up. But wherever he attains to a certain degree of independence there is the fear that he will resume the barbarous life and fierce habits of his African ancestors.<sup>263</sup>

The growth of interest in scientific thought played its part. Craniometrists examined skull shapes; anthropologists debated depth of skin tone; evolutionists placed races in a hierarchy, but 'almost all methods of classifying the human species, in fact, whether by language, brain, physical features or colour, resulted in the European coming out on top.'<sup>264</sup>

Victorian opinion as recorded and passed on to us is 'predominantly middle-class, referring in the main not to what the masses actually thought and believed, but to the writings of the literate minority about what they thought and believed their contemporaries to feel.'<sup>265</sup> While science emphasised the inferiority of the black man, popular culture was influential in changing him 'from an object of pity to a figure of fun.'<sup>266</sup> To some degree this was due to the exceptional popularity of the minstrel shows, which rapidly became a fashionable form of entertainment and which are considered in detail in the next section, and to the ubiquitous 'Tom shows'.

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<sup>261</sup> Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action 1780-1850* (Madison, WI, 1963), p.vi. Cited in Anthony Fothergill, 'Of Conrad, Cannibals and Kin', in *Representing Others: White Views of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. by Mick Gidley (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), pp. 37-59 (p.46).

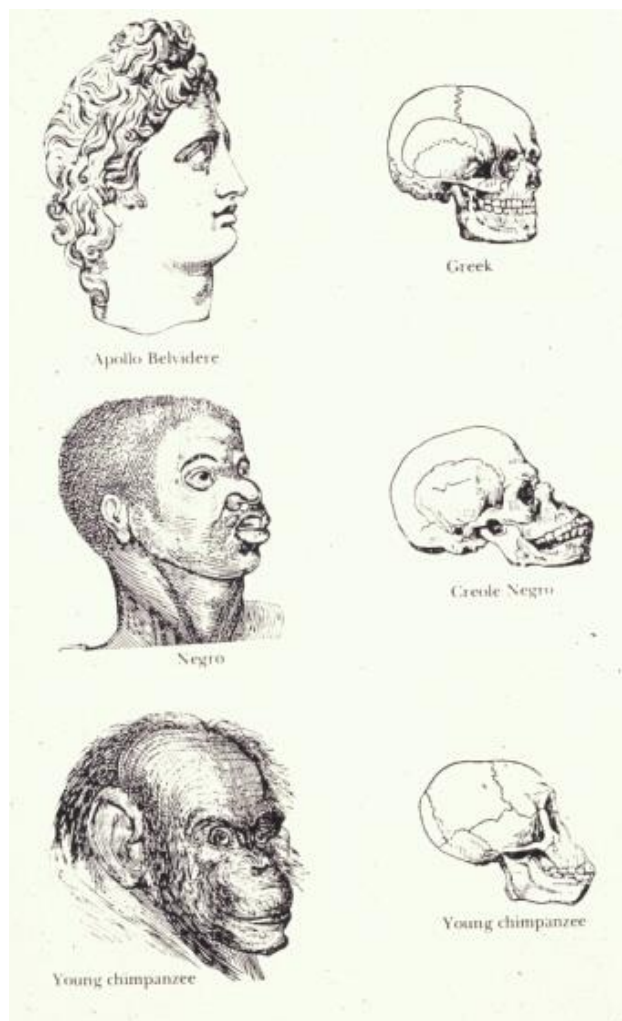
<sup>262</sup> W. Winwood Reade, 'Review: Burton's Mission to Dahome', *Anthropological Review*, 2 (1864), pp. 335-43 (p.342).

<sup>263</sup> The Times, 13 November 1865, cited in Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 76.

<sup>264</sup> Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 208.

<sup>265</sup> Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*, p. xiii.

<sup>266</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 82.



'A scientific demonstration from 1868 that the Negro is as distinct from the Caucasian as the Chimpanzee'.<sup>267</sup>

Harriet Beecher-Stowe's best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so popular that not only was the original novel dramatized, but it inspired a number of spin-off shows which became known as 'Tom shows'. It was largely due to these that Beecher-Stowe's characters became consolidated as stereotypes that were to linger well into the twentieth century in cinema and cartoon. These character types included loyal Aunt Chloe, the 'Mammy':

A round, black, shining face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban. [...] A cook she certainly was, in the very bone and centre of her soul. [...] The arrival of company at the house, the arranging of dinners and suppers "in style," awoke all the energies of her soul; and no sight was more welcome to her than a pile of travelling trunks launched on the verandah, for then she foresaw fresh efforts and fresh triumphs.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>267</sup> Image from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Races\\_and\\_skulls.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Races_and_skulls.png)>[accessed 15 March 2011].

<sup>268</sup> Harriet Beecher-Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Chapter 4.



Topsy, the comical picaninny:

She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment at the wonders of the new Mas'r's parlor, displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth. Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity. She was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; and stood with her hands demurely folded before her. Altogether, there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance...<sup>269</sup>

and Uncle Tom himself, the long-suffering yet ever-faithful servant, whose name was to become a pejorative term for a black man seeming too willing to accommodate himself to white authority:

Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow. He got religion at a camp-meeting, four years ago; and I believe he really *did* get it. I've trusted him, since then, with everything I have, - money, house, horses, - and let him come and go round the country; and I always found him true and square in everything.<sup>270</sup>

Although the Tom of the novel was a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, his image was changed over the years to something more sentimental:

Tom's evolution from the hearty adult of 1850s prints into the decrepit old geezer he became speaks volumes about how mainstream culture chose to view and remember former slaves in the aftermath of emancipation ... Appropriately, Tom the venerable, grandfatherly companion of Eva was the figure that lingered in the imagination. Not a dark ghost of slavery past, but a beloved slave who never was, and so could always be.<sup>271</sup>

Another beloved black figure was the golliwog. This was a character created by Florence Mary Upton in 1895. Inspired by a minstrel doll she had owned, she wrote a children's story, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a "Golliwogg"*. 'The Uptons did not copyright the Golliwogg, and the image entered into public domain. The Golliwogg name was changed to Golliwog, and he became a common Toyland character in children's books.'<sup>272</sup> Many Golliwog dolls were made, and the Golly remained popular until the 1960s. The same character, but always known as 'Golly', was famously used as a trademark by Robertson's preserves until 2002.

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., Ch. 20.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., Ch. 1. See <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/menu.htm>>[accessed 17 November 2008] for explanations of these stereotypes and how they developed from Beecher-Stowe's characters.

<sup>271</sup> Jo-Ann Morgan, 'Illustrating *Uncle Tom's Cabin*', (2007) <<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/exhibits/morgan/morgan.html>> [accessed 10 March 2011]. This article traces the illustrations of the book and the significance of their iconography.

<sup>272</sup> David Pilgrim, *The Golliwog Caricature*, <<http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/golliwog/>> [accessed 13 January 2009].



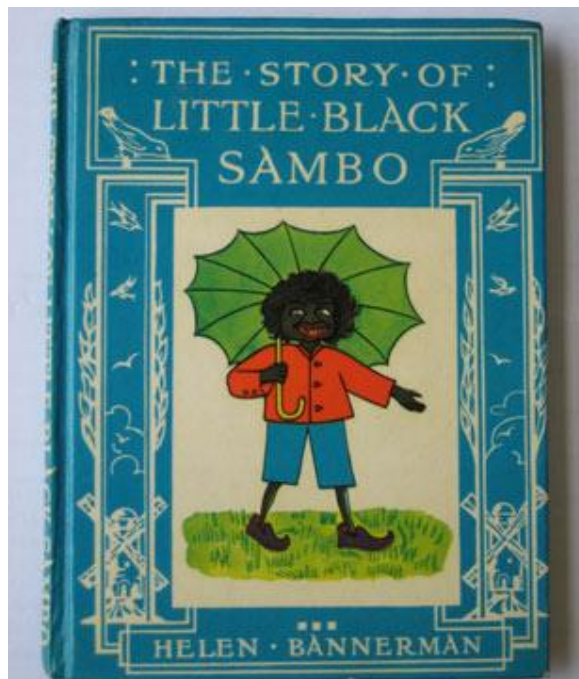
Nineteenth-century book cover. <sup>273</sup>



Golly on stall in Bury Market, 2009.  
(All photographs P. Bater unless otherwise acknowledged.)

<sup>273</sup> Image from <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16770/16770-h/16770-h.htm>> [accessed 13 January 2009].

A different children's book which was to cause similar controversy in the late twentieth century was published in 1899: *The Story of Little Black Sambo*.



Book cover<sup>274</sup>

The image of blackness as an undesirable attribute or object of ridicule continued to be used in advertising, especially for 'soap, starch, boot and grate polish or any other commodity where the issue of black and white and cleanliness came to the fore and the theme of colour could be exploited', as seen in the example over. The advertisement for Dome black lead (grate polish) poses an interesting contrast with a Pears' soap advertisement of a hundred years earlier, which played on the proverb of 'washing the Ethiop white'.<sup>275</sup> In this example, rather than an attribute to be washed away, blackness is outwardly accepted, as 'Topsy' (presumably a maid) exclaims, "It am good fo' de Cuplekshun". However, this echoes the impression of the 'round, black, shining face' used in the description of the 'Mammy' above, while drawing attention to the assumed simplicity of the black domestic and her ungrammatical speech patterns.

Use of the contrast between black and white continued in advertising for decades, as the toothpaste box shows. Made in Malaysia, it was bought in Sierra Leone by an Englishman about twenty years ago, and represents how the stereotyped image of a black face spread around the world and persisted long after its origins had been forgotten.

<sup>274</sup> Accession number ISM.2008.3.1-

2<[http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/recent/little\\_black\\_sambo\\_books.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/recent/little_black_sambo_books.aspx)> [accessed 10 March 2011].

<sup>275</sup> Permission to use this image was not given. The reference is Ethnology collection DX1779, found on <[www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk)> [accessed March 2011]. I was later unable to find the image on this website [March 2013].



Advertisement c.1900.<sup>276</sup>



<sup>276</sup> <[http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/legacies/black\\_lead.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/legacies/black_lead.aspx)> DX1779D [accessed 10 March 2011].

### 3.2.3 From Second-class to Underclass

Although black faces were becoming more visible, both in daily life and in the media, Jamaican poet Claude McKay, who lived in England 1919-1921, 'found the English could not think of a black man as being anything but an entertainer, a boxer, a Baptist preacher, or a menial.'<sup>277</sup> There were certainly plenty of black musicians:

The black entertainer in England before 1900 usually had come as part of a minstrel show or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company. Black performers who came to England in the decade between *In Dahomey* and the Great War included solo singers, small singing groups, instrumental ensembles, dancing teams, and comedians. To this throng in 1918 were added black military bands, and after the war so-called syncopated orchestras arrived playing arrangements of spirituals...ragtime, blues, and other popular tunes.<sup>278</sup>

As well as recorded music, the new medium of film was increasingly influential, and with it the impact of the USA and American attitudes. At first many parts in films, just as in live entertainment, were played in blackface, such as Al Jolson's minstrel most famously featured in the first 'talkie', *The Jazz Singer*.



Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>279</sup>

<sup>277</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 320.

<sup>278</sup> Thomas L. Riis, 'The Experience and Impact of Black Entertainers in England, 1895-1920', *American Music*, 4.1 (1986), 50-58 (p. 54). *In Dahomey* was the first all-black musical comedy, produced in London in 1903.

<sup>279</sup> Image courtesy of <<http://www.parlorsongs.org>> [accessed January 13 2009].

However, ‘...sound created the popular demand for real blacks with black voices’,<sup>280</sup> until decades later it became increasingly recognised just how stereotyped and demeaning those parts were. They were particularly prevalent in a series of films released before World War II which, like the minstrel shows before them, depicted an idealised antebellum ‘Old South’, whether this was interpreted as ‘contented slaves leisurely picking cotton to orchestrated spirituals’, or by Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson dancing with Shirley Temple in an obvious Uncle Tom/Eva relationship in *The Little Colonel*, or by the quintessential ‘Mammy’, Hattie McDaniel, in that film and in *Gone With the Wind*, among others.<sup>281</sup> Similar stereotypes appeared in countless cartoons made during that era, and were shown repeatedly in cinema and on television until late in the twentieth century.<sup>282</sup>

Barely had the inherent offensiveness of these stereotypes been recognised when another set took their place. Hollywood, exploiting a ready audience amongst inner-city blacks at a time when its previous core audience was declining, formulated a film genre which became known as ‘Blaxploitation’. These films

...usually consisted of a pimp, gangster, or their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or retribution motif against corrupt whites in the romanticized confines of the ghetto or inner city. These elements were fortified with liberal doses of gratuitous sex and drugs and the representation of whites as the very inscription of evil. And all this was rendered in the alluring visuals and aggrandized sartorial fashions of the black underworld and to the accompaniment of black musical scores that were usually of better quality than the films they energized.<sup>283</sup>

The musical scores were in a style known as funk, characterised by electric bass and drums, use of the wah-wah pedal, and brass or saxophone riffs. An amalgam of soul, jazz, and rhythm’n’blues, this genre was to influence later black styles such as rap and hip-hop. Indeed, some rap artists were to take on the personae of the films; one sub-genre, gangsta rap, reflected the violent lifestyles of inner-city American black youths. One such rap artist, Tupac Shakur, was notorious for conflict with the law. When he was fatally wounded in a drive-by shooting in 1996 this merely compounded the image.

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<sup>280</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p.20.

<sup>281</sup> Quote from Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p.15.

For footage from *The Little Colonel*, see

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjCFYpWdMfM>> [accessed 21 March 2011].

The daughter of ex-slaves, Hattie McDaniel was the first African-American to win an Oscar, for her role in *GWTW*. However, she had not been allowed to the film premiere in Atlanta.

For an interesting view of these issues in the making of *GWTW*, see Leonard J. Leff, ‘“Gone with the Wind” and Hollywood’s Racial Politics’, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, (1999), pp. 106-14.

<sup>282</sup> A representative example is *Sunday Go to Meetin’ Time* (1936, directed by Friz Freleng); <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh0Znp5CsBY&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh0Znp5CsBY&feature=player_embedded)> [accessed 17 May 2011].

<sup>283</sup> Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) p. 94.

...gangsta rap - a narrow strand in black culture that is now a powerful influence on how young black people see themselves. But gangsta rap doesn't reflect the reality of being young and black; its huge success is, in fact, due to how it titillates the fears and fantasies of whites. Gangsta rap is overwhelmingly bought by white kids. Go to any concert by Snoop, Jay-Z or 50 Cent, and you will see a sea of white faces. Mollycoddled in the suburbs, white kids long to live the edgy, anti-social rebellion they associate with these acts. But this definition is sadly one that many black kids now also regard as the authentic blueprint for their identity.<sup>284</sup>

The popularity of these new music genres among black and white youth alike led to a great deal of controversy and resulting publicity about the subject-matter of the lyrics. All of this served to reinforce the new stereotype of blacks – no longer slaves, no longer loyal and willing servants, no longer minstrels, but misogynistic, drug-dealing, violent gang members.

In the twenty-first century, McKay's summary of black presence in England as entertainer, boxer, preacher, or menial is still to some extent true. Blacks are most often encountered in the media in the fields of music and sport, or as an underclass. However, there is increasing acceptance of ethnic minorities as ordinary members of society who should not only be portrayed as such, but who should be fully represented in all fields of life.

### 3.2.4 Minstrelsy

Countless times when I have mentioned the subject of my research the response has been 'Ah! The Black and White Minstrel Show!'<sup>285</sup> Consequently it would be unreasonable to attempt a summary of depictions of black people, or indeed of the tradition of blacking up, without considering this subject in some greater depth. There is more information about the actual performers and performance style in the next chapter (4.1.2. Theatre); here my intention is to acknowledge minstrelsy as a widespread representative form of blacking up, to discuss it as a dominant representation of blackness in performance, and to give a brief overview of academic interpretations of its meaning.

Despite a long tradition of blackface theatrical performance in England, minstrelsy in its best-known form originated in America. It was a popular form of entertainment in England for over 150 years, arriving with the 'Father of American Minstrelsy', American comic, Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, in 1836. In 1828, Rice had blacked his face to perform a song-and-dance routine he had supposedly learned from an African-American stablehand. This 'Jim Crow' routine with its song, 'Jump Jim Crow', became an instant success. Other minstrel shows followed, but in the main the genre developed with comic interpretations of stereotypical characters (see 3.2.2 above), chiefly 'Jim Crow' the slow-witted plantation man; 'Zip Coon', the sharply-dressed city wideboy whose over-confidence led to his downfall; the loyal

<sup>284</sup> Nirpal Dhaliwal, 'Emily Calling Charley a 'Nigger' Was a David Brent Moonwalk', *The Independent*, Sunday, 10 June 2007.

<sup>285</sup> BBC TV show running from 1958-1978.

slave 'Old Darky'; 'Mammy' or 'Aunt Dinah'; and a saucy mulatto 'wench' or 'Yaller Gal'. The female roles were played by men.<sup>286</sup>

The impact was immense and lasting, spanning both living memory and the time of the old 'folk' performers interviewed by later collectors. However, it is the negative stereotypes portrayed and the implication of happy slaves nostalgic for the old plantation which was thought to influence public perception of Blacks. This led to the rejection of minstrelsy in a more enlightened twentieth century, although it was to linger for many years. In England, the sentimental songs of Stephen Foster, widely featured in minstrel shows, were thought suitable for primary school children to learn as late as 1975,<sup>287</sup> and the BBC continued showing 'The Black and White Minstrel Show' until 1978. Even so, at a time of increasing awareness of civil rights, these relics were more and more criticised for a demeaning attitude to Blacks, and so minstrelsy has finally been abandoned as a form of mainstream entertainment.

Unsurprisingly, academics have suggested many interpretations of the meaning and significance of minstrelsy. Robert Toll provided a comprehensive history of the genre and placed minstrelsy as instrumental in the evolution of the social culture of nineteenth-century America.<sup>288</sup> Eric Lott took a more Freudian viewpoint, reflecting the old association of Blacks with licentiousness.<sup>289</sup> What others viewed as vulgarity he thought of as 'illicit sexuality', referring to the 'air of a collective masturbation fantasy' represented in posters of the Virginia Minstrels, and the 'phallic nose and the engulfing, vaginal throat' which 'finally wreak revenge on the master' in a nonsense song about a slave girl who swallowed the coat 'Old massa' had hung up on her nose. Lott's theme is that the white man was equally drawn to and disgusted by aspects of his character as played out by blackface performers. This develops a view he had explored in a previous paper, in which he regards minstrelsy as an attempt by whites to assume control of a threatening black culture.<sup>290</sup>

Other writers have sought to place minstrelsy in a wider context. As Rehin points out, 'In our own time, those who might value minstrelsy for its contribution to popular culture have been embarrassed by the pejorative racial imagery and its divisive potential.'<sup>291</sup> He denies minstrelsy can be viewed simply in American terms. In a study more relevant to the theme of this thesis, he attempts to re-contextualise the genre in an English theatrical and folk tradition, suggesting that it

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<sup>286</sup> For more on caricature and stereotypes, see <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/menu.htm>> [accessed 17 November 2008].

<sup>287</sup> 'Music Workshop', personal memory, verified by <<http://www.artsedarchive.org.uk/collitem.aspx?id=9116&cid=52>> [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>288</sup> Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: OUP, 1974).

<sup>289</sup> Eric Lott, 'Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy', *Representations*, 39 (Summer, 1992), pp. 23-50 (p. 29).

<sup>290</sup> Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy", *American Quarterly*, 43.2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 223-254 (p.227).

<sup>291</sup> George F. Rehin, "Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Black-face Clowning", *Journal of Popular Culture* 9.3 (Winter 1975) pp. 682-701 (p. 696).



'communicated in universal symbols' and that this, along with the Englishman's familiarity with blackface make-up, led to its popularity, a popularity that proves the flexibility of the form. Rehin further places the Negro stereotype, especially that of 'Jim Crow', within the clowning tradition:

The personality and behavioural traits of the minstrel-clown, a figure central to the burnt-cork theatre, were no more racially specific than the costume, the physical and physiognomic signs, which have been shared by theatrical and ceremonial clowns and buffoons in other traditions [...] The American mask of minstrelsy has been partly stripped away. Beneath the burnt cork, Jim Crow is a kindred spirit of Harlequin, Clown and many others.<sup>292</sup>

Later Rehin turned to the subject of blackface busking, using contemporary sources to glean information about 'the connections between "Negro" minstrelsy and racial attitudes'.<sup>293</sup> With the necessary warning that his sources reflect educated, literate opinion, not that of the working classes, he traces blackface buskers through the streets of London, public houses, markets, and fairs, to the seaside – in fact, wherever there might be a generous audience to be found. Rehin contrasts the entertainment of this time with the 'privatized participation in, and consumption of, popular culture' today, noting 'the blackface busker and his performance would have been very familiar to members of the public'.<sup>294</sup> He draws attention to the fact that the general public did not regard these buskers as genuinely black, and suggests that the mask was as much theatrical as caricature. This mask 'helped buskers to act, to be uninhibited and symbolically to flout convention and authority, and to distance themselves from the close physical proximity of the audience'.<sup>295</sup> The buskers were merely responding to public demand after the instant success of the American minstrels.

Rehin, whilst not denying that racism did exist in Victorian England, does seem to want to distance it from minstrelsy. 'Racial prejudice does not have to be postulated as a cause or an effect of the popularity of the blackface buskers, nor was street minstrelsy in Britain so simply and directly a reinforcement of derogatory attitudes and images as many modern statements aver.' This may seem a little simplistic, but in placing English minstrelsy firmly in an English context, Rehin has opened a valuable line of thought. Throughout this period, the situation of Blacks in England, imperfect though it was, was vastly different from that in the USA, where 'Jim Crow' became known no longer as a comic dance, but as the name of a system of segregation. Given the dominance of American culture and thought in England nowadays, it is all the more necessary to attempt to identify historical differences where they occur.

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 689

<sup>293</sup> George F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and its Resorts: Popular Culture and its Racial Connotations As Revealed in Polite Opinion', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 15.1 (Summer 1981), pp. 19-38 (p.20).

<sup>294</sup> George F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and its Resorts: Popular Culture and its Racial Connotations As Revealed in Polite Opinion', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 15.1 (Summer 1981), pp. 19-38 (p.28).

<sup>295</sup> I argue many of these reasons apply to traditional performers today – see Chapter 7.

Bratton also distinguishes American minstrelsy from British. Referring to Toll's idea that minstrelsy performed a social function in helping work out the relationship between black and white Americans, he asserts 'Very little of what explains its success in America is relevant to its success in Britain'.<sup>296</sup> He goes on to explore the reasons for audience reactions in Britain and to suggest what developments could have resulted from 'the separate evolution of minstrelsy' here. Pointing out the relatively low number of Blacks in England at the time, Bratton suggests the working classes 'had no reason to be attracted to black-face shows out of a cultural need related to threats presented by blacks' and 'did not have the personal need to feel blacks were inferior'.<sup>297</sup> The reasons for minstrelsy's success lay in other features.

One of these reasons was apparent from the introduction of minstrelsy – T. D. Rice's act. 'The effect of the song and dance [Jim Crow] was overwhelming. Rice sang it, and every blacked-up performer [...] was obliged to sing it; most importantly, the audiences sang it'. Bratton attributes this not just to the attraction of the tune (incidentally, 'partly English and partly Irish in origin') but to the adaptability of the words, which could be 'added to, changed, parodied, made to fit every occasion'. Other examples of how songs were amended to suit English conditions are given. However, this was not the only factor in minstrelsy's English success. Bratton indicates that it attracted an audience of 'dissenting lower middle classes, the ministers, shop keepers, and respectable ladies' who could not otherwise indulge in theatrical entertainment, providing them with 'certain liberating elements of popular entertainment'.<sup>298</sup>

Speaking from an avowedly anti-racist position, Michael Pickering warns against letting our personal views impinge upon historical analysis, whilst acknowledging that we cannot be altogether free of them. For him, he says, 'embarking on a study of minstrelsy created a dilemma between the historical responsibility of trying to understand it, and the political response of trying to disown it'.<sup>299</sup> He agrees with Rehin and Bratton that British minstrelsy 'developed as a distinctive counterpart to the American brand', but far from seeing this as a continuation of English culture, he asserts 'The blackface mask and all it connoted was defined against a central and directive conception of the uniqueness of British, and, more specifically, English culture and identity'.<sup>300</sup> His opinion, that Victorian ideas of Blacks as an inferior species were reinforced by caricatured impersonations, is closer to that of Toll. However, Pickering takes a broader view. He concedes:

'Nigger' minstrelsy cannot be explained simply as providing a straightforward justification for colonialism, imperialism and the 'white man's burden', since much of what went on in minstrel comedy and sentimentalism was not confined in appeal to its racist abuse [...] If minstrelsy had been little more than [...] racist taunts [...] its success

<sup>296</sup> J. S. Bratton, 'English Ethiopians: British Audiences and Black-Face Acts, 1835-1865', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 11 (1981), pp. 127-142 (p.127).

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.130, 131.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.134, 128.

<sup>299</sup> Michael Pickering, 'John Bull in Blackface', *Popular Music*, 16. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 181-201 (p.187).

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 192.

would probably have been either short-lived or socially very much confined.<sup>301</sup>

'The minstrel show had the blackface character as its focus; vaudeville inherited him and passed him on to the musical theatre, the movies, and radio.'<sup>302</sup> Minstrelsy's enormous popularity spread beyond 'professional' performance, and the 'large and inexpensive editions of minstrel songs and routines' attested to the 'enthusiasm of countless amateur groups who danced and sang before innumerable village fetes and chapel anniversaries.'<sup>303</sup> Its music pervaded all levels of society, and its legacy includes the continuing appropriation of black music by whites through ragtime, jazz, blues, and rock 'n' roll, behind all of which 'lay the old stereotypes of black people as being innately spontaneous, more body-centred and less inhibited by social conventions than white people'.<sup>304</sup> As shown in the introduction to this section, it remains the most abiding representation of blackness for English people today.

### 3.3 Terminology

One of the noticeable things doing this research has been the changes in the words used to describe people with shades of skin darker than those historically associated with Northern Europe, most often people of African origin and their descendants. The change is summarised in a comment made by black singer Marsha Hunt in interview: 'I was "negro" when I came over [to England] in 1966, and in 1968, I became "black". But I lived past [Jimi Hendrix] to become "African-American."' <sup>305</sup> This echoes a Jules Feiffer cartoon about poverty:

I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn't poor, I was needy. They told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, I was deprived. Then they told me underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged. I still don't have a dime. But I have a great vocabulary.<sup>306</sup>

No matter what words are used, skin colour remains, yet because of the underlying racism shown in this chapter, some of the words applied to 'people of colour' have over the years become unacceptable in polite usage. In this section, I intend to feature a few of the many words used and discuss some of the issues surrounding them.

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>302</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, 'Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920', *American Quarterly*, 29.1 (1977), pp. 102-16 (p. 103).

<sup>303</sup> Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 89.

<sup>304</sup> Michael Pickering, 'John Bull in Blackface', *Popular Music*, 16.2 (May, 1997), pp. 181-201 (p.198).

<sup>305</sup> Marsha Hunt, quoted in Jenny Johnston, 'Marsha Hunt: 'I'm glad Mick didn't help raise our girl'', *Daily Mail*, 27 September 2008, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1062630/Marsha-Hunt-Im-glad-Mick-didnt-help-raise-girl.html>> [accessed 29 September 2008].

<sup>306</sup> Personal memory, refreshed by <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/203797/Jules-Feiffer/203797suppinfo/Supplemental-Information>> [accessed 9 February 2011].

### 3.3.1 “Blackamoor”

In the Middle Ages Moors (originally, inhabitants of Mauretania, a Roman province in western North Africa) ‘were widely supposed to be mostly black or very dark-skinned, although the existence of ‘white Moors’ was recognized.’<sup>307</sup> Saracens too were ‘presented as comprising peoples of different colour: blue (blue-black), yellow (very light skin) and black as moors’.<sup>308</sup> Since both terms were linked with Islam, ‘Saracen’ during the Crusades and ‘Moor’ after Muslim rule was established in the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century, it is not surprising that some confusion arose:

In the British Isles, *Saracen* and *Moor* were used interchangeably with little regard for racial and cultural difference, as is illustrated in a case in the Calendar of Patent Rolls of Henry III, dated 21 June 1259, where a runaway ‘Saracen slave [*servus*]’ is referred to as ‘the said Ethiopian’ in the same document.<sup>309</sup>

It can be seen from this that ‘Ethiopian’ too was used to denote a dark-skinned person. The OED lists the first use of ‘Ethiophe’ in 1382, in Caxton’s Bible, while ‘Moor’ appears in 1393, ‘Blackamorian’ in 1526 and ‘Blackamoor’ in 1581. The latter term appeared a few years earlier in 1548 as ‘Black Moor’, possibly as a way of distinguishing from a ‘White Moor’.<sup>310</sup> Thus the timing of the use of the term ‘Blackamoor’ in its many various spellings (e.g. blake More, Blacke Moryn, black a Moore, blackmoor, Blackemore) appears connected with the increasing number of black people in England. Whatever its derivation, it became widely used, and although now archaic, it remains to this day, along with ‘Saracen’, in the name of some public houses.

### 3.3.2 “Coon”

‘...possibly ‘coon’ is not the right word, which, however, is accepted here as modern slang for a nigger.’<sup>311</sup>

‘Coon’, a dehumanising abbreviation of ‘raccoon’, became in the later nineteenth century the term used for Blacks in general, but particularly for two contrasting stereotypes, offshoots of minstrel show characters. One was the lazy, good-for-nothing, water-melon eating, chicken-stealing slave. The other was an urban wideboy: ‘Low-life violence, treachery, dishonesty, and greed were accompanied by the shiftless, ne’er-do-well qualities characterized by the gambling at cards in which the razor-wielding bully and his companions indulged’.<sup>312</sup>

<sup>307</sup> OED online [accessed 10 May 2011].

<sup>308</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, ‘The Sultana and Her Sisters: Black Women in the British Isles before 1530’, *Women’s History Review*, 10 (2001), pp.187-210 (p. 190).

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>310</sup> ‘Black Moor’ was the form in use until the middle of the eighteenth century. OED online [accessed 10 May 2011].

<sup>311</sup> *Westminster Gazette*, 18 May 1903, cited in OED online.

<sup>312</sup> Michael Pickering, ‘Eugene Stratton and Early Ragtime in Britain’, *Black Music Research Journal*, 20 (2000), pp. 151-80 (p. 172).

Sheet music covers, 1896 & 1901.<sup>313</sup>

The first stereotype was embodied in film by Stepin Fetchit. The following quotes are representative of the widely divergent interpretations of the meaning of his, and similar, performances:

Stepin Fetchit's act continued the "trickster" tradition of slaves: outwitting their oppressors by pretending to be slow-witted and lazy, and thereby exploiting whites' sense of superiority. He became a very wealthy man portraying "the laziest human being in the world," the quintessential coon; shuffling, mumbling, slacking an dozing off whenever he could, his heavy eyelids and loose lower lip forever dangling, scratching his shaved head in befuddlement whenever a White actor upbraided or barked orders at him, as they did all the time.<sup>314</sup>

Fetchit was the embodiment of the nitwit Black man. ... He was portrayed as a dunce. In *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), he was tricked into thinking that a "talking" penguin was really Jimmy Durante. Fetchit, scratching his head, eyes bulging, portrayed the coon so realistically that Whites thought they were seeing a real racial type. ... Fetchit's coon characters were racially demeaned and often verbally and even physically abused by White characters. In *David Harum* (1934) he was traded to Will Rogers along with a horse. He was traded twice more in the movie. In *Judge Priest* (1934), he was pushed, shoved, and verbally berated by Will Rogers; even worse, his character was barely intelligible, scratched his head in an apelike manner, and followed Rogers around like an adoring pet.<sup>315</sup>

The second Coon type featured in the eponymous song genre popular from the 1880s until the first decade of the twentieth century. It was among the characters portrayed by Eugene Stratton, a white American who found fame in Britain and

<sup>313</sup> Images from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coon\\_song](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coon_song)> [accessed 11 May 2011].

<sup>314</sup> <<http://black-face.com/Stepin-Fetchit.htm>> [accessed 10 May 2011].

<sup>315</sup> <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>> [accessed 10 May 2011].

became possibly the most successful performer of these songs in England. He was billed as 'The Dandy Coloured Coon' after the title of one of his songs, and performed mostly as the sole blackface act in Variety shows. Coon songs, composed by black as well as white songwriters, were musically significant not only because they were among the most popular songs of the time and some of the earliest recorded music, but also because they introduced ragtime rhythms and led on to the development of jazz. The sheet music covers below demonstrate the white eyes and red lips continued from the minstrels. Unsurprisingly, 'the racism of Stratton and other "coon" performers is now generally regarded as among the most blatant aspects of "bad form" in the musical and theatrical culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the "coon" subgenre of blackface entertainments was at the height of its popularity.'<sup>316</sup>

### 3.3.3 "Nigger"

'Nigger' is thought to be derived from *niger*, the Latin word for black, or from a southern States pronunciation of the word 'negro'. It is today a most contentious term, and the subject of heated debate among black and white alike. Unlike 'coon' and 'blackamoor', it has easily been in regular use in living memory, and is still currently used in some forms, as shown in the discussion below.

The OED writes 'The word was initially used as a neutral term', and although the entry continues 'and only began to acquire a derogatory connotation from the mid-18th century onwards',<sup>317</sup> I would argue that until the 1970s its use was as coarse slang rather than deliberately intended to be demeaning. 'Nigger' brown merely denoted a shade of colour, just as did 'navy' blue or 'bottle' green; schoolchildren (including me) skipped to the rhyme 'I know a nigger boy' within earshot of teachers.<sup>318</sup> The well-known counting-out rhyme

Eeny, meeny, miny mo,  
Catch a nigger by his toe;  
If he squeals, let him go,  
Eeny, meeny, miny mo.

was included in a book of children's poems published in England as late as 1976.<sup>319</sup> And 'Nigger' was a favourite name for a dog, the most famous undoubtedly being the black Labrador owned by Wing Commander Guy Gibson. This dog was the mascot of 617 ('Dambusters') Squadron and its name was used as the codeword for the breaching of the Möhne Dam. The dog features in the film *The Dam Busters*, made in 1954, which has led to difficulties with later showings of

<sup>316</sup> Michael Pickering, 'Eugene Stratton and Early Ragtime in Britain', *Black Music Research Journal*, 20 (2000), pp. 151-80 (pp. 154-5).

<sup>317</sup> OED online [accessed 22 March 2011].

<sup>318</sup> 'I know a nigger boy and he's double jointed, Gave me a kiss and made me disappointed, Gave me another To match the other, My word [name] I'll tell your mother, For kissing [name] down by the river. How many kisses did he give you that night?' [counting out to faster rope turning].

<sup>319</sup> Michael Floss, *Traditional Nursery Rhymes and Children's Verse* (London: Michael Joseph, 1976).



Nigger's grave at RAF Scampton.<sup>320</sup>

the film on TV, in which the word has been censored, and some debate about whether the dog should be renamed in a remake of the film.<sup>321</sup>

Increasing sensitivity to use of the word has led to other similar amendments. Agatha Christie wrote a book with the title *Ten Little Niggers*, (a variation of children's rhyme 'Ten Little Indians') which was first published in London in 1939, but in the early 1980s was renamed after the last line of the rhyme, *And Then There Were None*. A further example occurred in 2004, when an advertising poster for ice cream was withdrawn because there had been objections to the use of the words 'Eeny, meeny, miny, mo' simply because of their connection with the rhyme above.<sup>322</sup> In 2007 a contestant was evicted from the television show *Big Brother* because she used the word:

The middle-class 19-year-old said it while dancing with black housemate Charley Uchea. Charley was swinging her hips, diva-like, when the West Country white girl, in an idiotic attempt at sounding cool, remarked: "You pushing it out, you nigger?" ... Charley is, in her [own] opinion, a "nigger"; but only other "niggers" can call her that. That 20-second episode revealed both the inanity and the complexity of racial politics today.<sup>323</sup>

'Perhaps', points out another journalist, 'she had been listening to Notorious BIG's "The Realdest Niggaz", Jay-Z's "Jigga That Nigga" or Snoop Dogg's "For All My

<sup>320</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:RAF\\_Scampton\\_022.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:RAF_Scampton_022.jpg).

<sup>321</sup> <http://independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/nigsy-trigger-nword-dilemma-bounces-on-for-dam-busters-ii-1680148.html> [accessed 22 February 2011].

<sup>322</sup> <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2004/may/19/advertising.race>> [accessed 12 May 2011].

<sup>323</sup> Nirpal Dhaliwal, 'Emily Calling Charley a 'Nigger' Was a David Brent Moonwalk', *The Independent*, Sunday, 10 June 2007.

Niggaz And Bitches".<sup>324</sup> For here lies the perplexity currently surrounding the 'N-word', as it has come to be known –

[O]ver the past quarter century, largely in conjunction with the dissemination of the hip-hop culture, the term nigger has grown in usage and popularity. What is truly compelling about nigger, Professor Todd Boyd observes, is that many blacks "have chosen to adopt a nuanced form of the word as a vital aspect of their own cultural identity." One aspect of the nuance is linguistic. The blacks to whom Boyd refers have changed nigger to "nigga" or "niggaz." More fundamentally, they have continued the tradition that redefines nigger from a term of abuse to a term of affection.<sup>325</sup>

In a television interview broadcast in April 2009, Whoopi Goldberg similarly challenges the word:

To me, the word only has power if you give it power. The kids today, who put it in the music, don't give it any power...I believe if you want to use it, use it at your own risk...I think that the more you use it, the less power it has.<sup>326</sup>

However, the overall impression is that 'blacks can properly use nigger, at least in certain circumstances, while whites cannot.'<sup>327</sup>

### 3.3.4 "Negro"

In the 1950s I was taught that this was the polite term to use; it was rude to refer to a person as 'black'. This has been completely reversed in my lifetime:

With the rise of the Black Power movement in the 1960s, the designation black was reclaimed as an expression of racial pride and, since then, the term Negro (together with related terms such as Negress) has fallen from favour and is now typically regarded as out of date or even offensive in both British and American English.<sup>328</sup>

Nevertheless, pronounced 'nigro', in 2011 it was the term used on the radio by Clarence B. Jones, personal counsel, speech-writer and close friend to Dr Martin Luther King, in conversation with Libby Purves.<sup>329</sup>

### 3.3.5 "Black"

It is interesting that 'black' was an early description – reference was made to 'blak Elene' and 'blak Margaret' and 'blak ladyis madinnis' in the time of James IV of Scotland.<sup>330</sup> As a noun, the first use was recorded in 1625, though the OED

<sup>324</sup> Katy Guest, 'Big Brother: A Brief History of the 'N' Word', *The Independent*, Sunday, 10 June 2007.

<sup>325</sup> Randall L. Kennedy, 'Who Can Say "Nigger"? And Other Considerations', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (1999), 86-96 (p. 90).

<sup>326</sup> <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/8339945.stm>> [accessed 12 May 2011].

<sup>327</sup> Randall L. Kennedy, 'Who Can Say "Nigger"? And Other Considerations', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (1999), pp. 86-96 (p. 91).

<sup>328</sup> OED online [accessed 22 March 2011].

<sup>329</sup> *Midweek*, Radio 4, broadcast 9 March 2011.

<sup>330</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, 'The Sultana and Her Sisters: Black Women in the British Isles before 1530', *Women's History Review*, 10 (2001), pp. 187-210 (p. 188).



remarks that such usage may be a translation of 'negro'.<sup>331</sup> As noted above, in the 1960s the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and adoption of the slogan 'Black is Beautiful', led to the idiom replacing the previously neutral 'negro' as the term of choice. As in many other fields, Britain followed the USA in this, and 'black' is now used in the media and, as 'Black British', as a category in official documents. 'Black British' might be regarded as the UK equivalent of 'African American', which 'achieved sudden prominence at the end of the 1980s when several Black leaders, including Jesse Jackson, championed it as an alternative ethnonym for Americans of African descent.'<sup>332</sup> Even so, accepted usage of the word has not solved all problems associated with the terminology:

*Black* is sometimes capitalized in its racial sense, especially in the African-American press, though the lowercase form is still widely used by authors of all races. The capitalization of *Black* does raise ancillary problems for the treatment of the term *white*. Orthographic evenhandedness would seem to require the use of uppercase *White*, but this form might be taken to imply that whites constitute a single ethnic group, an issue that is certainly debatable. Uppercase *White* is also sometimes associated with the writings of white supremacist groups, a sufficient reason of itself for many to dismiss it. On the other hand, the use of lowercase *white* in the same context as uppercase *Black* will obviously raise questions as to how and why the writer has distinguished between the two groups. There is no entirely happy solution to this problem. In all likelihood, uncertainty as to the mode of styling of *white* has dissuaded many publications from adopting the capitalized form *Black*.<sup>333</sup>

The approach I take in this thesis is explained in the Introduction.

### 3.3.6 Other terms

In previous centuries different expressions were used to denote specific degrees of 'black blood'. A mulatto was the child of white and black parents, a quadroon the offspring of a mulatto and white, while a sambo was the issue of a mulatto and a black, or one of mixed negro/Indian/European blood. An octoroon was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black (i.e. had one black great-grandparent). Eventually, 'mulatto' was replaced by 'half-caste', 'mixed race', and, latterly, 'dual heritage'.

'Fuzzy Wuzzies', a term used by British soldiers in the nineteenth century to refer to warriors fighting for the Sudanese Mahdi, featured in a 1918 poem by Rudyard Kipling. In the British sitcom *Dad's Army*, Corporal Jones often spoke of his time fighting them, thus carrying the expression into the late twentieth century.<sup>334</sup>

<sup>331</sup> OED online [accessed 22 March 2011].

<sup>332</sup> The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009. On <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/black>> [accessed 08 February 2011].

<sup>333</sup> Op. cit.

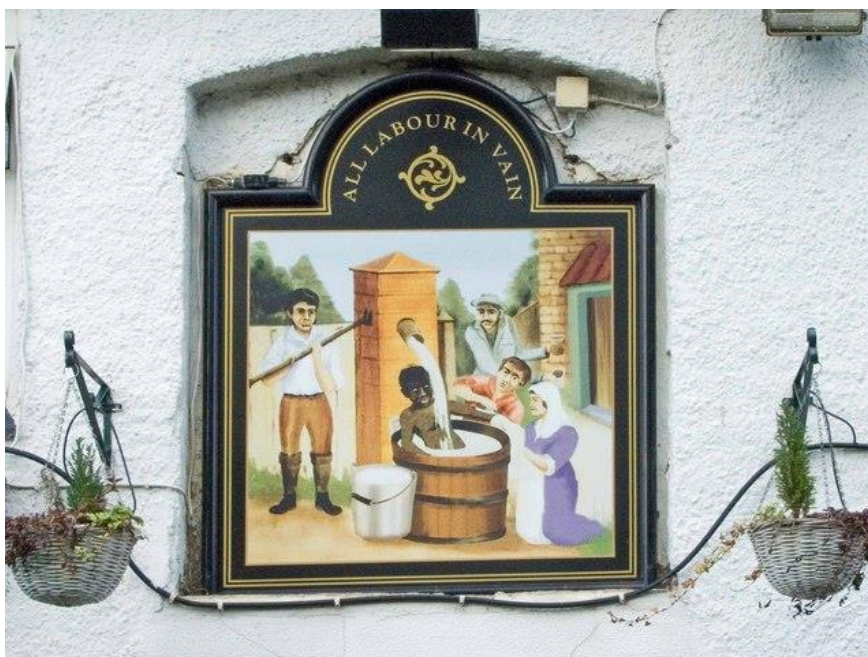
<sup>334</sup> In 1985, at a time of intense antagonism between factions in the staff over the use of potentially racist terms in school, I overheard one teacher say to another who was going to take up a post in Africa, 'I hear you're going to work among the Fuzzywuzzies.'

'Spade' is a slang term for a black man, possibly derived from the expression 'black as the ace of spades'. It was first recorded in the 1920s, and was in wide use in subcultures until the 1960s.

There are, of course, many, many expressions which are deliberately intended to be insulting and offensive. Here, I have considered only those which, however unacceptable in the twenty-first century, have at one time been thought suitable for general use in polite company.

### 3.4 Racism and Political Correctness

The 1970s saw a reappraisal of much in society that had been previously taken for granted. An overhaul took place of the language, policies and behaviour which might be unacceptable to groups such as women, ethnic minorities, those with different sexual orientations, disabilities, etc. People were no longer referred to as 'crippled' or 'handicapped' but 'disabled'; children dressed up as 'fire-fighters', not 'firemen'; and meetings found comments addressed to the 'Chair' rather than the 'Chairman'. A wider understanding of the offensiveness of many terms such as those in the section above, coupled with an increasing recognition of racism in society (see Chapter 2.6 & 2.7), led to decisive action. For example, books such as *Little Black Sambo*, which were considered to show demeaning and racist images or stereotypes, were withdrawn from schools and libraries, and the 'gollywog' characters in Enid Blyton's *Noddy* books were replaced in new editions. Pub signs which showed a black figure being scrubbed in a wash tub white were removed, sometimes to the indignation of the local population.



Pub sign near to Horsehay, Telford and Wrekin (photo Mike White)<sup>335</sup>

<sup>335</sup> (N.B. this is not the pub referred to in the quotation above, but it has a similar sign.)

The name itself is now rare, and few if any of the pubs using it still display the sign which traditionally illustrated it, for this is regarded as offensive. ... [At Westergate] there was a plan afoot to remove the original sign, as being racist; local people defended it.<sup>336</sup>

People tended to blame 'political correctness' for these changes. On the other hand, many welcomed the positive changes that occurred, especially regarding the care taken to include positive representations of minority groups in printed materials, particularly those for use in schools.

Although the change was intended to avoid language and actions which might cause offence to or disadvantage social minorities, the term 'politically correct' came to be applied to that form of speaking. Due to some over-zealous applications of the principle (and much publicity by the right-wing press), 'political correctness' became an object of ridicule such that the expression is now used in a pejorative way, most often in the trope "political correctness gone mad". Many true stories were augmented by apocryphal tales: of blackboards being renamed chalkboards (although whiteboards remained for use with marker pens); of teachers who changed the words of *Baa baa black sheep* to *Baa baa rainbow sheep*; of 'nitty gritty' being a term derived from slave ships, and therefore offensive in use.<sup>337</sup> Sadly, there have been examples of over-enthusiasm in practice. In the USA in 1999 the use of the word 'niggardly' by an aide to the mayor of Washington DC led to his resignation, even though the word has no connection to 'nigger' in anything but sound. In England, there have been several reports of police being required to confiscate golly dolls from shop windows under the Public Order Act, which makes it an offence to display material which could be deemed threatening, abusive or insulting.<sup>338</sup>

By the 1990s it was almost a requirement to mock political correctness by inventing similar new terms. Thus 'bald' men became 'follically challenged', the 'old' were 'gerontologically advanced' or 'experientially enhanced', and 'failure' became merely 'deferred success'. Together with the encroachment of other legislation, such as the similarly-maligned 'elf'n'safety', political correctness was positioned not only as the opposite of common sense but as a form of George Orwell's 'Newspeak', and as such to be resisted. Nevertheless, many became aware of

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<div xmlns:cc="http://creativecommons.org/ns#" xmlns:dct="http://purl.org/dc/terms/" about="http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/905902"><span property="dct:title">All Labour in Vain</span> (<a rel="cc:attributionURL" property="cc:attributionName" href="http://www.geograph.org.uk/profile/26045">Mike White</a>) / <a rel="license" href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/">CC BY-SA 2.0</a></div>

<sup>336</sup> Jacqueline Simpson, *Green Men & White Swans: The Folklore of British Pub Names* (London: Random House, 2010), pp.159.160. These signs referred to the proverb about the folly of washing a black man, but in Sussex was thought to refer to a local legend about a woman who bore a black child out of wedlock. See also

<http://www.thisstaffordshire.co.uk/news/Pub-finds-new-spot-maligned-sign/article-1334387-detail/article.html> [accessed 23 May 2011].

<sup>337</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/200205270004> [accessed 17 May 2011].

<sup>338</sup> E.g. Manchester Evening News, 16 March 2007, [http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/news/s/1002078\\_police\\_seize\\_golly\\_dolls](http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/news/s/1002078_police_seize_golly_dolls); also <<http://www.bob-pearson.net/gollyshop/bromyard3.html>> [accessed 18 May 2011].

increased sensitivity and sought to apply it in their everyday lives. Some occupational groups, such as police and teachers, did so as part of their work, but countless individuals also acted from genuine acceptance of the principle and reluctance to cause offence. This has had an effect on situations involving blacking up traditions today, as will become apparent in later chapters.

Before those traditions are introduced, the next chapter demonstrates how blackface has been used in England for hundreds of years.

## Chapter 4: Historical References to Blackened Faces in England

This chapter sets out to answer some questions about blackened faces in the past. When and where were they seen? In what contexts? Were members of any particular geographical, social, or occupational group more likely to black their faces? Why might people have done so? What did they use? And how do we know these things?

Finding historical references to practices taken for granted is notoriously difficult, especially so when those practices were the province of the 'common people'. It is recognized that, until the last century, 'history' was largely written about great affairs of state, and the mass of the population was only mentioned when it became troublesome or rioted. The everyday lives of the common people were rarely, if ever, recorded.

The information in this chapter has therefore been gleaned from several sources. The chief among these has been newspaper accounts.<sup>339</sup> This has not been without its own attendant difficulties. Despite the resources of the internet, only a fraction of the material published can be accessed, let alone examined. Obviously, newspapers reported only the errant or the novel, not the quotidian. Articles seem to have been syndicated, appearing *verbatim* in more than one publication. Also, whenever customs in particular are mentioned, it is to report some related misdemeanour, or in the context of a 'golden past'. Finally, except for court reports and suchlike, there is no way of corroborating the truth of any particular story, apart from 'triangulating' it with similar stories from other times or places, and assessing the likelihood of it being a fair account. With all this in mind, I have taken the reports I quote at face value as being truthful.

Another source has been indications of blackened faces or similar disguise found in scholarly books and journals, with references followed up wherever possible. Again, a problem has been that such information has often been mentioned only in passing, tantalizing in its lack of detail. As Simms observes, 'as so often in studies more concerned with causes and effects than in processes, the exact nature of these disguises is hard to come by.'<sup>340</sup>

Added to this is the problem that, even when early antiquarians and folklorists became interested in English customs and traditions and began to collect information, they generally satisfied themselves with descriptions of dances, music, texts etc. and rarely, if ever, sought the opinions of the participants about why they dressed or behaved as they did.

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<sup>339</sup> Unless otherwise stated all newspapers accessed through Gale Group *British Newspapers 1600-1900*, <[http://find.galegroup.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/bncn/start.do?prodId=BNWS&userGroupName=su\\_uk](http://find.galegroup.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/bncn/start.do?prodId=BNWS&userGroupName=su_uk)> [February-April 2010].

<sup>340</sup> Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummers Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78 (p. 170).

Field notes would seem to be a fairly reliable source. However, as mentioned above, each collector had his (or her) own particular interest, and so information is, for my purposes, incomplete. For example, Russell Worley frequently noted that participants in Plough Monday customs in East Anglia blackened their faces, but did not add details about how or why they did so, nor what they thought it represented.<sup>341</sup> Also, as well as first-hand observation, field notes often consist of the memories of interviewees, which may themselves be confused or inaccurate. Moreover, they only give us access to a limited span of the past. Cutting sees 1850 as a watershed in information: 'If we add fifty-five or sixty years of living memory onto the front end of our present interest in folk material, we get back to around 1850...morris information is different after 1850 from what it was before.'<sup>342</sup> Sadly for this research, by 1850 the popularity of minstrelsy was already established, the effect of which is discussed further below.

Finally, contemporary illustrations have sometimes given information about blackened faces and the contexts in which they appeared.

In a similar exercise tracing the spread of Jack-in-the-Green, Roy Judge warned:

Caution is necessary in using this material. Partly this is because of its extremely diverse and varied character, ranging from eye-witness accounts to nostalgic reminiscence. It is also necessary because of the distortions that arise from the fact that some areas...have been more thoroughly investigated than others...<sup>343</sup>

With this caveat in mind, I shall now list examples of blackened faces and similar disguises under the following headings: Entertainment; Criminal activity; Social disorder; and Custom and Tradition. This will be followed by discussion of some of the issues raised by these examples.

## 4.1 Entertainment

Blackened faces were employed over many centuries and across many classes in connection with entertainments of various kinds. The chief of these are considered below.

### 4.1.1 Court entertainments

Some of the earliest references to blacking up are in connection with court entertainments, open-air pageants, and masques. Masques became popular in Henry VIII's time. These elaborate entertainments featured stunning costumes, spectacular scenery, and rich allegorical verse. They developed further in Elizabeth's reign and reached their zenith in the Stuart court.

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<sup>341</sup> Russell Wortley Collection, 97-022/7, University of Sheffield.

<sup>342</sup> John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>343</sup> Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 200.

In the theatrical realm, Africans seem initially to have been introduced for their visual power. They were literally spectacular, and the makers of court masques and public plays during the second half of the century were not slow to exploit the phenomenon. Moors were frequently used in outdoor pageants - along with monstrous-looking wild men - as presenters, figures who by virtue of their startling appearance were able to capture the courtiers' attention and make space for the performance. Such was the case, for example, when a masque of six Moors appeared at Elizabeth's court in 1560. The black characters displayed on the stage or in outdoor pageants were usually white actors dressed in black cloth or body paint, but, however the message of blackness was conveyed, its impact was acute: audiences could instantly see the difference between the black character's real or contrived skin color and the other actors' lighter hue.<sup>344</sup>

Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*, in which James I's queen blacked up, was described in Chapter 3.2.1.

#### 4.1.2 Theatre

The first theatrical appearance of blackness was in depictions of the devil in the mediaeval mystery plays. The general belief at that time was that Satan was blackened by the smoke and soot of the fires of Hell, as well as in contrast to the light of heaven and the brightness of the angels. 'It was because of this traditional belief that the Devil of the mystery plays was habited in a leather suit painted black, or covered with black horsehair.'<sup>345</sup> The player also had a false head,<sup>346</sup> but 'evidence suggests that early devils could appear either in black masks/heads or in painted blackface...Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter have argued that "the wearing of masks and the painting of faces...seems to have been considered very much as equivalents" [sic] in the Middle Ages and early Tudor period.'<sup>347</sup>

It is not just a direct reference to the devil in blackface as such but links with folk tradition and the beginnings of a theatrical tradition which are relevant here. Potter thought that the devil was 'property of legend and folk-tale...confused in the popular mind with elf and dwarf, satyr and Puck and Robin Goodfellow etc.'<sup>348</sup> This folk connection was echoed by Wood: 'Often he was confused with numerous heathen deities and in a number of sermons and homilies similar feats were attributed to him as to the giants and elves of mythology.'<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, 'Before Othello: Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54 (1997), pp. 19-44 (p.29).

<sup>345</sup> Frederick T. Wood, 'The Comic Elements in the English Mystery Plays', *Neophilologus*, 25 (1940), pp. 194-206 (pp.199-200).

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202.

<sup>347</sup> Robert Hornback, 'The Folly of Racism: Enslaving Blackface and the 'Natural' Fool Tradition', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism and Reviews*, 20 (2007), 46-84 (p. 50).

<sup>348</sup> Russell Potter, 'Three Jacobean Devil Plays', *Studies in Philology*, 28 (1931), 730-36 (p. 730).

<sup>349</sup> Frederick T. Wood, 'The Comic Elements in the English Mystery Plays', *Neophilologus*, 25 (1940), pp.194-206 (p.199).

In the mystery plays, while intrinsically an 'evil' character, the Devil was 'the comic villain *par excellence* of these cycles...who never failed to keep the audience amused with his quips and cranks, roaring and crying.'<sup>350</sup> He was also portrayed as a much ridiculed figure, the butt of jokes, leading Hornback to argue that 'blackness in these mystery plays was instead associated less with evil...than with folly, madness, and an absence of that divine gift, the "light" of reason.'<sup>351</sup>

As the mystery plays were gradually replaced by Interludes and Morality plays during the religious turmoil of the Tudors, familiar and popular character types were retained. 'In the Interlude-Moralities and Interludes first appears The Vice, a rogue who sums up in himself all the Vices of the older Moralities and serves as the buffoon ... Transformed by time, the Vice appears in the Elizabethan drama, and thereafter, as the clown.'<sup>352</sup> Tiddy believed there were strong links between the devil, the Vices, and folk characters:

The most substantial of the links that unite Mummers' Plays, Miracles, Moralities, interludes, and literary drama is provided by the Vice and by the characters that are clearly akin to the Vice. Make every possible allowance for the universality of the dramatic instinct and, even so, it is still difficult - to me it is impossible - not to believe that the Morris fool, the Doctor's man, Beelzebub, the fool of the Mummers' Play, the clown of the Sword Play, the devils of the Moralities and the Interludes are all, by dint of their mischief or their black faces or their fooling, ultimately one and the same.<sup>353</sup>

Parallels between Vice characters, the Fool of the folk play, and the mystery play devil have also been drawn by Happe<sup>354</sup> and Mares.<sup>355</sup> Mares states: 'It is [the Vice's] job to keep the audience amused during the lulls of the action'; he is 'often left free to extemporize', 'on intimate terms with his audience and cracks jokes with individual members of it'; he 'acts as presenter and chorus, introducing other characters to the audience and commenting on them aside',<sup>356</sup> just as the Fool in many guises acts in folk performance to this day. He finds further parallels with folk fools through the costume used in performance, and thence a connection with the Lords of Misrule:

In the records of the Revel's Office can be found further evidence to support the suggestion of a popular origin for the Vice... In 1551 a payment was made to: "Nycolas Germaine for one vyces dagger & a ladle with a bable pendante by hym garnished & deliverid to the Lorde of mysrules foole ... in decem-ber".<sup>357</sup>

<sup>350</sup> Frederick T. Wood, 'The Comic Elements in the English Mystery Plays', *Neophilologus*, 25 (1940), pp.194-206 (p.199).

<sup>351</sup> Robert Hornback, 'The Folly of Racism: Enslaving Blackface and the 'Natural' Fool Tradition', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism and Reviews*, 20 (2007), pp. 46-84 (p. 49).

<sup>352</sup> Anniina Jokinen, 'Medieval Drama: An Introduction to Middle English Plays', <<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/medievaldrama.htm>> [accessed 12 April 2010].

<sup>353</sup> R. J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 112-3.

<sup>354</sup> P. Happe, 'The Vice and the Folk-Drama', *Folklore*, 75 (1964), pp. 161-93.

<sup>355</sup> Francis Hugh Mares, 'The Origin of the Figure Called "The Vice" In Tudor Drama', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 22 (1958), pp. 11-29.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



The ladle and bauble in particular recur throughout folk performance and can still be seen today, as will be shown. Mares concludes from the Revel's Office payment:

The presence of a Vice (who was not a dramatic figure) at court in the train of the Lord of Misrule before any dramatic Vices known to us except Heywood's, and the fact that the majority of the early Vices belong to Christmas festival plays, suggest that the influence is from the popular tradition to the drama and not the other way. The use of the term "the Vice" for what were without any doubt popular figures makes this all the more likely.

Because of this, he supports a 1785 suggestion that the name 'Vice' comes from the term 'vis' (visage) for face, rather than for moral features: 'This explanation fits what we know of the face-blackening habits of the Vice and the folk fool'.<sup>358</sup> Welsford similarly states that 'the Vice is always "a riotous buffoon" and derives his character from that of the domestic fool or jester', but also observes that 'vice and folly were frequently regarded as synonymous'.<sup>359</sup> Thus we come full circle to Hornback, who cites examples of faces being blackened during these plays, but as a sign of folly:

The kind of connection between blackface and "natural" folly...appears even more clearly in three Tudor moral interludes, the "Wit" marriage plays. In each of these, a vice lulls the youth or everyman figure Wit to sleep, blackens his face, and leaves him to be discovered a fool.<sup>360</sup>

Against this cultural background there appeared in the works of Shakespeare one of the great portraits in which blackness and folly are combined, the tragedy of *Othello* (1604). Two further lasting black roles were *Oronooko*, a story by Aphra Behn about an African prince tricked into slavery which was adapted for the stage by Thomas Southerne in 1695, and *Zanga*, a wronged African King in Edward Young's 1721 play *The Revenge*. These plays remained popular throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, and, in the case of *Othello*, to the present day, with the roles taken up by the leading actors of the time – Kemble and Kean in blackface, while black actor Ira Aldridge overcame the 'novelty' of his colour to be acknowledged as a great actor:

His performances of *Othello*, *Oronooko*, *Gambia*, and *Zanga* are admirable specimens of acting; and his representation of Mungo, in the "Padlock," is unexampled in its excellence. This artist would most assuredly be worth the consideration of one of our metropolitan managers; his undoubted talent, the novelty of a man of colour assuming the sock and buskin, with the number of years that have elapsed since he first appeared in London, could not fail to be a profitable speculation to any adventurous caterer for dramatic novelty.<sup>361</sup>

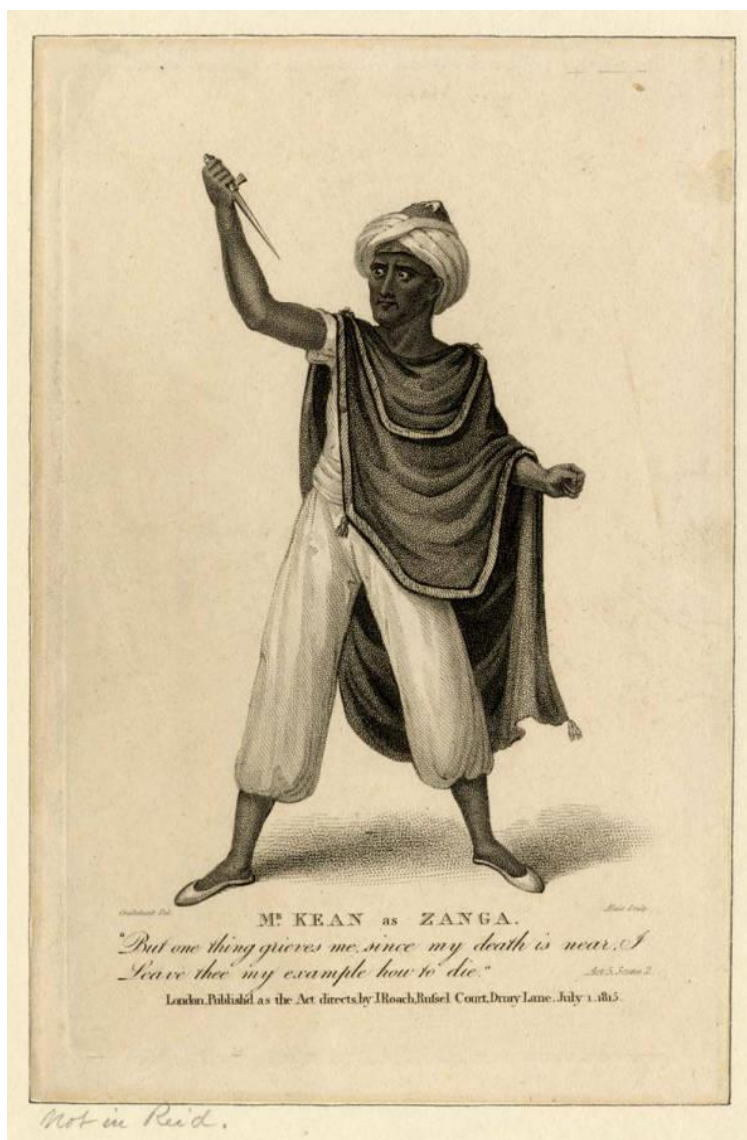
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<sup>358</sup> Francis Hugh Mares, 'The Origin of the Figure Called "The Vice" In Tudor Drama', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 22 (1958), pp. 11-29 (p. 29).

<sup>359</sup> Enid Welsford, *The fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), pp. 285-6.

<sup>360</sup> Robert Hornback, 'The Folly of Racism: Enslaving Blackface and the 'Natural' Fool Tradition', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism and Reviews*, 20 (2007), 46-84 (p. 55).

<sup>361</sup> *The Era* (London, England), Issue 416 13 September 1846.



Edmund Kean as Zanga in *The Revenge*, 1815.<sup>362</sup>

However, even the great tragedies were not immune from the inclusion between acts of comic interludes:

How was I disappointed when I found the Rival Theatres contending who should outdo each other in low Buffoonery, Mountebank Tricks, and *Bartholomew-Fair* Drollery...the best of *Shakespeare's* Works, acted by the best Performers, will not fill a House, unless one of these Pantomime Entertainments be tack'd to it.<sup>363</sup>

'Pantomime Entertainments' had developed as a side effect of Charles II's licensing of theatrical companies, which had effectively granted a monopoly on

<sup>362</sup> Image from University of Illinois Theatrical Print Collection, <[http://images.library.uiuc.edu:8081/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/actors&CISOPT R=2840&CISOBOX=1&REC=4](http://images.library.uiuc.edu:8081/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/actors&CISOPT R=2840&CISOBOX=1&REC=4)> [accessed 17 March 2010].

<sup>363</sup> *British Journal* (1722) (London, England), Issue CCXXXIV, 18 March 1727.

spoken drama. To circumvent this, many producers had simply set the action to music. Such entertainments became so popular that they were included even in serious drama, as witnessed by the apoplectic reaction above, and interludes, particularly pantomimes and Harlequinades, persisted throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Thus English theatrical pantomime began around 1716-17, 'put together by Rich and/or Weaver from elements drawn from English opera and masque, English folk farce, late seventeenth-century adaptations of the *commedia dell' arte*, and theatrical song and dance.'<sup>364</sup> Scott argues convincingly that it was influenced by players from French fairs, another link not only with popular culture, but with blackface. The most influential of the characters was undoubtedly Harlequin, as evidenced by the interludes which took his name. Harlequin's lineage may be no coincidence:

An early appearance by Harlequin was in the Medieval French miracle plays, under the name of *Hellequin*. There he is found as the messenger of the Devil, coming straight from the inside of the Earth (hence his blackened face) and leading a boisterous gang of evil spirits.<sup>365</sup>

Harlequin often appeared in a black mask: 'He is further exoticised racially as characters mistake him for a "blackamoor" because of his characteristic black mask, an association between Harlequin and Africans that becomes common after the 1770s.'<sup>366</sup> However, it may also be assumed that sometimes the mask was replaced by blackface. Thomas Dibdin tells a tale of one Harry Johnston amusing the assembled company with impressions of famous actors' reactions to being required to play Harlequin. As 'Mr Kemble' he declaims, 'I have blacked my face for Othello, for Oronooko, and for Zanga; but for a thing of shreds and patches!'<sup>367</sup>

Interludes were included between acts of plays, and their variety may be judged from an example taken from the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in 1736: 'The two pierots', 'A Mock Italian Song', 'A Harlequine', 'A Tambourine', 'A Dance of Sailors',<sup>368</sup> while a performance of Oronooko at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1762 included 'a proper dance of slaves' choreographed by Signor Grimaldi, father of the famous clown'.<sup>369</sup> In later decades other exotic acts, such as coconut dancers, would be included.

<sup>364</sup> Virginia P. Scott, 'The Infancy of English Pantomime: 1716-1723', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 24 (1972), pp. 125-34 (p. 125).

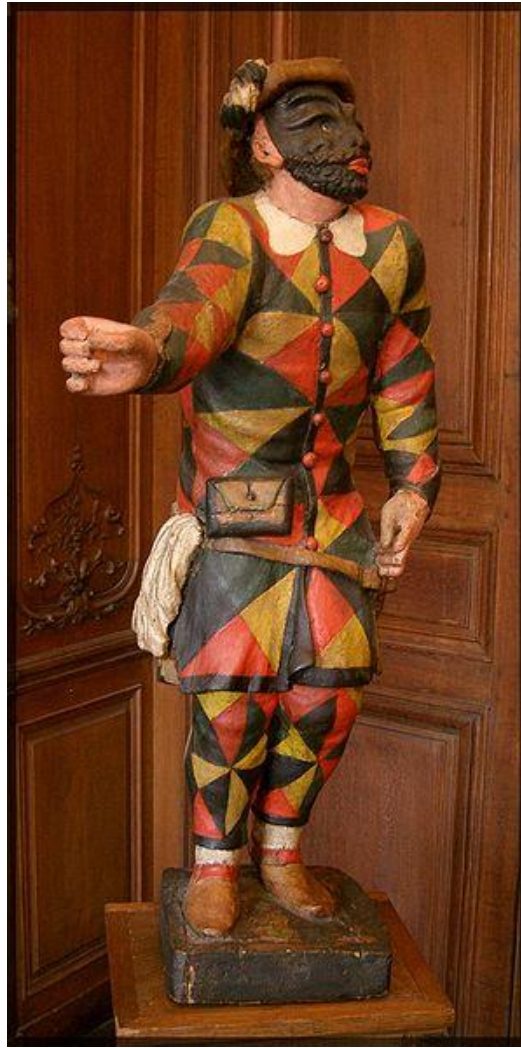
<sup>365</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, OUP 2010, <<http://www.askoxford.com/languages/culture/vulture/general/harlequin/?view=uk>> [accessed 16 March 2010].

<sup>366</sup> John O'Brien, 'Harlequin Britain: Eighteenth-Century Pantomime and the Cultural Location of Entertainment(S)', *Theatre Journal*, 50 (1998), pp. 489-510 (p. 508).

<sup>367</sup> Thomas Dibdin, *The reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin: of the Theatres Royal, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Haymarket &c.* (London: Henry Colbourn, 1837) p. 379. <[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zVpSuLBgH3YC&dq=Thomas+John+Dibdin+reminiscences&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zVpSuLBgH3YC&dq=Thomas+John+Dibdin+reminiscences&source=gbs_navlinks_s)> [accessed 17 March 2010].

<sup>368</sup> *London Daily Post and General Advertiser* (London, England), Issue 468, 1 May 1736.

<sup>369</sup> *Public Advertiser* (London, England), Issue 8545, 24 March 1762.



18<sup>th</sup> century statuette of Harlequin. <sup>370</sup>

In 1768 a new blackface character appeared at Drury Lane in a comic opera based on a story by Cervantes. Mungo, a West Indian servant, was a part created by Charles Dibdin in Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Padlock*, and is often mistakenly referred to as the "first blackface comic figure on the London stage".<sup>371</sup> With his mixture of song, drunken antics and critique of his master's cruelty, Mungo became an enormously popular figure who, like the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a hundred years later, was to appear in many other pieces. In 1787 the characters of Mungo and Harlequin were combined in *Harlequin Mungo, or, A Peep into the Tower (A new pantomimical entertainment in two acts)*, 'a phenomenal example of the cross-referential, multi-media and multi-cultural range of theatre.'<sup>372</sup> It may be no coincidence that Dibdin's son Thomas 'was a popular and skilled Harlequin and creator of pantomime scenarios',<sup>373</sup> and the combination of the two blackface roles may have seemed an obvious development.

<sup>370</sup> <commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arlequin\_-\_co...> [accessed 12 April 2010].

<sup>371</sup> Julie A. Carlson, 'New Lows in Eighteenth-Century Theatre: The Rise of Mungo', *European Romantic Review*, 18 (2007), pp. 139-47 (p. 139).

<sup>372</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>373</sup> John O'Brien, 'Harlequin Britain: Eighteenth-Century Pantomime and the Cultural Location of Entertainment(S)', *Theatre Journal*, 50 (1998), pp. 489-510 (p. 510).



Charles Dibdin as Mungo in *The Padlock*.<sup>374</sup>

Although, as shown above, blackface roles had a long history in English theatre, the early nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a form of blackface entertainment which was to supersede all others and become irrevocably connected with the very term 'blackface' in the mind of the 'man in the street' and which therefore has had the greatest influence upon general public opinion on the subject: minstrelsy.

In 1828 an American comic, Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, blacked his face to perform a song-and-dance routine he had supposedly learned from an African-American stablehand, and minstrelsy became the new fashion:

A policeman stated, that on the preceding night he saw the defendant in the midst of a crowd in the Waterloo road, with his face blackened, and a negro cap upon his head, singing "Jim Crow" as loud as his lungs would enable him; he was also throwing himself into the most grotesque attitudes, striking about with his arms at all the persons who approached him.<sup>375</sup>

The man said he wanted to be an actor, and was 'practising'.

This was in 1836, the year Rice came to England, when it was widely reported that he had, 'by merely singing the song "Jim Crow," in America, realised the immense sum of £16,000.'<sup>376</sup> Despite this wealth, Rice was obviously keen to protect his rights, but, it seems, was too late:

<sup>374</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/47195550@N05/4332676279/>> [accessed 13 April 2010].

<sup>375</sup> *The Examiner* (London, England), Issue 1499, 23 October 1836.

<sup>376</sup> e.g. *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh, Scotland), Issue 17988, 29 September 1836.

Mr. Rice, of the Surrey Theatre, has given Mr. Nelson Lee, who has the direction of the Sadler's Wells Theatre, notice of his intention to institute a prosecution against him, for having the song of "Jim Crow" sung by Mr. Dunn, he, Mr. Rice, possessing the copyright. The question if tried will involve much curious matter, seeing that the song has been so generally appropriated, and also that the song has been sung by Mr. Webster long before Mr. Rice came to this country.<sup>377</sup>

As early as 1834, a benefit concert in Manchester had advertised, "Jim Crow," a popular American nigger Song, in character by Mr BENWELL' where 'Two thousand copies of this song will be delivered gratis at the doors.'<sup>378</sup> No wonder then that the journalist above thought Rice's effort would be futile.

Other minstrel acts followed. In 1843 Dan Emmett led a group of four white men who set themselves up as the 'Virginia Minstrels' in a format which was soon widely copied. Wearing blackface, they played violin, castanets, banjo, bones and tambourine to imitate the music of Blacks. 'Within a few short months scores of similar minstrel bands were performing throughout the country.'<sup>379</sup> They were also the first to use the blackface format for a whole show rather than as an interlude. 'With their chairs in a simple semi-circle, the quartet offered a fresh combination of songs, dances and comic banter, creating cartoonish Negro caricatures.'<sup>380</sup> They too toured England within months of their creation. Another group, the Ethiopian Serenaders, attempted to appeal to a better quality audience by omitting the bawdy humour of the Virginia Minstrels and singing songs of a sentimental, romantic nature, even pieces from opera. They travelled to England in 1846.

The two extremes of style - comedy and sentiment - were combined by the Christy Minstrels, founded by E. P. Christy. Many of their songs were written by Stephen Foster. They introduced the line, with 'endmen' 'Mr Tambo' and 'Mr Bones' in blackface while the 'middleman', master of ceremonies 'Mr Interlocutor' was white.<sup>381</sup> Their three-act format became the norm for minstrel shows. After the line processed onto the stage, 'Mr Interlocutor' announced 'Gentlemen, be seated.' There followed a section of jokes between the Interlocutor and the endmen, together with songs and dances. The endmen spoke in a caricature of black colloquial speech, while the Interlocutor mocked white upper-class condescension. After an intermission there was a section of variety acts ending with a 'stump speech' full of malapropisms, jokes, and puns which addressed contemporary issues and poked fun at political figures. To students of the theatre, they 'presag[ed] the stand-up comedy acts of the next century',<sup>382</sup> but the mixture also

<sup>377</sup> *The London Dispatch and People's Political and Social Reformer* (London, England), Issue 6, 23 October 1836.

<sup>378</sup> *The Manchester Times and Gazette* (Manchester, England), Issue 285, 12 April 1834.

<sup>379</sup> Janet Jacobs, KCRF, 'The Dan Emmett Story', (1996) <<http://www.danemmett.org/>> [accessed 9 November 2008].

<sup>380</sup> John Kenrick, *A History of the Musical Minstrel Shows* (Copyright 1996, Revised 2003) <<http://www.musicals101.com/minstrel.htm>> [accessed 9 November 2008].

<sup>381</sup> This is disputed by Eric Lott, who asserts the interlocutor was 'popular myth notwithstanding, in blackface.' 'Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy', *Representations*, 39 (Summer, 1992), pp. 23-50 (p. 28).

<sup>382</sup> Kenrick, *A History of the Musical Minstrel Shows*.

sounds extremely familiar to anyone conversant with forms of folk drama. The third and final act consisted of a slapstick musical plantation skit or a send-up of a popular play, often with a Shakespearean title such as 'Bad Breath, the Crane of Chowder', 'Julius Sneezer', or 'Dars-de-Money'.<sup>383</sup>

Not surprisingly, Jim Crow was assimilated into the Harlequinade just as Mungo had been. By Christmas 1836 the Theatre Royal Adelphi was marrying the two popular themes: 'To conclude with the new comic Pantomime called Cowardy Cowardy Custard, or Harlequin Jim Crow and the Magic Mustard Pot'.<sup>384</sup> Rehin draws more parallels between Harlequin and Jim Crow:

The similarities of blackface minstrelsy and the Italian improvised comedy should be regarded mainly as instances of the convergence of theatrical forms, but some aspects of the resemblance of Jim Crow and Harlequin might suggest continuity...Harlequin seems to have begun his undying career as a tatterdemalion rustic, with a strong regional dialect, and his black mask has been equated with the burnt-cork make-up of Jim Crow.<sup>385</sup>

The impact of the minstrelsy genre was immense and lasting. It spread widely across America, Europe, even Australia, and spawned a copycat movement amongst street entertainers. It joined with the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to give the Tom shows, plays using variations on Beecher Stowe's characters and minstrel songs. Features of the minstrel show can be traced through burlesque, Variety theatre, stand-up comedy, and popular song. Entertainers of the late twentieth century, such as Morecambe and Wise and Ronnie Barker, who had learned their trade in the Variety halls, display the influence of minstrel shows in their love of word-play and adaptations of well-known plays.<sup>386</sup> It would be perverse to believe that folk tradition alone remained unaffected:

In addition to buskers, well-organized professional companies, both permanent and touring, presented full minstrel shows in theatres, concert halls and similar venues...and blackface acts flourished on all the music-hall stages. Amateur minstrel productions were also found...for example in workingmen's clubs and at village fetes. By these means, but mostly by the busking medium, the material created for the minstrel theatre and the music-hall was diffused to the widest audience, not only in the cities but throughout the countryside.<sup>387</sup>

It is the use of blackface in street entertainment which is considered in the next section.

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<sup>383</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (Oxford University Press, 1993) cited in <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel\\_show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show)> [accessed 9 November 2008].

<sup>384</sup> *The Examiner* (London, England), Issue 1508, 25 December 1836. Could this be linked with a childhood taunt from the 1950s, 'Cowardy cowardy custard, You can't eat mustard!' – or did the rhyme predate this?

<sup>385</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Black-Face Clowning', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9.3 (1975), pp. 682-701 (p. 691).

<sup>386</sup> E.g. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtHNrRk3IQM&feature=related>> [accessed 16 May 2011].

<sup>387</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and Its Resorts: Popular Culture and Its Racial Connotations as Revealed in Polite Opinion', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 19-38 (p. 20).

### 4.1.3 Street entertainment

The streets were the performance space for a wide variety of entertainers. Sword-swallowers, acrobats, performing animals, Punch-and-Judy men, marionettes, jugglers: all took their place amongst the costermongers, hawkers, pedlars and ballad-singers. In his paper on blackface minstrelsy in Victorian London, Rehin gives a comprehensive overview of musical street entertainment during that period, drawing on contemporary reports:

Three brass bands; several barrel-organs and hurdy-gurdies; one “infernal machine,” apparently a large piano-organ; a man with triangles, cymbals, monkeys and dancing dogs; a woman and three children singing psalms; a ballad singer rendering “I have a silent sorrow here”; and “three Ethiopian melodists up the street.”<sup>388</sup>



Minstrels on the streets of London, circa 1880.  
(From the Spurgeon collection, courtesy of Doc Rowe.)

Many of these musical entertainers were interviewed by Henry Mayhew for the series of articles which made up his *London Labour and the London Poor*. Our concern here is with those who performed in blackface. Mayhew found about fifty ‘Ethiopian Serenaders’, and interviewed two: ‘Both were dressed like decent mechanics, with perfectly clean faces, excepting a little of the professional black at the root of the hair on the forehead’.<sup>389</sup> One told him, ‘Some niggers are Irish.

<sup>388</sup> G. F. Rehin, ‘Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and Its Resorts: Popular Culture and Its Racial Connotations as Revealed in Polite Opinion’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 19-38 (p. 22).

<sup>389</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 3, p. 190.



There's Scotch niggers, too. I don't know a Welsh one, but one of the street nigger-singers *is* a real black - an African.<sup>390</sup> Just as many of the performers took up roles in pantomime or other shows in the wintertime, the close link between popular and 'folk' tradition is demonstrated in the busker's next comment: 'The Christmas time is very good for us, for we go out as waits, only we don't black, but only sing; and that I believe - the singing, I mean - is, I believe, the original waits.'<sup>391</sup> This impression of minstrelsy being just another string in the entertainer's bow is strengthened by another interview, in which a street clown informs Mayhew how he paints his face with white lead: 'I grease my skin first, and then dab the white paint on (flake white is too dear for us street clowns).' The same man was later seen 'dressed as Jim Crow, with his face blackened.'<sup>392</sup>

Minstrels remained popular throughout the nineteenth century, until overtaken by the Pierrot shows. In some forms they were still to be found into the mid-twentieth century. 'Whatever else may be said, the blackface busker and his performance would have been very familiar to ordinary members of the public.'<sup>393</sup>

#### 4.1.4 Practical Joke

From newspaper reports, it appears that faces of unsuspecting victims were often blackened as a prank. In 1856 a young man visiting a servant was apprehended, as he had a blackened face. Charges were dropped, since he was found to be of good character, and had not known about his face, as 'a trick had been played...at his master's house, by rubbing his face over with cork and lampblack.'<sup>394</sup> Faces of those not able to hold their drink were blackened, a joke which is played to this day, albeit with felt-tip pen rather than soot. One report from 1852 tells of a man who had bought threepenn'orth of whisky, and was then found insensible, with his face blackened,<sup>395</sup> while the following year two men who went to meet a friend at Conway railway station found the porter asleep. It was 'impossible to rouse him', which suggests that he had over-indulged in alcohol, so they blackened his face and cut off his whiskers.<sup>396</sup> Similarly, at the Junction Inn, Pudsey, the landlord testified to 'about fifteen lads assembled in his taproom...all of whom had drunk freely of beer.' This time the high spirits went a bit too far, as the youths seized one of their number and 'blackened his face with soot, smeared his head and face also with blood, and putting a rope around his neck dragged him about.'<sup>397</sup>

This section has looked at the use of blackface in entertainment, from royalty to busker. The next section gives instances of its appropriation by less law-abiding persons.

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<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>392</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 26051, 30 May 1850.

<sup>393</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and Its Resorts: Popular Culture and Its Racial Connotations as Revealed in Polite Opinion', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 19-38 (p. 28).

<sup>394</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London, England), Issue 291, 9 March 1856.

<sup>395</sup> *The Derby Mercury* (Derby, England), Issue 7142, 10 March 1852.

<sup>396</sup> *Liverpool Mercury* (Liverpool, England), Issue 2554, 15 November 1853.

<sup>397</sup> *The Bradford Observer* (Bradford, England), pg. 5; Issue 1208, 26 March 1857.

## 4.2 Criminal activity

References to blackened faces in connection with criminal activity can be found across many years and in all parts of the country. It is reasonable to assume that sometimes the disguise was for concealment in the dark as much as to prevent identification, as in the case of the Wirksworth poacher in 1845 whose 'face was blackened in order to disguise him',<sup>398</sup> but who doubtless would have welcomed the camouflage too as he moved about the countryside.

Face blackening seems to have been used frequently in cases of burglary, but was by no means restricted to that. A selection of examples follows.

In 1770 the murderers of William Powell in Carmarthenshire, had blacked their faces, the witness's 'own forehead was blacked a little to hid the scars'.<sup>399</sup> The following year 'about twelve at night a villain, disguised with a blackened face and carter's frock' broke into a house in Gloucestershire,<sup>400</sup> while in 1788 it was 'six villains, with their faces blackened, and otherwise disguised' who forced their way into a house, fastening the owner into a closet and confining the servants in the cellar while they stole plate and valuables.<sup>401</sup> In 1848 two burglars were apprehended; 'One of the fellows had on a velveteen coat, with his face covered with crape; the other wore a fustian jacket, and had his face blackened.'<sup>402</sup> Similarly, at the trial of a man charged with breaking and entering, 'P.C. 48 stated that when he took the prisoner into his custody his face was blackened, apparently for disguise.'<sup>403</sup> A few years later, at Troway, a burglar's face 'was blackened to disguise his features.'<sup>404</sup>

A more cunning use of the disguise came to light in Southwark: 'Thomas Hughes [Hooper in another paper], a man who is in the habit of disguising himself to prevent detection in cases of felony...appeared at the bar with his face blackened...' He had called at a house saying he was a chimney sweep, and, being denied access, had gone to the house next door. There his story was believed, so he was allowed through the house, climbed over the wall at the rear, and stole a copper from the washhouse. He flattened the copper and left through the front door with it in his soot bag.<sup>405</sup>

Blackened faces certainly appear to have impeded identification. A woman who was robbed '...stated one of the robbers was the chimneysweep who usually swept her chimney, and whose name was Wilson. He, she said, was the person with his face blackened.' Wilson was convicted and sentenced to transportation, but 'on

<sup>398</sup> *The Derby Mercury* (Derby, England), Issue 5911, 22 October 1845.

<sup>399</sup> <<http://www.earlymodernweb.org.uk/waleslaw/glanareth.htm>> [accessed 21 February 2010].

<sup>400</sup> *Bingley's Journal* (London, England), Issue 74, 26 October 1771.

<sup>401</sup> *General Evening Post* (London, England), Issue 8566, 9 October 1788.

<sup>402</sup> *Glasgow Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland), Issue 4773, 27 October 1848.

<sup>403</sup> *The Bristol Mercury* (Bristol, England), Issue 3237, 3 April 1852.

<sup>404</sup> *Manchester Times* (Manchester, England), Issue 763, 1 November 1856.

<sup>405</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 26862, 27 January 1853.

further investigation the authorities were satisfied that Wilson was innocent, and he obtained a pardon.<sup>406</sup> However, the disguise was not infallible: in another case the witness stated 'although [the burglar's] face was blackened, from the length of time he continued standing over him, and a light being in the room, he had an opportunity of narrowly observing his features, and swore to him as being the prisoner.'<sup>407</sup> Even so, the benefit of the doubt sometimes went with the prisoner. Near Worksop, a man was accused of robbing a boatman, who 'knew him though his face was black'. Despite another witness saying she remembered the accused coming home with his face partly blackened, the jury acquitted him, the judge advising him 'to take care in future how he traversed the country with a face darker than that which nature had given him'.<sup>408</sup>

The harsh punishments of the time gave good reason to hide identity. In 1801 two men, who 'with faces blackened' had rushed into the house of a vicar as he was preparing to lock up for the night and rifled his pockets, were condemned to death at Norfolk Assizes.<sup>409</sup>

In one case, blackface was not used as disguise, but as a form of censure, disapproval or even punishment. In this case links are shown between social unrest and criminal activity, an area which is investigated further below. In a pub in 1817 Dyall, a known agitator, asked Bagshaw, a silk weaver, to sign a paper relating to a meeting to be held regarding 'petitioning the Prince Regent respecting general grievances'. He refused, as did another man, who subsequently had his face blackened by 'some person in the room'. The case was reported since Dyall complained 'he [Bagshaw] beat, kicked, and dragged me around the room, and finally blackened my face with grease, soot, blood, and every thing obnoxious he could procure, until I was rendered a most dreadful, as well as the most wretched object, and made the ridicule of every person who chose to laugh at my expence.' The magistrate agreed Dyall had been assaulted and probably injured, but, maybe because of his reputation as an agitator, not to mention the fact that the magistrate had 'committed him some time ago for being disorderly', chose not to send the case forward to the Sessions.<sup>410</sup>

The reason for face blackening in these cases was patently not to impersonate black people. However, in some situations that was indeed the intention:

...the excitement roused by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set off a minor boom in destitute negroes from the slave states...At the height of the boom, a number of optimistic Europeans corked their faces like the Christy Minstrels in hopes of imposing on the public; but their careers soon ended in the police court.<sup>411</sup>

<sup>406</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 22702, 24 August 1842.

<sup>407</sup> *The Newcastle Courant* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England), Issue 9092, 9 March 1849.

<sup>408</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 18573, 26 March 1829.

<sup>409</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England), Issue 2500, 28 March 1801.

<sup>410</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 15156, 28 November 1817.

<sup>411</sup> Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld*, (London: Temple Smith, 1970), p. 201.

One man in the West Country was trying his luck in this way in 1848, but paid insufficient attention to detail:

An impudent Cornish beggar lately blackened his face and his hands, and successfully appealed to the sympathies of several householders of St. Austell, for a distressed and deserving negro; but, unluckily for himself, forgot he had a hole in his trousers. One gentleman, whose eyes were keener than those of his neighbours, at last noticed that the beggar's legs differed in colour from his face.<sup>412</sup>

The beggar was sentenced to three months in jail.

Whereas these instances are clearly related to criminal activity, the next section looks at the use of blackface in more ambiguous circumstances.

### 4.3 Social disorder

The borderline between criminal activity and social disorder is often a tenuous one. It must certainly have seemed so to the victims of outrages and to the magistrates who punished the perpetrators, but some reactions to the social, agricultural and industrial changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had features which marked them as different from common crime. These features have more in common with traditional folk customs, and many authors have commented on the significant interplay between them.<sup>413</sup> The very word 'custom', referring to the long-established habits or traditions of a society, carries with it overtones of practices which have come to be regarded as law.<sup>414</sup>

In the minds of the common people they were merely defending their customary rights: 'In legal theory, and in social reality, there existed a direct connection between the national rights of the freeborn Englishman and the local rights attached to a particular social group or inhabitants of a certain place,'<sup>415</sup> and the people 'were aware that a ruling class that rested its claims to legitimacy upon prescription and law had little authority to over-rule their own customs and

<sup>412</sup> *The Preston Guardian etc* (Preston, England), Issue 1895, 23 December 1848.

<sup>413</sup> See amongst others: A. W. Smith, 'Some Folklore Elements in Movements of Social Protest', *Folklore*, 77.4 (1966), pp. 241-52; E.J. Hobsbawm, and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummers Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78; Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20; Chris Hare, 'The Skeleton Army and the Bonfire Boys, Worthing, 1884', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp. 221-31; Graham Seal, 'Tradition and Agrarian Protest in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp.146-69; Alan Howkins, and Linda Merricks, 'Wee Be Black as Hell: Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion', *Rural History*, 4 (1993), pp. 73-85; Andy Wood, 'The Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture: England. 1550-1800', *Social History*, 22 (1997), pp. 46-60.

<sup>414</sup> See, for example, David J. Bederman, *Custom as a Source of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>415</sup> Andy Wood, 'The Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture: England. 1550-1800', *Social History*, 22 (1997), pp. 46-60 (p. 49).

rights.<sup>416</sup> They then relied upon a familiar customary framework on which to build their protest.

As Hobsbawm noted, 'Even the poorest had experience of two or perhaps three types of organized collective activity: for labour, for ritual purposes, and perhaps for certain customary functions of the entire village such as beating the bounds'.<sup>417</sup> It was easy to draw upon these when action was needed, and as Seal states

...many of these ritual elements encourage the participation of those not directly involved in the "performance" of the ritual or custom...One important function of these ritual elements, then, is to encourage participation in the various types of traditional activities that tend to "break the bounds" or somehow transcend the everyday mundanities. Such participation is a guarantee of communal sanction for such activities as well as a legitimation of their violent, bawdy or extra-legal aspects that function to alter or reverse the norms of everyday behaviour.<sup>418</sup>

Pettit considered the similarities between festival and revolt lay in patterns of organization (often the leader was a mythical character: 'Rebecca'; 'Captain Swing'; 'Ned Ludd'; just as folk traditions have their stock characters such as the Fool, Tommy, or Bessy); patterns of movement, (processions etc.); and patterns of behaviour, including disguise.<sup>419</sup> Seal's list of 'ritual elements' encompasses disguise; levying; perambulating; adornment; officials; effigies; music (including blowing horns and 'rough music') and mock violence (verbal threats, buffeting, jostling).<sup>420</sup> Some of these elements are present in each of the examples considered below, but these particular examples have been selected because blackened faces, 'the simplest form of disguise encountered in both seasonal festivity and popular revolt',<sup>421</sup> are mentioned.

An early reference to blackface which may have been used in this context is in connection with the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536:

Examination of Percyvall Saunders and Wm. Charnoke ... Saunders deposes that on Tuesday night Nov. 28, about 12 o'clock, Hugh Parker and others, disguised and armed, broke open his door and forced him by blows to be sworn "to God and the King and the commons." ... Charnoke deposes that the same night they came to his house ... Hugh Parker (16 years old), deposes that he went to one Bankes house to get his head rounded, and afterwards met with John Pyper and John Yate at an alehouse; was induced to go with them as in sport, and denies that Charnoke offered any resistance ... Robt. Bankes deposes to the

<sup>416</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History*, 3 (1978), pp. 133-65 (p. 158).

<sup>417</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 44.

<sup>418</sup> Graham Seal, 'Tradition and Agrarian Protest in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp. 146-69 (p. 150).

<sup>419</sup> Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (p. 6).

<sup>420</sup> Graham Seal, 'Tradition and Agrarian Protest in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp. 146-69 (p. 150).

<sup>421</sup> Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (p.14).

minstrel (Piper) coming with the others to his house with their faces blacked... John Yate, one of the prisoners, says they acted on the procurement of John Piper, and 'only for pastime and no evil intent'.<sup>422</sup>

Here a musician, an alehouse, and a perambulation, are involved, but there is no evidence of any festive activity, nor am I aware of any significance attached to November 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>423</sup> However, the use of blackened faces at so early a date is of interest here. Although there were black courtiers at that time (see Chapter 2) they were a rarity, and so a blackened face would have aroused attention and curiosity were it not already familiar in other contexts.

In Hampshire in the early eighteenth century, the blackened faces of deer-stealers and their attendant actions led to the passing of the Black Act by the Whig government in 1723. This act 'extended the death penalty to various events linked to deer-stealing at night: wearing disguises and blacking faces, the destruction of forest wood and fences, and rural affray against both crown and private property...It was soon accepted by the judges that the Act could apply even where deer-stealing was not involved.'<sup>424</sup> Despite this, blackened faces continued to appear in connection with protest for at least the next two centuries.

An extract from a letter from Hereford only a decade later tells how the Ledbury Rioters 'appeared a Hundred in a Gang, armed with Guns and Swords, as well as Axes, to hew down the Turnpikes, and were dressed in Womens Apparel, with High-crowned Hats, and their Faces blackened,'<sup>425</sup> and similarly in 1749 'several hundred armed Somerset farm labourers, with blackened faces, led by mounted men with flags, marched on [Bristol] and destroyed the turnpike gates.'<sup>426</sup>

Later the manufacture of cloth was the target of unrest under the leadership of "Ned Ludd". In 1802 a cart 'returning from Warminster, loaded with cloths, was overtaken on the Downs by six men with blackened faces, who took out the cloths, cut five or six of them, and damaged 14 others',<sup>427</sup> and in Leeds ten years later 'Magistrates were informed that within about two hours an attack was to be made

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<sup>422</sup> James Gairdner (ed.) *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 11* Notes 1230, 1251,

<<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=75489>> [accessed 14 April 2010].

<sup>423</sup> Pettit overstates the case when he avers other men 'took advantage of the Plough Monday customs (presumably the *quete* of the ploughboys) the following January to recruit support for what came to be known as Hallom's Rebellion' ("Here Comes I, Jack Straw' p.4): the record merely says that the men 'had been drinking together at one John Bell's in Watton with many other parishioners, "as the manner is there of plough days.'" (Gairdner (ed.) *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 12* Note 201).

<sup>424</sup> John Broad, 'Whigs and Deer-Stealers in Other Guises: A Return to the Origins of the Black Act', *Past and Present* (May, 1988), pp. 56-72, p. 56. While E. P. Thompson sees the actions of the Waltham Blacks and similar outbreaks as part of the struggle between Whig landowners and ancient common rights, Broad places the introduction of the Black Act in a wider political perspective.

<sup>425</sup> *Read's Weekly Journal Or British Gazetteer* (London, England), Issue 549, 11 October 1735.

<sup>426</sup> Philip D. Jones, 'The Bristol Bridge Riot and Its Antecedents: Eighteenth-Century Perception of the Crowd', *The Journal of British Studies*, 19 (1980), pp. 74-92 (p. 82).

<sup>427</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, (London, England), Issue 10360, 3 August 1802.

by a number of persons on some premises...where the dressing machinery...had been established...the men concerned in the outrage were to have their faces blackened and to be armed with short hammers.'



'The Leader of the Luddites', 1812 engraving.<sup>428</sup>

The men appeared to have been warned as the planned attack did not take place, but one man was incriminated, being found with 'a hammer and a large piece of burnt cork'.<sup>429</sup> The same year, 'a body of 10 or 12 men, with their faces blackened, attacked the watchman [of a factory]...in consequence of some information he is said to have given respecting the rioters',<sup>430</sup> and in Golcar, Yorkshire, William Hinchcliffe, a cloth dresser 'saw upwards of fifty people about his house and heard a great many more, that their faces were disguised being marked black and white'.<sup>431</sup> In Loughborough there were 'dissidents with blackened faces' and in

<sup>428</sup> Image from <<http://schools-wikipedia.org/images/505/50544.jpg>> [accessed 19 February 2010].

<sup>429</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 13323, 20 January 1812.

<sup>430</sup> *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh, Scotland), Issue 14096, 27 April 1812.

<sup>431</sup> <<https://eee.uci.edu/clients/bjbecker/SpinningWeb/week8d.html>> [accessed 19 February 2010].

Stockport 'two men dressed as women'.<sup>432</sup> A Report of the Secret Committee investigating such matters stated that

...alarming disturbances, destructive to property, prevailed in the counties of Lancaster, York, &c...That the rioters assembled in the night-time, with their faces blackened, armed with the implements of their trades, and other implements, with which they destroyed the property of those obnoxious to them...the first object of these Rioters seemed to be the breaking of machinery.<sup>433</sup>

Again, folklore elements in the protest are apparent. There are great parallels with the Welsh form of rough music, the *Ceffyl Pren* (wooden horse): 'The victim of the Ceffyl Pren was paraded in effigy on a wooden pole or ladder by a crowd with blackened faces, the men wearing women's clothes...the whole proceedings were accompanied by "rough music"...'<sup>434</sup> Rough music is 'a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which usually directed mockery or hostility against individuals who offended against certain community norms'.<sup>435</sup> As a traditional form of social censure, it lies between custom and protest.

While it has been shown that movements of social unrest made use of ritual elements, this was not a one-way process. As Pettitt noted,

Festivals are the principal occasions of the year when large numbers of people from a particular neighbourhood assemble, and provide useful opportunities for subversive propaganda or conspiracy, or a convenient cloak to mask the gathering of forces for a rebellion planned in advance.<sup>436</sup>

At the Oldham Wake in 1826, the usual form of celebration was used to make a political statement: 'Instead of the usual rush-cart, a loom and a winding-wheel were exhibited...with two emaciated figures at work, weaving and winding...I saw nothing like feasting.'<sup>437</sup> In the same area of the country, concern was expressed some years later at the time of nominations for the Blackburn election:

Great numbers of mummers are holding their carnival, too, every evening, going through the performances called "pace-egging;" in other parts of the country peculiar to the Christmas holidays, but here as common, it appears, at Easter also. It will be well if the disguises for such occasions are not turned to purposes favourable to an election riot.<sup>438</sup>

There were legitimate grounds for concern:

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Also cited in Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummers Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78 (p. 171).

<sup>432</sup> Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummers Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78 (p. 171).

<sup>433</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 13470, 9 July 1812.

<sup>434</sup> Graham Seal, 'Tradition and Agrarian Protest in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp. 146-69 (p. 161).

<sup>435</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', *Folklore*, 103.1 (1992), pp. 3-26 (p. 3).

<sup>436</sup> Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (p. 4).

<sup>437</sup> *The Leeds Mercury* (Leeds, England), Issue 3190, 2 September 1826.

<sup>438</sup> *Manchester Times* (Manchester, England), Issue 459, 26 March, 1853.



The festival facilitates the violence in providing an occasion when not only do large crowds of excited, inebriated and quite possibly armed people gather, but when disorder and even (as in the charivari and its variants) the expression of dissatisfaction and frustration are for the moment licensed as acceptable.<sup>439</sup>

Of course it is possible that some took advantage of customary disguise to push boundaries beyond traditional transgression, or to indulge in blatantly criminal activity. Does the following account suggest some such element? The description is very reminiscent of characters in a mummers' play, and the season is appropriate. A burglary was committed by three men in Denbigh, on 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1775, between seven and eight in the evening. Of the men, one had his face blackened, one had 'a fine shirt' thrown over his other clothes, and the third was 'dressed in a smock-frock, with a cap on, such as Merry Andrews wear in stage-playing'.<sup>440</sup> Were the 'burglars' involved in a house-visiting custom, or merely taking advantage of traditional disguises? It seems strange that the three were dressed in such distinctively different manner from each other if their intention had been to set out to rob. While we can only speculate, it is acknowledged that the borderline between customary practice and disorder was often blurred. Bradtke notes, 'The behaviour of some nineteenth-century Molly dancers fell just short of the intimidation and destructiveness of an angry mob. Their disguises and destructive or violent actions posed an underlying threat to order.'<sup>441</sup> The consequences of such behaviour led to action being taken by the authorities in some parts of the country:

The mayor and magistrates of the borough of Scarbro' strictly prohibit any person joining in, or forming, either alone or in company with others, any procession of mummers, morris dancers, or ploughs, within the borough of Scarbro'; and any person found so offending will be taken into custody and dealt with according to law. This prohibition, we are sure, will give general satisfaction, and prevent, according to custom, a many respectable people from being openly insulted. It is not more than two or three years since the life of a youth...was in the greatest danger in consequence of having received a severe blow on the head from a man who carried a large bladder with stones in it at the end of a long stick...but owing to the disguise of the party it never could be satisfactorily ascertained by whom the assault was committed.<sup>442</sup>

Although the Black Act had been repealed in 1827, authorities were still concerned about the use of disguise. 1851 saw the passing of the Prevention of Offences Act: 'if any person shall be found by Night having his Face blackened, or otherwise disguised, with Intent to commit any Felony...shall be guilty of a Misdemeanor'. A few years later in 1857 this new law was interpreted at Oxford sessions as 'with face blackened, or *the person* otherwise disguised' (my italics), and so a man was convicted of 'being found, at the hour of ten at night, in the public streets, disguised

<sup>439</sup> Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (p. 5).

<sup>440</sup> *Chester Chronicle Or Commercial Intelligencer* (Chester, England), Issue 37, 8 January 1776. A Merry Andrew was a clown, buffoon or fool.

<sup>441</sup> Elaine Bradtke, *Truculent Rustics: Molly Dancing in East Anglia before 1940*. ed. by Jennifer Chandler (London: The Folklore Society 1999), p. 12.

<sup>442</sup> *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times* (Hull, England), Issue 3342, 12 January 1849.

in woman's clothes'.<sup>443</sup> Despite this, the use of black faces and women's clothes continued to be widely used in folk traditions, as had been the practice for generations. This is the subject of the next section.

Blackleg miners in South Wales were the target of the Scotch Cattle, though the protest took on a familiar form:

Offenders were 'scotched' which involved a visit by the Cattle, faces blackened and dressed in animal skins with the 'Tarw' wearing a headdress bearing a bull's horns. Normally, the punitive action would be undertaken by a herd from another area to avoid recognition by local residents.<sup>444</sup>

The first attempt [at] organisation by the workers was the "Scotch Cattle". This movement which became widespread in the industrial areas of South Wales appeared first in Nantyglo and Blaina in 1822. To prevent identification to members disguised themselves with the skins [of] beasts and blackened their faces. The leader was known as the "Bull" and bellowing loudly would head the attacking mob...The works manager's house was stoned and a Bull's head was painted in red on the doors of the black legs houses. The Bull's head was a warning sign that the "Scotch Cattle" would strike. The black legs continued working and the night following the warning the "Scotch Cattle" struck. On the night of February 17th between 150 and 200 men met near the Cornish pit, where they were commanded by their leaders to turn their coats and blacken their faces, an order which was promptly obeyed. Then the procession headed by a man blowing a horn descended on the cottages of two of the marked men. Windows was [sic] smashed, the door forced open, the furniture destroyed and the inmates beaten in a most brutal manner.<sup>445</sup>

E. P. Thompson notes the 'ritualistic elements' of the Scotch Cattle: 'men, with blackened faces, dressed as women; animal-guising with horns, skins, and masks; the blowing of horns, lowing, rattling of chains, and firing of guns...'<sup>446</sup>

The next of the movements was the Captain Swing riots of the 1830s. This was an uprising by agricultural workers in the south and east of the country in protest against the threshing machines which took away winter employment. Machines were destroyed and ricks burned.

There was always a certain ceremonial attending such operations. The leader might wear a white hat or ride on a white horse; flags were carried, and horns were blown [...] to arouse the villagers and warn them of the rioters' approach. In the earlier (and later) days, when the militants were more inclined to fear detection, raiding parties might blacken their faces and do their work at night; but as the movement developed, riots took place in the open day, and were public performances and at times assumed a festive air.<sup>447</sup>

<sup>443</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England), Issue 5419, 7 March 1857.

<sup>444</sup> <<http://www.sirhowy.com/scotchcattle.html>> [accessed 19 February 2010].

<sup>445</sup> David James, *A History of Nant-y-glo and Blaina*, <<http://www.huwcole.com/nantCh4.html>> [accessed 19 February 2010].

<sup>446</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', *Folklore*, 103.1 (1992), pp. 3-26 (p. 17).

<sup>447</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.178.

A report from a Chartist uprising in Ebbw Vale, 1839, shows how a blackened face was not always used to confuse the authorities, but sometimes to mingle with the crowd. An account by an unnamed man says how, as the mob were seeking to swell their numbers, he 'attended to the advice of others, and, disguised in the garb of a miner, wended my way among the moving throng towards the mountain.' He sought refuge in a farmhouse which he found unlocked, but 'when they discovered my uncouth garb and blackened face, they at once imagined that the revenge of the unlawful mob had overtaken them.'<sup>448</sup>

Tollgates in Wales were the target of protest in the Rebecca Riots of the mid-nineteenth century. 'Rebecca' and her 'daughters' tore down the gates in protest at the heavy turnpike fees levied. In 1843 the Porthyrhyd gate and toll house were destroyed:

Rebecca and her daughters arrived there about five minutes after twelve o'clock...seemed to be well organised...old mother Powell... obliged to get out of bed to supply the Rebeccaites with ale, the money being returned to her in different cups. The leader, who was on horseback, with his face blackened, intimated to Mrs. Powell that she need apprehend no injury, as they would neither molest nor wrong her...<sup>449</sup>

Their next visit was to a shopkeeper, where they requested powder and percussion caps. They would not be fobbed off with a servant, but when the shopkeeper appeared and gave them what they wanted they promised no further interference. However, the blacksmith, who had said he could face fifteen Rebeccas and had been sworn in as special constable, had his door and windows smashed and smithy partially destroyed in his absence. The inn windows were also smashed, but later a letter of apology was sent with payment enclosed, prompting one reporter of this incident to comment, 'It is characteristic of the marauders, who combine frolic and humour with mischief, clearly showing that they are not political conspirators.'<sup>450</sup>

However, those attacking the Pontardulais gate near the village of Llanon were not so fortunate, as they found the police waiting, and the leaders were arrested and transported.

The Rebecca ...being dressed in the full costume of bonnet and veil, with other articles of female attire, armed with a gun, and mounted on a powerful horse; they formed a procession, and under Rebecca's orders, began their march, with their horns blowing...all her followers being disguised in white dresses, with caps or bonnets; those who had bonnets having placed a bunch of fern in them.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England), Issue 4517, 23 November 1839.

<sup>449</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian* (Southampton, England), Issue 1047, 19 August 1843; *19th Century British Library Newspapers: Part II*.

<sup>450</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian* (Southampton, England), Issue 1047, 19 August 1843; *19th Century British Library Newspapers: Part II*.

<sup>451</sup> *The Examiner* (London, England), Issue 1858, 9 September 1843.



Depiction of the Rebecca Riots, *Illustrated London News* 1843.<sup>452</sup>

#### 4.4 Custom and Tradition

The terms 'custom', 'tradition' and 'ritual' have all been used in the previous section somewhat loosely, and here some clarification should perhaps be offered. In this chapter they are intended to refer to activities undertaken generally by the labouring classes in connection with celebration or holiday at certain pre-determined times of year, activities which, although changing over time, demonstrate continuity in terms of the elements listed by Pettitt and Seal in Section 4.3 above. 'Ritual' here does not have any religious connotations, particularly in any Frazerian sense.

Although many customs are thought to have grown out of older celebrations, such as the Feast of Fools, Lord of Misrule, Mayoral processions, or Church Ales, knowledge about these older festivities is limited, often gleaned only from passing mention as part of church or state record of payment. As noted above, the lives of the common people were not often recorded. Pettitt points out that 'our knowledge and understanding of the festival activities themselves, particularly for the earlier periods, are still very incomplete', and the best examples come from 'the early decades of the nineteenth century, which is precisely the time at which the efforts of the early folklorists were starting to provide at least some evidence of traditional customs'.<sup>453</sup> These are the instances considered in this section, ones which will be immediately recognizable to the follower of such activities today. Since these older activities, or modern-day impressions of them, lie at the heart of much practice today, references are included in some detail.

<sup>452</sup> <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:RebeccaRiots.gif>> [accessed 14 April 2010].

<sup>453</sup> Thomas Pettitt, 'Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore*, 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (p.16).

#### 4.4.1 Folk Drama

Folk Plays, commonly referred to as Mummers' Plays, are found across England from Cornwall to Durham, and scripts date from the late eighteenth century to the present.<sup>454</sup> Most people understand the term 'Mummers' to refer to those who participate in folk plays under various names according to the time of year or area of performance - Guisers, Plough Jags, Soulcakers, Tipteerers, Pace Eggers and so on. Mumming was a perambulatory custom, for which various forms of disguise were used. Some simply turned their coats, while others had smocks or shirts covered with patches, ribbons, paper strips, or similar, and 'the face was commonly disguised either by blacking up or by obscuring the face with the headgear'.<sup>455</sup>

The first examples here are connected with Lancashire Pace-egging, which took (takes) place at Easter. This report, from 1843, shows it as a begging tradition:

According to ancient custom the town of Wigan, during the week preceding Easter, was overrun by numbers of lads, dressed in the usual fancy garbs, and soliciting eggs and money as *pace* or peace eggs, and also other "children of older growth," in most cases armed with cudgels, and faces blacked, endeavouring to obtain the same by means of terrifying the persons honoured with their visits.<sup>456</sup>

The next, from Blackburn in 1849, is quoted at length, as it shows links to the begging custom as well as to folk-play, and because in many respects it bears a strong resemblance to the folk play performance of Pace Eggers today:

Monday last [i.e. the Monday before Easter] was the day on which the gathering of the Easter pasque-egg commenced. Early in the forenoon, groups of boys, dressed in tinselled finery, made their calls on their grandmas to receive the gift. Then, as the curtains of evening became drawn, groups of young men, fantastically dressed, and wearing masks, entered the lists with their juvenile competitors. It would appear, however, that their object is not to beg an *egg* here and there, but to obtain money or beer. Preceded by a trumpeter, to give notice of their approach, they unceremoniously enter the inns of the town, and make their way to the bar, or the room in which there is the greatest number of guests, and commence the acting of a series of heathen-like vagaries—not unfrequently striking the tables with their clubs, and making the glasses jump from their stands. This has the desired effect, and the landlord, to rid himself of the annoyance, draws liberally and gratuitously from his beer butt ... These doings have been nightly repeated during the week up to Thursday night, when the grand climax melo-drama took place—when the most public streets of the town assumed the appearance of a very great masquerading ground. Personages there were to represent the inhabitants of other countries, even from the Turk to a nameless ruler of a dark dominion. The discordant blasts of horns, the harsh beating of drums, the yells and screams of a dense multitude; the brandishing of swords, clubs and sticks, presented to the eye of the

<sup>454</sup> For comprehensive coverage of folk plays, see <<http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm>>

<sup>455</sup> Peter Millington, 'Mystery History: The Origins of British Mummers' Plays', *American Morris Newsletter*, 13 (1989), pp. 9-16.

<[http://freespace.virgin.net/peter.millington1/Mystery\\_History.htm](http://freespace.virgin.net/peter.millington1/Mystery_History.htm)> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>456</sup> *The Manchester Times and Gazette* (Manchester, England), Issue 759, 22 April 1843.

spectator one of the most savage-like assemblages of Englishmen that could be imagined.<sup>457</sup>

Like so many similar activities, by 1854 the tradition was increasingly frowned upon:

...a company...demanded a peace egg, having at the time black faces, and being otherwise disguised. Mr. Scowcroft refused to comply with the demand, and several of the company insisted that they would not leave the premises without one...the superintendant of police stated that fifty or sixty sticks had been taken from the peace-eggers this year, and the nuisance had become so great that in future the practice would not be permitted.<sup>458</sup>

Needless to say, pace egging survived, as the photograph below demonstrates. Of particular interest in this picture are the characters in the foreground, one of whom appears to be a 'Lord' with top hat and cane, the other 'Dirty Bet' with blackened face, dressed as a woman. These are characters who recur through many traditions and who will appear in other examples in this chapter.



Pace Eggers, Rochdale area, poss. c. 1900. Rochdale Library Collection.<sup>459</sup>

<sup>457</sup> *The Preston Guardian etc* (Preston, England), Issue 1910, 7 April 1849.

<sup>458</sup> *Manchester Times* (Manchester, England), Issue 570, 19 April 19 1854.

<sup>459</sup> Thanks to Alan Seymour, Bury Pace Eggers, for this.

In Cheshire the mummers are called Soulcakers, and go around about Hallowe'en and All Souls' Day. This too stems from an earlier visiting custom without a play:

This was the night before All Soul's Day, and it was the practice to celebrate that night by different customs in different parts of England. In Cheshire a custom was observed called "souling," namely, going about singing before people's doors and getting money for it. Those young men, after leaving the public house, went "souling" to several houses...the young men, standing on the drive outside the house, commenced singing. After the first song was sung one of them rang the hall door bell, and after another song had been sung the bell was rung a second time, in order, no doubt, to fetch some one who would give them money for their singing.<sup>460</sup>

This is from a report of an incident in 1873 in which the Master of Foxhounds, a Magistrate of Shropshire, shot at the soulers while they were visiting his house, and was charged with unlawful and malicious wounding. The resulting trial gives us an insight into the minds of the participants, their attendant puzzlement that their activity needed explanation, and the gulf between them and their 'betters'. Extracts from the trial were given by the newspaper:

Mr Swetenham: Do you know the meaning of All Saints' Day?

Witness: Yes, it is for people to go about singing. (Laughter)

Mr Swetenham: Has it anything to do with sacred song?

Witness: I do not know that it has.

Mr Swetenham: Is it time for a little more drink than usual?

Witness: Well, yes.

The witness gave the chorus of the song, still used today:

"We will come no more a souling  
Until this time next year"

Thomas Barlow, a later witness, was equally baffled:

Mr Swetenham (cross-examining): What is souling?

Witness: Well, it's souling (Laughter)

Mr Swetenham: But what is souling?

Witness: Well, I don't know. (Renewed laughter)

Mr Swetenham: Has it anything to do with religion?

Witness: I don't know that it has. It has not anything to do with drink.<sup>461</sup>

Although disguises are not mentioned in this example, two years later the same newspaper carried an article about old Cheshire customs, 'very popular fifty years ago' but 'lost or completely forgotten by many of the rising generation.' Among these was mentioned 'the practice of young men going round farmhouses on All Souls' Eve...dressed in all kinds of queer costumes.'<sup>462</sup>

<sup>460</sup> *Cheshire Observer* (Chester, England), Issue 1112, 29 November 1873; p. 7.

<sup>461</sup> Op.cit. It is worth noting that the song of the Pace Eggers is very similar to the Souling song, especially in the conclusion 'We'll come no more nigh you Until the next year.'

<sup>462</sup> *Cheshire Observer* (Chester, England), Issue 1216, 27 November 1875; p. 2.

There was a similar custom on the other side of the Pennines:

On Halloween we had "Caking Night" when the children went door to door in their neighbourhood singing. We wore masks or blackened our faces with soot from the fireplace. They let us get warm by their fire and gave us a scone and a small coin, then we were on our way again.<sup>463</sup>

Later references to 'Cakin Neet' show people dressing up in other ways, demonstrating that the difficulty of reaching any definitive statement about the sorts of disguise employed on such customary occasions is not limited to ancient sources.<sup>464</sup>

In some areas visits by Mummers were a regular feature of Christmas time into the twentieth century:

Voices called: "Let the guysers in..." Men were dressed as women; women as men; some had black faces and others carried musical instruments...they sang songs and danced jigs in which all the family joined.<sup>465</sup>

In South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire mumming took the form of the 'Old Horse' play:

It is an old Christmas custom in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire to go from house to house with the skull of a horse, painted black and red, and supported on a wooden fore-leg. A man in a stooping posture, and covered with a cloth, represents the body of the horse, and, from the inside, snaps its formidable jaws at the company<sup>466</sup>

Such a horse is still seen in the Soulcakery's performance, as well as in other Christmas visiting customs such as the Winster Guisers, the Kentish Hooden Horse and *Mari Lwyd*.

The 'Derby Tup' is a similar figure from the same area. Addy gives a description of the players:

George Potter, of Castleton, told me in 1901 that when he was a boy the Christmas guisers in that village were about twenty in number. They wore masks, big hats, and short trousers. At the present time a boy gets into a sack, the top of which is tied in such a way as to represent two ears or horns, or else the sack is surmounted by a real sheep's head. A second boy represents a butcher, and carries a knife in his hand; a third is dressed like a woman; a fourth, who has his face blackened, represents an old man, and carries a bowl or basin in his hand.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Edith Lily Schofield (Mrs. John A. Hogeland) *Memories of Stocksbridge*, <<http://www.bolsterstone.de/Families/Schofield.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>464</sup> <<http://www.folkplay.info/Links/CakingNight.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>465</sup> George Hitchin, *Pit-Yacker*, (London: Cape, 1962), p. 24, <<http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/durhamdialect/newseaham.htm>> [accessed 3 December 2008].

<sup>466</sup> M. H. Mason, *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs: Both Tunes and Words from Tradition*, (London, Metzler & Co., 1902) pp. 49-50, <<http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/90sk--mm.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>467</sup> S. O. Addy, 'Guising and Mumming in Derbyshire', *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, Jan.1907, Vol.29, pp. 31-32,





Guisers at Castleton, before 1907.

The photographs accompanying Addy's information show two and three boys, all of whom appear to have faces blackened.

We can see from these examples that characteristic aspects of guising include painted faces, some cross-dressing, animal imitation, either of a very stylized kind or using actual heads, and a perambulatory begging element. These are constituents which feature strongly in the next set of seasonal customs, those associated with Plough Monday.

#### 4.4.2 Plough Monday Traditions

Plough Monday is the Monday following Twelfth Night, and was traditionally the day on which ploughing started following Christmas festivities: 'Plow-day, being ever the first Monday after Twelfth day, at which time you shall go forth with your draught and begin to plough'.<sup>468</sup> The day was marked with plough plays, costumed plough processions and sword or Molly dancing. These took place chiefly in the counties of the East Midlands, Yorkshire, and East Anglia. Sometimes the plough, drawn by youths called 'Plough Stots' or 'Plough bullocks' was referred to as a 'Fool Plough'. Other persons in the procession variously included a man with a bladder on a long stick, a female character, a fool figure and often one with a calf's tail attached.

The pageant and dance, called fool plough, which is annually to be seen in the streets of Beverley and many other towns in the north, seems to be a composition of gleanings of several obsolete ancient customs. The fool and the bussy are evidently fragments of the Feast of Fools.<sup>469</sup>

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<<http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/90sk18sa.htm>> [accessed 01 March 2010]. See also Ian Russell, 'Here Comes Me and Our Old Lass, Short of Money and Short of Brass': A Survey of Traditional Drama in North East Derbyshire 1970-8', *Folk Music Journal*, 3 (1979), pp. 399-478.

<sup>468</sup> Gervase Markham, *The English Husbandman*, 1613, Pt i, ch. 5, lines 24-8, cited in Thomas Davidson, 'Plough Rituals in England and Scotland', *Agricultural History Review*, 7 (1959), pp. 27-37 (p. 29).

<sup>469</sup> G. Poulson, *Beverlac*, II 1829 p. 661. From Paul Davenport, <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

There was a miniature edition of Plough boys with their usual attendants of fools with black faces and hump-backs from this town the last two days, consisting for the most part of boys from 10 to 12 Years of age...<sup>470</sup>

There was also a begging custom associated with the Christmas/Plough Monday season:

The Mumps in nineteenth-century Barnwell, east Cambridge, came out onto the streets on Plough Monday to threaten passers-by for money. [...] In 1851, The *Cambridge Independent Press* reported "a large number of these ugly ruffians black their faces and provided with large sticks, they beat at doors, and calling themselves 'Mumps', are clamorous for halfpennies."<sup>471</sup>

Some customary rituals were still preserved in the 19th century by the village children. The boys went round singing and asking money on Plough Monday, and mumping with blackened faces at Christmas.<sup>472</sup>

The following extracts describe Plough Monday customs across more than a hundred years, the more detailed accounts coming unsurprisingly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as early as 1672, Pegge wrote in *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

On this day the young men yoke themselves and draw a plough about with musick, and one or two persons in antic dresses, like jack-puddings, go from house to house, to gather money to drink. If you refuse them, they plough up your dunghill.<sup>473</sup>

A hundred years later in Northumberland, Hutchinson observed:

Men in gay attire draw about a plough, called the stot plough, to obtain contributions and when they receive a gift from a house visited by them they exclaim *Largess*, but when they do not receive a gift from the House they plough up the ground in front of it. I have seen twenty men in the yoke of one plough.<sup>474</sup>

This much fuller account comes from a little further south twenty years later. Like many of the references here, it is taken from the work of Paul Davenport, who has spent many years researching the dance and ceremonial traditions of the North-East Midlands and Holderness areas:

<sup>470</sup> Robert Sharp, 'The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave' *Life in an East Yorkshire Village 1812 1837*, Ed. J.E. & P. A. Crowther 1998. From Paul Davenport, *ibid.*

<sup>471</sup> Nigel Pennick, *Crossing the Borderlines: Guising, Masking and Ritual Animal Disguises in the European Tradition*, (Chieveley: Capall Bann, 1998), p. 215.

<sup>472</sup> 'Parishes: Grantchester', *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 5* (1973), pp. 198-214.

<<http://www.britishhistory.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=66688&strquery=blackened>> [accessed: 23 November 2008].

<sup>473</sup> Christina Hole, *English Custom and Usage*. 3rd edn (London: Batsford, 1950), p. 32. A 'jack-pudding' was another term for 'buffoon, clown, or merry-andrew, esp. one attending on a mountebank' (OED online).

<sup>474</sup> W. Hutchinson, *History of Northumberland*, 1798, II, App., p. 18, cited in Thomas Davidson, 'Plough Rituals in England and Scotland', *Agricultural History Review*, 7 (1959), pp. 27-37 (p. 31).

On Plough Monday there is a procession of rustic youth, dragging a plough, who, as they officiate as oxen are called plough stots. They are dressed with their shirts on the outside of their jackets, with sashes of ribbons fixed across their breasts and backs, and knots, or roses of ribbons, fastened on their shirts and on their hats, Beside the plough draggers, there is a band of six in the same dress, furnished with swords, who perform the sword dance, while one or more musicians play on the fiddle or flute. During the dance, two or three of the company called 'Toms' or 'clowns', dressed up as harlequins, in the most fantastic modes having their faces painted or masked, are making antic gestures and movements to amuse the spectators, whilst another set called, 'Madgies' or 'Madgie pegs' clumsily dressed in womens clothes and also painted or masked, go about from door to door, rattling old canisters in which they receive money.<sup>475</sup>

The next example, from 1838, is interesting because of the way the author links the characters with those of the Harlequinade, as well as mentioning faces in colours other than black. It also demonstrates the disapproval which these customs increasingly faced:

Plough-Monday, here and there, in the thoroughly agricultural districts, [still] sends out its motley team. This consists of the farm-servants and labourers. They are dressed in harlequin guise, with wooden swords, plenty of ribbons, faces daubed with white-lead, red-ochre, and lamp-black. One is always dressed in woman's clothes and armed with a besom, a sort of burlesque mixture of Witch and Columbine. Another drives the team of men-horses with a long wand, at the end of which is tied a bladder instead of a lash; so that blows are given without pain, but plenty of noise. The insolence of these Plough-bullocks, as they are called, which might accord with ancient license, but does not at all suit modern habits, has contributed more than anything else to put them down.<sup>476</sup>

A similar complaint was voiced in 1858:

The Plough Monday begging was a complete nuisance in Stamford on the 11th inst. There was a much larger number than usual of farm servants, dressed up in fantastic style, with blackened and ochred faces; and their attempts to levy contributions from the tradesmen and other inhabitants were carried on with rude inportunity some of them entering houses and penetrating to the sitting-rooms of the residents.<sup>477</sup>

Eventually the plough was increasingly left out:

Martinmas time being over, some of the unhired men disguise themselves by dressing in motley garb. One will dress as a woman and, carrying a besom, is known as Besom Bet; another, having his hat and coat covered with strips of all kinds and colours or rags, has a 'blether; (bladder) attached by a string to the end of a stick, and is called,

<sup>475</sup> Dr. Young, *History of Whitby* 1817 From Paul Davenport, <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>476</sup> W. Howitt, *The Rural Life of England*, (London, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1838) pp.217- 218, <<http://www.folkplay.info/Notts/Td00263.htm>> [accessed 01 March 2010].

<sup>477</sup> Lincoln, Rutland & Stamford Mercury, 15th Jan.1858, pp.4b, <<http://www.folkplay.info/Notts/Td00719.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

'Blether Dick'; the others adopt other devices and, going from village to village,



'The Fool Plough'

from George Walker *The Costume of Yorkshire*, first published in 1814.<sup>478</sup>

collect odd pence. Dick and Bet form the comic element, the former using his "blether" to maintain order much to the amusement of the boys, who often get a sounding whack on their heads and backs. These 'Ploo Lads' (Plough Boys) seldom have a plough with them, as they used to have, but execute a rude dance wherever they think there is gain.<sup>479</sup>

But still the custom remained. The *History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely* records that 'the revived bacchanalian Plough Monday plough-drawing (left to children c. 1920-39) by beribboned village lads with blackened faces'<sup>480</sup> was still taking place just before the First World War. A Mr Foster, interviewed by Paul Davenport in 1981, remembered the 'vessel-cuppers' or plough Lads in Roos annually from 1916 onwards. 'They came from Driffield, Sledmere, Garton on the Wolds after the hirings if not hired...Blackened faces with cork - didn't was[h] for a

<sup>478</sup> <[http://www.yorkshire-folk-arts.com/info/traditions/plough\\_stotts.html](http://www.yorkshire-folk-arts.com/info/traditions/plough_stotts.html)> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>479</sup> J. Nicholson, *Folklore of East Yorkshire* 1890, p. 17. From Paul Davenport, <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>480</sup> A. F. Wareham & A. P. M. Wright, 'Swaffham Prior', *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 10: Cheveley, Flendish, Staine and Staploe Hundreds (north-eastern Cambridgeshire)* (Victoria County History: 2002), pp. 273-278. <[http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=18878&strquery=blackened face](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=18878&strquery=blackened+face)> [accessed 23 November 2008].

week. Slept in horse box at top of village used Roos as a base.<sup>481</sup> Another informant told Andrea Robertson that Plough Stots were called 'mummies' up until the First World War. In the 1920s the 'lead' dancer, Sam Clayton, wore a bull's skull with the horns attached, carried a cudgel and had his face made up in red and white stripes. The other dancers had blackened faces; about half were dressed as women. The men's jackets had ribbons pinned on like streamers and a stripe of ribbon pinned down the leg of the trousers. Mr Walker variously described the leader as the 'devil' or as 'frightening the devil'.<sup>482</sup>

In Cambridgeshire the schoolboys' begging tradition was called 'Black Boying'. Russell Wortley noted that in Bottisham 'On Plough Monday in the morning the village boys used to go round with their faces marked with patches of black (by means of burnt corks)<sup>483</sup> while in Great Wilbraham schoolboys 'blackened their faces and shouted the rhyme.'<sup>484</sup> George Maynard, of Whittlesford, near Cambridge, 'quotes his father as saying that in 1853 the boys would mark their faces with black spots made with soot. They would then go to the more respectable people's doors calling out 'tid de rol, tid de rol' and ask for a gratuity.'<sup>485</sup>

However, in Cambridgeshire it is Molly Dancing which is most strongly associated with Plough Monday. Most references to Molly Dancing are relatively recent: 'The custom is not as ancient as Cotswold Morris, but rather a more recent development which peaked in the early part of the nineteenth century.'<sup>486</sup> Mostly what is known is due to the work of Joseph Needham, Arthur Peck, Cyril Papworth and Russell Wortley, William Palmer and, latterly, George Frampton and Elaine Bradtke.

Molly Dancers had a Lord and a Lady, together with other dancers, some in women's clothing, some men wearing shirts decorated with ribbons, rosettes or sashes. Trousers were tied below the knee with ribbons or strips of cloth known as 'lallygags'. Many Molly dancers wore blacking on their faces: Bradtke tabulates nineteen instances of 'B=black-face' in her table summarizing details of Molly dancers before 1940, with sixty-eight other references marked as 'no information'.<sup>487</sup> Fieldnotes in the Russell Wortley collection give some further details. Interviewing Mr Osbourne, then aged 69, at Great Wilbraham, 26 March 1938, he was told, 'At one time they blacked their faces, but they didn't think that was "needful".'<sup>488</sup> He also notes: 'Molly Dancers before 1914 at C. Camps – not on P[lough] M[onday] – in winter when many were out of work – dressed up with

<sup>481</sup> Paul Davenport, Field Notes Ms. 21st March 1981- Interview with Mr. Foster, Roos, on <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>482</sup> Andrea Robertson, Field notes 7th August 1994 Interview with Mr. A. Walker. From Paul Davenport, <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>483</sup> Russell Wortley collection 97-022/7/1/28.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 97-022/7/1/31.

<sup>485</sup> Judith Allen, 'It Is the Custom in This Village', *Folklore*, 92 (1981), pp. 67-76 (p. 71).

<sup>486</sup> Elaine Bradtke, *Truculent Rustics: Molly Dancing in East Anglia before 1940*. ed. by Jennifer Chandler (London: The Folklore Society 1999), p. 17.

<sup>487</sup> Elaine Bradtke, *Truculent Rustics: Molly Dancing in East Anglia before 1940*. ed. by Jennifer Chandler (London: The Folklore Society 1999), Appendix.

<sup>488</sup> Russell Wortley collection 97-022/7/1/ 26 March 1938.

different bits and pieces – (some with skirts) blacked faces – triangle and accordion for music.<sup>489</sup>

An earlier note by Cecil Sharp, from information given him by Robert Grimditch, then in Ely workhouse, states, 'The sweeper they called Humpty. He had a hump on his back, a besom in his hand, his face blackened, and a long tail of braided straw hanging down his back.'<sup>490</sup> It is unclear from this whether this referred to Molly Dancers in particular or other Plough Monday customs, but it is included here because it references not only the blackened face, but also a 'tail' and the use of straw in the costume. Census returns show Robert Grimditch, born around 1831 in Little Downham, was an agricultural labourer in 1891. When an earlier census was taken, in March 1851, his father is registered as living on parish relief, so his is exactly the kind of family to be involved in begging customs to supplement their winter provisions.

Some of the last performances by the Little Downham Molly Dancers, in 1932 and 1933, were observed by William Palmer. He noted that by 6 p.m. on 9 January, 1933:

Already two "gangs" of boys were parading the streets dressed up as Molly Dancers, with blackened faces and ribbons attached to their clothing. One gang had an accordion player, and the other a mouth organ and tambourine. They seemed to be jigging about in imitation of the real Molly Dancers.

Of the adults, he wrote:

There were six men in the "gang": an accordion player, a Bessy, a man carrying a birch broom and the money-box, and three others. The Bessy wore a hat and veil, and a skirt over a large straw "bustle." The other five had blackened faces.<sup>491</sup>

There are other references to the use of straw in the costume, probably as much for insulation as shape, and of course in this area the Straw Bear also visits on Plough Monday.<sup>492</sup>

#### 4.4.3 May Day

May Day has a long association with folk practices, from the 'bringing in the may' referred to by Bishop Grosseteste around 1240, through the May games associated with early accounts of morris dancing, to the maypoles and children's garlands which survived into the twentieth century.<sup>493</sup> Intriguingly, in Manchester there was a custom of small boys calling themselves Molly dancers blacking their

<sup>489</sup> Russell Wortley collection 97-022/7/1/10.

<sup>490</sup> Cited in Joseph Needham, and Arthur L. Peck, 'Molly Dancing in East Anglia', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 1 (1933), 79-85.

<sup>491</sup> William Palmer, 'Plough Monday 1933 at Little Downham', *EDS*, XXXVI (1974), pp. 24-5 (p. 24).

<sup>492</sup> See <<http://www.strawbear.org.uk/History.htm>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

<sup>493</sup> See John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1999), pp. 127-139; Jacqueline Simpson, and Steve Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 226-230.

faces, dressing up in women's clothing and going from door to door soliciting money and treats during the week leading up to the first of May, although this is not related to the East Anglian form: the same name is used as 'molly' is an old term for a lower-class woman or an effeminate man.<sup>494</sup> This section, however, refers to those May Day customs relating to the milkmaids' and sweeps' celebrations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Certainly as early as the seventeenth century it was the custom on May 1<sup>st</sup> for milkmaids to decorate their milkpails, which they carried on their heads, and dance in the streets.<sup>495</sup> As can be seen from the illustration below, the milkpail evolved into a 'garland' decorated with silverware so large it required an attendant to carry it. The picture also shows sweeps' boys playing on shovel and brush. At some point the sweeps also began to carry a garland. 'The concept of the garland did not belong only to the Milkmaids, and other groups were taking advantage of May Day as a good occasion to collect from the public.'<sup>496</sup> An illustration accompanying a 1769 poem shows a sweeps' garland almost identical to the milkmaids' example, accompanied by a figure wearing a crown and one in a tall conical hat with a streamer attached.<sup>497</sup> A later illustration, dated 1778, also includes a figure in a crown, with what appears to be a streamer behind, playing on a brush and shovel. There does not appear to be a garland, unless the elaborate head-dress of the woman figure is intended as such. The illustration has the words 'Ev'n Sweeps highly prance, And in fantastic Dance, Announce[s] return of the May' printed beneath.<sup>498</sup>



<sup>494</sup> <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/making\\_history/makhist10\\_prog5d.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/making_history/makhist10_prog5d.shtml)> [accessed 16 April 2010].

<sup>495</sup> Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*. 2nd edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), pp. 3-9.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>498</sup> <<http://legacy.lclark.edu/~jhart/mezzo1775/mezzodated1778.html>> [accessed 18 April 2010]. The streamer is cropped off in the same illustration in Judge, p. 12.

'The Milkmaid's Garland' or 'Humours of Mayday', Francis Hayman c. 1741-2.<sup>499</sup> William Hone's *Every-day Book: Or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastime, Ceremonies* gives detailed accounts and illustrations of some May Day customs. One letter, dated April 14, 1825, tells of a similar practice in Wales, and although milkmaids are not mentioned it refers to many features which by now will be familiar to the reader. The area is not given, but the Cadi Ha is associated nowadays with Denbighshire and Flintshire in North Wales. In the days prior to May Day houses in the neighbourhood were solicited for the 'loan of watches, silver spoons, or whatever other utensils of this metal are likely to make a brilliant display'. The chief of the characters was the Cadi:

... always the most active person in the company...by virtue of his important office, the chief marshal, orator, buffoon, and money collector. He is always arrayed in comic attire, generally in a partial dress of both sexes. His countenance is also particularly distinguished by a hideous mask, or is blackened entirely over; and then the lips, cheeks, and orbits of the eyes are sometimes painted red...As the procession moves slowly along, the Cadi varies his station, hovers about his party, brandishes a ladle, and assails every passenger with comic eloquence and ludicrous persecution, for a customary and expected donation.<sup>500</sup>

The rest of the party wore shirts and hats decorated with ribbon, 'The ornaments of the hats are large rosettes of varied colours, with streamers depending from them', and carried a white handkerchief which they 'throw up...with a shout' during their dance in a manner similar to that of Cotswold morris dancers today. The garland is described in detail:

... a long staff or pole, to which is affixed a triangular or square frame, covered with strong white linen, on which the silver ornaments are firmly fixed, and displayed with the most studious taste. Silver spoons and smaller forms are placed in the shape of stars, squares, and circles. Between these are rows of watches; and at the top of the frame, opposite the pole in its centre, their whole collection is crowned with the largest and most costly of the ornaments; generally a large silver cup or tankard.<sup>501</sup>

This garland was carried around the farmhouses of the area:

During the whole of this time, the buffoonery of the Cadi is exhibited without intermission. He assails the inmates of the house for money, and when this is obtained he bows or curtsies his thanks, and the procession moves off to the next farmhouse. They do not confine the ramble of the day to their own parish, but go from one to another, and to any country town in the vicinity...<sup>502</sup>

<sup>499</sup> ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/21306-popup.html>> [accessed 18 April 2010].

<sup>500</sup> William Hone, *The Every-day Book: Or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastime, Ceremonies ..* (Hunt and Clarke, 1826) . <<http://www.archive.org/stream/everydaybookore00honegoog#page/n300/mode/1up>> [accessed 8 March 2010].

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.



By now, it is not surprising to hear that after expenses, the money collected during the day's excursion was 'spent in jovial festivity'.<sup>503</sup> It was probably the *Cadi Ha* which was witnessed by Mr Nathaniel Caine of Liverpool at Abergele (N. Wales) in 1849:

a crowd of people gathered round a troop of men, bedizened in many coloured rags and tawdry ribbons, their faces painted, and performing all sorts of loutish, awkward antics; accompanied by the discordant tones of a broken-winded fife, and the discordant tootings of a brass horn. They told him these men were Morris-dancers; what that meant he could not tell.<sup>504</sup>

William Hone's *Every-day Book* also contains a letter dated 1823, from Hitchin, Hertfordshire. It describes how, in the early hours of the morning, a 'Mayers' Song' is sung and boughs brought in to decorate the doors of the town.<sup>505</sup>

Later,

parties of these Mayers are seen dancing and frolicking in various parts of the town. The group that I saw to-day...was composed as follows. First came two men with their faces blacked, one of them with a birch broom in his hand, and a large artificial hump on his back; the other

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England), Issue 2097, 5 June 1849.

<sup>505</sup> Compare this with current tradition in Padstow, Cornwall, where branches are brought to decorate the town, and night singers visit houses around the town from midnight into the early hours.



dressed as a woman, all in rags and tatters, with a large straw bonnet on, and carrying a ladle: these are called "mad Moll and her husband:" Next came two men, one most fantastically dressed with ribbons, and a great variety of gaudy coloured silk handkerchiefs tied round his arms from the shoulders to the wrists, and down his thighs and legs to the ancles; he carried a drawn sword in his hand; leaning upon his arm was a youth dressed as a fine lady, in white muslin, and profusely bedecked from top to toe with gay ribbons: these, I understood, were called the "Lord and Lady" of the company; after these followed six or seven couples more, attired much in the same style as the lord and lady, only the men were without swords. When this group received a satisfactory contribution at any house, the music struck up from a violin, clarionet, and fife,<sup>506</sup> accompanied by the long drum, and they began the merry dance.

It will be noted that the Lord and Lady, cross-dressing, ribbons, black faces, hump, besom, and ladle all appear here, as in many other settings.

The bringing of greenery into towns may be associated with the development of Jack-in-the-Green, a man garlanded from head to foot with greenery and flowers

<sup>506</sup> William Hone, *The Every-day Book: Or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastime, Ceremonies ..* (Hunt and Clarke, 1826).  
<<http://www.archive.org/stream/everydaybookore00honegoog#page/n301/mode/1up>>  
[accessed 8 March 2010] Image p. 302.

which became associated with the sweeps' processions in the late eighteenth century.<sup>507</sup> The last of the entries here from Hone concerns a Chimney Sweeps' parade of 1825:

Their garland is a large cone of holly and ivy framed upon hoops, which gradually diminishes in size to an apex, whereon is sometimes a floral crown, knots of ribbons, or bunches of flowers; its sides are decorated in like manner; and within it is a man who walks wholly unseen, and hence the garland has the semblance of a moving hillock of evergreens. The chimney-sweepers' jackets and hats are bedizened with gilt embossed paper; sometimes they wear coronals of flowers in their heads; their black faces and legs are grotesquely coloured with Dutch-pink; their shovels are scored with this crimson pigment, interlaced with white chalk. Their lord and lady are magnificent indeed...he carries in his right hand a high cane with a shining metal knob, and in his left a handkerchief held by one corner, and of a colour once white. His lady is sometimes a strapping girl, though usually a boy in female attire, indescribably flaunty and gaudy; her head in full dress; in her right hand a brass ladle, in her left a handkerchief like to my lord's...they twirl and whirl in sight of each other, though on opposite sides of the dancing garland, to the continued clatter of the shovel and brush held by each capering member of the sooty tribe...with imploring looks, to spectators or in the street; the little sootikins hold up their shovels, my lady with outstretched arm presents the bowl of her ladle, and "the smallest donations are thankfully received" by all the sable fraternity...This is the chimney-sweepers' London pageant on May-day 1825; but for the first time, there was this year added a clown, a-la-Grimaldi, to one or two of the sweeping processions.<sup>508</sup>



Jack in the Green: May Day Celebrations of the Chimney Sweeps of London,

<sup>507</sup> See Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*. 2nd edn (London: FLS Books, 2002) for a definitive account.

<sup>508</sup> William Hone, *The Every-day Book: Or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastime, Ceremonies ..* (Hunt and Clarke, 1826), <<http://www.archive.org/stream/everydaybookore00honegoog#page/n311/mode/1up>> [accessed 8 March 2010].

c.1850, by Thomas Sevestre.<sup>509</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the kind of disorder which seems to have been associated with Pace Eggers and Molly Dancers was also attendant. In the same year as the description above,

A motley groupe of May-day sweeps, consisting of Jack in the Green, May-day Moll, a drummer, a mouth-organ player, and a fiddler, with about nine persons of very suspicious appearance, were brought to this office by a party of Bow Street Patrol...amongst all the prisoners, there was only one sweep, the rest were well known characters who were in league with a desperate gang of pickpockets.<sup>510</sup>

These pickpockets were seen moving amongst the crowd gathered to watch the sweeps. On this occasion the magistrate proved a little more sympathetic, as he said, 'it would serve them all right to commit them, indiscriminately, to prison, as rogues and vagabonds; but he did not wish to interfere unnecessarily with the customary amusements of the lower classes'.<sup>511</sup>

Roy Judge has amassed numerous references to Sweeps' and Jack-in-the-Green festivals, a few of which are given below.

[1827, Lewes, Sussex] ...the Chimney Sweepers, who dressed up in all the finery that different coloured paper, cut into patches, and stitched to shirts having a greyish hue, can produce. The brush and soot board are in perpetual motion...<sup>512</sup>

[1850, Uxbridge, Middlesex] ...the group consists of Bagley's Sweeps and climbing boys, all washed clean, decorated in fancy costume, ribbons, etc., two or three of them dressed as girls with painted and powdered faces and arms...<sup>513</sup>

[1843, Birmingham, Warwickshire] ...a great band of sweeps, gaily bedizened in long robes, enlivened with coloured paper, and many of them attired in women's clothes, paraded the streets of Birmingham and other Midland towns, accompanied by a Jack-in-the-Green and very noisy and unskilled music.<sup>514</sup>

[1860s, Farnham, Surrey] ...On that same morning the chimney-sweeps came round, gathering largess. A wonder it was to see that their oddly familiar faces, usually sooty, were really much the same colour as other people's.<sup>515</sup>

These references are interesting because they point to the sweeps, who would normally have faces blackened with soot in their day-to-day occupation, sometimes

<sup>509</sup> Image ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London, taken from <http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/readArticle/94> [accessed 19 April 2010].

<sup>510</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Issue 17487, 4 May 1825.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> T. W. Horsfield, *The History and Antiquities of Lewes and its Vicinity*, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 159.

<sup>513</sup> Thomas Strutt, *The Peregrinations of a Kiddy*, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 190.

<sup>514</sup> Lady, 29 April 1897, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p.127.

<sup>515</sup> Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 143.

going to the opposite extreme for their festivities. ‘Painted and powdered’, ‘grotesquely coloured with Dutch-pink’, their faces are referred to elsewhere as ‘marked with chalk’ or ‘whitened with meal’, or sometimes even painted with brick-dust.<sup>516</sup> Yet other references do point to black faces:

[1892, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire] The dancers are the chimney-sweeps of the town, two of whom, dressed in ordinary clothes, but with faces blacked, play on a fiddle and a tin-whistle for the dancing...Three young men are attached, so to speak, to the bush, and now begin to dance around it. Their faces are blackened; they are crowned with complete caps (not garlands) made of all manner of leaves and flowers.<sup>517</sup>

[1911, Tring, Hertfordshire] The old customs connected with May Day have not yet died out in Tring. On Monday bands of youngsters, in grotesque garbs, and with their faces blacked, paraded the town and made a not very graceful Maypole dance, to the accompaniment of “tin can” music.<sup>518</sup>

Such processions, with their ‘basic pattern of Jack, Lord, Lady, Clown, Music and Imp or Imps’,<sup>519</sup> are relevant to this thesis in three ways: the similarity of the figures involved to those in other such customs; the mention of blackened faces; the influence of popular culture, in the later inclusion of clown figures; and the fact that the revived traditions take place in the south of England today, just as the Straw Bear and associated Molly dancing have been revived in Cambridgeshire.

#### 4.4.4 Morris dance

A lively traditional English dance performed in formation by a group of dancers in a distinctive costume (usually wearing bells and ribbons and carrying handkerchiefs or sticks, to emphasize the rhythm and movement), often accompanied by a character who generally represents a symbolic or legendary figure (as the Fool, Hobby Horse, Maid Marian, etc.); any of a repertoire of such dances. Hence: any mumming performance of which such dancing is an important feature (now rare).<sup>520</sup>

The OED’s first reference regarding morris dance is dated 1458, and is from the will of Alice Westerhale, who left to her daughter three silver cups ‘sculptos cum moreys daunce’. Later examples refer to ‘morrise daunce’, ‘Mourice daunce’, ‘morres daunce’, ‘morrice daunce’ and ‘moreis daunce’, while entries for ‘morris dancer’ include ‘Moryssh Dauncers’, ‘morys dauncers’, ‘Moresdauncers’, ‘Morris-dancers’ and ‘Morrice-dancer’, all before the end of the seventeenth century. Add to this medley entries for ‘Blackamoor’ which include ‘blake More’ and ‘Blacke Moryns or Mores’, and for ‘Moor’, ‘More’, ‘maures’, ‘mowres’, ‘moure’, and ‘mores’,

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>518</sup> *Bucks Herald*, 6 May 1911, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 189.

<sup>519</sup> Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>520</sup> OED online.

and the confusion which has surrounded the early origins of morris is apparent.<sup>521</sup> References to mummers, Moors, Matachins, moriscos, fool's dance, morris dance, in contexts of masques, processions, and May games increase the difficulty of teasing out a chronology.<sup>522</sup>

One early reference to blackface, published in 1743 but written by Franz Junius, 1589-1677, demonstrates the problem: 'They generally smear their faces with soot and wear a foreign style of dress to take part in such spectacles so as to appear to be Moors.'<sup>523</sup> This is often taken to refer to morris dancers blackening their faces, but nowhere in this quote does it say they were then referred to as 'morris dancers'.<sup>524</sup> 'Traditional' morris teams extant today have records dating back to 1560, 1623, 1722, 1700s, 1747, but these are Cotswold teams, who do not use blacking.<sup>525</sup> For this reason, I intend here to try and draw out a few general points regarding morris dance rather than attempt a comprehensive review of early information.

Firstly, one theory of the origins of morris states that it came from Morocco via Spain, and was a 'Moorish' dance. We have seen above that disguising as Moors was a pastime amongst the court. (see Section 4.1.1) Secondly, the Puritans thought morris dance was pagan, the work of the devil, and the devil was represented in blackface. It must be noted, though, that 'pagan' in this context often meant Popish, that is, connected with the church before the Reformation. Next, the connection of morris with May games and the early appearance of a man/woman figure in the form of the Maid Marian should be noted. May games came to play a part in the depiction of morris in the theatre:

The stage morris was typically performed by a rural troupe (often played by the company's clowns) as part of a May game or other spring festival, forming an interlude in the main drama for the amusement of the main characters in the play<sup>526</sup>

and a jig was often performed at the end of a performance. Shakespeare's clown/fool was Will Kempe, famous for his morris dance from London to Norwich. Cutting goes on to state, 'The fad for importing images specifically from May games into stage plays peaked around 1600 and again around 1620, but by the 1630s it was passe.'<sup>527</sup> Nevertheless, similar interludes developed for use between acts using morris as well as other exotic dances and survived into the late nineteenth century, as described in Section 4.1.2.

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> For a comprehensive account of what is known to date, see John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1999), and for a shorter summary of sources, see John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005).

<sup>523</sup> Franz Junius, *Etymologicum Anglicanum*, 1743, trans. by Mark West, 1983, cited in John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005), p. 22.

<sup>524</sup> Of course it may be that appears elsewhere in the document, which I have been unable to find.

<sup>525</sup> <[http://www.themorrisring.org/Ring\\_History.htm](http://www.themorrisring.org/Ring_History.htm)> [accessed 25 April 2010].

<sup>526</sup> John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1999), p. 219.

<sup>527</sup> Op.cit.

Given the geographical localisation of what is known of some customs today, it is unclear what is referred to when mention is made of morris in earlier times. It could be that no distinction was made between the types as they emerged in the twentieth century.<sup>528</sup> Possibly any dance of the common people in distinctive dress was referred to as 'morris': 'The single holiday of the sweep is, or used to be, on May-Day, and consisted in a silly exhibition of themselves and families in the garb of morris-dancers, accompanied with rough music in the public streets.'<sup>529</sup> Cecil Sharp noted 'Morris is nearly always associated with strange customs which are apparently quite independent of the dance itself.'<sup>530</sup> Certainly he and other early collectors of morris favoured the Cotswold version, and so the chance to collect information about variants in the nineteenth century was lost: 'the concentration of collectors and researchers in this direction was balanced by a neglect of morris from elsewhere'.<sup>531</sup>

Apropos the subject of this thesis, Cutting notes

The question of blackface looms large in many discussions of morris origins, but it is in fact a fairly rare occurrence if one looks at the whole range of traditional morris as collected. The only areas in which it attains significant proportions is the border morris of Shropshire, Hereford and Worcestershire.<sup>532</sup>

Although Cutting overlooked the Molly Dancers of East Anglia, it is the Welsh Border area which will now be examined in greater detail.

The term 'Border Morris', now widely used, was proposed by E. C. Cawte in his article 'The Morris Dance in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire'.<sup>533</sup> After examining records of morris in those counties, he concluded that there was a distinct difference between the dances there and those recorded elsewhere. Again, not all of the examples quoted here mention blackened faces, but since this is one of the features Cawte found was distinctive to this area, they are included because of other elements which parallel information from other areas of the country.

At Ketley, about 1840, at Christmas, colliers were seen 'dressed in grotesque clothes with a lot of gaudy ribbons, danced with stick hitting'. A reference to 'a good deal of "patter"' may infer there was a play as well as a dance.<sup>534</sup> In Shrewsbury the same year, and again in winter in the 1870's, bricklayers out of work because of frost were seen carrying their trowels and short thick staves, with 'a fiddler, and a fool who had ribbons on his hat and coat, coloured face, and a bell on the back of his belt'. In their dance they struck their trowels with the sticks.<sup>535</sup>

<sup>528</sup> Cotswold, sword (longsword and rapper), North-west, border, Molly, etc.: for more information see e.g. <<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town/avenue/pd49/morris/types.htm>> [accessed 25 April 2010].

<sup>529</sup> Cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2nd edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 64.

<sup>530</sup> John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005), p.33.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.193-4.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>533</sup> *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 9 (1963), 197-212.

<sup>534</sup> E. C. Cawte, 'The Morris Dance in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 9(1963),pp. 197-212, p. 202.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

In 1879-80 a team was seen in Much Wenlock:

Performances continued intermittently at Christmas until 1935. The dancers wore tags of cloth on their ordinary clothes, later the tags were paper, then the clothes changed to fancy dress reminiscent of circus clowns, and finally the tags were abandoned because boys used to set them alight. The dancers blacked their faces and hands, wore top hats, and some dressed as women. There were probably twelve dancers at one time, but this was later reduced to nine or seven: six or four of them holding sticks, and one each carrying tambourine, triangle, and bones.<sup>536</sup>

In Broseley a few years later, another team:

a dozen men, in fantastic dresses with plenty of coloured paper, and black faces, still appeared. They alternately hit sticks and danced, but there was no singing. The performances continued until about 1914, and children did the same sort of thing until about 1950. There were six or eight dancers, who wore women's dresses, feather boas, and flowered hats, and blacked their faces.<sup>537</sup>

Two hundred years earlier, 'dancers, with Lord of Misrule, Lord's Son, and six sword bearers' had been seen at Broseley, but as Cawte notes, without records it is impossible to say what took place in the intervening years.<sup>538</sup> At Evesham, from 1875 to 1895, ten dancers (who were also mummers) appeared wearing their ordinary clothes, but with black faces and coloured paper on their legs, together with 'a clown with a bladder, two collectors, and a concertina player'.<sup>539</sup> A BBC recording gave a similar description from Bromsberrow Heath, where a morris dance was performed at Christmas at the end of the nineteenth century:

The dancers wore pieces of rag tacked onto their ordinary clothes, ribbons, and bells, some wore women's clothes. The King, or Clown, wore a fur hat with a bell on it, and a bell at his waist. The music was provided by concertina, mouth organ, tambourine, triangle, and bones. Some of the team blacked their faces.<sup>540</sup>

Cawte cites many, many more instances, but here it will be sufficient to repeat his summary of the style:

Certain features, in particular the black faces, coloured cloth tags, and the clown's ladle, establish its relationship with other traditional rituals, in England and elsewhere. The black faces, season of performance, singing during the dance, and exclusive performance of stick dances in many places, in one or another combination distinguish it from all performances in neighbouring areas.<sup>541</sup>

It is fairly conclusive then that this form of morris was performed in blackface, but the dates of the references should be noted.

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>537</sup> Cited in Cawte, p. 201.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>540</sup> Cited in Cawte, p. 206.

<sup>541</sup> Cawte, p. 207.



There remains one more traditional blackface dance to be considered which, although associated with Morris today, is entirely unique – the Coconut Dance, so called because the dancers have wooden discs (earlier, actual coconut shells) fixed to hands, knees and waist/chest, which they strike during the dance. They also dance with hooped garlands. Performance of this dance was connected with Easter and also the summer rushbearing processions. Theresa Buckland has researched this tradition and traced its origins in the Rossendale area in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>542</sup>

Although the sole example of this tradition nowadays is the Britannia Coconut Dancers, Buckland found references to at least six teams in the early 1900s. The earliest record seems to be from the 1850s. The Tunstead Mill team, which handed on the tradition to the Britannia Nutters, was founded in 1857. Previously, in 1854, the *Rochdale Sentinel* had reported dancers from Shawclough: 'We saw these sable gentlemen dance a polka in the middle of Drake Street, waving circular garlands over their heads'.<sup>543</sup> However, coconut dancing is mentioned by name in newspapers only from 1882.

Buckland draws parallels with the coconut dances seen on the English stage in the nineteenth century. The first of these appeared in 1824, as part of the melodrama *Agamemnon, the Faithful Negro*.<sup>544</sup> The dance obviously became a popular feature, and I have found many references to such dances employed as interludes or pantomime scenes (see Section 4.1.2). For example, in 1825 a coconut dance was included in a pantomime based on Captain Cook's voyages; in 1840 it was part of a Circus entertainment; in 1853 it even appeared in a performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin.<sup>545</sup> In 1874 a lengthy account of the *Bluebeard* pantomime in Bradford included 'a number of juvenile black slaves, who perform the Cocoa Nut Dance'.<sup>546</sup> As Buckland states, 'The connection between stage coconut dancing and the representation of Africans is clear'.<sup>547</sup> It is less clear how this relates to street performance of the dance, but Buckland cites a theatrical handbill from 1865 and a photograph from Kent taken around 1891-3 which, taken together, seem to link the two.

By 1892, there is another instance of the cross-referential nature of theatrical performance: a feature by the Mohawk Minstrels 'was the introduction of the celebrated cocoa-nut dance, so named from the performers striking together, as they dance, the half shells of cocoa-nuts'.<sup>548</sup> This introduces another aspect of the

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<sup>542</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (1990), pp. 1-12.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>545</sup> *Liverpool Mercury etc* (Liverpool, England), Issue 715, 4 February 1825; *The Bristol Mercury* (Bristol, England), Issue 2646 28 November 1840; *The Era* (London, England), Issue 753, 27 February 1853.

<sup>546</sup> *The Bradford Observer* (Bradford, England), Issue 3742, 26 December 1874; p. 7.

<sup>547</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (1990), pp. 1-12 (p. 7).

<sup>548</sup> *The Era* (London, England), Issue 2811, 6 August 1892.

coconut dance: the link with minstrelsy. The impact of this tremendously successful entertainment on street buskers has been noted above (4.1.3): it would be foolish to believe there was not a similar impact on folk tradition. This will be discussed in greater detail below, but for now it will be sufficient to note that coconut dancers were referred to as 'nigger dancers' in the press, and that there were in the same area instances of the activity of 'niggering' (see discussion in Section 4.5). However, by the early 1900s coconut dancing had taken on its own identity so by then there was 'no need to relate it to the contemporary practices of black-faced pace-egging and niggering.'<sup>549</sup>

#### 4.4.5 Guy Fawkes

The end of the agricultural year attracts its own cluster of customs, but here mention will be made only of those relating to Guy Fawkes, chiefly because of a connection made between Fawkes and the devil: 'Guy Fawkes was represented as the emissary of Satan, and effigies of the Pope and the Devil appeared in processions in staunchly protestant districts.'<sup>550</sup> It was shown above how the devil was associated with a black face, and this could explain how Bonfire Night became associated with 'the carrying round of effigies or of live men with blackened faces, as well as processions with masks, disguises and music.'<sup>551</sup>

An example of a live guy can be found in 1835. On 5<sup>th</sup> November a 20-year-old man was seized, tied to a chair, his face blackened with lampblack and vermilion rubbed on his cheeks, then paraded around as a Guy Fawkes. A complaint about this treatment was dismissed because 'the complainant ... held out his "mug" [face] while they were using the blacking brush.'<sup>552</sup> Charlotte Burne remembered a live guy, as well as being told many years later of boys in Coventry 'with masks or blackened faces go[ing] from house to house begging for money to expend on bonfires and fireworks'.<sup>553</sup> Her account of a November 5<sup>th</sup> procession in 1903 is even more interesting:

London this year; a sign, I fear, of want of work among the casual labourers. One procession, which I saw from my window in Kensington about the middle of the day, deserves notice. The "Guy," an unusually large one, was mounted in a small cart drawn by a pony. It was preceded, first, by a man ringing a bell, and then by two dancers, wearing costumes resembling that of a clown and masks of the common painted kind sold in the shops at this season, who danced up the street in front of the effigy in the real old style, lifting the arms in the air alternately, in time to the motion of the feet. For musicians they had a man playing a shrill long tin whistle or pipe, and another following the cart beating a drum. A man in woman's clothes walked beside the cart, occasionally cutting a clumsy caper, as well as his clinging skirts would allow. The rear of the procession was brought up by the clown, capering and curveting and shaking his money-box. It was a poor vulgar show,

<sup>549</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (1990), pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

<sup>550</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, 'Folklore and Myth', *Folklore*, 87 (1976), pp. 131-45 (p. 142).

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>552</sup> *The Examiner* (London, England), Issue 1451, 22 November 1835.

<sup>553</sup> Mabel Peacock, and C. S. Burne, 'Fifth of November Customs', *Folklore*, 14 (1903), 89-91 (p.91); Charlotte S. Burne, 'Guy Fawkes' Day', *Folklore*, 23 (1912), pp. 409-26, footnote p. 418.

no doubt, but it retained in its debased state several of the principal features of the old morris-dance. There were the time-honoured figures of the Fool and the Bessy accompanying the dancers; the drum and penny whistle represented the ancient tabor and pipe; while the bell which the Fool formerly wore hung at his back, was now carried in the van to inform the householders of the passing of the show (very possibly the original purpose for which the bell was introduced). As a remarkable specimen of what is daily becoming rarer, genuine London folklore, I think this Guy Fawkes procession is worthy of record.<sup>554</sup>

The account itself draws parallels with other similar processions, but it is thanks to Burne's interest in and knowledge of such matters that the description above is so complete: the similarities could so easily have been lost, just as the newspaper reference to the 'live' guy only survives because he took his complaint to the authorities. Burne also witnessed the larger bonfire processions in the south-east, in Hastings, Rye and Folkestone, processions which still take place in that area and which have survived in unbroken tradition in Lewes.<sup>555</sup>

Roud notes how, from the time of the Gunpowder Plot,

Guy Fawkes night continued to develop as a mass working-class event, with the streets of most towns thronged every year with crowds, bonfires everywhere, fireworks thrown, and guns fired indiscriminately, along with spectacular practices such as the rolling of blazing tar barrels. But by the mid nineteenth century, these street celebrations were increasingly seen as dangerous drunken riots that should not be tolerated, and many towns in England, but particularly in the south saw growing confrontations between the 'bonfire boys', who were determined to keep up their old traditions come what may, and town authorities, who were equally determined to put them down.<sup>556</sup>

In Worthing in 1853, a group known as the 'Skeleton Boys', but which was closely related with the Bonfire Clubs, was involved in one such riot against the Salvation Army. The members were often described as 'on November 5 and other occasions...being "grotesquely disguised" with "blackened faces"<sup>557</sup> Notwithstanding the links between guys and black faces, Hare suggests this added to the mystery of the proceedings, as well as preventing identification. I would like to suggest a further possibility. According to Hare, 'When Captain Ada Smith declared "If the Devil doesn't attack us, we ought to attack him," she was flinging down a challenge to traditional plebeian culture which could not be ignored.'<sup>558</sup> Since she likened her opponents to the Devil, might the Bonfire Boys not have adopted the Devil's traditional black face in order to mock her further?

## 4.5 Links and Crossovers

Many common themes have been raised in the preceding sections. Here some will be made more explicit.

<sup>554</sup> Charlotte S. Burne, 'Fifth of November Customs', *Folklore*, 15 (1904), pp. 106-07.

<sup>555</sup> <<http://www.lewesbonfirecouncil.org.uk/societies/index.html>> [accessed 18 April 2010].

<sup>556</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 334.

<sup>557</sup> Chris Hare, 'The Skeleton Army and the Bonfire Boys, Worthing, 1884', *Folklore*, 99.2 (1988), pp. 221-31 (p. 227).

<sup>558</sup> Loc. cit.

An account, written in 1606, of a visit at a wedding feast will serve as an introduction:

In comes...a messenger from a maske, that deliuered such a speech of the aduenturs of an asse vpon the but of a rams horn, & the dangerous passage oner a puddle of water, that but for the honor of that knight, & trouble of his house, they wold not vndertake for a bushel of wheate, with a deal of trash as was not worth remembrance: somewhat absurdly ere the tale was told, with a dru~ & bagpipe came such a morice dau~ce, a maske I would say ther; but they made fools merry, and themselues sporte, I could saye little in their Commendation, but that for their cost and their cariage, bred and cheese, and a cup of ale, had ben a sufficient banquet for such a company: who hauing daunced, which they did very ilfauouredly, fel to dicing being both Maskers and mummers, when after the rate of nine shillings among eightheene- of them, they fell to plaie, and hauing gotten some ten groates, struck vp the drumm with no little mirth: for, though they cared not for their mony, yet their gaines would pay for their vizards: and for their clothes, they were but borrowed of their neighbours: but thus, after they had masked and mumed, away they went.<sup>559</sup>

From this we can take that the participants were lower-class, satisfied with bread-and-cheese and ale; that there was a visit, and a dance; that this morris dancing was associated with Mumming (in both its senses – the contemporary sense of a folk play implicit in the sometimes ridiculous claims from the introductory speech, and the older sense of disguised men involved in playing dice); that it was amateurish performance, them dancing ‘ill-favouredly’; that they acquired payment, in the form of winnings, which paid for their masks; and that disguise was worn, together with a ‘costume’ removed from yet still rooted in the everyday, in clothes ‘borrowed of their neighbours’. These are features which recur time and again in the examples of folk practices and blackface given above. Other persistent themes include procession, animal disguise, and men dressed in women’s clothes.

Before the advent of antiquarians and folklorists, those reporting on customs and traditions were in the large part ignorant of what they were describing, and so relevant detail (such as the form of disguise in the account above) has been lost. Unsurprisingly, there was cross-fertilisation between traditions, and features common in one area might exceptionally appear elsewhere. Russell Wortley found that in one Cambridgeshire village faces were not blacked, and instead on Boxing Day there were ‘Molly Dancers...men wearing animal heads’, and that the same animals’ heads were kept from year to year ‘prob. in families’.<sup>560</sup> Animal heads are connected with the Scotch Cattle, as well as the horses’ heads of Soulcaking etc. Moreover, rough music, in the form of the ‘instruments’ used, was linked with Molly Dancing too: ‘Some beat on old tin kettles and pans, others played mouth organs or concertinas.’<sup>561</sup> One informant, Mr Charles Huntlea of Girton, gave evidence of the overlapping of now ‘geographical’ customs in a given area. He played for

<sup>559</sup>Nicholas Breton, *Choice, chance, and change: or, Conceites in their colours* (1606) [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:citation:99840444](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99840444) [accessed 7 April 2010].

<sup>560</sup> Russell Wortley collection 97-022/7/1/24.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 97-022/7/1/29.

Girton Molly Dancers but also for 'May Garlanding' on May Day – 'They dance round a Jack in the Green who held up a big green branch decorated with ornaments of various kinds'.<sup>562</sup>

Nor are the influences restricted in genre. Margaret Dean-Smith traced similarities between folk-plays and English masques,<sup>563</sup> while Peter Millington considered later links between theatre and folk play:

Can English folk plays have failed to be influenced by the Harlequinade? I doubt it. The costumes of the Harlequinade compare well with the decorated type of folk play costume. In particular Harlequin and Beelzebub have some similarities. Compare the mask and black face, and the bat and the club. Could there be a relationship? Most of the characters of the Italian Comedy wore masks, which in due course gave way to makeup. Perhaps here we have a source for the blackening of faces in folk plays.<sup>564</sup>

Comment has already been made on the inclusion of 'a Grimaldi' in the Sweeps' parade.

This report makes clear how easily one movement could be taken up by others, if there was profit to be made:

Of the fourteen unfortunate men who were executed at York, on the 15th Jan. 1813, not one-half of them, as I am informed, were in reality Luddites. Either five or six of them were Luddites, who were convicted of entering houses and demanding fire-arms, or breaking, or attempting to break machinery, part of them upon one charge, and part of them upon the other. As to the rest of the fourteen, they were, as I am informed, utter strangers to the system of Luddism: but knowing something of Luddism by popular rumour, they had designated themselves Luddites. Wherefore on entering a house they would preface their demand of money, by telling the people General Ludd was come: or that Ned Ludd had sent them to make such and such a demand.<sup>565</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that the biggest popular craze to hit nineteenth-century Britain should have an effect on those participating in traditions which were essentially a form of begging, and that minstrelsy – 'fashionable, readily accessible, and easily imitated in concept as well as repertoire' – was incorporated into existing practice.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 97-022/7/1/28.

<sup>563</sup> Margaret Dean-Smith, 'Folk-Play Origins of the English Masque', *Folklore*, 65 (1954), pp. 74-86.

<sup>564</sup> Peter Millington, *A New Look at English Folk Play Costumes*, <<http://freespace.virgin.net/peter.millington1/Costumes/Costumes.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>565</sup> George Beaumont, *The Beggar's Complaint*, (Sheffield: J. Crome, 1813) on <<https://eee.uci.edu/clients/bjbecker/SpinningWeb/week8d.html>> [accessed 19 February 2010].

<sup>566</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (1990), pp. 1-12 (p. 8).

This process can be traced through newspaper accounts, photographs and reminiscences. In 1851 the *Oxford Chronicle* noted:

We must not forget to mention that the sweeps as usual turned out in considerable groups, with their May garlands and fantastic dresses. Some of the decorated “darkies” were accompanied by a fiddler, or a tambourine, while one or two of the parties adopted the more appropriate music (?) of the banjo and bones.<sup>567</sup>

Note the reference to ‘darkies’ rather than ‘sooty tribe’, and to the ‘appropriate’ music of banjo and bones. The following decade, it was again reported that ‘the chimney-sweepers have, in some cases, been reinforced by the black minstrels.’<sup>568</sup>

This infiltration was the cause of regret for a reporter in 1879:

All that is left of such exhibitions is the guise-dancing, which in Cornwall supplies the place of the Midland Mumming. Worse still, at St. Just the guisers have of late years given up the old dragon-play, with St. George, and the Doctor, and Saladin, &c., and become a mere band of nigger minstrels – a sad falling-off indeed.<sup>569</sup>

This influence was to continue in Padstow until the twenty-first century. The complete integration of the minstrel into the existing folk characters can be judged from this account from E. H. Shepard’s memoirs:

One fellow, completely covered with greenery, so that only his legs were showing, was jiggling up and down. Another had his face smeared with paint to represent a clown, and a third, in striped cloth coat and trousers, with a huge collar and a blackened face, was beating a tambourine. But the one that really frightened me was a man got up as a woman.<sup>570</sup>

Imitation of minstrels was adapted into current custom. Buckland refers to the practice known as ‘niggering’:

Gangs of young boys with blackened faces would perambulate the streets at Eastertide, performing popular songs and playing mouth organs, tambourines, and bones, or whatever musical instruments they could find. Some wore striped trousers and straw hats, but for most boys blackening the face was sufficient to identify themselves as niggers.<sup>571</sup>

This took place around Rossendale, in the area where Pace-egging was carried out. Was this simply a continuation, under what was then thought of as a more acceptable format, since pace-egging had become frowned upon? The photograph below, taken in 1913, shows the Mary-Anne Street Pace Eggers of Accrington. One of them, ‘Tosspot’, with a blackened face, top hat, fancy suit, holding a fretless banjo, definitely appears to be linked with minstrelsy.

<sup>567</sup> Oxford Chronicle, 3 May 1851, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p. 165.

<sup>568</sup> Cited in Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green*, p. 60.

<sup>569</sup> *The Graphic* (London, England), Issue 517, 25 October 1879.

<sup>570</sup> E. H. Shepard, *Drawn from Memory*, cited in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green : A May Day Custom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: FLS Books, 2002), p.181.

<sup>571</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage', *Dance Research Journal*, 22.2 (1990), pp. 1-12 (p. 7).



Mary-Anne Street Pace Eggers, 1913<sup>572</sup>

Cawte found examples of influence in the Welsh borders:

There was a team at Orleton up to the 1920's at Christmas. Two dancers carried bones in each hand, and the third a tambourine. The fourth, who also sometimes danced, played an accordion. They wore fancy clothes and top hats with feathers, and blacked their faces. They had neither bells nor sticks.<sup>573</sup>

Also:

An account of 'niggering' comes from Aston on Clun. The lads of the village dressed in old clothes, blacked their faces, and toured the inns at Christmas, up to 1938, with bones, tambourines, tin whistle and such like, but there was practically no dance.<sup>574</sup>

On the other side of the country, this account of plough customs shows the influence of minstrel songs:

Between Martinmas and Christmas was a generally slack time for farmers, and it was during this time that the young farmhands went 'plough ladding'...The lads has blackened faces, wore strange clothes; one was usually dressed up as a woman, and one as a doctor. They

<sup>572</sup> Alan Seymour (personal communication): note made 1977, information and photograph from Mrs Catherine Taylor of Accrington.

<sup>573</sup> E. C. Cawte, 'The Morris Dance in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 9(1963), pp.197-212 (p.204).

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203.

had bells on their boots, and played melodeons or mouth organs to the accompaniment of rattling spoons or dried sheep's rib bones which they called knick-knacks. They sang loudly and danced, and knocked boldly on cottage doors asking for some money, drink, a kiss or all three!

We're niggers from the south, ha! ha!  
 We cannot shut our mouth  
 We took him to the tailors shop  
 To get his mouth made smaller

a popular song in Aldborough, and from nearby Garton

Where is that nigger Josey gone  
 Look for him everywhere  
 There'll be no fun at the ball tonight  
 If Josey isn't there.<sup>575</sup>

However, definitive evidence of how and why minstrelsy had an effect on existing customs is contained in the reminiscences of a group of men from Bloxham, near Banbury, recorded in 1978 by Yvonne Huntriss.<sup>576</sup>

Their tales would have covered memories going back to the middle of the nineteenth century, but mummering continued strongly till the First World War. After this war niggering began: the "Niggers" often being called "The Bloxham Mummers". As will be seen the links between true mummering and niggering are unbroken and interesting.

An account of the Mummering is given:

Mr. Preedy remembers that they came down the street on Boxing Day; some wore masks, those who had no masks had faces blacked with cork and candle. They were either four or five in number. He remembers that the first mummer would come across with a besom and sweep the doorsteps, and up and down the middle of the road. Then the mummers would do a dance similar to that of the Morris Dancers. The one with the besom would suddenly shout out: "Here comes old Father Beelzebub, and in his hand he carries his club." Other remembered words were 'For where is a man that will bid me stand? I'll knock him down right in the sand. I'll cut him up as small as flies, and then you can have him to make mincepies." He would then run at the crowd with his club which was a knobbly stick and frighten the children to death. One mummer was dressed as a woman.

Reasons are given why the niggering was taken up:

There is a general agreement that niggering took over from mummering to keep up the old custom. Where there were four or five mummers, they could manage with three niggers. These also went round the streets on Boxing Day. No masks were used but the niggers blacked their faces. They wore red mufflers and flashy waistcoats with pearl buttons, black trousers and high silk hats. In the early days they wore ribbons on the back of their long tail coats, recalling those Mr. Woodford remembers worn by the mummers. These coats were often

<sup>575</sup> A. Wright, *Folklore of Holderness*, Hedon & District Local History Society, 1978, pp. 8, 9. From Paul Davenport, <[http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm)> [accessed 22 March 2010].

<sup>576</sup> Y.S. Huntriss, 'Mummering and Niggering in Bloxham', *Cake & Cockhorse* 7 (1978), pp. 219-25. <<http://www.cherwell-c.gov.uk/media/pdf/n/4/pdf4605351411515079278.PDF>> [accessed 22 February 2009].



secondhand, donated or lent by the gentry or their staff, and if they were too big it did not matter because it was always cold and then two or three jackets could be worn underneath.

Huntriss gives another rationale for the inclusion of minstrel elements:

It is possible that as the words of the mummers' plays were handed down verbally, gaps may have occurred in them as the ritual became less important to the actors, and minstrel songs inserted to make up for them. Mr. Preedy says: "The mummers would interweave dance to the melodeon and bones and then sing songs which were the ones the niggers took over."<sup>577</sup>

On one occasion a photograph was taken by someone passing in a car, at a time when the men generally travelled around by pony and trap. It is worth commenting that, although there is reference to one of the mummers being dressed as a woman, and one of the 'nigger' characters is referred to as 'Sally', all of the men in this photograph are wearing trousers. It is also very pertinent that, although some of the mummers 'had faces blacked with cork and candle', mummering was obviously considered to be an entirely different practice from imitating minstrels.



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<sup>577</sup> Y.S. Huntriss, 'Mummering and Niggering in Bloxham', *Cake & Cockhorse* 7 (1978), pp. 219-25.

<<http://www.cherwell-c.gov.uk/media/pdf/n/4/pdf4605351411515079278.PDF>> [accessed 22 February 2009].

Bloxham 'Niggering' c. 1920s?: (left to right: William Preedy – 'Bumper Jones', Bert Green – 'Sally', Syd Charles – 'Uncle Neddy').<sup>578</sup>

Links between traditions are obvious when accounts from different areas are read in sequence, and some cross-fertilisation, chiefly of theatre and folk practice, has been identified here. When viewing this material it is important to keep in mind the physical circumstances of earlier times whilst being aware of the danger of making sweeping generalisations covering many centuries. Nevertheless, we can consider some conditions before the enormous technological changes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries became universal. Every house would have had an open fire. Lighting levels, especially indoors, were poor, reliant on rushlight, candlelight, firelight, lamplight, and with no street lighting night-time would seem darker when there was no moon.

Furthermore, with modern communications and transport, it is easy to think of parts of the country as being totally isolated in earlier times, but we forget the role of pedlars, travelling fairs, etc. in disseminating information. The spread of minstrelsy to all corners of England demonstrates how thoroughly this could happen. Also, the great shifts in population which occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution led to a breaking down of geographical boundaries, and the possibility of previously localised customs intermingling.

Today we tend to forget the commonality of people such as sweeps, miners, and smiths having blackened faces in everyday life. On the other hand, most people up to the mid-twentieth century would never have seen a genuine African. With no photographs or TV to familiarise them with how black people really look, their only understanding was that the skin was black. Still, it is indisputable that people did deliberately blacken their faces from an early period.

This chapter set out to illuminate questions about blackened faces in the period up to the early twentieth century. It has shown that blacking has been used for hundreds of years, in theatrical convention, from mystery play devils through Tudor fools to Victorian minstrels, as well as for portraying characters such as Othello; in criminal disguise; connected with social disorder; and in folk customs spread throughout the year and across the country. Although there was a fashion of imitating Moors in the Tudor court, those using black faces were generally the poor, labouring classes. They used blackface as part of a disguise which, whilst ceremonial in form, served to legitimise activities which would normally be considered strange at best and criminal at worst. This use predated the introduction of minstrelsy, although the popularity of this genre had an undoubted, and in some cases lasting, effect.

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<sup>578</sup> Y.S. Huntriss, 'Mumming and Niggering in Bloxham', *Cake & Cockhorse* 7 (1978), pp. 219-25 (p. 223).

<<http://www.cherwell-c.gov.uk/media/pdf/n/4/pdf4605351411515079278.PDF>> [accessed 22 February 2009].

Performers of mumming, morris dance and related activities today are very attuned to many of these issues of what they consider to be 'tradition'. How they have interpreted this in current practice is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Current Practice**

So far this thesis has had a strongly historical focus, first giving a chronology of black people in England and examining the ways blackness has been represented over the years, and then tracing the numerous ways in which blackened faces have been made use of in the past, with an emphasis on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Attention now turns to current practice – to those contexts in which blackened faces can be seen today, but, significantly, also to the ways in which practice has changed. This chapter will show how, although blacking up has practically disappeared in all other areas, it is still strongly represented in two aspects of the folk tradition – mumming and (used in its widest sense) morris dancing. It also describes how some teams formed in the late twentieth century began to adopt alternatives to blackface, and shows that 'blacking up' does not describe one catch-all make-up, certainly not that of the minstrel shows, but a range of choices.

The first section is a brief resume of the other categories used in the previous chapter (Entertainment; Criminal Activity; Social Disorder) as a barometer of present-day attitudes in those areas. The category of 'Custom and Tradition', however, does not have the underlying temporal structure used previously, but is instead divided into three broad sections, 'Mummers', 'Morris Dance', and 'Calendar Customs', each subdivided as necessary. These give a general overview

of the contexts in which the 'man in the street' might encounter blackface today. Further information and discussion about the reasons why teams adopted their current practice, and wider reactions to it, form the subject of Chapter 6.

## 5.1 Entertainment

### 5.1.1 Theatre

The use of blackface in theatre has all but ceased in the twenty-first century, although some exceptions can still be noted. This change is demonstrated in two productions of 'Othello', thirty years apart. Laurence Olivier received an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of Othello in the 1965 film of his stage performance, but was later decried for his use of black makeup in the part. On the other hand, Patrick Stewart fulfilled his ambition to play the role by staging a racially reversed production:

"When the time came that I was old enough and experienced enough to [play Othello], it was the same time that it no longer became acceptable for a white actor to put on blackface and to pretend to be African." ... The answer he eventually arrived at reflects the influence of the RSC's daring approach to Shakespearean adaptation: Stewart would invert the racial topography of the original text by playing Othello as the only white character in a society otherwise comprised completely of blacks.<sup>579</sup>

This shift in convention has come about because of the widespread recognition that actions which can be interpreted as racist are no longer acceptable. Equity, the actors' union, states this explicitly in its policy: 'Equity acknowledges that the practice known as "blacking-up" is offensive to many performers and cannot be justified except in very limited circumstances.'<sup>580</sup> This has led to some curious decisions.

It was one of the iconic moments of the 20th century – Al Jolson singing "My Mammy" in the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*. But in a new theatrical production based on the life of the man famous for "blacking up", the actor who plays Jolson will perform the song without minstrel make-up, to avoid offending audiences.

The decision not to include a full blackface scene in *Jolson & Co – the Musical* at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh next month is likely to invoke allegations of over-the-top political correctness. The production embarks on a UK tour after the Edinburgh run. [...]

An Equity spokesman, Paul Brown, said the union opposed the use of blackface but the Jolson show was "one of the very limited times when we might not actively object".<sup>581</sup>

As the *Independent* predicted, this did indeed 'invoke allegations of over-the-top political correctness':

<sup>579</sup> <<http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/plays/articles.aspx?&id=130>> [accessed 16 June 2011].

<sup>580</sup> British Actors' Equity Association, *Equity's policy statement on integrated casting*, 2011, <<http://www.equity.org.uk/documents/integrated-casting-race/>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

<sup>581</sup> <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/what-would-mammy-say-actor-to-play-al-jolson-without-blacking-up-1625970.html>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

Laura Midgley of the Campaign Against Political Correctness said the decision made "absolutely no sense" and was a clumsy case of "political correctness taking the place of authenticity".<sup>582</sup>

The decision had a knock-on effect later that year, when the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry required Al Jolson mimic Clive Baldwin to appear without wearing blackface makeup, arguing that it would have been 'inappropriate in a modern multicultural society', despite the fact that this would be historically inaccurate, and that the performance had taken place elsewhere without challenge.<sup>583</sup>

Moreover, amateur theatre has been affected by the prevailing feeling against blackface, as this report from the year 2000 shows:

Rotherham is believed to be the first council in Britain to have a formal written ban [preventing white actors from "blackening up" for roles portraying characters from other ethnic groups]. It applies to all performances in council buildings, including schools.

But other councils have also stopped productions in their buildings on the same grounds. Last August members of the all-white Studley Operatic Society, who perform at the council-owned Palace Theatre in Redditch in Warwickshire, were not allowed to wear dark face paint to play black slaves in the musical *Showboat*.<sup>584</sup>

One notable modern blackface character is Papa Lazarou, who appeared in the BBC TV series *League of Gentleman*. The ringmaster of a travelling circus, the conceit is that the black face, with its exaggerated white minstrel circles round the eyes and mouth, is his natural skin tone, and he has to use makeup to appear 'normal'. This was possibly accepted because of the provocatively outlandish and surreal nature of all the characters in that show.

### 5.1.2 Street entertainment

Buskers nowadays have to have a permit. Given the above decision regarding theatrical performance, it is reasonable to assume no council would issue a permit for blackface performance, and that such a performance would be strongly challenged were it to be tried. Needless to say, I do not intend to test out this assumption in participant fieldwork.

### 5.1.3 Practical Joke and Fancy Dress

Practical jokes on people insensible through drink are still played today, but have moved beyond smearing with soot to other forms of personal assault:

... a member was left unconscious [from alcohol] in the Reception area...students, two male and two female quickly galvanised themselves, collecting razors, shaving foam, permanent markers and scissors. I arrived to witness his left eyebrow being shaved off, and a

<sup>582</sup> Daily Telegraph 19 Feb 2009 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/4689847/No-blackening-up-in-new-Al-Jolson-musical.html>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

<sup>583</sup> Daily Mail 6 November 2009 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1225457/After-60-years-Al-Jolson-mimic-banned-blackening-up.html#ixzz1PLlqtsii>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

<sup>584</sup> <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1068743.stm>> [accessed 15 June 2011].

crude cock being drawn on the side of his face. ... The student's hair was already snipped and 'restyled', he was undressed, his trousers taken off and his underpants snipped at the waist.<sup>585</sup>

These actions were accepted without comment by the victim when he awoke.

A new development in the past decade or so has been the increase in fancy dress as a component of social activities. Following the Soulcaakers in 2009, I saw a man in blackface and devil horns as part of a Hallowe'en event in one of the pubs, apparently unaware that this could be controversial, but I was unable to speak to him. On the other hand, blackface may be used knowingly as a deliberate provocation, as in this example:

[T]he Football Club all dressed in black-face to Juice. This caused controversy and complaints, which resulted in the students' removal from the club. Before this happened I questioned one of the members who explained the club were all dressed as the Everton footballer Joseph Yobo, as a tribute. Indeed, he could not understand why anyone was upset: 'no harm's intended', he pointed out, commenting 'there's a black person on the social, he didn't have to bother putting any make-up on'. It was obvious however that members were aware that there was something risky about the costume: although that was the whole point; it was intended to be an aggressive speculation in liquidity. ...While this transgressive edge may have heightened the performance of going out (thus increasing its integrative power amongst the team) it was designed to establish the reputation of the club as 'legendary' in the eyes of others. The performance was thus tailored towards Juice, and targeted at the heart of student culture. It could not have taken place in another nightclub, or indeed on West Street, where the students would have certainly risked bruising to their already blackened bodies.<sup>586</sup>

At Whitby Folk Week in 2010 there was a Motown-themed ceilidh ('Fancy dress optional but preferable'), one of a series of themed ceilidhs that had previously featured the music of the Beatles, Abba and Queen adapted into a folk idiom suitable for the style of dance. It was noticeable that, although those present were undoubtedly familiar with blackface dance teams and a few 'Afro' wigs were seen, no-one had attempted to black up as a Motown singer.

## 5.2 Criminal activity and social disorder

Whilst, as has been shown in the previous chapter, the use of blackened faces used to feature strongly in both these areas, this is no longer the case. The development of forensic science has revolutionised identification in criminal cases, whilst social disorder is now of a different nature from the past. With the diverse populations and neighbourhoods today, community censure has been replaced by complaints to the council or police. The involvement of the media has also had an effect. If disguise is used at all, it is currently achieved by masking the face with

<sup>585</sup> Matthew James Cheeseman, *The pleasures of being a student at the University of Sheffield*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield 2011.

<sup>586</sup> Matthew James Cheeseman, *The pleasures of being a student at the University of Sheffield*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield 2011.

scarves, hoods, balaclavas, or with ready-made masks related to popular films such as 'Scream'. One example will suffice:

Police were alerted to the robbery at Barclays Bank, Manor House Street in Pudsey, on Tuesday at about 1130 BST. The men wearing a balaclava and Halloween mask entered the bank and threatened staff.<sup>587</sup>

In street protests, masks are increasingly popular at the moment caricaturing the faces of people, generally politicians against whose ideas or policies the protest is intended, but latterly also Guy Fawkes.

Thus, since blackened faces in these contexts were only ever used as disguise, not imitation, this is a situation in which their use has been discarded due to general developments in society, not because of any sensitivity about causing offence.<sup>588</sup>

### 5.3 Custom and Tradition

It is a truism that the contexts, temporal constraints, occupations and participants in activities associated with blackface described under this heading in the previous chapter are very different from those of today. Nevertheless, I have retained the terminology, as the vast majority of people taking part believe they are, in some way, continuing a distinct activity from the past, either in a deliberate reconstruction or as a 'living tradition', and indeed are likely to answer queries about such activity with the catch-all riposte, "It's traditional". This explanation will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6: the purpose of this section is to give an overview of the wide range of practice in folk traditions today. There are two ways in which I have interpreted the term 'folk traditions': one concerns specific activities peculiar to a certain location, for example Lewes, which are performed and supported by the local community but nevertheless attract spectators, who may or may not be interested in 'folk' in the second sense used here. 'Folk' in this second form refers to the subculture of people often referred to as 'folkies'.<sup>589</sup> These people variously listen to (and play) folk music, sing folk songs, take part in social dance and/or morris and/or mumming, may attend calendar customs (such as the events referred to above), and generally constitute the performers and purchasers of tickets at the many Folk Festivals held around the country as well as being those attending smaller local events like folk clubs, pub 'sessions' and 'singarounds'.<sup>590</sup>

<sup>587</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bradford-west-yorkshire-13359211>> [accessed 17 June 2011].

<sup>588</sup> Ironically, while writing this, I read about a white American who had indeed used silicon 'Hollywood' mask to disguise himself – as a black man. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8234603/Best-criminal-disguises-of-2010.html>> [accessed 17 June 2011].

<sup>589</sup> For a tongue-in-cheek, but broadly accurate, description, see <<http://www.folklib.net/folkfile/f.shtml#Folkie%20Profile>> [accessed 22 June 2011].

<sup>590</sup> 'Sessions' are meetings of musicians, typically held in a public bar on a set evening, where anyone is welcome to listen or to join in with the tunes/songs being played. Although

Some of these are the people the general public are likely to encounter still with blackened faces - in mumming, in some types of 'morris' dancing, and, very occasionally, in certain calendar customs - although, as will be shown, the 'traditional' blackface has also been modified in several ways. A basic explanation and description is included for those unfamiliar with the activities referred to in this section.

### 5.3.1 Mummers

According to the Traditional Drama Research Group, 'Guisers' and Mummers' Plays are short traditional verse sketches performed around Christmas and other calendar festivals, and taken round pubs and private homes in return for money and ale.<sup>591</sup> (This pertains to England: 'mumming' is a rather different activity as found in more distant areas such as the Shetland Isles or Newfoundland, where no such formalised drama is involved.) Peter Millington has itemised over 300 groups associated with mumming in England today, half of whom exist only to perform plays, while others do so as an adjunct to other activities such as morris or sword dancing.<sup>592</sup> Most performances occur around Christmastide. Those taking part are referred to by different names – Mummers, Guisers, Tipteerers – while Plough Jags, Soulcakkers, and Pace Eggers appear at different, calendar-specific times, which broadly follow distinct geographical areas.<sup>593</sup> Some groups appear on only one day each year, usually a day such as Boxing Day which is already over-subscribed in terms of calendar events. Because of these constraints of number, time and place, my fieldwork comprises only a sample of such occasions. I have attended several Soulcakkers' plays, performed in Cheshire around Hallowe'en and All Souls' Day; Pace Egg plays, performed in the week before Easter; various plays taking place near to Sheffield around Christmas, such as those of Winster Guisers, Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers, and the Long Company; and plays performed at Folk Festivals throughout the summer by groups such as the Bradshaw Mummers and Coventry Mummers. The Soulcakkers', Pace Eggers' and Winster plays are hero/combat plays. Those of HTSD are varied and have included Old 'Oss and Tup plays, while Bradshaw Mummers now perform mostly their own work, 'while remaining faithful to the origins of a unique form of theatre'.<sup>594</sup> I also attended the 'Mummers' Unconvention', a mass international meeting of mummers held in November 2011. Disappointingly, no group performed a 'Recruiting Sergeant' or 'Wooring' play, usually performed around Plough Monday, which I have been unable to see in the field. The resources of the internet, particularly the two sites mentioned (see footnote 13) have been invaluable in providing details of performances, including numerous photographs. I have also been in email contact

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informal in organisation, there is usually a 'session leader' who starts off the first few tunes. (See Jonathan Stock, 'Ordering Performance, Leading People: Structuring an English Folk Music Session', *World of Music*, 46 (2004), pp. 41-70) 'Singarounds' are similarly organised for singers.

<sup>591</sup> <<http://www.folkplay.info/>> [accessed 20 June 2011]. This section draws strongly from this website and from <<http://www.mastermummers.org/index.htm>>

<sup>592</sup> <<http://www.mastermummers.org/groupslist.php>> [accessed 5 July 2011].

<sup>593</sup> See <<http://www.mastermummers.org/atlas/TimesOfAppearance.php?maptype=static>> [accessed 5 July 2011].

<sup>594</sup> <<http://www.bradshawmummers.com/index.php>> [accessed 5 July 2011].



with representatives of certain groups, such as Chas Marshall of Knaresborough Mummers, who together with Stuart Rankin has researched the Yorkshire 'Blue Stots' play.<sup>595</sup>

Mummers wear a variety of costumes. Some are character-specific; some wear coats turned inside-out; some wear long tatters or strips of ribbon. Marshfield still wear costumes made from strips of paper. Most, if not all, mumming groups do not have an unbroken tradition of performance. Even the Marshfield Paper Boys had ceased performing around 1840, the play being revived in 1930 by the vicar's sister, one Violet Alford, after the vicar had heard his gardener reciting some lines one Christmas.<sup>596</sup> Many other 'revival' sides grew out of the folk clubs and morris sides of the 1970s. Nevertheless, groups pride themselves that their costume is somehow linked with past 'tradition':

The [Long Company] costume is based on the Marshfield Paperboys and also one illustration of a "rag" costume in Alex Helm's book.<sup>597</sup>

In 1977 Adlington Morris Men decided that they wanted to revive a local Mummers Play and a chance comment by a friend of a friend, set us on our way. They had bought some old clothes at a farm auction... The clothes from the auction turned out not to have been the old Mummers' kit. What did remain of them was in Mrs Houseman's safe keeping... We base our kit on the 1920s photographs.<sup>598</sup>

Preparations were made to perform at Marton-cum Grafton on the Saturday preceding 12<sup>th</sup> night, 1980. Few details were available of costumes worn at Marton, but as jackets worn inside-out with strips of cloth attached were known to have been favoured at other North Riding locations, these were decided upon. Faces were blackened with Leichner stage make-up and hats of any kind were worn. Clogs and corduroy trousers, tied up with *billy-band* [original italics] were preferred.<sup>599</sup>

Painstaking research has proved that both St George and Turkish Knight (see next picture) benefitted from the early invention of spectacles. Sadly, the idea was subsequently lost for a few centuries, until it was reinvented by Salvino d'Armato in the 1300s. Our Christmas Boys are faithful to the true tradition. ... [The Doctor] wears a top hat and frock coat with black ribbons over his face. The hat and coat were from the wedding suit of Mrs Penton's husband, and therefore have a lineage with the past.<sup>600</sup>

<sup>595</sup> Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin, *The Return of the Blue Stots* (London: Dockside Studio, 2003).

<sup>596</sup> See S. Lichman, 'The Gardener's Story: The Metafolklore of a Mumming Tradition', *Folklore*, 93 (1982), pp. 105-11.

<sup>597</sup> Sue Coe, Ryburn 3 Step, personal correspondence. The book referred to is possibly Alex Helm, *Five Mumming Plays for Schools* (London: EFDSS, 1965), which opposite page 25 includes an illustration of the 1936 Shrewton Mummers (Wiltshire) wearing outfits similar to those adopted by the Long Company.

<sup>598</sup> Duncan Broomhead, 'The Alderley Mummers' Play: A Story of Survival and Revival', in *Folk Drama Studies Today: proceedings of the International Traditional Drama Conference*, ed. by Eddie Cass & Peter Millington (Sheffield, 2002), pp. 7-22, p.14.

<sup>599</sup> Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin, *The Return of the Blue Stots* (London: Dockside Studio, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>600</sup> <<http://winterbourndownbordermorriss.co.uk/mummers.htm>> [accessed 6 July 2011]. Mrs. Penton passed on the play, learned from her father, in 1978.

It can be seen from these examples and the photographs below that, in mumming, black faces are in no way universal, nor, as will be shown, can they be categorised as being specific to a particular season of play. In the following section, I shall describe the range of current practice I myself have seen in fieldwork, supplemented with information from photographs and websites.



Blue Stots (Knaresborough Mummers) Nidderdale, 1990s.



Alderley Mummers: (photo courtesy of Duncan Broomhead).



St George, Frome Valley Mummers, Bath 2011.



The Long Company (photo courtesy of Sue Coe).

### 5.3.1.1 Soulcakers

Souling plays are hero/combat plays performed in Cheshire on or around All Souls' Day, 2 November. Actual dates of performance can vary from late October to the

middle of November. Because of the location and times of performance, I have been able to see several gangs – Warburton, Antrobus, Comberbach, and Chester. All the plays are broadly similar, though each has its own identity. Performances take place in public houses, in the evening, though some of the pubs seem now to be more dedicated to serving food. Although ‘walking’ tours are possible (Chester 29 October 2010; Warburton 5 November 2010) the pubs are mostly spread around the countryside and necessitate travel by car or sometimes, for the team, minibus. The performance generally starts with a song outside the pub door, maybe with the door held ajar to allow the sound in. An Enterer-in prepares the way for the characters, who appear one by one. There is combat in which King (sometimes St) George slays an adversary variously known as ‘Turkish Knight’, ‘Black Prince’ or ‘Prince Paradise’, followed by a lament by the female character (played by a man) and the revival, with much stage business, by the Doctor. Derry/Dairy Doubt sometimes comes in, followed by Beelzebub with his club (/clog) and pan. As part of his act, Beelzebub often takes a full pint belonging to an unsuspecting member of the audience, and downs it in one go. The Cheshire plays conclude with the entrance of a horse and driver. The horse is a real horse's skull mounted on a pole, held by a man bent under a fabric cover. The driver/groom's speech and ‘horseplay’ ensues, and a final song heralds the quête, or collection, proceeds of which are these days generally given to charity. The whole play lasts about ten or fifteen minutes, depending on the amount of audience feedback, fluffed lines, ad libs, and action. After the players have refreshed themselves with beer, often provided free of charge by the landlord, they move on to the next venue.

For Soulcaking, the actors dress in character, ‘as was customary in Cheshire’<sup>601</sup> but there are no hard and fast rules about the makeup the different gangs use. I have found no Soulcaking group who all black their faces. Instead, the characters most likely to be blacked up are George's opponent, often referred to in the script as ‘black Moroccan dog’, and Beelzebub,<sup>602</sup> but as will be shown this is not always so.

### **Antrobus**

Antrobus performances ceased, as with many, with the death of some of the team in the First World War. With the encouragement of Major A. W. Boyd the play was revived by the local Young Farmers' Club,<sup>603</sup> and so the tradition has been carried on to the extent that Antrobus are now regarded as ‘the only local team with a direct connection to the old tradition’.<sup>604</sup> (Ironically, Boyd states ‘it was left to the

<sup>601</sup> Duncan Broomhead, ‘The Alderley Mummings’ Play: A Story of Survival and Revival’, in *Folk Drama Studies Today: proceedings of the International Traditional Drama Conference*, ed. by Eddie Cass & Peter Millington (Sheffield, 2002), pp. 7-22 (p.14).

<sup>602</sup> ‘The prince of the devils’, according to Matthew xii 24 (King James Bible). The long history of devils being blackened is referred to in Chapter 4.

<sup>603</sup> Alex Helm, ‘In Comes I, St George’, *Folklore*, 76 (1965), pp. 118-36, p.131. I am unsure how this can be reconciled with the comment ‘The Antrobus Gang are thought to have had performances continuously dating back hundreds of years’, given under the entry for Antrobus on the Master Mummings site,

<<http://www.mastermummings.org/groupslist.php?oID=11&format=full#medialinks>> [accessed 19 July 2011], except as a mark of the respect the team is held in.

<sup>604</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 326.

Comberbach Soulcakery to keep [the performance of the ancient rite] alive', and it is the text of the Comberbach play he recorded in 1926.<sup>605</sup>) It might be assumed there have been few changes in this version of Soulcaking, and there are indeed strong continuities. The Driver still sports his pink hunting coat, and the Black Prince still wears a replica of the 'spiked helmet taken from a German by an Antrobus man in September, 1914',<sup>606</sup> but nowadays King George has a red tunic, not khaki as Boyd states. Boyd makes no reference to black faces in his costume description, nor indeed to any colour makeup at all, but in 2010 all the characters except the Enterer and, ironically, the 'woman' Mary were painted to some degree in a broad caricature. Derry Doubt had red cheeks, the Driver a red nose and a painted black moustache similar to King George's smart military-style moustache, while Beelzebub and the Doctor sported false noses, as can be seen from the photographs. As well as the bright red nose, Beelzebub had black smears on his cheeks, but these in no way approached blackface.<sup>607</sup> On the other hand, the Black Prince's face and neck were definitely blackened, as befits his name, supplemented with black gloves on his hands. However, in a photograph in Boyd's book taken in 1946, Black Prince's face appears unmarked and hands ungloved.<sup>608</sup> There is no way of knowing whether this photograph is of a performance; Boyd seems to value the 'traces of a ritual origin, in which the restoration to life of a dead man and the appearance of a man in woman's clothes are a salient point',<sup>609</sup> so it is at least possible it was posed especially for him to record the scene without regard to makeup; the rather stilted positioning of the figures also suggests this.



<sup>605</sup> A. W. Boyd, *A Country Parish: Great Budworth in the County of Chester* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 68.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>607</sup> Rather than a devil, he resembles more the 'tramp figure with red nose' suggested elsewhere – see Ian Russell, 'In Comes I, Brut King: Tradition and Modernity in the Drama of the Jacksdale Bullguisers', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 94 (1981), pp. 456-85 (p. 462).

<sup>608</sup> A W Boyd, *A Country Parish: Great Budworth in the County of Chester* (London: Collins, 1951), Plate xviii, opp. p. 69.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Antrobus, 2010: Doctor, Mary, Driver, King George, Derry Doubt (above);  
Black Prince, Beelzebub (below).



Antrobus, 2010: King George, Derry Doubt.

### **Comberbach**

The team Boyd credited with keeping Souling alive lapsed and was reformed in 1985 as the Comberbach Swiltub Mummers.<sup>610</sup> I was able to see them perform the Comberbach Soulcake Play in 2009.

All the characters in Comberbach were made up – even the horse (centre), who appears under cover, had a red and white face. Beelzebub again had a false nose,

<sup>610</sup> <<http://soulcakers.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 21 July 2011].

but with red patches on his cheeks, and Black Prince had a black face. This prince had only the front part of his face blacked, and not his neck or ears, nor underneath his chin.



Comberbach, 2009: Black Prince.



Comberbach, 2009: Beelzebub.



Comberbach Swilltub Mummings 2009: "Never Knowingly Over-Rehearsed".

### ***Jones's Ale Soulcakers, Chester***

Broomhead notes that this group, made up of sons of the first 'revival' side, is younger in age than most others.<sup>611</sup> I met them on tour in the fortieth year of the group, the fifteenth for that line-up, in Chester on 29 October 2010. The Chester Beelzebub, unlike the 'tramp' figure of the gangs above, tended towards the 'devil' look. He wore a sort of knee-length tunic dress of a bright material, patterned in reds and yellows, and the upper half of his face was painted red, with a large black patch around the eyes in the style of a sleeping (or 'Zorro') mask. A pair of horns completed the costume. The Prince Paradise did not have a blackened face, but he told me later that this was because he had been short of time. Normally, he would wear a black 'Zorro' mask and black the area of his face showing beneath it. Interestingly, one of the members told me of a time when he had blacked up to play Paradise but had then changed his part to that of the Doctor, so ended up playing a blackface Doctor. This could explain the photograph below, taken in 2002, and shows not only that photographic evidence, although useful, is not infallible, but also the pitfalls of basing 'tradition' on a single collected occasion. The next entry is also relevant to this matter.

<sup>611</sup> Duncan Broomhead, 'The Alderley Mummings' Play: A Story of Survival and Revival', in *Folk Drama Studies Today: proceedings of the International Traditional Drama Conference*, ed. by Eddie Cass & Peter Millington (Sheffield, 2002), pp. 7-22 (pp.13-14).





Jones's Ale Soulcakers: The cure - Doctor stands over Colonel Slasher.  
(photo courtesy of Duncan Broomhead).

### ***Warburton Souling Play***

Prior to revival in 1978, the Warburton play had last been performed in 1936. I visited them in 2008, and again in 2010 and 2011. This group is particularly interesting as it demonstrates changes in the use of blackface.

A range of makeup is used in the characters, as shown in the photograph below. The Doctor has a whitened face with additional spots, but more notable is the Turkish Champion's red face, ears and neck. I was told that the Turk used to have a black face, but the player was embarrassed and so used red instead. This must have been quite early in the revival: a photograph on the Warburton website shows red face was being used in 1992.<sup>612</sup>

In 2008 Beelzebub had a black 'front' face, but told me that his son, who was to take over the part, was not so happy blacking his face, and might just have a black beard and moustache. In fact, the 2009 Beelzebub had a black moustache, beard, and eyebrows, although the same man was playing the part. By 2010 his son had indeed taken over, but had black smears across his forehead and cheeks rather than any particular dark area. The following year the top half of his face was completely blacked, with the bottom area altogether uncovered.

<sup>612</sup> <<http://www.larchfieldhouse.co.uk/Souling/GalleryPast-1992.html>> [accessed 25 July 2011].



Warburton Gang, 2008.



Warburton 2008: Beelzebub (father); Doctor.



Warburton Gang 2009: Beelzebub on right.



Warburton, 2010, 2011: Beelzebub (son); Turkish Champion and his 'mother', 2010.



An interesting footnote to the Warburton gang is this picture of the Enterer, taken in 1999 (see next page). As this differed from the Enterer I had seen, I queried it and received this response:

The Play we do was last performed in its 'original' form in 1936/38. We have conflicting dates here.

It was subsequently collected and published in two books, one of Cheshire Plays and the other with a more national coverage – their names elude me at present as I only have photo copies of the pages of interest. I attach a gif of the intro from one giving details of the Play's collection and of the Enterer's collected description that I think will be of use. My text accompanying the photo of our 1999 Enterer was making reference to that.

The Enterer and Beelzebub were noted as blacked up and the Turkish Champion had a red face – We keep to the latter two, however it depends upon who does the Enterer as to whether we portray him in the more familiar Cheshire Enterer style as you have seen or as the collected version as in that 1999 photo.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Laurence Armstrong, personal correspondence 2011.



Warburton Enterer, 1999: another example of the mutability of 'tradition'.  
(Photo courtesy of Duncan Broomhead).

### 5.3.1.2 Pace Eggers

Pace Egging plays are performed around Easter time in Lancashire, West Yorkshire and parts of Cumbria. Eddie Cass has a long-standing interest in these plays, and his books are a valuable source of information.<sup>614</sup> Although the Calder Valley High School has a long connection with the play, performing it since 1932, other sides have sprung from the folk revival of the 1960s and 70s, and 'having acquired sufficient stability and longevity, can now claim to have founded new traditions in themselves.'<sup>615</sup>

#### **Midgley**

The Midgley Pace Egg play, performed by boys from the Calder Valley High School, is renowned for its elaborate hats.

<sup>614</sup> See <<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/~wap001/staff/cass.shtml>> [accessed 15 August 2011].

<sup>615</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 121.



Midgley, 2004 (photo courtesy of S.N. Bater).

### ***Bury Pace Eggers***

Bury Pace Eggers were formed in the late 1960s by members of Bury folk song club, and began performing a local play discovered by Alan Seymour. They perform on the weekend before Easter, and occasionally at other local events.

I visited the Bury Pace Eggers in 2009 and 2011. Their costumes are varied: some dress in character, while others wear jackets turned inside-out, adorned with sashes or strips of fabric. All the players black their faces.<sup>616</sup> Their website offers the reason for this:

In these days when it is easy to give unintended offence a word about our appearance may be appropriate. The whole point of the costume is to form a very simple disguise, the intention of the play and the anonymity of the players themselves was vital to bring luck and to recognise identity of the performer would cancel this. As the community that this play was originally performed in was quite tightly knit the players adopted disguises to prevent the people they worked, lived and often died amongst from recognising them.

Firstly the players coat was turned inside out, whilst the play's character was visible this had the effect of making the player himself invisible (*there is some doubt over the effectiveness of this!*).

Secondly, blacking was applied to the face, this completed the cunning disguise making the player completely unidentifiable to his fellows (*there is some doubt over the effectiveness of this as well!*). The whole point of the blacking and the dress code is a disguise and is not a mimicry or mockery of anyone or anything.<sup>617</sup>

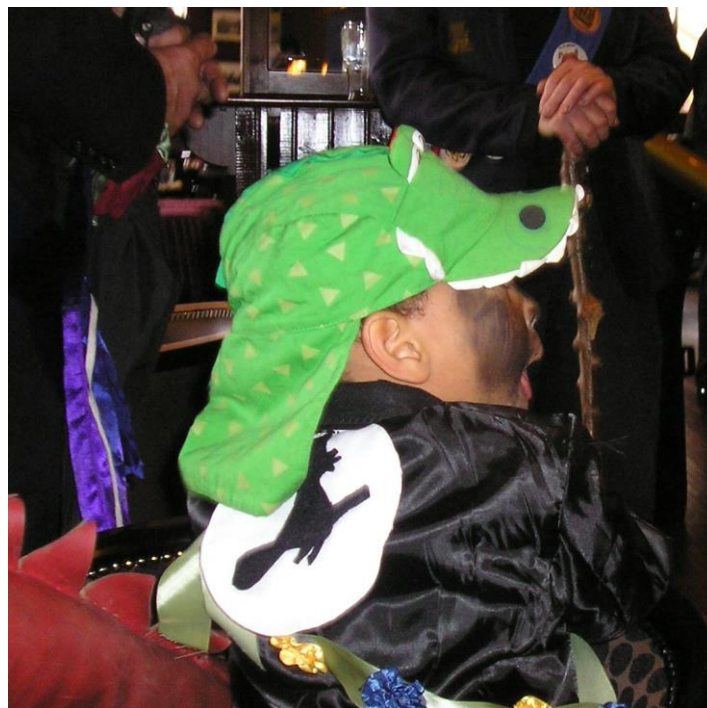
<sup>616</sup> See also <<http://burypaceeggers.co.uk/Cast.php>> [accessed 16 August 2011].

<sup>617</sup> <<http://burypaceeggers.co.uk/About-Us.php>> [accessed 16 August 2011].



Bury Pace Eggers 2009: Beelzebub and St George.

This last point was emphasised by the daughter of one of the Pace Eggers, who on my 2009 visit included her dual heritage children on the tour, suitably made up. She told me she had insisted on this, and said she hoped if people saw her children it would help them realise the makeup was nothing to do with impersonating a black person, but was part of the tradition for disguise. She added that, if her husband were to join the team, he would be expected to black up also.



Bury Pace Eggers 2009: baby dragon.



Bury Pace Eggers 2009: note jacket turned inside out.

**Other groups** formed at around the same time as Bury Pace Eggers, and which also use blackface, include Abram Pace Eggers, and Furness Morris Men, who perform a Pace Egg play at Eastertide. Cass notes that the latter group had a close link with Alex Helm, who 'provided some assistance when it came to choice of costume.'<sup>618</sup> Helm himself stated *apropos* mummers' plays in general, 'An essential purpose of the costume was to hide the wearer's identity...although the disguise might have dwindled to a blackened or raddled face and clothes worn inside out, nevertheless anonymity was essential.'<sup>619</sup>

### 5.3.1.3. Christmas Performers

Most of the groups I witnessed at the Mummers' Unconvention in Bath perform around Christmastide. A range of costume and disguise was represented, from the all-black Herga Mummers of Middlesex, who perform on Boxing Day, to the whitened faces of Stony Stratford Mummers (North Buckinghamshire).

<sup>618</sup> Eddie Cass, *The Lancashire Pace-Egg Play: A Social History* (London: FLS Books, 2002) p. 104.

<sup>619</sup> Alex Helm, *Eight Mummers' Plays* (London: Ginn, 1971), p. 10.





Bath 2011: Bold Slasher, Sompting Tipteers (above);  
unidentified (Gloucestershire?) (below).





Bath 2011: Herga Mummers.





Bath 2011: Rockness Mummers.





Bath 2011: Stony Stratford Mummers.

#### 5.3.1.4. Year-round Groups

##### *Bradshaw Mummers*

Bradshaw Mummers are 'a street theatre group, performing traditional and contemporary plays based on the medieval mumming traditions of death and re-birth and the triumph of good over evil...'<sup>620</sup> Their plays are mostly new material written by themselves, but they consider they are 'remaining faithful to the origins of a unique form of theatre including the blacking of faces, echoing the tradition that actors believed themselves cursed by the Devil if they were recognised.'<sup>621</sup>



Bradshaw Mummers, Warwick 2011.

<sup>620</sup> <<http://www.bradshawmummers.com/content/bradshaw-mummers>> [accessed 21 February 2013].

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

### ***Knaresborough Mummers***

Founded in 1974, Knaresborough Mummers are another group formed from the folk clubs of the 1960s-70s revival. They have performed '22 different versions of the various styles of Mummers Play', some traditional, many of them adapted by themselves.<sup>622</sup> Most of these plays do not involve blacking up in any way, but one 'traditional' play which did so has been modified:

We are currently reviving a play which has long been in the Knaresborough Mummers repertoire for the imminent Beverley Festival. This play is heavily based on the Manx White Boys play and includes a blacked up character called Sambo. We think that this is rather closer to offending modern sensibilities in comparison to our Blue Stots offering and we now refer to this character as "Sammy" and he generally sports a multi coloured face.<sup>623</sup>

However, for the local Blue Stots play, performed around Christmastime, all the cast black their faces in accordance with the collected tradition.<sup>624</sup>



Knaresborough Mummers, Beverley 2011: 'Sammy' and the King of Egypt  
(photo courtesy of Chas Marshall).

<sup>622</sup> <<http://www.teddodsworth.talktalk.net/km/knaresbo.htm>> [accessed 16 August 2011].

<sup>623</sup> John ('Chas') Marshall, personal correspondence.

<sup>624</sup> Chas Marshall, and Stuart Rankin, *The Return of the Blue Stots* (London: Dockside Studio, 2003), p.14.



Knarsborough Mummers, the 'Blue Stots', as they appear in a Hedingham Fair greetings card (© Karen Cater) issued for their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>625</sup>

### 5.3.2 Morris Dance

When morris dance is mentioned, most people think of the bell-pad wearing, hankie-waving dances of the villages of the Cotswolds which were dominant in the first half of the twentieth century:

It was generally believed, from the last years of the nineteenth century onward, that the best morris came from the Cotswolds, and naturally both field and library research have been angled in this direction. Now it is almost certainly true that the Whitsun ales and fairs of the Cotswold area did indeed generate a high point in both the quality and the quantity of morris dancing, but the concentration of collectors and researchers in this direction was balanced by a neglect of morris from elsewhere. Morris from these other areas was seen (if at all) as inferior and not really worth recording ... It would, I think, be fair to say that interest in Other Morris did not come to life until about 1970.<sup>626</sup>

Cotswold dances were the ones collected first by Cecil Sharp and the enthusiasts of the English Folk Dance Society, although Sharp also later collected longsword dances from Yorkshire and rapper (short sword) dances from Northumberland and Durham. While Needham and Peck had written about Molly Dancing as early as 1933,<sup>627</sup> it was left to enthusiasts in the later years of the twentieth century to resurrect Molly as well as the styles known as Border and 'Forgotten' morris which

<sup>625</sup> used with permission.

<sup>626</sup> John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005), pp. 193-4.

<sup>627</sup> Joseph Needham, and Arthur L. Peck, 'Molly Dancing in East Anglia', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 1 (1933), pp. 79-85.

have become increasingly popular. These are the types of dance in which blacking up is used nowadays, but, as will be shown, some teams have rejected blackface while keeping the element of disguise. Border, Molly and 'Other', the less classifiable varieties of morris, will be considered separately in the following sections. The only reference I have found to blackface used in Cotswold-style morris is at Winster, Derbyshire, where dances were collected by Sharp in 1908. Winster Morris have a complement of characters – King, Queen, Fool and Witch. The fool is sometimes dressed as a jester and at others as a Pierrot,<sup>628</sup> and while the witch had a blackened face in Sharp's time, the current witch does not because the necessary makeup causes a skin irritation.



Witch, Winster Morris, as photographed by Cecil Sharp (picture courtesy of EFDSS) and at Bampton, June 2010.

### 5.3.2.1 Border Morris

An account of the historical background of Border Morris has been given in the last chapter (4.4.4) together with an explanation of the geographical location which gives this style of dance its name. It should be noted at the outset, however, that this, as with other kinds, can nowadays be found danced by teams all over England. A search of the Morris Federation site alone listed over sixty teams dancing only Border, and about the same number dancing Border alongside other styles.<sup>629</sup> Nowadays most Border sides wear costumes decorated with strips of material (known as tatters), disguise their faces, and perform boisterous and energetic stick dances accompanied by large groups of musicians which often feature drums, brass instruments and tambourines alongside the more usual squeezeboxes and fiddles found in most morris dance styles.

<sup>628</sup> Pierrot shows took over in popularity from minstrel shows as a form of seaside entertainment in the 1890s.

<sup>629</sup> A common pattern is to dance Cotswold in the summer months and Border during the winter.



Winster Pierrot Fool, Bampton, June 2010.

There is some debate over who was the first of the revival sides, but the starting point is placed by Roy Dommett as 1972:

Welsh "Border" morris, not the Welsh "Marches" which would seem historically more correct, although the majority of the counties are normally grouped as the West Midlands, has existed in its modern form only since the Ledbury workshop in January 1972. I know because my youngest son Reuben was being born. ... I had published a set of notations called "Other Morris" because it included similar dances from elsewhere, such as Kimber's Headington Morris Reels and Steeple Claydon. Such had been used at an EFDSS weekend residential Staff Conference because of the already mentioned perceived need to have some easy morris that could be used in mixed sex situations.<sup>630</sup>

Although he was unaware of this workshop, John Kirkpatrick, a morris dancer who had moved to Shropshire in 1973, had access to a copy of the 'Other Morris' notes and an interest in local traditions:

<sup>630</sup> Roy Dommett, 'Years of Morris Change & the Sidmouth Festival', 1994. Available on <<http://www.opread.force9.co.uk/RoyDommet/Others/sidmouth94lect.htm#Title>> [accessed 14 September 2011]. 'Workshop' is the term used in the folk world for a session where new dances are learned.



[A]s we were interested in these things, we started digging out what there was in the way of local folk music, songs, tunes, and dances, and found that there was this neglected local form of Morris dancing. ...I had never seen any Border Morris. I knew there was a group of dancers from various local Morris teams who got together every Christmas to do the Border dances in their proper midwinter season, but I had never seen them, and never did see them subsequently.<sup>631</sup>

Kirkpatrick founded (one could almost say invented) the Shropshire Bedlams, a team which was to be influential in the spread of Border Morris:

What I *didn't* do was any collecting or original research. I slightly regret that now, but at the same time I can see that it would have been inhibiting, and I was determined not to let a small thing like lack of information stand in my way. ... So the first thing I decided to do was to create a style, and impose that style on the notations, rather than try and do each dance "correctly"... With Border Morris, I was very keen to establish a way of dancing that wasn't like just another Cotswold style. It was a golden opportunity to introduce something new into Morris dancing.... There's no traditional basis for this pattern of stepping in Border Morris, or in anything else really, I just made it up.... We were very much out on a limb, artistically and geographically, and gradually we've seen our approach and some of our actual dance style being absorbed by other teams and taken to be a norm for Border morris. Initially it grieved me beyond words to see this happening. Now I can see it is a compliment and there is nothing we can do to stop it. It's nice to know we started it.<sup>632</sup>



Shropshire Bedlams (photo courtesy of Peter Bigglestone).

<sup>631</sup> John Kirkpatrick, 'The Shropshire Bedlams ', *American Morris Newsletter* 23 (2000). Available on <[http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo\\_ShropshireBedlams.asp](http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo_ShropshireBedlams.asp)> [accessed 14 September 2011].

<sup>632</sup> John Kirkpatrick, 'The Shropshire Bedlams ', *American Morris Newsletter* 23 (2000). Available on <[http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo\\_ShropshireBedlams.asp](http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo_ShropshireBedlams.asp)> [accessed 14 September 2011].

The Bedlams danced at Sidmouth Folk Festival in 1977. Unusually, they black all their face, 'right down into the collar', and the backs of their hands. 'I just think it looks more complete than seeing bits of pink peeping through. [I like to look frightening.]'<sup>633</sup> Costume consists of tattered jackets and top hats decorated with feathers of native species of birds. A contemporary touch, perhaps reflecting the Bedlams' innovative attitude, is the use of blue jeans and white trainers.

Meanwhile, the late Dave Jones, who had established Silurian as a Cotswold side in 1969, was also researching the Border tradition. The side had started dancing a few Welsh Border dances mixed in with their existing Cotswold repertoire, but in 1979 began to perform exclusively Border dances, with a new kit to match:

...at the Bromyard festival that year, Silurian emerged in a new costume, based on descriptions on what the Upton Morris Men had worn at the turn of the twentieth century. The first Border Morris revival side, the new kit causing quite a stir amongst traditional Cotswold Morris Ring sides. In keeping with the tradition, the costume included black faces, shirts with tatters and tail coats, suitable for the traditional winter dancing.<sup>634</sup>



Silurian (photo courtesy of Silurian Border Morris Archive).

<sup>633</sup> John Kirkpatrick, 'The Shropshire Bedlams', *American Morris Newsletter* 23 (2000). Available on <[http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo\\_ShropshireBedlams.asp](http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo_ShropshireBedlams.asp)> [accessed 14 September 2011].

<sup>634</sup> <<http://www.silurianmorris.org.uk/>> [accessed 13 September 2011].

Unlike Shropshire Bedlams, Silurian adhere closely to collected tradition. Their costume

...comprises a black bowler hat, black tailcoat and black trousers, with a white shirt with strips of coloured rags sewn on. Each dancer then wears a coloured sash across his shirt, with a matching ribbon in the bowler hat and around his knees, to which the bells are attached. The delightful appearance is completed with a pair of Dr. Martin's [sic] boots, or equivalent.<sup>635</sup>

Their faces are blacked, but not necks or hands. The dances they perform are still named and identified by 'the villages they came from'.

Since these two seminal teams there has been a surge of sides dancing what is loosely grouped as Border Morris, but which encompasses both traditional dances and new dances developed by teams themselves. This popularity was possibly influenced by a factor briefly referred to by Dommett, the 'perceived need to have easy morris that could be used in mixed sex situations'.<sup>636</sup> In the 1970s it was practically unheard of for women to dance the (Cotswold) morris. The 'new' border style, with its shape-disguising tattered jackets and black faces masking features, emerged at the same time as the demand for mixed teams as well as those comprising just male or just female dancers. Today it is generally accepted that both genders may dance any style, in single-sex or mixed teams. Even the all-male Morris Ring accepted women musicians into its teams in 2011.

A feature of the 'new' border dance teams is the increasing use of different colour face paints and of more elaborate facial decoration. Below is a selection of photographs taken in the last few years of male, female and mixed Border dancers and musicians showing the range of current practice.



Red Leicester, Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009.

<sup>635</sup> <<http://www.silurianmorris.org.uk/>> [accessed 13 September 2011].

<sup>636</sup> Dommett, see longer quotation above.



Witchmen, Warwick Folk Festival 2010.



Beltane, Warwick Folk Festival 2011.



Silhil, Warwick Folk Festival 2011.



Boggart's Breakfast, Buxton 2012 (photo courtesy of S.N. Bater).



Wharfedale Wayzgoose, Sheffield JMO, 2011.



Poacher, Gate to Southwell Festival 2010.

### 5.3.2.2 Molly Dancing

In 1976 Ashley Hutchings, a musician already influential as a founder member of folk rock groups Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span and the Albion Band, released a record called *Rattlebone and Ploughjack*. This was a compilation of tunes and readings; one side (in the age of vinyl LPs) was devoted to Border Morris, the other to Molly Dance. Hutchings' liner notes stated:

This album is neither a work of scholarship, nor is it entertainment pure and simple. Rather, it lies somewhere between the two... What I feel is valuable about the Molly and Border Morris is the insight it gives us into the oldest, most basic, least civilised antics of our dancing ancestors... It

may well be impossible to satisfactorily capture centuries of tradition on one long-playing record, but what I hope is that I have faithfully related many of the interesting elements that made up these customs and, who knows, possibly even taken you there for a brief moment.<sup>637</sup>

The consequences of this record were more far-reaching: it was to stimulate an actual revival in Molly dancing. One of the people featured on the record was Cyril Papworth, a member of the Cambridge Morris Men.<sup>638</sup> His grandfather had been a member of the old Comberton Molly dancers and had passed on some dances.

In 1977, Cyril and Russell Wortley, had taught what Cyril remembered and Russell had collected, to the Cambridge Morris Men who started touring some of the villages on Plough Monday. In 1980 the newly formed organisation, Open Morris, with many of its early teams based in East Anglia, invited Cyril to run a molly workshop as their first such event. Present were individuals who started at least 3 of the revival sides. Cyril taught the dances, which he called 'feast dances' to about 60 people. Although a firm believer, at the time, of morris being a 'men-only' tradition, he said that the molly dances were identical to the feast dances (i.e. country dances) performed at village events in southwest Cambridgeshire, mainly Comberton and Girton, and so he felt happy teaching them to mixed groups.<sup>639</sup>

Thus began the Molly revival. Most groups are still midwinter only, with about half following the style taught by Cyril, while others have developed into full-time, festival-attending year-round sides.

One of the midwinter teams is Mepal Molly, the longest established molly side in the UK, who also danced out for the first time in 1977. Mepal was formed by Brian Cookman, himself inspired by a 1974 *English Dance and Song* article which led to him composing a repertoire of dances inspired by the recorded broomstick dances.<sup>640</sup> Mepal dance locally on Plough Monday as well as appearing at Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival, held on the following Saturday.

While Mepal Molly appear locally and within a limited period of the year, 1977 also saw the conception of an innovative side which was to appear at festivals around the country and perhaps become the most influential team in the revival of Molly, in much the same way as Shropshire Bedlams were for Border Morris. In fact, seeing the Bedlams at Sidmouth in that year had fuelled the discontent of a group of dancers who earlier that summer had already toyed with the idea of performing Cambridgeshire dances. A team was duly formed...

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<sup>637</sup> Taken from <<http://www.informatik.uni-amburg.de/~zierke/guvmor/records/rattleboneandploughjack.html>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>638</sup> One of the first Cotswold revival sides, on whose instigation the Morris Ring, an association of men's morris clubs which is still extant, was founded in 1934.

<sup>639</sup> <<http://www.mollydancing.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011]. This site gives an excellent overview of Molly dancing past and present, with a detailed account of the revival, as does George Frampton's 1999 booklet, *More Honoured in the Breach than the Observance: Molly Dancing and other Plough /Monday customs in Cambridgeshire – Tradition and Revival*.

<sup>640</sup> <<http://www.mollydancing.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].



Mepal Molly, Whittlesea Straw Bear 2011 (photo courtesy of Ron Day).

... whose objective lay merely in being superlative. No decision had yet been made about what to dance, and Cotswold Morris dances were actually tried in the first few months. After the initial flush of interest, three members left the side, and with one away at university, practices were cancelled. Dancing was abandoned that autumn and a Christmas mummies' play used as a vehicle to "get them doing something" in front of an audience. The play script used was based on that of Shoreham near Sevenoaks in Kent, and like others in the West Kent area was actually called "the Seven Champions of Christendom".... After the mumming season, the team once more explored the option of Molly dancing as repertoire from research conducted at Cecil Sharp House by Chris White and Dave Dye. What they found there was not much...Acting upon the incentive of organising a workshop on mumming and performing the play at a St. George's festival at Cecil Sharp House in April 1978, the new team now called "the Seven Champions" practised one dance from the notation given by Needham and Peck.<sup>641</sup>

Seven Champions started by attempting to recreate dances from notation, but, isolated from the Fenland by their Kentish location, they were unaware of developments there: 'There was no "black book" of Molly dances to refer back to. Evolution threatened.'<sup>642</sup> Eventually new dances were devised and performed. Champions have been credited with originating the heavy 'stomp' step that was taken up by Ouse Washes, which in turn influenced many new teams.

The first group to move away from the norm, slowly at first, were Ouse William Morris. They had from an early stage called themselves Ouse

<sup>641</sup> George E. Frampton, 'Repertoire?-or Repartee? The Seven Champions Molly Dancers 1977-1987', *Lore & Language* 6(1987), pp. 65-81.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid. The "black book" refers to Lionel Bacon's *A Handbook of Morris Dances*, the go-to book for Cotswold dances and tunes.



Washes Molly and their first notable changes came with their women deciding to wear more outrageous costumes, unlike the other groups who maintained Victorian milkmaid garb for their females. A number of their members were in an Arabic dance group, called Mysteries of the East, and met up with Seven Champs in the mid 80s at Whitby Folk Festival. They became good friends and gradually Ouse Washes started to change their style to one more similar to Champs. In 1992 they became the second 'full-time' molly side in the country, and the first in East Anglia. They also had great immediate success, performing at all the major festivals, and followed Champs in their ability to innovate and inspire.<sup>643</sup>



Ouse Washes Molly Dancers, old kit, Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009.

One of their innovations was the use of music from popular culture sources rather than sources recognisable as 'folk', for example, dancing to minor key arrangements of tunes such as Lonnie Donnegan's *Battle of New Orleans* and The Doors' *People are Strange*.<sup>644</sup> In 2011, Ouse Washes changed their old random 'psychedelic charity shop' clothes for a new look. As they told me, 'We looked around and realised every folk festival was full of people dressed just like us.'<sup>645</sup> Now the men (apart from the Molly) wear black trousers, lallygags and waistcoats, while the women display rather deliberately dishevelled 'posh frocks'. Their black faces have been retained. Interestingly, this style of dress reverts back to the one adopted by Old Glory, a 'traditional' style team which nevertheless was only formed some fourteen years after Ouse Washes. This team has retained the old 'Lord' and 'Lady', dressed in finer clothes, while the rest of the dancers sport working clothes, the whole group seemingly protected by the men who prowl the perimeter avoiding eye contact by staring through onlookers. Although the dancers are all men, the musicians are women, and have themselves extended the black faces into a distinctive and unsettling appearance, their hats and long coats rendering them black from head to foot except for green sashes and the long garlands of ivy decorating the hats.

<sup>643</sup> <<http://www.mollydancing.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011]

<sup>644</sup> Fieldwork notes. See

<[http://www.ousewashes.com/Ouse\\_Washes\\_Molly\\_Dancers/ousewashesdancestory.html](http://www.ousewashes.com/Ouse_Washes_Molly_Dancers/ousewashesdancestory.html)> [accessed 22 September 2011] for the background to these tunes and dances.

<sup>645</sup> Personal conversation, Warwick 2011.



Ouse Washes Molly Dancers, new kit, Warwick Folk Festival 2011.



Old Glory 'Lady' and 'Whiffler', Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009.



Old Glory musicians, Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009.

Just as in Border Morris, some Molly teams have rejected blackface. The first team to do this was the first women's Molly side, Paddington Pandemonic Express, formed in London in 1980:

It was decided that the Molly would have an urban flavour because we all lived in London and that is what we knew about (ploughs were not big in Paddington in 1980)... Initially Paddingtons appeared in traditional black faces but it was felt that in London not everyone would readily grasp the idea that blacking up was intended as disguise and nothing more. Therefore 'blueing up' became the style...<sup>646</sup>



Paddington Pandemonic Express at Kirtlington Lamb Ale 2010  
(photo courtesy of Peter Greenway).

<sup>646</sup> <<http://www.grenmorrissandsamstephens.com/Paddington-Pandemonic-Express-Urban-Molly-Dancers>> [accessed 20 September 2011].



Gog Magog Molly Dancers, Straw Bear 2009.

Gog Magog Molly are a Cambridge side formed in 1996 to celebrate Cyril Papworth's eightieth birthday. Inspired by Ouse Washes, they adopted the brightly coloured garb of that team, but each person's face is painted a different colour. Gog Magog in turn were among the influences on the Rhubarb Tarts, a 2004 mixed side from Yorkshire, 'Rhubarb because we hail from the famous Rhubarb Triangle in West Yorkshire twixt Rothwell, Morley and Carlton, close to the cities of Leeds and Wakefield. Tarts because most of us dance with other Morris sides.'<sup>647</sup> They have adopted 'the colours of that noble culinary veg - green, pink, red, yellow and

<sup>647</sup> <<http://www.rhubarbtarts.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].



Rhubarb Tarts Molly Dancers, Gate to Southwell Festival 2010.

make no excuses for our flamboyant and often ridiculous costume.<sup>648</sup> As can be seen, these colours also predominate in the facepaint used, but in this case with extra decoration applied to a base colour.

A team which is distinctive in more ways than one is Pig Dyke Molly, formed in the early 1990s. Not only is their monochromatic dress unmistakable, they are unusual in being 'something of an exception to general trends in that their music and garb is of the 'modern school', while their dances are still based on adaptation of country/feast dance, using double stepping'.<sup>649</sup> This is explained by group leader Tony Forster:

In style of dancing, we are a tribute to Seven Champs - our tribute is that we react strongly against it. Champs style works brilliantly, but it just isn't all there is, though widely copied, and is no more "correct" than any other style. So we base all our dance patterns on "social" structure rather than Morris structure (sequence of figures repeated rather than figure/chorus), and we dance fast, trying to give a feeling of exuberance and movement and flux rather than fist-punching military discipline. We have developed our dances from the collected dances and then some.<sup>650</sup>

With striking facepaint more akin to that of the rock group 'Kiss', Pig Dyke exemplify the inventive attitude of many of the revival Border and Molly sides which sit alongside the more traditionally-inclined teams such as Silurian and Mepal, yet which, apart from the context of performance, might not at all be recognised as 'morris dancers' by the general public.

<sup>648</sup> <<http://www.rhubarbtarts.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>649</sup> <<http://www.mollydancing.com/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>650</sup> <<http://www.pigdyke.co.uk/what-is-molly.php>> [accessed 20 September 2011].



Pig Dyke Molly, Whittlesea Straw Bear 2009 (above right);  
Belper 2010 (above left and below).



### 5.2.3.3 Other dance styles

There are a few teams also associated with morris but which defy categorisation. Each of these teams has attained its own idiosyncratic appearance and dance style.

Responding to research into a particular locality, three more traditionally-based sides grew out of Paul Davenport's work tracing the 'Forgotten Morris',<sup>651</sup> which

... describes a dance style based mainly in the Holderness area of East Yorkshire. The dances belong essentially to the winter season, as are the various associated customs of Plough Stotting, Plough Dragging, Longsword dancing and mumming. There was "no regular dance", but the main essence involved a single line of dancers performing reels and either rattling bones (also known as "knick knacks") or waving small flags. A solo dance performed over the poker and tongs from the fireplace in the manner of the Cotswold "Bacca Pipes" jig is also reported.<sup>652</sup>

The first of these teams, The Infamous Audreys, was short-lived, but I have spoken with some of the original members. One of these retained his outfit and used it on other occasions, including dancing with Border side Wicked Stix and appearing at Whitby Folk Week fringe events. The headdress was inspired by the description of the leader of the Snaith Plough Stots of 1920 wearing 'a bull's skull with the horns attached', with his face 'made up in red and white stripes'.<sup>653</sup>



Tony Canning wearing 'Infamous Audreys' headdress.

<sup>651</sup> Paul Davenport, 'The Forgotten Morris'; see <http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris.html> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>652</sup> Chas Marshall, 'An Insight into the Flag and Bone Gang', <http://www.crimple.demon.co.uk/fabmeds.htm> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>653</sup> Andrea Robertson, Field notes, 7th August 1994, quoted in [http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris\\_files/MorrisRef.htm](http://www.hallamtrads.co.uk/ForgotMorris_files/MorrisRef.htm) [accessed 20 September 2011].

...so this one account is what we based the hat on. The horns are Andrea's I made the rest. And the first time it was used was when we named Billie. We had a naming ceremony in full kit and black faces. We danced drank and ate all afternoon. And Billie lay asleep in her pram, with a black face from the kisses she received off the Audreys...<sup>654</sup>

The Flag and Bone Gang of Harrogate was formed at around the same time (1995). A mixed team, they were anxious to distance their appearance from Border sides:

A fool plough costume suggested the idea of arm and leg tatters ... These arrangements seemed far more practical than the chicken feathers reported in Paul Davenport's booklet, in spite of having a poultry farmer among our number! The tatters were made of red satin and were originally intended to provide a unifying theme over a shirt, trousers and shoes of any dark colour. Later the majority agreed that the shirt, trousers and shoes should be black.<sup>655</sup>

To retain the element of disguise without resorting to blackened faces, Flag and Bone have adopted an unusual, and so far unique, solution in the use of black 'beekeepers' veils.



Flag & Bone Gang, Gate to Southwell Festival 2010.

<sup>654</sup> Tony Canning, personal correspondence, 15 April 2010. Andrea told me the horns used were actually from a Botswanan cow! [conversation 27 September 2011].

<sup>655</sup> Chas Marshall, 'An Insight into the Flag and Bone Gang', <<http://www.crimple.demon.co.uk/fabmeds.htm>> [accessed 20 September 2011]. See illustration of a fool plough in Chapter 4.4.2.



The third of the groups influenced by the 'Forgotten Morris' is Rattlejag, formed in Retford in 2002:

Using recently collected material from East Yorkshire as a starting point and also our own material from local research into dancing in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire we have set out to revive and then develop our own locally based dance tradition...

...in all the references the dancers disguised themselves by colouring their faces either with soot or coloured clay, the references suggest lots of coloured ribbons flowing from shirts and hats (see our costume records section). We decided each dancer should choose one colour for their ribbons and face paint which together would give the side a multi-coloured effect. We wear collarless shirts, black trousers and waistcoats which reflect the clothes worn by ploughmen in the nineteenth century. To the waistcoats coloured ribbons are sewn. References from Holderness mentioned the dancers playing or rattling bones during the dances. So we have invested in a range of clickers and shakers (some made out of goats' toe nails!) which give distinct sounds to the different dances.<sup>656</sup>

Rattlejag members do not paint the whole face, but as an acknowledgement of the tradition use a vestigial pattern which varies individually.



Rattlejag, Gate to Southwell Festival 2010.

Four 'unclassifiable' teams demonstrate the malleability of English morris/folk dance. In various ways, people familiar with the main forms of morris and other traditional dance have adapted them to their own particular strengths and interests and founded new styles which, while remaining individual, have been accepted into the 'Folk' world.

One of the first of these groups, formed in 1982, was Sheffield's Lizzie Dripping:

The aim was to be street entertainers, with an eye-catching and versatile kit. The image was a cross between a 1920s 'bathing belle' and a fairground Aunt Sally. Vivid jade and red was chosen, with

<sup>656</sup> <<http://www.rattlejagmorris.org.uk/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

bloomers and a top forming the basic kit. To this was added a skirt, mop cap and a shawl, depending on the type of dance. Accessories of scarves, bells and wavers added even more interest. The 'Lizzie look' of hooped green and white tights and bright red shoes instantly became a trademark, as did the exaggerated makeup of red lips and cheeks, and black eyelashes, copied by many children watching at the festivals they attended.<sup>657</sup>

The painted faces were a strong feature of the team, but were discontinued with a change of kit in 2002. The dances the 'Lizzies' perform are 'step dances, tap routines, team dances in the North West style and traditional dances from Scotland, the Isle of Man and Wales,' but despite appearing at folk festivals and other gatherings of morris teams, they do not regard themselves as morris dancers as they 'do not dance any one particular Morris tradition'.<sup>658</sup>



Lizzie Dripping, Chesterfield 1983 (photo courtesy of Lizzie Dripping archive).

On the other hand, the Raving Maes are a self-styled 'Alternative Morris Dancing team' formed in 2007. The dances they perform are related to Molly dance, involving brooms, but their red and black kit is strongly influenced by the corsets and lacing of Goth culture, or burlesque. The team themselves quote a description as being 'a cross between Rocky Horror and traditional Morris Dancing (or S&M crossed with M&S!)'.<sup>659</sup> Although ostensibly Molly dancers, they use no form of

<sup>657</sup> <<http://www.lizziedripping.org.uk/about.html>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>658</sup> Ibid.

<sup>659</sup> <<https://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=52291527164&v=info>> [accessed 20 September 2011].



Raving Maes, Gate to Southwell Festival 2010.

facial disguise. However, as all the 'other' teams, they demonstrate the continuing influence of popular culture and the ever-changing nature of folk 'tradition'.

Far from rejecting disguise, the people forming the group known as Mr Fox take it to extremes, not only wearing identical masks when performing but even remaining secretive about membership: 'the folk who take part are close, and will not even declare who is and who is not of their number'.<sup>660</sup> The masks are elaborate, 3-D representations of a fox head and are worn with hooded tunics which, together with black trousers, give a disconcerting uniform appearance. Mr Fox dances are performed at night, as they involve the use of burning torches instead of the usual sticks, take place within an arena ringed by braziers, and are accompanied by pyrotechnic effects. Musicians also wear the same disguise. Much use is made of drums, although other instruments include concertina, melodeon, pipes and other woodwind. Although far from the general idea of morris, Mr Fox is a member of Open Morris,<sup>661</sup> and many members do dance more 'mainstream' styles with other sides.

<sup>660</sup> <<http://www.mr-fox.org.uk/history.htm>> [accessed 4 October 2011].

<sup>661</sup> One of the three morris organisations in England, the others being the Morris Federation and the Morris Ring: see <http://www.morrisdancing.org/>.



Mr Fox (photo courtesy of Sarah Cole).

The last of the groups considered in this section is definitely not a Morris dance team, yet they have appeared alongside morris teams at events such as 'folk festivals, rushbearing events, morris days and sheep fairs'.<sup>662</sup> Four Hundred Roses are a group of women from the area around Leeds, Bradford, and Keighley:

We first came together in late 2005 in a series of experimental workshops run to explore the possibilities of combining UK folk music and dance with Tribal style bellydance. Tribal bellydance is a dance form that seeks to recreate a feel of a communal / ethnic dance form without belonging to any real-world ethnic grouping. ... Tribal bellydance is strongly a group / collective dance form. It encourages groups (or 'Tribes') to develop their own ideas and to bring local elements into the dance mix to create a unique style.<sup>663</sup>

The end result is surprisingly effective; folk dance figures are interspersed with bellydance movements taking the place of the chorus common in many morris dances. Four Hundred Roses use no facial disguise, but do display the elaborate eye decoration common to Tribal Bellydance in the UK. They are included here as another, albeit extreme, example of how 'foreign' elements can be absorbed into English traditional dance culture.

<sup>662</sup> <<http://www.tgpdanceshow.co.uk/york-opera-house-dance-display/>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>663</sup> <<http://www.fourhundredroses.co.uk/aboutus.htm>> [accessed 13 September 2011].



Four Hundred Roses, Sowerby Bridge Rushbearing 2011.

### 5.3.3. Five Calendar Customs

Many of the activities above are connected to the calendar – the seasons of various mummers' plays, the link between Molly dancers and Plough Monday – but there are some traditional events which do not fit as neatly into the categories above. However, they are closely associated with particular days of the year, and thus have been grouped together in this section. Events of five very different days and locations are described: Haxey, on Epiphany, 6 January (Christmas Day in the old calendar); Bacup on Easter Saturday; Abbots Bromley on Wakes Monday; Lewes on Bonfire Night; and Padstow on Boxing Day/New Year's Day.

#### ***Haxey Hood***

The village of Haxey, North Lincolnshire is in a bleak rural location on the Isle of Axholme, a flat area which before drainage was surrounded by marshland. At over 700 years old, Haxey Hood is one of the oldest local traditions in England. A variation of the once widespread street football games, 'It is most easily described as a kind of rugby game with unlimited participants and few rules, where a leather tube is slowly walked by a large unorganised rugby scrum to 1 of 4 pubs. Here it remains until the following year's game.'<sup>664</sup> The game is overseen by twelve 'Boggins' and a 'Lord', accompanied by a Fool. Before the game begins the Haxey Fool is smoked in a fire of damp straw lit beneath the stone where he delivers his

<sup>664</sup> <<http://www.wheewall.com/hood/index.php>> [accessed 26 July 2011]. This website contains a comprehensive description of the game and surrounding events which has been omitted here as superfluous to the subject of this thesis.

speech. In previous times, 'a more substantial fire was lit with damp straw beneath a tree. The Fool was then suspended over the fire and swung back and forth until he was almost suffocated before being cut down and dropped into the fire, where he had to make his escape as best he could.'<sup>665</sup> It is easy to see how previous generations of folklorists could associate such practices with ritual sacrifice. Haxey is included here because, although the rest of the Boggins have clean faces (at least to begin with), the Fool's face is smeared with black. Red is also applied, though the red is not as apparent. It was shown in Chapter 4 that in the early years of the theatre fools had blackened faces. Given the great age of the game, this may be a survival of this association.



Haxey Hood 2011: Fool, and Boggin – muddied, not blackened.

<sup>665</sup> <<http://www.wheewall.com/hood/index.php>> [accessed 26 July 2011].

***Bacup, Easter Saturday: Britannia Coconut Dancers***

Bacup is a small town in Lancashire, situated in the Southern Pennines close to the border with West Yorkshire. On Easter Saturday, the Britannia Coconut Dancers, accompanied by Stacksteads Silver Band, dance from boundary to boundary of the town, with frequent stops both to perform their other dances and to refresh themselves in the traditional manner. Their dance is now unique, although there were historically other troupes in the area (see Chapter 4.4.4).



Britannia Coconut Dancers (photos courtesy of S. N. Bater).

The 'coconuts' are actually wooden discs attached to hands, knees and waist belt, which are struck in rhythm at certain points in the dance. The dancers' costumes are unlike any seen elsewhere, consisting of black jumper and leggings, short white and red hooped skirt, white socks, clogs, and a white hat with red and blue pompoms and a red or blue zigzag ribbon. The dancers, all male, blacken their faces and necks, but not their hands. The dances are performed elsewhere at festivals etc., but to the accompaniment of a concertina rather than the band. However, Easter Saturday is their most significant outing, and is a tradition which plays a large part in the identity of the local area (see Chapter 7.5).

### ***Abbots Bromley Horn Dance***

On the Monday after the first Sunday following 4 September, six men carrying reindeer antlers, accompanied by a musician, a Fool, a Maid Marian, a hobby horse, a bowman, and a boy playing a triangle, perambulate the parish of Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire, in certain places falling into formation to execute a simple dance. Abbots Bromley is included here as a counterpoint to Haxey Hood. It too is believed to be a custom of great age – one set of antlers has been carbon-dated to the eleventh century – although the earliest reference accepted by Roud is the early seventeenth century.<sup>666</sup> As at Haxey, there is a Fool included in the characters associated with proceedings, although his part is restricted to taking part in the dance. However, despite having a similar historical pedigree, at Abbots Bromley there is no suggestion of blackface at all. Intriguingly, the music used is not the fiddle tune familiarly linked with the dance and used by groups elsewhere, but a selection of popular folk tunes such as 'Cock o' the North' along with an occasional music hall tune like 'The Man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo'.



Abbots Bromley 2012: Maid Marian, off-duty dancer, Fool.

<sup>666</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 291.



### **Lewes Bonfire Night**

Lewes is the foremost of the East Sussex towns which hold bonfire processions, evidenced by the fact that Lewes's own celebrations take place on the Fifth of November itself (unless it falls on a Sunday). Tens of thousands of spectators attend, despite warnings about road closures, crowd density, difficulty of transport and potential danger. Six of the seven Lewes Bonfire Societies parade on the Fifth (the seventh, Neville, is a juvenile society which parades earlier). There are several processions involving thousands of participants walking through the narrow streets, carrying flaming torches, drawing fire barrels and huge effigies, and accompanied always by the sound of exploding firecrackers and the even louder 'rookies' underfoot. After processing round the streets, the societies move to their individual bonfire sites where the effigies are burned and display fireworks let off. Essentially, this event has not changed in the hundred years since this account was written:

Lewes, where Bonfire Night is a perfect saturnalia which involves shuttering or boarding up windows and the importation of a hundred constables from Brighton. Several Bonfire Societies are formed in the town, which get up independent processions with bands, fancy dresses, tar-barrels, Bengal lights, and effigies filled with fireworks. Not content with Guy Fawkes, they also represent the Pope and any notorious criminals of the year. At five o'clock they meet in Commercial Square, where a mock Archbishop leads the "Bonfire Boys' Prayers," which consist of a doggerel condemnation of Romanism and the Gunpowder Plot. Then the grand procession forms up, marches to a special tune through the streets, and breaks up again into its component parts, each of which wends its way to its own gigantic bonfire, where its own effigies are burnt. An interesting incident is that the Borough Boys throw a burning tar-barrel from the bridge into the river, which marks the boundary between the town and the Cliff, which is the local area of the Cliff Boys.<sup>667</sup>

The only changes I noted were in the number of police drafted in, and the fact that the 'Prayers' concluded rather than opened ceremonies.

Each Bonfire Society includes three groups – the 'Pioneer Front' who lead the parade, 'Second Pioneer Front', and 'Smugglers' – as well as bands, visiting Bonfire societies from the surrounding area and invited groups which may include morris dancers. The Pioneer groups are elaborately costumed, extremely varied, and include the Mongolian Empire; Priory Monks; North American Indians; Vikings; French Revolution; and Tudor Ladies and Gentlemen among others. The smugglers wear white trousers and striped jerseys (a different colour for each society) and a red cap. I was fortunate enough to participate with the Lewes Borough Bonfire Society in 2011 - the disadvantage of this was that I was not able to observe any other societies. Although I saw a few smugglers with faces streaked with black, it is the Borough First Pioneer Front, the Zulu Warriors, who are of interest here. The Zulus first appeared in 1948 and became the only first pioneers the following year.<sup>668</sup> The costumes are detailed, and include huge feathered

<sup>667</sup> Charlotte S. Burne, 'Guy Fawkes' Day', *Folklore*, 23 (1912), pp. 409-26 (p. 414).

<sup>668</sup> <<http://www.lewesboroughbonfire.co.uk/firstpioneer Costume.htm>> [accessed 8 November 2011]. Photographs of the Zulus can be found on the Borough Bonfire website.

headdresses which have become bigger and brighter over the years. Those wearing the costumes blacken all visible skin, not just the face.

### ***Padstow 'Darkie Day': Boxing Day and New Year's Day***

Padstow is a small fishing town and tourist destination on the north coast of Cornwall, famous mainly for its May 1<sup>st</sup> 'Obby 'Oss tradition, and latterly as the location of chef Rick Stein's restaurants. 'Darkie Day', in which some residents adopt blackface and tour the pubs singing and collecting for charity, take place on Boxing Day, New Year's Day, and the day after the 'Oss. The practice has become highly controversial, so much so that it is was subject to official scrutiny and is now referred to as 'Mummers' Day'. That issue is discussed at length in Chapter 6.1: here I describe my own experience at New Year 2011.

I asked about 'Mummer's Day' at the Tourist Information Office, and was told, 'It was always known as Darkie Days here in Padstow but,' the sentence tailed off, 'Political Correctness...'. According to the receptionist, it involved local people who 'go round with their accordions and sing shanties.' The people themselves proved harder to locate. The barman at the Golden Lion ('Home of the Old 'Obby 'Oss') had told me the mummers would meet at the Social Club about 10am on New Year's Day. I duly turned up, only to find a deserted bar, the steward informing me they would be meeting up about midday. This was confirmed by an accordion-carrying youth I met in the street. Midday arrived, only for me to find on my second visit to the Social Club that they had decided to meet at the Lodge instead.

I eventually found the mummers on the harbour side about 2.30pm, at the Shipwrights; I was too late to hear them perform there, and the pub was too crowded to enter, but I spoke to a couple of participants outside, one of whom (below) told me, 'They tried to stop it you know – never, never!' I then was told their next destination was the Old Custom House, so I went on there so as to be in place when they arrived.

The mummers wore a varied, but not uniform, costume. Many men, and some women, wore waistcoats, black trousers, and white shirts. Bowler hats decorated with tinsel were worn by both sexes. A few women wore long skirts with aprons, large hooped earrings, and turbans. There were also men and women in everyday clothes, but with faces blackened. Music was provided by accordions and drum, as on May Day, with the addition of tambourine and 'lagerphone' (a broom handle with beer-bottle top jingles fixed along the length, which doubled as a walking aid – see photograph below). Once inside the Old Custom House, the mummers sang 'Dem Golden Slippers' and 'Camptown Races'. After a break 'Dirty Old Town' and 'The Leaving of Liverpool' were also sung, but these seemed a less 'official' part of the proceedings and not all of the mummers joined in.

I then moved on to the Golden Lion, again ahead of the group. Standing at the bar there was a man in everyday clothes who had his face blackened, but who was not going round with the mummers. He explained that his wife was part of the group,



Outside the Shipwrights, Padstow: New Year's Day 2011.



Inside the Golden Lion, Padstow: New Year's Day 2011

and told me that 'other people' had a problem with the custom, not Padstonians. A long while later, an accordion playing 'She'll be coming round the mountain' was heard outside and some twenty or thirty mummers entered in single file making their way through the passage to the small back bar, a process which took several minutes. Their number crowded out the entire bar, and it was impossible to get near, such that this was tantamount to a private event. Once established, they sang through a set of tunes which appeared to be in a prescribed order, sung without break. Others in the pub joined in. The songs explain some part of the controversy associated with Darkie Day, as they are songs strongly associated with the plantations.<sup>669</sup> One of the songs included the line 'Gone where the good niggers go', and another the ditty:

I had a little nigger and he wouldn't grow no bigger  
So I put him in a Wild West show.<sup>670</sup>

The later song titles were announced by the lead accordion player over the last bars of the previous tune, and after the last song, the end was signalled with the 'Shave and a haircut' rhythm.

My overall impression of the event is that the participants are fiercely protective of the practice, and have a 'take it or leave it' attitude to outside interest. I must agree with Roud's assessment that it is 'one of the last vestiges of the black-faced minstrel craze of the nineteenth century',<sup>671</sup> but it should also be noted that efforts are being made to defuse accusations of racism. As mentioned above, there is more discussion of this, and other matters, in the next chapter, *Reactions, Responses and Reasons*.

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<sup>669</sup> The songs I recognised, or traced later, included Lucy Long, Polly Wolly Doodle, Oh Susanna, Swanee River, Poor Old Joe, Golden Slippers, and Camptown Races.

<sup>670</sup> This song was also recorded by Cawte in Brosely, Shropshire (E C Cawte, JEFDSS No 4 1962) and by Jim Coulson in Topcliffe, N. Yorks. (<<http://www.crimple.demon.co.uk/FieldNotes.pdf>> [accessed 1 June 2011]). A version is still used by Silurian Border Morris in the dance *Dilwyn*.

<sup>671</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 411.



## Chapter 6: Reactions, Reasons and Responses

Chapter 5 described how the practice of blacking up has been discontinued in practically all areas except an English folk setting, and detailed several instances of its preservation in such activities.<sup>672</sup> This chapter recounts a number of occasions when ‘official’ bodies have shown increased sensitivity to the issue of racism and, by extension, to blackface. Actual objections to folk performers blacking up are discussed before opinions and explanations given by some performers and bystanders are presented.

### 6.1 Sensitivity and censorship

There have been several examples showing how the police and the media, particularly advertising bodies, have become increasingly sensitive to issues of race.

In 2011, the producer of the long-running detective series *Midsomer Murders* was suspended following his remarks that the inclusion of ethnic minority characters in the show would undermine the show’s setting as ‘the last bastion of Englishness’, with the implicit assertion that to be English was to be white.<sup>673</sup> Later that year chocolate manufacturers Cadbury were forced to apologise to black model Naomi Campbell after she threatened legal action over an advertisement for a new chocolate bar which used the slogan ‘Move over Naomi – there is a new diva in town’, though at least one commentator wondered if this was deliberately calculated to be provocative so as to engender more publicity.<sup>674</sup> The Advertising Standards Authority received four complaints about the advertisement, but ‘considered that the ad was likely to be understood to refer to Naomi Campbell’s reputation for “diva-style” behaviour rather than her race. On this basis the Council decided that the ad was unlikely to be seen as racist or to cause serious or widespread offence.’<sup>675</sup> And in the autumn, a woman was arrested and charged with ‘displaying an item likely to cause racially-aggravated harassment’ after her neighbour complained about a golly doll placed in her window, although the case was dropped when the Crown Prosecution Service offered no evidence on the grounds that it was ‘not possible to show exactly who was responsible for placing

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<sup>672</sup> The term ‘English’ is used here notwithstanding the existence of a Cornish Nationalism movement.

<sup>673</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12741847>> [accessed 17 April 2012].

<sup>674</sup> ‘Chocolate bar’ is a frequent playground taunt of black children.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jun/03/cadbury-naomi-campbell-ad>>; Lester Holloway, ‘No Offence, but...’ *The Guardian* 31 May 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/31/naomi-campbell-cadbury>> [accessed 17 April 2012].

<sup>675</sup> <<http://www.msafropolitan.com/2011/06/cadburys-naomi-campbell-asas-response.html>> [accessed 17 April 2012].

the doll in the window'.<sup>676</sup> Recently, according to one source, advertising for the launch of a car named up! was amended:

Car manufacturer Volkswagen has got into a muddle over the name of its new supermini. To advertise the up!, VW produced black and white versions, with number plates reading "White up!" and Black up!" – until it was pointed out that in the UK, this could be taken as an instruction to stage a minstrel show. Now the plates read "Up! Black!" instead,<sup>677</sup> which makes no sense, but was deemed less likely to cause offence.

However, sensitivity over featuring black-faced teams on TV goes back much further:

20 years ago Blue Peter filmed us at Rochester Sweeps but didn't show it because of the black faces.<sup>678</sup>

We were at Rochester Folk Festival one year and Blue Peter pulled a planned item as there were blacked up sides there and they didn't want to be accused of being racist. I thought this was a pity as they could have taken the opportunity to explain the tradition.<sup>679</sup>

On the other hand, in 1995 another blackface side, Silhill Morris, did appear on the BBC in an episode of *Dangerfield*.<sup>680</sup> The side was approached by the same producer six years later with a view to them appearing in an episode of *Dalziel and Pascoe*. The producer was reminded Silhill was a blackface side, as 'sensitivities were on the rise at that time', but replied that he had remembered this. However, he returned and told the team that his superiors at the BBC 'were not prepared to go forward with a blackfaced side', and would they be prepared to perform without blacking their faces, which they refused to do: 'We are what we are, we do what we are [sic] for a reason'. Other black-faced sides in the area gave the same negative response, and eventually the producer had to find a side from a tradition which does not black up for his plot device. The team regretted this:

We've come to the conclusion that from the BBC's point of view we are unusable as extras in anything which we think is very disappointing because we are part of the community today and this is part of our heritage and people will see us and appreciate what we do.<sup>681</sup>

Border team Motley Morris, based in Kent, expressed a similar feeling after a school appearance was cancelled by the headteacher in case it caused offence:

Morris dancer Jim Snelling said: "I understand the school's concern but it is a shame they didn't take the opportunity to find out or ask us along to have a discussion about this fairly important part of our culture."<sup>682</sup>

<sup>676</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-15429369>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

<sup>677</sup> *The Week*, 14 January 2012.

<sup>678</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> <<http://www.silhill.f9.co.uk/index.htm#authentic>> [accessed 17 April 2012].

<sup>681</sup> Information and comments taken from interview with Silhill member, Warwick, 31 July 2011.

<sup>682</sup> <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/kent/8123664.stm>> [accessed 12 April 2012].

Carlisle Sword, Morris and Clog perform a number of dance traditions. The men dance longsword, rapper and border dances – with blackened faces for the border – and the women perform step dances in clogs. Amongst the tunes used for the border dances is Stephen Foster's *Oh Susannah*. In 2000, the local council banned the team from appearing at a local Arts Festival, as the appearance of 'white' women alongside blacked up males, together with the tune, meant the team were too readily associated with TV's Black and White Minstrel Show by someone who then made a complaint.

### **Padstow Mummers' (Darkie) Day**

This thesis began with the words 'In 2005 the Crown Prosecution Service was sent police film of a long-established English folk tradition...', that tradition being Darkie Day. My experience of one Darkie Day (by then officially renamed 'Mummers' Day') is described in the previous chapter. In this section, information relating to this name change and other official reaction to the event will be supplied.<sup>683</sup> It is pertinent to later discussion, not only because of its intrinsic relevance as official response to a 'blacked up' event, but also because I believe it demonstrates the extremes of knowledge, understanding and attitude amongst the 'powers that be', and by extension the general public, about such occasions and the fierce, defensive loyalty they engender in participants.

Opposition to Darkie Day had first been voiced on a national level in 1998 by the late Bernie Grant, the black Labour MP for Tottenham, who condemned the tradition as "offensive to black people all over the place". It seems little overt action was taken until meetings in 2004, possibly prompted by rumours of Channel 4 filming the day and the wider publicity that would bring to a previously modest local event. Notes from a meeting on 1 December 2004,<sup>684</sup> attended by David Brown, Chief Executive of North Cornwall District Council, a representative of Cornwall Race Equality Council, and two police officers from the Diversity Unit, show a rather robust attitude towards 'Darkie Day':

This tradition is considered highly inappropriate by numerous agencies and individuals in society. CREC and the Police have been trying to get this tradition changed for about 4-5 years.

The point [DB] wanted to make was that the hole was getting bigger for those who participate in the current format and that individuals taking part have been lucky so far not to get into trouble. However, he wanted to point out that if it carries on that this year there may be complaints and prosecutions but next year there certainly would be.

It was also highlighted that last year a picture appeared in the local press on the front page of a newspaper. This showed individuals dressed up with black faces. If there had been a complaint from the public, that individual [sic] would have been identified and prosecuted.

<sup>683</sup> The sources for the information in this section include documents available online following a Freedom of Information request by Susan Davis: <[http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/padstows\\_darkie\\_day\\_or\\_mummers\\_d](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/padstows_darkie_day_or_mummers_d)> [accessed 19 October 2011]. Quotations from these documents are referred to as 'Record 1' etc. according to the numbering on this website.

<sup>684</sup> Record 5. This date is taken from the Diversity Unit's covering letter. The date on the actual minutes is 1 November 2004.



A meeting was to be held between Brown and some of the organisers of the event, although 'he did not know who he was meeting or if anyone would turn up' as '[t]he problem is that there is no official organiser, or so they tell the authorities, but it is obvious that people do not spontaneously just turn up, all dressed up etc. at a given time.' He was to state three minimum changes were required: the blackening out of faces was felt unacceptable; the lyrics to some of the songs were unacceptable and an individual would commit a racially aggravated public order offence by singing them; and the name of the day needed to be changed from "Darkie Day" to something more appropriate. Other suggestions were made, including 'Paint faces with St Pirans [sic] flag and wear Cornish attire (e.g. rugby kit etc.)' and 'approaching the breweries and indicating that they are being associated with a racist festival.' The agreed plan of action was to 'Overtly film the event so that organisers, musicians and so forth can be identified for the future', while in that future there was to be '[e]vidence gathering on the day and prosecutions following on from that.' The clear message was that "Darkie Day" is not wanted and not supported by any authority, however, a revised celebration based on a Cornish theme, for example St Stephen- as it occurs on St Stephens [sic] day, with correctly licensed fund-raising would be supported.'

Sgt. Richard Hockin, Diversity manager, had been present and had contributed to the notes on that meeting. Its mood was echoed in his email of 8 December:

I explained to [PC Burt] that the best way forward for the event is moving away from the slavery links and making it more like a St Stephens feast day. PC Burt informed me that the people involved would be very unlikely to listen to this as an option and it sounds like they are prepared to dig their heels in. If that is the case I have no sympathy for them. CREC has made every effort, I believe, to help these people and to educate and motivate them into doing something else so that they do not get into trouble. If, at the end of the day, they are prepared to 'run the gauntlet' they will get into trouble.

I would recommend that you have sufficient staffing to cover both Boxing Day and New Years Day and that OEG is a must for both days. If the traditional parade does go ahead and your staff find themselves facing say upwords [sic] of 5 people that are causing offence, of course it may not be a good idea to arrest them there and then as a large scale disorder may take place. It would be my recommendation that the event is allowed to run its course but that all available evidence via OEG and witnesses is gathered and then a slow time positive prosecution investigation be carried out during January.<sup>685</sup>

As stated above, filming did indeed go ahead on Boxing Day 2004 and New Year's Day 2005, and footage was submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The response, showing a different perception of (and possibly attitude towards) the event, is worth quoting at some length:

Racially aggravated Section 5:

There is no evidence on the police papers that a person or persons has/have been harassed, alarmed or distressed by the spectacle of a group walking through the streets of Padstow dressed in costume with

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<sup>685</sup> Record 7.

blackened faces and to a musical accompaniment, nor that any were likely to be so affected.

The people in the parade appear to be generally peaceful, and do not, so far as I can tell, indulge in threatening, abusive, or insulting words or behaviour, or disorderly behaviour, either in general or towards any ethnic minority.

I have paid particular attention to whether there is any demonstration towards anyone of any hostility based on anyone's membership (or presumed membership) of a racial group. On the material shown to me I can find no evidence of this.

Stirring up racial hatred:

It is an offence to use threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour if the perpetrator either intends thereby to stir up racial hatred, or where racial hatred is likely to be stirred up. My comments above apply but in addition I have seen no evidence of an intention to stir up racial hatred, or any likelihood of it being stirred up. Crucially, 'racial hatred' is hatred against a group of persons defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins. None of the actions of those parading seem to have had or be likely to have the effect of causing this.

Public nuisance:

This is an offence with ancient roots and was defined as 'such an inconvenient or troublesome offence as annoys the community in general, and not a few individuals only, and is indictable as a misdemeanour'. ... The community of Padstow does not appear to be annoyed by the custom described on this file; on the contrary it seems on the evidence contained in the video to rather enjoy it. I have seen no evidence that the wider community is annoyed by what has taken place in Padstow. While it is difficult to infer the state of opinion from national and local media, the general tenor of such coverage to date has been that greater annoyance is shown towards those who would seek to ban rather than permit this rather eccentric custom.

...

In summary, I have concluded that the file does not contain sufficient evidence which would lead me to conclude that the evidential test was passed in relation to any offence.<sup>686</sup>

These documents encapsulate the extremes of opinion about Mummers' Day – that it is a highly offensive practice which should be stopped, and that it is a 'rather eccentric custom' valued by the local community.

A sort of compromise seemed to be established during the following year:

The participants agreed to change, including the name to 'Mummers' day, no afro style wigs, and no racist wording in any songs. The blackening of faces was an issue that could not be resolved, especially if they had consented to the agreed changes requested. The changes made brought them in line with similar events around the Country, and elsewhere world-wide, where the practice of blacking up one's face, was not construed as racist.<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>686</sup> Record 10.

<sup>687</sup> Record 9, p.4.

It is telling, in the context of this thesis, that the blackening of faces – ostensibly, the most noticeable feature and the one most likely to be misinterpreted by ‘outsiders’ – was not to be changed.

An article written by an observer invited to participate the following Boxing Day gives an impression of reaction amongst the mummers:

Most conversation was informal social exchange but there was some discussion of the concerns expressed about the event by the Police and recognition of the need to use the term “Mummers” rather than “Darkie” as well as caution about the type of costume worn.

During a previous year someone had apparently turned up wearing a joke shop “afro” wig and this was felt to be quite wrong and inappropriate. There was also a sense of anger at being misrepresented by people who knew nothing of an event that involved no more than dressing up, community singing and collecting money for charity.<sup>688</sup>

Cornwall, in common with other regions, has a long history of mumming, known locally as ‘Guise dancing’ or ‘Geese dancing’.<sup>689</sup>

The term ‘guizing’, from which ‘geese-dancing’ derives, describes the ancient practice of disguising traditional performers by blackening their faces or clothing them in grotesque headgear, thus elevating them above ordinary mortals. In Cornwall the letter ‘s’ is pronounced as ‘z’, so ‘geese-dancing’ reflects the same source.<sup>690</sup>

Mummers’ Day falls into this context, although, as remarked, it ‘would have been more accurate’ to call it Guizing Day.<sup>691</sup> When Diane Abbot’s 2006 motion ‘raised the profile of the event again, when so much hard work behind the scenes [had] gone into making this as acceptable as possible’,<sup>692</sup> a comprehensive debrief covering events from 2004-6 sent by Inspector Ian Marshall to the Chief Superintendent definitively placed the custom as a form of mumming, stating, ‘Whatever, the practice has nothing to do with slavery, the slave trade or black people’.<sup>693</sup> Currently, ‘the custom continues, virtually unchanged’<sup>694</sup> – a judgement borne out by my own observations (see previous chapter).

The spurious connection with the slave trade stems from a popular story circulating in Padstow that Darkie Day celebrates the dancing of slaves in the harbour when they were allowed temporary freedom. As the Inspector states,

<sup>688</sup> M. R. Davey, ‘Guizing: Ancient Traditions and Modern Sensitivities’, *Cornish Studies* 14 (Exeter: 2006).

<sup>689</sup> Amongst others: Roud, p. 391; Tony Deane & Tony Shaw, *Folklore of Cornwall* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), p.141; Simon Reed, *The Cornish Traditional Year* (Penzance, Troy Books, 2009), pp. 46-64. M. R. Davey, ‘Guizing: Ancient Traditions and Modern Sensitivities’, *Cornish Studies* 14 (Exeter: 2006).

<sup>690</sup> Tony Deane & Tony Shaw, *Folklore of Cornwall* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), p.175.

<sup>691</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>692</sup> Record 9, p. 4.

<sup>693</sup> Record 9, p.5.

<sup>694</sup> Deane & Shaw, *Folklore of Cornwall*, p.175.

It is established that no slave ship ever docked at Padstow, the harbour and estuary are far too shallow. It is also unlikely that any slaves in the hold of a ship would have been allowed on deck, and even if they had, it's unlikely the captive men, women and children on board would have been in any condition to sing and dance.

Nevertheless oral tradition is persistent, and I was still given this 'explanation' in 2011.

This section has dealt with official opposition to blacking up, reviewing at length reaction to one custom in which it has been retained and placing that custom in the context of a longer tradition. The following section looks at the attitudes of lay people who encounter blackface performance in dance and mumming in the street and other public places, as perceived by performers in communication with me, and by me personally during extensive fieldwork.

## 6.2 Reactions of onlookers

Two points must be made before moving on to present the opinions of members of the general public who have seen blackface performances. Firstly, many people who are offended by the sight of blackface are unlikely to remain in its vicinity, let alone approach an entire group of people so attired to express their objections. Secondly, the number of black people present at events where blackface is likely to be found is small: ethnic minorities are, for whatever reasons, under-represented in the English folk world.<sup>695</sup> From Cornwall to Cambridgeshire, Sussex to Northumberland, I have rarely seen more than one or two black passers-by, let alone any who stayed to watch. I have endeavoured to approach black onlookers wherever possible: nevertheless, the number I have been able to speak to is small, and their views may be unrepresentative. It is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a widespread survey. Instead, the responses I have collected are offered alongside those participants have given me, and their value lies in the consistency of the answers elicited.

Overall, the feeling of participants is that any objections are voiced by white people:

Regarding modern experience the only people who are generally offended are the white middle class

Only ever been challenged by white people who think it is offensive to black people and then only a handful in all the years we have been dancing.

...occasionally a white partner will drag a coloured boy or girlfriend over to find out what it's about. Never a problem!

We are frequently (several times a day) asked why we black up, and the answer follows these lines. We are careful to explain that there is no racial motivation. Curiously it is rarely black or brown people asking the

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<sup>695</sup> In a lifetime following English folk events, I have encountered fewer than half-a-dozen black or dual heritage participants. This could be compared with Goth subculture, where black people are similarly absent.

question and for the most part people are slightly worried that they may not be politically correct for asking.

Similar opinions have been voiced to me in conversation with performers from all over the country. The impression given is that black people themselves react with good humour – at least, those speaking to the performers:

Black people seem to love it and make a point of talking to us and asking about the origins of it in all my years no black person has said anything about it being offensive rather they joke and say, "Mine doesn't come off!"

The fact is though that most Blacks, Indians or Asians see us as either funny or for what it is, just another odd English tradition and nothing to do with race. I remember when I was just starting to do the play one of the pubs we used to go to was the [...] which at the time had a very predominantly Sikh clientele. There was never a problem with this. In fact the Turk used to come on to loud cheers and shouts of "come on Abdul!"

This year I met a customer of mine he just happens to be black now in my business we take the mickey out of everyone so when I saw him on the 5th I went up to him and said "are you offended in any way by me doing this?" his reply "Why should I be?" he then said "Well yes I am offended that you have found it necessary to even ask. Is it cos you's black?"<sup>696</sup>

It may be that such reactions are more easily recalled as they reinforce the beliefs of performers. The responses I gained from the few black people I was able to speak to were more mixed. One black woman in Warwick (2011) expressed surprise that people were still blacking up, but then 'saw the feathers in their hats and wondered if they were trying to be ravens'. (Pheasant feathers are a common decoration in border morris hats: see photographs in Chapter 5.3.2.1). Another found no offence at all, and was pleased that English traditions not only existed but were being maintained. A black woman with a white partner told me that she did not find the idea offensive, but (perhaps not grasping the idea that it was not intended to imitate black people) said she would be hypocritical if she did so – the previous New Year she had been to a party painted yellow and dressed as a Chinese woman.

At one of the larger festivals I interviewed one of the catering teams, who described themselves as 'Jamaican Brummies', to get their opinions about the blackfaced dancers who daily passed in front of their stall. They acknowledged that some found the practice upsetting, but having found out the reason behind the English tradition, they were passing on the explanation to others:

The first time I saw any blackman face it was the Black and White Minstrels; it was very controversial at the time I know. I've since found out the history behind the black face [in morris], and I don't know if I've got it right or was told it right, it was about them having to feed a family, they'd go dancing in the streets...their boss didn't know they were and that was why they blacked their face. Being black ourselves as you

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<sup>696</sup> One of the catchphrases of controversial comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's 'Ali G' persona was "Is it cos I is black?"

know it was controversial and a lot of people was upset by it, and since I've found that obviously I've passed the information to them.

Also the morris dancers and the blacking up of the face, that actually comes with a procession that we have in the Caribbean...so when we came here at [...] and saw the blacking up of the faces we thought 'Oh!' and the procession, this reminds us just the same like we would have the same thing that goes on.

Most people from our background wouldn't go to folk festivals...I think probably they don't want to go camping!

[Some teams feel uncomfortable putting black on their faces] It's a shame because if that's the reason why not? I suppose it used to be charcoal, they used, I should imagine, so that's why the black.

Rapper is a form of traditional dance which does not involve blackface but nevertheless involves many people who also dance Border and Molly. At the annual Rapper Competition<sup>697</sup> I was reacquainted with a Black British woman who had filmed the occasion the previous year and so had contact with a part of the 'folk' world. I asked her if she had ever seen any blacked-up dancers, and what her reaction to them would be. Her carefully-worded reply was that she would be put off – 'If they don't know that's offensive, then they're not used to different cultures.' As it happened, there was a member of the Witchmen border dancers there, and I asked him to explain the reasons why he blacked up – he gave her the common explanation that it was disguise for labourers (see below). She responded by saying that she hadn't known that and previously had always associated blackface with minstrels. When I asked if the explanation would change her opinion, her ready reply was 'Yes, one hundred percent!' This corresponds to the attitude of the caterers above, and suggests that offence lies in misperception of the reasons for blackface.

As will be seen below, some teams accept the strong possibility of misunderstanding, and have amended their makeup accordingly (see photographs in Chapter 5), while others hold firmly to the 'traditional' blackface. The next section considers the reasons participants in dance and other traditions illustrated in Chapter 5 give for blacking up, or for seeking alternatives, together with their thoughts about various other aspects of the practice.

### 6.3 What the performers say

#### *Tradition*

Unsurprisingly, 'tradition' is a strong feature of morris dance and associated activities, acknowledged even by those sides who are developing the elements handed down to them:

I can only surmise that it was to do with discoveries about the original performances..... There was a lot of emphasis on upholding the

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<sup>697</sup> Dancing England Rapper Tournament.

tradition, even though we were re-creating it, and had no direct connection to the original performers.

It feels like a connection to people who've lived before.

I think it's important to keep traditions like this going because it's part of England's identity.

...traditions and roots are worth remembering...<sup>698</sup>

Predictably, then, 'tradition' is given as the underlying reason for blacking up:

How was the decision to black up made originally? Following Border Tradition

We formed the Witchmen as a traditional Border Morris side back in the days when there were very few border sides about - Silurian, Ironmen and Shropshire Bedlams are all I can remember as being 'full time border', and a part of traditional border is the black face.

I feel very strongly about the continuation of this particular tradition of Morris Dance, as collected, Dave Jones began the revival, and as a very small boy I can remember seeing Blackface Morris Dancers in Upton on Severn (am now 64) so want to see it continue.

Mepal Molly Men are the oldest revival molly side in Britain (January 1977). The founder Brian Cookman talked to original Molly Dancers in 1976 they last danced in the mid 1930's...We keep Molly as traditional as possible.

Oddly proud to be keeping true to the tradition. More so after the Unconvention in Bath and seeing how many sides don't black up anymore. Possibly their local tradition didn't black up but it seems to be a caving in to peer pressure.

...feels 'right' continuing a tradition (one of the only ENGLISH traditions) that reaches back further than we imagine, possibly one my own forebears practiced [sic] as I was born in Brimfield (Mothers home Village - one dance from here) and grew up in Upton on Severn (Fathers home Town - two dances from here).

Of course, this begs the question of why, in that hazy period known as 'the past', it was the tradition to black the face. Throughout most of the twentieth century the prevailing opinion amongst folklorists, following Frazer, Sharp, Fairman Ordish, Alford *et al*, was that activities such as mumming and morris dance were remnants of magical pre-Christian rituals: '[P]ronouncements on folkloristic matters were unerringly guided by the survivalist notion of folklore as the fossilised intellectual remains of the primitive world'.<sup>699</sup>

What was the specific ritual? The English writers never explained it very well. It was presented as a generic, but somewhat vague and never documented, sacrificial ritual, reaching back to a prehistory never defined by time or space. Sharp, in his sword dance booklets, put the basic concept most clearly in an arrangement that dominated the English "revival" movement for decades:

<sup>698</sup> Representative quotes are taken from anonymised personal email communication and conversation, unless otherwise referenced.

<sup>699</sup> John Ashton, 'Beyond Survivalism: Regional Folkloristics in Late-Victorian England', *Folklore*, 108 (1997), pp. 19-23 (p. 20).

1) That the [sword] dance originally formed part of a ceremony quasi-religious or magical in character, the purpose of which was to promote the fertility of the soil and of all living things;

2) That the central ritual act was the killing and subsequent restoration to life of a man who, from the character of his dress and other considerations, represented, apparently, the animal world (Sharp 1985, part 3, 10).

Other ritual motives to which Sharp referred were to "celebrate the victory of spring over winter," or "to purge the village of ghosts, devils, diseases," and so on (Sharp 1975, 9). He and others argued that English morris dancing and sword dancing, and mumming, were closely linked, and in fact represented the surviving fragments of a once-united, pan-European sacrificial ritual.<sup>700</sup>

If these rites were indeed magical, then it was important that the people performing them stood apart from the norm, whether to distinguish themselves from the *hoi polloi* or to protect themselves from the retribution of evil spirits, and so disguise, in terms of costume and masking or blacking the face, became a strong feature, especially in mumming. This view was still being expressed as recently as the 1960s, at the time of a strong revival in folk music and dance when many current performers 'cut their teeth':

What survives today is a relic of a custom which was designed to bring 'luck' and fertility to the people and places visited. When the champion is killed and revived, he is symbolising the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, or summer over winter. This is the message of the play which primitive people could see enacted for themselves when the crops began to grow again in spring after the dead period of winter. [...] Even today, ceremony is preserved: the costume maintains the disguise which was essential to promote the luck. To be recognised broke the magic, so that, however slightly, the features of the performers must be hidden.<sup>701</sup>

It has been suggested that Helm would have repudiated the survivalism theory had he lived longer:<sup>702</sup> nevertheless, the idea gained wide circulation amongst followers of folk tradition, and, despite its rejection by current-day academic folklorists, similar ideas have been passed down by word of mouth and are remarkably resistant, as seen below.

### ***Paganism and the Devil***

Even if morris dancing was not originally a pagan fertility rite, it undoubtedly is now, at least in the eyes of a great proportion of performers and their audience.<sup>703</sup>

<sup>700</sup> Stephen D. Corsin, 'The Founding of English Ritual Dance Studies before the First World War: Human Sacrifice in India ... And in Oxfordshire?', *Folklore*, 115 (2004), pp. 321-31 (p. 323).

<sup>701</sup> Alex Helm, ed., *Five Mumming Plays for Schools* (London EFDSS & Folklore Society, 1965), p. 3.

<sup>702</sup> Eddie Cass, Norman Peacock, Christopher Cawte, Peter Millington, Paul Smith, and Derek Schofield, 'Discussion about Alex Helm and his collection', *Folk Drama Studies Today* (2003), p.177.

<sup>703</sup> Trubshaw, *Explore Folklore* (Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press 2002) p. 142.



This link, together with the resurgence of paganism in recent years, means the pagan connection has been positively embraced by some. This is reflected in the name of sides such as Witchmen and Beltane Border and the attendance of non-morris dancing pagans at folk-based events such as the Hastings Jack-in-the-Green festival at the beginning of May.

I like to think that this form of dance goes back further into the mists of time as its form and the ragged/blacked appearance gives it an altogether more Pagan feel. It follows traditional dance on other continents that make use of colouring face/bodies.

Generally the public react in a different way to Border than other forms of Morris, again the 'Pagan' connections, the drums of a side such as Witchmen can only be described as primeval and people react accordingly...

We black our faces up as a disguise as we dance and move the autumn and winter spirits away and dance springtime and fertility in and it's all part and parcel of the tribute that we pay to springtime.<sup>704</sup>

Along the way, generic 'evil spirits' became associated with the devil of Christianity:

Morris dancers would also perform at wassail and other crop blessing ceremonies, as they still do today, to drive the devil or other evil spirits away and blacked up so the devil wouldn't come back and get them later.

My initial memory of the original decision to black up was that the plays mocked the Devil and since this was considered unlucky in superstitious society, it was best to hide your identity.

I like the theory that the dancers' clothes and paint were in association with their time and tradition, but there are some Morris who say blacking one's face would be so the devil wouldn't recognise you and has pagan connotations.

Possible reasons for the 'survival of survivalism' are discussed in Chapter 7.4.1. Although the pagan connections are attractive to some, in the twenty-first century the reason for blacking up most generally given is that it was done for disguise.

### ***Disguise***

'...all the dancers I know tend to the "disguise" theory of the blacking...'

Overwhelmingly, disguise is the reason given for the original use of blackface, in conversation, email, and on team websites.<sup>705</sup> In fact, I cannot think of a single example where this was not so, and though the reasons given for disguise vary they generally centre on a labouring, predominantly rural, theme:

I don't know much about blacking up but have always been told it was a disguise for working men who were trying to make some money on the side.

There are numerous accounts of "ploughboys" going out on Plough Monday with a blackened face in Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire

<sup>704</sup> Joe Healey, secretary, Britannia Coconut Dancers, 'Still folk dancing after all these years' BBC TV: available on <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sZR4MPQIk4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sZR4MPQIk4)> [accessed 19 March 2012].

<sup>705</sup> Examples can be found through links on <<http://www.morrisdancing.org/>>

throughout the 1800s. They obviously needed the disguise as they were frequently in trouble with the law for the mischief they got involved in. Some accounts describe molly dancing, others mischief, vandalism and thieving on Plough Monday.

Blacking up for border morris I am led to believe started with farm/estate labourers. As this form of morris is a winter sport (the opposite to Cotswold) it was used as a form of begging by workers that had been laid off during the fallow winter months. They blacked their faces with soot as a disguise should their employers take a dim view of their antics (dancing for money) and thus not reemploy them in the spring

... so as not to be recognised by their employers, as often they should have been hard at work, instead of dancing and were also embarrassed to be seen begging for money.

Border Morris ... was danced in the winter by out of work farm labourers in and around ale and cider houses for money. The dancers would black up and wear reversible rag jackets so that a) it would be very hard to recognise them and b) so they could make good their escape if necessary.

When people ask me why we're painted my answer is usually along the lines of 'so you won't recognise me again', which is what I believe dancers in the past were doing, disguising their faces so their bosses wouldn't know them when they were out celebrating a day off from their labours and earning the odd penny or two by dancing and entertaining. They were beholden to their employers and earning extra would not have been approved of.

I've always understood the blacking up to be part of just generally disguising oneself as at one point the play would have been performed by tenants to their landlords. By the wearing of tatter jackets (hiding the body shape) and blacking up they would have been able to do what is essentially a begging play (Jackie Sweep's last lines being "it's money we want, it's money we crave! If you don't give us money I'll sweep you all to the grave"), collect the money and not have their landlords turn up on the doorstep the next day trying to get it back. No idea how much of this is based in truth but it does have some kind of sense to it.

Molly sides black up and wear "silly" costumes as a form of disguise. Winter was a difficult time particularly over the Christmas New Year period. Dancing was a form of cadging. The dancers did not want their identities known to their friends, neighbours, relations and employers. In addition it was a time of "misrule" at the end of one year and start of a new year. Tricks and jokes were played on difficult people in the village i.e. wealthy, clergy. Blacking up was important.

Used in the part of guising too, and linked into mummering, pace egging and other such cash raising activities, blacking up originates from a desire to camouflage oneself. The great and good may have known very well who you were, but in disguise, you could be anonymous, to say and do whatever you wanted. There are connections here too with Lords of misrule.

... the blacking of the face has a long tradition going way back. Contrary to opinion it has nothing to do with what ethnic background you come from but not wishing to be recognised (wearing the same outfits was all part of everyone looking the same to protect the individual's identity ie our smuggler costumes). The Bonfire Boys and Morris Men were people from the lower class and when they went out they would often earn extra pennies that helped out their meagre salaries. Should they be recognised by their employer then the money they received would be

docked from their wage and in a few cases they were sacked from their job.

Another related reason that was suggested to me in conversation applies particularly to mummers (and probably to Bonfire Boys too) – that the black face aids camouflage at night. This would have been useful both to avoid capture, and, for mummers, as an extra theatrical effect when players appeared out of the winter darkness and as quickly disappeared.

### ***Minstrelsy and Racism***

As I indicated in Chapters 1.3 and 3.2.4, people most readily associate the term 'blacking up' with Victorian blackfaced minstrelsy and its later manifestations. It has been suggested that Border dances in particular do have strong links:

There would seem to be little doubt that the black faces of the traditional morris dance groups of the Welsh Border counties were at least influenced by minstrelsy. The occasional use of banjos, bones and tambourines in these morris dances cannot be mere coincidence.<sup>706</sup>

However, few dancers subscribe to the view that there is such a link:

To my knowledge there is none.

Heard some people suggest a link, have no knowledge myself.

There are no links that I can see between minstrels and ritual dance. All cultures use(d) masks at some point in their history and English culture is no different. (See Molly dancing/guising/mumming/Bacup Britannia Coconut dancers etc.) and blackface is only a mask.

Others are more open to considering the possibility, although placed in a context of an existing tradition:

I can also imagine that in the 19th Century, when minstrel shows took hold of America and then, to a lesser extent, the UK, then it might have been interpreted in that light by the culture of the time. However, I think it is highly unlikely that the roots of blacking lie in minstrel shows, evidenced by the much earlier recordings of black faces in English history and morris dance.

To others, it is a more recent connection made solely in the minds of onlookers:

From good intentions some people have equated blacking up with the 'black' minstrel tradition, where blacking up was pretending to be another race, but the folk tradition in the UK doesn't have links to this.

Having done the play for close on 26 years now I have noticed that the PC brigade have started to get more and more twitchy about us blacking up. Many of them thinking that it "must" in some way be along the same lines as the Minstrels and just not wanting to listen when we try to tell them that it goes back a hell of a lot further than that.

One correspondent mentioned a group which for him suggested how an association could be made:

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<sup>706</sup> Derek Schofield, 'A Black and White Issue?', *English Dance and Song* 67.2 (2005), p.13.

I don't however like the totally blacked up look of Shropshire Bedlams, seeing them with their black necks and hands with no skin showing is the only time I see the hint of a connection with minstrelry.<sup>707</sup>

However, John Kirkpatrick, the founder of the Bedlams, would not agree with this:

Picking out some of the more commonly mentioned points of fashion among Shropshire morris dancers, I arrived at black top hats decorated with feathers, tattered jackets, and, later, one ring of bells below each knee. And, of course, blackened faces and hands.<sup>708</sup>

We used to sing the words, "There was a little nigger but he grew no bigger ... " but we've changed them to avoid offending black people. I don't think there's any cause for offence in blacking up, but singing about niggers is rather different.<sup>709</sup>

Yet another saw a strong connection – but it was not to do with the black faces:

...similar reason for inception --- requirement:- raise cash, reward:- get away from home with the 'lads' for a while, bonus:- free beer etc.

Clearly it is the association with the black makeup used in minstrelsy to imitate black people, and all the negative connotations of that genre (see Chapter 3) which have led to accusations of racism in the use of blackface today. Several performers have been approached, but the comments I have received relating to this matter have been somewhat unexpected. I found that, as well as being criticised for wearing blackface, some performers had attracted unacceptable comments from others because of their makeup. This was the experience of one of the Lewes Bonfire Boys:

The biggest confrontation I ever experienced was when I was working as captain of ranks and my wife and 2 daughters were dressed as Zulus there were 4 or 5 lads in their late teens one of whom was of ethnic race making insulting remarks to my family using racial remarks ... I took issue with these lads. A fight broke out and several of the group were arrested. ... About 8 years ago I gave up working in the procession on the 5th and decided I would make a Zulu costume and black up, I was very surprised to hear a few racist remarks as we paraded down the streets. It has over the last few years died down I am pleased to say and the last comment I received was in fact from a white woman who stopped me and asked me if I realised I was a racist and by dressing up I was demeaning the Zulu race.<sup>710</sup>

That performers would attract racial abuse of this sort while blacked up was unforeseen, so I asked for further clarification whether the abuse was directed at the 'white' or the 'black' person:

<sup>707</sup> A picture of Bedlams can be seen in Chapter 5.3.2.1.

<sup>708</sup> John Kirkpatrick, 'Bordering on the Insane', *English Dance & Song*, 41 (1979), pp. 12-14, p. 14.

<sup>709</sup> John Kirkpatrick, 'The Shropshire Bedlams', *American Morris Newsletter* 23 (2000). Available at

<[http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo\\_ShropshireBedlams.asp](http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/mo_ShropshireBedlams.asp)> [accessed 14 September 2011].

<sup>710</sup> Interestingly, a black African bandsman I spoke to in Lewes told me that, far from the fancy dress being demeaning, he had been attracted to the Borough Society because of the care taken to make the Zulu costumes look authentic.

Only the once by the lady was anything directed to me as a white person blacking up. The rest of the time it was as though I was black.

The reasons for this are themselves worth further investigation. Were the remarks symptomatic of genuine racial antagonism? Or did people feel that it was somehow acceptable to give abuse because the Zulus were not 'really' black? Was it possibly related to local inter-society rivalry? The relevance here is whether other different groups have been the target of similar comments, or whether the remarks were connected with the fact that the Zulus are in fact imitating black people, while the other traditions maintain that this is not their intention:

One thing is for sure - there is certainly no element of racism or mocking of dark-skinned people in the modern border morris tradition.

Although attitudes back then [early 1970s] were different, there was never any racist element to the thinking about us blacking up - it was just the proper way to exhibit the play.

This seems to be the case. No other person reported being abused as a 'black' person; nevertheless, some have attracted unwelcome attention:

Occasionally we have to respond to people who want to make out that we share their racial motives or who think it's clever to sing Al Jolson songs, but we explain the history and they lose interest.

I personally was pleased about the different colours. In the 1980's we danced in Billericay and a woman came up to me and said "It's very nice, but do you have to black up, there are enough of them here already". At the time I made a terse response.

One suggested that a link with black people could have been a positive thing:

Incidentally, although we talk about the blacking being a disguise, surely even way back some members of the community would have made the connection with 'looking like foreigners'. Indeed, it might have been seen as a very positive, almost exotic aspect?

This resonates with a previous suggestion, now rarely heard, that the black faces form part of a link with Moorish/morris dancers of the Middle Ages.<sup>711</sup>

Others suggest that the accusation of racism could actually be substantiated by abandoning blacking up:

I personally get frustrated by some of the politically correct moves (particularly in North America) to colour the face in other colours or wear masks, as I believe by doing this it is implicitly indicating that the blacking of the face does have racist overtones. Far better to explain the original meaning and current interpretation instead of create a wrong impression.

Many sides today have moved away from blacking their faces instead using a rainbow of colours, I suspect due to the racist connotations (I have been called this to my face by some very uninformed 'Chavs') and the possible hassle they might encounter. Personally I think this is wrong, there is no shame blacking your face, the public need to be

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<sup>711</sup> For further explanation of Moorish, morris and similar terms, see Chapter 4.4.4.

educated as to why you do this not just change tradition because it may offend.

The folk community is a very broad church in which all points of view may be included; indeed, within the community some topics are rarely broached as being largely irrelevant to the matter in hand. I am not so naïve as to imagine that there are no people who subscribe to racist views yet are morris dancers, or mummers, or who take part in traditional pastimes. Nevertheless, the comments above make it clear that, with the exception of the 'Zulus', blacking up is not employed in imitation of black skin. Whether or not the practice can be considered racist *per se* is discussed below; meanwhile, in the words of the CPS above, 'I have seen no evidence of an intention to stir up racial hatred, or any likelihood of it being stirred up'.

Notwithstanding the comments above, there are those who, while adhering to the concept of disguise, are sensitive to the possible offence black faces could cause. Their views, and the alternatives they employ, are given in the next section.

### ***Alternatives to blacking***

Chapter 5 described how, in the Warburton Soulers, the Turkish Knight has a red face even though he is referred to as 'black Moroccan dog', a description other mummers have interpreted literally rather than figuratively with their black-faced Turks. It was also recounted how Beelzebub too has amended his black face over the last few years so it gives a less solid appearance. This is because the son taking the part had worked with black youths in Manchester and so was attuned to the idea voiced in the MacPherson report that a racist act was one that could be perceived as racist, whether or not it was intended as such. That chapter also established how Knaresborough Mummers, a team which blacks up for its winter 'Blue Stots' play, nevertheless had amended the facepaint and name of the traditionally blacked character 'Sambo' to a multi-coloured 'Sammy' to avoid offence.

At the Mummers Unconvention in Bath, Bristol Rag Morris Mummers performed an innovative play recounting the life of Brunel in which the devil 'Brunelzebub' had a blue face. It could be assumed that this was similarly to avoid offence. That might have been an unstated consideration – none of the rest of the team was blackened – but there was an unusual reason explaining how they had arrived at this colour. 'Brunelzebub' was imagined as Brunel's alter ego, and the team had found an entry in Brunel's diary of 1829 in which he had said he sometimes felt 'rather blue-devilish', meaning feeling low. This comment was adopted by the team to good effect.

Many dance teams have replaced blackface with a mixture of effects. In at least one case the decision to move from blackface was a direct result of its unacceptability to the family of a team member. I was told by a member of Wharfedale Wayzgoose that, when the side was being formed, one of the members had a black relative who objected strongly to the concept of blacking up, to the extent that said member was about to leave the team. A compromise

suggestion of black and white was made and found acceptable, and Wayzgoose have decorated their faces with those colours ever since. Happily, black and white are also the town colours of Otley, where the team is based.

Similar sensitivity, though without the direct opposition above, was shown by Tony Forster, the founder of Pig Dyke Molly. He explained his judgement in an interview with me.<sup>712</sup> Originally he had danced blackfaced with Old Hunt Molly, but one day, on his way home and so alone, was asked by a black woman why he was so made up. He thought through his possible answers. Explaining it was 'traditional' he thought would make no sense to the woman as it was out of context. Neither would it be acceptable to tell her that it was to look frightening, nor that it was to make all team members look the same. His reflections on this encounter resulted in Pig Dyke Molly originally using white makeup on their faces when the team was formed. This evolved into the elaborate and decorative black-and-white patterns used today, which, taken with their black and white clothing, ensures that it is impossible to confuse them with the black and white faces of Wayzgoose.<sup>713</sup>

... black and white and bold and not boring is our aim for costume and face make-up - and we know that it works. We do not use full black-face make-up. We don't want to be linked to "nigger minstrels", or the Black and White Minstrel show. Molly dancers in the past blacked their faces for disguise, weirdness, and loss of personal identity: we achieve that.<sup>714</sup>

Pig Dyke's approach is echoed by other teams:

We decided to colour our faces, initially considering black - burnt cork or make-up. This was because historically these dances originated in villages and towns near the Welsh Border and the participants used polish or burnt cork on their faces for disguise. A number of us felt that this would be inappropriate for the kind of society we have today in the UK, with people of different skin colours and the history of derogatory "negro minstrels" and other forms of often perceived insulting behaviour...

This passage sums up the attitude of Border and Molly sides choosing not to use black faces as disguise. As seen from photographs in the previous chapter, the outcomes of that decision are as varied as members wish:

[W]e decided that we would allow individuals to decide what colour to use as a disguise - this would keep within the tradition and hopefully avoid causing offence...So we had a range of face colouring - black, white, yellow, red, green.

Chapter 5 described how Paddington Pandemonium Express was the first team to change from blackface. The decision was described to me in detail, and is quoted in full because it shows the degree of thought which lies behind such choices:

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<sup>712</sup> Belper, 26 June 2010.

<sup>713</sup> See photographs of both these teams in Chapter 5.3.2.

<sup>714</sup> Tony Forster, 'Pig Dyke and the Molly Tradition', *Mardles*, November (2009). Available on <<http://www.pigdyke.co.uk/what-is-molly.php>> [accessed 19 June 2012].

As blacked up Molly dancers in multi-cultural London we were extremely aware that we could be accused of being racist. Because of the transitory nature of the public watching dancing in the streets we rarely had the opportunity to respond and tell the audience or any accuser why we were blacked up – in traditional disguise. We got more and more uncomfortable about continuing a tradition that clearly could be seen as racist and had, for the public, connotations of Black & White minstrels and a general belittling of black people - not ideas and images we thought worth preserving.

The 1980s are often thought of as a time of great selfishness and everyone being out for all they could get, but that is only partly true...and for many of us not true at all. It was a time when many people made a stand for what they believed in and many of us spent our time with politicised people. The folk scene in particular is a platform for many contemporary singer/song writers, what would have been called 'protest singers', and we spent our time at festivals and clubs listening to this music. In the early 1980s there were several riots in London and other areas such as Toxteth. Two of our members lived on the Broadwater Farm estate where a serious riot took place leading to the death of a policeman. The Miners' Strike had ended in March 1985 and the Live Aid concert took place that July. It was a time of feminism and Greenham Common. Without there necessarily being a direct cause and effect, all of this played into our decision to make a stand.

It might be worth mentioning that it was one of our youngest members who first asked why we needed to keep wearing black face, perhaps it took someone a little less steeped in tradition to raise the question. So we discussed the question at our AGM on 9th November 1985. We talked about the core reason for blacking up - DISGUISE - and with that it was easy to look at using another colour for the same purpose, which would instantly take us out of situations where we could cause offence. It was proposed and unanimously agreed that "in the current racial climate we should change to another facial colour"

We agreed that the new colour should not be anything that could possibly be called a human skin colour and also that it needed to go on well without being patchy and should go with our kit. We added an extra half an hour to practice a week later and in the meantime our Mollies scurried around buying the colours. We tried blue, green, purple and red. The final decision was unanimous in favour of royal blue as being quite striking and yet *not* sinister, girly or downright yukky!<sup>715</sup>

Despite the change of colour, teams still value adherence to tradition, as shown in these comment from another side:

The kit we wear is a reflection of the workers garb:- heavy boots, shirts decorated with old rags and an old top hat decorated with pheasant feathers and foliage to take the mickey out of the squires, masters and well-to-do. With all that implied it was probably best to be in disguise. The green colour again is because of our name but the distinctive kit also makes us known amongst other Morris, as the tradition would have been in association with sides from different villages and towns.

However, some dance groups have decided to wear no makeup at all. It is not unusual for musicians to be excused the black faces of dancers...

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<sup>715</sup> Personal correspondence.



Female band members don't black up, boys playing in the band who are not dancers may wear kit but not black up, dancers (all male) never dance in kit without blacking.

...while others have a mixed repertoire that makes blacking impractical:

Minster Strays don't use face paint even though some of our repertoire includes Border dances as well as Cotswold.

All this might suggest to you that Meddlars have a problem with dress if they are to dance both Border and Cotswold styles of dance. We overcome this with a simple compromise. The only thing that cannot be readily altered when changing dance styles is a blackened face, so we don't black up.<sup>716</sup>

We are a mixed border and Cotswold side (Mucky Mountains Morris). We do not black up as we do Cotswold as well as the Border.

For a few teams, it is the cosmetic aspects which deter use:

As a side, we decided not to fully black up, as is the tradition with most Border Morris sides, as it is a very messy process and it can be off putting for new members.

Although we are a border morris side we do not black up partly because it is very bad for the skin, partly because it makes some of us a bit uncomfortable as not everyone understands the tradition.

The practice can be inconvenient too:

We are thinking of changing our kit now, and it's likely to mean that we don't black up any more. What will be better? Much easier to get changed into and out of kit. Save a fortune on wet wipes, tissues (you always sneeze just when you've got into the blacking), makeup - and on washing shirts etc. that get blacking dripped on them!

[Have you ever been challenged over your use of blackface?] Not by anyone whilst 'out' (only by my partner, Susan, 'cause of the mess it makes of the shower on its removal)

Some of the more innovative teams have replaced facepaint altogether. Customs and Exiles, a recently-established team, also has a mixed repertoire of Border and Northwest styles, but the men have adopted masks rather than abandoning the element of disguise for the Border dances. Like the possible influence of minstrelsy on dancers in the past, this example may show the effects of popular culture:

...have just set up a new side [...] the men will be doing Border wearing clogs and instead of actually blacking our faces we have produced fitted masks complete with strange looking beards which are plaited and have rings etc woven into them in the Viking tradition (alternatively it could be said to look like something out of Pirates of the Caribbean)

Elaborate masks are also used by Mr Fox as part of a totally anonymous disguise, while the Flag & Bone Gang chose beekeepers' veils as a deliberate method of marking themselves out as something different from the numerous border teams.<sup>717</sup>

<sup>716</sup> <<http://www.newforestmeddlars.co.uk/aboutus.htm>> [accessed 21 October 2010].

<sup>717</sup> Pictures of Mr Fox and the Flag & Bone Gang are provided in Chapter 5.3.2.

It is clear from the comments above that the decision not to use blacking but to replace it in some way whilst retaining an element of traditional disguise can be



: Customs and Exiles at Chippenham Folk Festival (photo courtesy of Customs and Exiles).

made for many reasons – the opinion of founder members, a group feeling, sensitivity to possible offence, or more mundane details like convenience and opportunity.

This chapter examined objections to blacking up and gave performers' own explanations of why they continue the practice. Other performers acknowledge the element of disguise that is regarded as traditional, but have found different ways of accomplishing this, whether by using other colours or by adopting masks. The next chapter considers issues arising from comments and conversations with participants before further reasons for the continued use of blacking up are suggested, placing the whole in a wider folkloric context.



## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

Earlier this thesis recounted a history of black people in England which illustrated how Blacks have been disadvantaged for centuries. Numerous examples were given of derogatory black stereotypes, some of which are still extant today. The many negative connotations of the very word 'black' were also listed. It was shown how these stereotypes, labels and other associations have gradually been rejected as it has become increasingly acknowledged that they have racist implications which are unacceptable in contemporary society.

Nevertheless, despite action on many levels, racism in Britain is not altogether a thing of the past, although it is now much more widely recognised. The spring of 2012 saw evidence that racism within the Metropolitan Police had still not been eradicated years after the MacPherson report found that body 'institutionally racist'.<sup>718</sup> Similarly, almost twenty years after the 'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign was launched, many column inches were dedicated to an accusation of a racist insult by the then captain of the England football team and the court case which followed.<sup>719</sup> A House of Commons Select Committee held an enquiry into Racism in Football, and concluded that, although there had been changes since the 1980s, more remained to be done:

Much has been done to improve the atmosphere and behaviour at football matches and it has become a much more family-friendly activity. However, recent incidents of racist abuse in the UK, both on and off the pitch, have highlighted the fact that there remain significant problems...

While the general level of progress in combating racism and racist abuse in the UK is positive and should be applauded, there is much more that can and must be done, and we believe it is for the FA to take the lead and set the example for everyone, from football authorities at all levels to the grassroots groups, to follow.<sup>720</sup>

In a situation outwardly similar to the start of the Broadwater Farm riot of 1985, riots which took place in 2011 were sparked by the fatal shooting by police of Mark Duggan, a black man suspected of being a gangster. However, in contrast to the riots of the 1980s (see Chapter 2.6) these took place across the country, and the rioters comprised many ethnic groups acting against a background that is much more ethnically and socially complicated than that of previous incidents.<sup>721</sup> Also in 2011, the co-creator and producer of *Midsomer Murders* had described its fictional

<sup>718</sup> <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/met-police-racism-scandal-spreads-with-seven-officers-facing-charges-7737808.html>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

<sup>719</sup> <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2012/jul/13/john-terry-acquitted-racism>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

<sup>720</sup> John Whittingdale MP, Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Report into Racism in Football, 19 September 2012.

<sup>721</sup> David Lewis-Baker, *The UK Riots of 2011: Uprising of 'Losers' and 'Chancers'*, (2011). <<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2011/08/uk-riots-2011-uprising-losers-chancers/>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

setting as a 'last bastion of Englishness', implying that to be English was to be white. 'We just don't have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn't be the English village with them. It just wouldn't work.' Reaction to this was mixed, one columnist pointing out old-fashioned English villages were not known for their multi-ethnicity, while in another producer's opinion, 'We have to be careful about seeking out something that offends us and then complaining.' Nevertheless, the furore led to the suspension of the show's producer 'pending an internal investigation'.<sup>722</sup>

All this shows a society in a state of transition. Black Britons have not had the violent struggle of the American South of the 1960s and 70s, nor the prolonged fight for freedom of the black people of South Africa. It may be that this has had an effect amongst the general white population in Britain, many of whom (especially an older generation) in the absence of such obvious injustice seem to have remained unaware of the extent of problems black people in Britain have faced and continue to face, from blatant discrimination to tiresome inconvenience. Similarly, given the dominance of American popular culture, it may be that some Britons, both Blacks and well-meaning Whites, have been influenced by the extremes of struggle there to over-react to perceived discrimination or insult, a situation which goes some way towards explaining the polarised opinions of 'political correctness'.

All this is to try to understand and explain why many people find the very idea of blacking up faces unacceptable, objectionable, or offensive. To them it is resonant of nothing more than the Black and White Minstrels, and echoes a time when demeaning stereotypes were rife through popular culture in every medium from the cinema screen to the logo on a bottle of jam. On the other hand are diverse groups of people: those who resent the adjustments to their language or habits necessary to conform with current ideologies, especially when they regard their practices as part of their 'English heritage'; those who remember golly badges and Hollywood cartoons with affection, and are bemused as to why they are now rejected; and those who are aware of the surrounding issues and agree with an anti-racist stance. Between them lie many other shades of opinion, and amongst all of these is a sub-group of people who choose still to black their faces to participate in their preferred pastime.

Chapter 4 showed how, historically, blackened faces have been used in England in a variety of contexts, by no means all of which were in imitation of black people. Comments related to the use of blacking up today have been presented in the previous chapter, and reasons for objections summarised above. Issues surrounding the continuation of the practice in the framework of folk activities will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter in an attempt to place the whole subject in a wider folkloric context.

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<sup>722</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12741847>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

## 7.1 Is 'Folk' Racist?

One of the first subjects to be investigated is whether the world of 'folk' in which blackface is still to be found is itself inherently racist.<sup>723</sup> Chapter 2.7 quoted a recommendation of the MacPherson report, that a 'racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. If this were to be followed strictly, then any form of blacking up could be interpreted as a racist incident by someone, and the section of society by which it was condoned could be regarded as racist. However, as seen in the reaction of the Crown Prosecution Service to the Padstow Mummerns (Chapter 6.1), a more robust definition is applied in law - of harassment, alarm or distress, of threatening, abusive, or insulting words or behaviour, or of intention to stir up hatred 'against a group of persons defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins'. According to these criteria, the mere action of painting the face black does not of itself constitute a racially aggravated offence, nor does it define those who pursue or associate with such a practice as themselves racist.

It cannot be denied that black morris dancers, mummerns, folk singers or even bystanders are conspicuous by their absence. Greenhill, writing in a Canadian context, attributes this to the inherent 'whiteness' of morris – in the clothes and handkerchiefs as well as the ethnicity of the dancers.

The manifest indifference of most people of colour to participating in Morris now may refer to its profound irrelevance to their own sociocultural values. On the other hand, their disinterest/reluctance may come from the obvious necessity of interrogating, by their mere presence, the whiteness of the practice.<sup>724</sup>

It becomes obvious from her other comments that she is referring to Cotswold morris, and has limited experience of other styles.<sup>725</sup> Nevertheless, many of the points she makes need to be considered against an English context. She notes how audiences, unfamiliar with explanations used by dancers, would be unlikely to 'see in blackface dances anything other than a white representation of black culture' and would 'likely contextualize blackface historically in terms of entertainment forms such as vaudeville and view it in light of the overtly or covertly racist agendas associated with these practices'.<sup>726</sup> This may be the case for people in North America who have limited exposure to Morris, and indeed there are probably similar reactions in sections of British society, where folk in general and Morris in particular, although much more widespread, is far from a mainstream activity. However, to Greenhill blackface only 'underscores the colonial complicity of Morris'. To her, Morris is raced/racist simply because its roots lie in English

<sup>723</sup> See definition of 'folk' in Chapter 5.3.

<sup>724</sup> Pauline Greenhill, 'Folk and Academic Racism: Concepts from Morris and Folklore', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 115 (2002), pp. 226-46 (p. 232).

<sup>725</sup> 'I did see an all-male American team...perform a violent, unruly dance in blackface...the performers charged around the room, banging their cudgels on the floor and brandishing them in the faces of their all-white audience...' p. 232. This seems so obviously a Border dance, but is not named as such.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

culture, and England was a colonial power: 'I hope to advance a notion of racism that extends beyond the discriminatory practices of individuals (Morris dancers and folklorists alike) into the underlying structures of their (shared) sociocultural context.'<sup>727</sup> This very broad definition is contrasted with suggestions that Morris would only be racist if teams actively discriminated against people wishing to join on grounds of their race, an argument Greenhill refers to as '[a]nother strategy for denying racism' by defining racism 'in such restrictive terms that Morris could not be considered racist'.<sup>728</sup> On the contrary, I suggest that a definition of racism which foregrounds differential treatment on the grounds of ethnicity is the one most understood and accepted by the general public. By Greenhill's definition, the world of folk arts is inherently racist, even though she herself admits the members of Morris she knew were 'mainly left and liberal in viewpoint, and certainly not prejudiced, as individuals, against people from racialized or minority groups'.<sup>729</sup>

For years the very expression 'folk' held resonances of the common people. In the nineteenth century especially it suggested a simpler, purer, rural existence, one of what has come to be referred to as 'Merrie England', and it is these connotations which have plagued folklorists for decades. This perception lies behind the anxiety of early collectors to record material before it became corrupted by urban living. Although on the one hand there is link between folklore and nation-building, and how it has been appropriated to underline nationhood - 'political parties (whether in power or explicitly denied it) have used folklore...to assert national identities'<sup>730</sup> – on the other, the link with 'the common people' remains in folk's indefinable links with left-wing rather than right-wing sympathies, from the radicalism of Woody Guthrie to the socialism of Ewan McColl. The most recent manifestation of this dichotomous relationship was seen in efforts by the British National Party (a far-right political organisation dedicated to defending 'the indigenous people of Britain') to appropriate British/English customs and folk music to their own agenda, an effort which was rapidly countered by the formation of Folk Against Fascism, a grass-roots campaign that is supported across a wide spectrum of lovers of folk music, from high-profile recording artists such as Billy Bragg to those who only join in choruses at their local pub.<sup>731</sup>

Folk Against Fascism was formed because many in the folk community wanted to say that you can be proud of England's music, traditions and customs without being a bigot or a racist. We also wanted to keep folk free from the taint of right-wing extremism.

FAF is neither left-of-centre nor right-of-centre. It is simply a coalition of people who care passionately about British folk culture and don't want to see it turned into something it's not: a marketing tool for extremist politics.<sup>732</sup>

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<sup>727</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>728</sup> Pauline Greenhill, 'Folk and Academic Racism: Concepts from Morris and Folklore', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 115 (2002), pp. 226-46 (p. 235).

<sup>729</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>730</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, 'Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (1993), pp. 3-37 (p.26). See also Caroline Lucas, 'The Imagined Folk of England', in *New Territories in Critical Whiteness* (University of Leeds, 2010).

<sup>731</sup> See Caroline Lucas, 'The Imagined Folk of England', in *New Territories in Critical Whiteness* (University of Leeds, 2010).

<sup>732</sup> <<http://www.folkagainstfascism.com/about.html>> [accessed 10 September 2012].

Folk Against Fascism stickers are a common sight on the instrument cases of morris dance musicians.

Although the world of folk is undoubtedly white – I have commented above about the lack of black spectators, let alone participants – in my experience, most individuals within it would welcome anyone who showed an interest in their activities, regardless of ethnicity. Whether black people would feel comfortable entering an all-white milieu is of course another matter. I can only refer to the comments of one of my black informants who did experience a weekend at a folk event (Dancing England Rapper Tournament 2011) and who found her prior misgivings about entering such an unfamiliar, white-dominated situation totally unfounded, the participants being friendly, open and welcoming.

The idea that morris dancers or mummers all black up deliberately to imitate and denigrate other races because of underlying racist sympathies is ludicrous. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that some instances are closer to imitation than others, and this will be explored in the next section.

## 7.2 Types of Blackface

Chapter 5 showed that there are many types of blackface used today, from perfunctory smearing to a total covering of face, neck and hands. This section discusses the materials used to black the face in the past and today, and the relationship of this to minstrelsy. Current practice is then divided into three categories according to how close the examples are, in intention if not in fact, to an imitation of black skin.

Firstly, there is no doubt that, in Royal masques, some theatrical roles, and in stage minstrelsy the intention was to portray black people. Historically some blacking up was simply to serve as a disguise during criminal activity, as the many reports in Chapter 4.2 demonstrate. However, when the mummers and pace-egggers took on the style, the matter becomes more complicated. 'The black-faced man of the folk drama belongs to another tradition than that of the blackamoor of pageantry.'<sup>733</sup> Their use of blackface seems to belong rather to a strand of disguise the lower classes used during times of social disorder, itself possibly an extension of the 'misrule' associated with festive periods.

It is indisputable that people did blacken their faces from an early period. Whatever the motivation, what did people use to colour their skin? The first thing to note is that black was not the only colour used. There have been references to red brickdust or raddle (a form of iron ore) and to white lead. A man who performed in the 1880s remembered 'Tom Fool, dressed clown fashion, odd socks odd boots, face made up red and white',<sup>734</sup> while a character in one of D. H. Lawrence's

<sup>733</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Black-Face Clowning', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9.3 (1975), pp. 682-701 (p. 687).

<sup>734</sup> <<http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/88sk86jh.htm>> [accessed 01 March 2010].



stories announces, "We're going to the Mill guysing....We can put some of that red paint on our faces, and some soot, they'd never know us."<sup>735</sup> This trend is reflected today in Red Leicester, who paint their faces red, both reflecting the raddle used in local sheep farming and punning on the name of their county cheese. The mention of other colours is also cited as justification for their use by teams rejecting blackface but retaining facial decoration.

Nevertheless, black was the colour most often used in the past, and with good reason: 'Perhaps the easiest way for a light-skinned person to become disguised is to become grimy, by blackening the face with ash or soot, in which condition the person's identity is obscured.'<sup>736</sup> As one present-day Beelzebub told me, disguise was as easy as putting the hand on the chimney back, curiously echoing a report from York Assizes in 1849. During a burglary, 'the wife...held the candle near to the face of Snowden, in order to enable her to recognise his features. Upon this Snowden spat upon his hand, put it up the chimney, and then blackened his face with soot.'<sup>737</sup> Other reports show different methods. Three robbers with blackened faces at Garstang in 1803 'left the blacking pot which they had used for their faces behind', while felons in 1827 described as being dressed in dark coloured clothes with black faces and hands left behind amongst other things 'a small tin pot containing charcoal'.<sup>738</sup> Lampblack has also been mentioned.

However, sources suggest a little more care was taken over donning blackface for performance. The mummers at Topcliffe are representative:

Firstly they put on a layer of cream, Vaseline or lard on which they rubbed burnt cork. Soot from the chimney was added last. George said they never put the soot directly onto their faces otherwise "your face would come up".<sup>739</sup>

A previous informant had said that faces were blackened with soot on top of lard – "to make it shine" Nowadays the entire cast for the Blue Stots play from the same area black their faces:

Though it had to be said that we tend to "dirty" our faces with our stage blacking, rather than putting a really thick black layer on. We feel this would be much more like what the old boys used to achieve with burnt cork, soot and the like.

Black remains the most popular colour today. Most teams now use modern theatre paint 'and layer it on thick', Snazaroo being the most popular brand followed by Ben Nye and Leichner, but some pay homage to the 'old ways'. Mepal Molly still black up with old soot from an open fire, or some use burnt cork.

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<sup>735</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *An Enjoyable Christmas: A Prelude*

<[http://www.folkplay.info/Forum/TD\\_Forum\\_8\\_Prelude\\_2.htm](http://www.folkplay.info/Forum/TD_Forum_8_Prelude_2.htm)> [accessed 01 March 2010].

<sup>736</sup> Nigel Pennick, *Crossing the Borderlines: Guising, Masking and Ritual Animal Disguises in the European Tradition*, (Chieveley: Capall Bann, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>737</sup> *Daily News* (London, England), Issue 981, 18 July 1849.

<sup>738</sup> *The Hull Packet* (Hull, England), Issue 883, 13 December 1803: *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England), Issue 3873, 21 July 1827.

<sup>739</sup> Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin: Blue Stots Field Notes pp. 60-61

<<http://www.crimple.demon.co.uk/FieldNotes.pdf>> [accessed 20 September 2011].

Sometimes the term 'burnt cork' seems to be synonymous with minstrelsy. One of the Victorian street minstrels told Mayhew, 'We used to use blacking then to do our faces... Burnt cork and beer wasn't so popular then'.<sup>740</sup> The Bloxham mummers gave even more detail:

Mr. Preedy [b. 1905] remembers the preparations. Two or three candles were set out on the kitchen table with two or three corks and a saucer of milk. They burned the ends of the corks, dipped them in milk and went over their faces to blacken them.<sup>741</sup>

Nowadays this procedure can be a little more troublesome:

While blacking up in the traditional manner i.e. burning a couple of corks rather than using the shop bought stuff (in front of a mirror in a gents loo) a smoke detector caught the tiniest whiff of what I was up to and the automated and unstoppable result was a fire crew in addition to the audience...<sup>742</sup>

Cecil Sharp, the early collector of morris dance in an era when minstrels were still popular, never associated the two genres, unless the black faces of Border morris dancers were seen as influenced by popular culture and this was what led him to describe that form as 'degenerate'. Furthermore, if Border morris dancers were imitating minstrels, would they not be more likely to include songs and patter routines than dance? The inclusion of remnants of a couple of ditties found in other places is hardly conclusive proof, especially as songs also feature in other forms of morris dance, such as 'Postman's Knock', 'Oh dear mother' and 'Bonny Green Garters' in Cotswold morris, calling-on songs in rapper dances, and the songs specific to the Grenoside Sword Dance or Kirkburton Rapier.

Nevertheless, one thing should be made clear: in no modern case have I seen folk performers attempt to make up like minstrels, with white circles around the mouth and eyes. Normally the lips and eyelids are blackened too. Rather than accentuating the eyes in this way, many morris dancers also wear dark glasses to prevent the eyes becoming noticeable, enhancing their disguise and increasing anonymity. (In a similar manner, Old Glory performers never smile and steadfastly refuse any eye contact with their audience.) Could it be that opponents are objecting to their own perception of minstrelsy rather than the actuality of the black face?

With all this in mind, I propose to divide the use of blackface today into three categories: Imitation, Transition, and Tradition.

### ***Imitation***

<sup>740</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 3, p. 192.

<sup>741</sup> Y. S. Huntriss, 'Mummers and Niggering in Bloxham', *Cake & Cockhorse* Vol.7, No. 7 Autumn 1978 <<http://www.cherwell-c.gov.uk/media/pdf/n/4/pdf4605351411515079278.PDF>> [accessed 22 February 2009].

<sup>742</sup> Email correspondence.

In this category I include those groups, or group members, who are using blacking to disguise their own fair skin in order to represent a person of different ethnicity. The Lewes Borough Bonfire Society Zulus are the predominant examples of this, using paint alongside great attention to detail in their costumes to represent Zulus, albeit in archaic traditional dress, in a realistic way (notwithstanding the increasingly elaborate feathered headdresses). I also include those Turkish Knights of mumming groups such as Antrobus or Comberbach (see Chapter 5) who black up to represent a foreign Other, although in this case the makeup is more of a caricature, as reflected in the face paint of other characters in the team.<sup>743</sup>

### ***Transition***

The transitional group comprises two sets of people, both located in small geographical areas – the Britannia Coconut Dancers of Bacup, Lancashire, and the Mummers of Padstow (see photographs in Chapter 5). I have labelled them ‘transitional’ because I believe that at some stage of their history the intention of these groups was to imitate black people in some way, but this aspect of blacking up is becoming forgotten and instead it is being absorbed into the explanation of ‘tradition’. Chapter 4.4.4 tells of links between coconut dancers and ‘stage Africans’, but the modern-day dancers now reference their black faces to the prevalence of mining in their local district, or to an older ‘pagan’ disguise from evil spirits. This discounts the exoticism of the rest of their costume, which is attributed to a link with ‘Moorish Pirates’ but which, I suggest, may be a further link with historical stage performance.<sup>744</sup> Chapter 5 described ‘Darkie Day’ in Padstow and showed why I amongst others believe it to have links with minstrelsy, in which performers would black up to be minstrels. However, Chapter 6 detailed changes occurring in this celebration and showed how it is gradually reverting to an earlier form of the custom, that of geese-dancing, a form of guizing which traditionally uses blackface for disguise. Therefore I consider these two groups to be in a transitional state, no longer blacking up in imitation of African or other nations, but not yet sufficiently distanced from these connotations.

### ***Traditional***

This is the category containing the largest number of performers by far. It encompasses the Fool of Haxey, the ‘witch’ character of Winster Morris in the early twentieth century, and the vast number of mummers and morris dancers who black up because of old reports saying their predecessors did the same. In none of these cases is the intention to imitate black people in any way.

The next section will consider whether these people have any justification for their belief that their blacking up is not descended from the minstrel tradition.

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<sup>743</sup> Confusingly, the blackened faces of Beelzebubs in mumming belong to the tradition of devils being black rather than having a racial element.

<sup>744</sup> <<http://www.coconutters.co.uk/history.htm>> [accessed 19 September 2012].

### 7.3 Is evidence of pre-minstrel blacking sufficiently connected to the context of folk activities nowadays?

Given the widespread popularity and impact of minstrelsy, how justified are folk performers today in insisting their blackface is not related to that genre?

Chapter 4 mentioned how 'living memory' was used as the chief source of information by early folklorists and later revivalists. As a mature person, it was a chastening experience to find that for the young enthusiasts still researching 'living memory', it now refers to my own generation:

We are currently working in the town of Ramsey, Huntingdonshire. We have recently discovered a whole generation of "Ploughwitches" that went out on Plough Monday in the 1950s as children. They say they blacked their faces with anything they could find, usually boot polish or soot from the chimney.<sup>745</sup>

It was also pointed out that 'living memory' in the context of interest in morris dance, mumming and associated matters reaches back to around 1850, by which time the popularity of minstrelsy was already established. The impact of minstrelsy on folk tradition was discussed in some detail in Chapter 4.5, but it was also shown that blackened faces were in use long before the advent of Jim Crow. Notwithstanding the fact that there have been black people in Britain for centuries, why would the impersonation of slaves have been advantageous to ordinary people? No doubt their circumstances had much in common:

What [landowners and farmers] did was to create an order in which the poor were pauperized and rightless, and rank and wealth became caste superiority, and the labourers' silence and humiliation in the face of their "betters" hid sentiments similar to those of Mississippi Negroes in the face of the whites.<sup>746</sup>

Despite this, it is extremely unlikely that straightforward impersonation was a factor in folk disguise in the past while there were many other powerful incentives for blackface to be employed, influenced by a long and common familiarity, from the 'devils' of mystery plays to the everyday faces of workers with limited washing facilities. It may seem like splitting hairs, but were even those participating in 'niggering' in Victorian and later years attempting to mimic black people, or endeavouring to portray the exaggerated features of *minstrels*? This point is also made by Rehin: 'the street "Negro" serenade became as much an occupational stereotype, in a role played by an actor, as a racial stereotype, in a role played by a minstrel'.<sup>747</sup>

The many contexts in which faces had been blackened in the past – in entertainment, criminal activity, social disorder, and especially in custom and tradition – have also been presented in detail in Chapter 4. It was noted how Tiddy,

<sup>745</sup> Email communication, Ouse Washes.

<sup>746</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 40.

<sup>747</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and Its Resorts: Popular Culture and Its Racial Connotations as Revealed in Polite Opinion', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 19-38 (p. 34).

amongst others, drew links between 'formal' stage and 'informal' folk performance, which would ascribe blackface to that element of tradition:

The most substantial of the links that unite Mummers' Plays, Miracles, Moralities, interludes, and literary drama is provided by the Vice and by the characters that are clearly akin to the Vice. Make every possible allowance for the universality of the dramatic instinct and, even so, it is still difficult - to me it is impossible - not to believe that the Morris fool, the Doctor's man, Beelzebub, the fool of the Mummers' Play, the clown of the Sword Play, the devils of the Moralities and the Interludes are all, by dint of their mischief or their black faces or their fooling, ultimately one and the same.<sup>748</sup>

As a survivalist, Tiddy was anxious to prove the common thread of ancient features. Nevertheless, his observation is at the very least intriguing, and the link he draws between stage drama and mummers is to some extent echoed by Millington's suggestion of the influence of Harlequin on folk plays.<sup>749</sup> They demonstrate how further areas of experience could have influenced folk performance.

Others have observed the strong links between social disorder and customary practice – disguise, cross-dressing, blackened faces, perambulation – and it is in these strands of social disorder as well as custom and tradition that mummers and dancers today seek for their associations. One good example of this is Slubbing Billy's, a Northwest Morris side from the Huddersfield area:

Our badge shows a pair of cropping shears and a hammer, both famous symbols of West Yorkshire's Colne Valley where we are based. The cropping shears were used by the Croppers, skilled tradesmen, to trim the knap of newly woven cloth. They were made redundant in the early 19th century by the invention of the Cropping Frame which mechanised the process. The frames were made by Enoch Taylor of Marsden, a blacksmith who also made hammers. The 'Luddites' used Enoch's hammers to smash the frames, calling 'Enoch made them, and Enoch shall break them!'<sup>750</sup>

Indeed, Slubbing Billy's weekend of dance is called 'Luddite Lunacy'.<sup>751</sup> Similarly, the Seven Champions Molly Dancers, who are based in Kent, named one of their early dances 'Captain Swing', the persona of the threshing machine wreckers in that area.. The trend is also demonstrated in this passage from the website of OBJ Border Morris, based in Wokingham:

Blackened faces were also used as a form of disguise in the "Rebecca Riots" in South Wales in the 1830's, which were a protest against toll roads, and also involved men dressing as women. There was also a more general use of face-blackening to disguise criminals - in the early 18th century a band of footpads and ne'er-do-wells known as the

<sup>748</sup> R. J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 112-3.

<sup>749</sup> Peter Millington, *A New Look at English Folk Play Costumes*, <<http://freespace.virgin.net/peter.millington1/Costumes/Costumes.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

<sup>750</sup> <[http://www.slubbingbillys.co.uk/?page\\_id=36](http://www.slubbingbillys.co.uk/?page_id=36)> [accessed 25 September 2012].

<sup>751</sup> A weekend of dance is when a morris side invites other teams to go and dance with them in their local area. It usually involves the visitors camping, e.g. at a local school, and informal evening 'social' sessions of playing music, singing and drinking.

"Wokingham Blacks" were a major criminal problem in the forests and roads between Wokingham and Windsor. Their lawlessness was eventually resolved by sending in the army, and led to the "Black Act" of 1723, making it a criminal offence to have a blackened face, with harsh penalties...We blacken our faces following the tradition set by some of the early Border Morris sides and with a nod to the local "Wokingham Blacks" mentioned above. In today's world we are careful to explain the history of this, and that there is no racial motive for our appearance.<sup>752</sup>

It was suggested above (7.1) that folk activities have a long history of connection to the common people, despite the fact that nowadays they are largely pursued by members of the middle class. An historical left-wing bias has been described: it is perhaps more clearly manifested today in an anti-establishment, alternative approach to life, and is shown in more subtle ways. Traditional crafts play a part, from the tatter costumes and home-customised hats to the craft fairs at folk festivals. Music is live: amplified or recorded music is extremely rare in street performance. Most performers are willing to 'rough it' when they travel to perform elsewhere, camping on *ad hoc* sites or sleeping in communal groups in places such as church halls, with only basic facilities. Even defiance of authority still has its place:

Cliffe has relished the notoriety surrounding its controversial activities. It has drawn strength from this...<sup>753</sup>

[People in the past] were doing something that at the time was absolutely logical. It made sense. It was fun; it was entertainment. It helped them turn a few pennies in times of economic hardship. Sometimes it was done for no other reason than to deny authority. And all through this is an attempt to establish legitimacy for their customs and traditions. It happens still. The kind of things that we, as the Ironmen, did recently were no different. We were stopped once from dancing in Bridgnorth. We hadn't got the appropriate police permit, and Constable Parsons came up (any unknown policeman in England is referred to thus) and he said the usual thing: "Hello, 'ello, 'ello, who's in charge of this?" It happened that I was at the time. He told me that "You can't do that there here." I explained that it had been done by Morris dancers for hundreds of years. All he need do was go down to the station, speak to his superintendent, who I had no doubt would confirm that we had always done this. (Bear in mind that we became a Morris dance side in 1976, and only started blacking up in 1980. "Oh, we've done it for hundreds of years!") He sent Constable Julie Wendt to find out whether this was true. We hurriedly did our dancing, collected money from the crowd, and disappeared into the nearest pub.<sup>754</sup>

All these features hark back to a simpler past, though modern transport and communications are vital in the continuation of these activities. Participants are

<sup>752</sup> George E. Frampton, 'Repertoire?-or Repartee? The Seven Champions Molly Dancers 1977-1987', *Lore & Language* 6(1987), pp. 65-81;

<<http://www.webfeet.org/eceildh/bands/captain-swing.html>>;

<<http://www.obj.org.uk/obj/objhistory.html>> [accessed 25 September 2012].

<sup>753</sup> <<http://www.cliffebonfire.com/history.html>> [accessed 4 October 2012].

<sup>754</sup> Gordon Ashman, 'Border Morris: Roots & Revival (Transcript of Talk)', *American Morris Newsletter*, 25 (2005), available at

<[http://www.americanmorrisnews.org/pastissues/april2005v25n1/current\\_issue/gordonashmanv25n1bordermorrisrootsandrevival.html](http://www.americanmorrisnews.org/pastissues/april2005v25n1/current_issue/gordonashmanv25n1bordermorrisrootsandrevival.html)> [accessed 25 September].

buying into more than a simple physical activity; they become part of a community, and a community referenced by the past history of the common people.<sup>755</sup>

Nowadays, with groups that have sprung up from mutual interest rather than geographical location, it is sufficient for them to cite a generalised past, to refer to the long history of people blacking their faces and participating in customary practices and traditions. It is now irrelevant whether or not there is a specific mention of a particular village in the area having a tradition of mumming or dancing with blackened faces which was recorded before the 1850 watershed of 'living memory' and so unsullied by the influence of Jim Crow minstrels; what is of concern, as shown in the previous chapter, is that tradition should be maintained. If there is a local link with an historical 'protest movement' so much the better; and if the practice is opposed by the 'powers that be', well, 'twas ever thus, and so in the eyes of its defenders this is further justification for the continuation of the activity. For all these reasons I consider that there is a genuine connection between pre-minstrel blackface and folk activities, but that it is one of self-identification rather than of an unbroken historical relationship.

## 7.4 Reasons for blacking

In Chapter 6 the comments of performers were presented, giving their own interpretation of why they adopt blackface. This section explores issues underlying those reasons.

### 7.4.1 Ritual, Paganism, Mystery and Spirituality

I have put these terms together because they all reflect aspects of folk tradition which, despite the efforts of current scholars to distance them from folklore, refuse to go away.

After all, it was the folklorists of the past who gave mummers of the present their views of the play as a ritual survival. By doing so they changed the perceptions of recent generations of pace eggers as to the nature of a folk play.<sup>756</sup>

The effect is not restricted to pace eggers. Despite the protests of folklorists about legitimacy, it is a fact that the public likes to hear the myth of ritual survivals perpetuated. 'It's a fertility dance, isn't it, the morris dance?' one sports commentator mused.<sup>757</sup> This opinion seems to be shared by other parts of the media:

Will fertility dancing boost the harvest?

Mother Nature is a doughty and reliable woman but just to lend her a helping hand on the allotment, Radio Bristol decided to call in the services of a local group of morris men to boost the plot's fertility. Morris dancing is believed to be based upon an ancient tradition to encourage healthy livestock and bumper crops. It has elements of circle dancing,

<sup>755</sup> Further discussion of this aspect is included in Section 7.4.2 below.

<sup>756</sup> Eddie Cass, *The Lancashire Pace-Egg Play: A Social History* (London: FLS Books, 2002), p.xii.

<sup>757</sup> Phil Tuffnell, Test Match Special, BBC Radio 5liveSX, 19 June 2012.

resurrection and death and ritual combat deriving from our earliest pagan ancestors...<sup>758</sup>

Another example is the 'fertility cake' carried by some Cotswold teams. This is a fruit cake in a round tin, impaled on a vertical sword. The sword and cake are decorated with ribbons and flowers, and pieces are given to bystanders in return for a contribution. It is variously described as bringing 'good luck' or 'fertility', according to the predilections of the sword bearer. As can be seen from the responses below, the concept lingers even though the underlying belief is no longer taken seriously:

Our collector has been distributing fertility cake for many years. Some years ago we danced at a folk club over Rugby way and the fertility cake became the centre of attraction to several young married ladies. We thought no more about it until nine months or so later we made headlines in the Sun newspaper over the baby boom our cake had caused. The team bagman received numerous requests for pieces of cake to be posted off...It's all in the mind you know...this fertility rubbish, but I doubt our fertility cake does more harm than good, much more likely the other way round...<sup>759</sup>

Although approval is far from universal:

...I had hoped we had seen the back of the 'fertility' rubbish. There is no historical evidence for any connection between morris and fertility rituals...<sup>760</sup>

Even though Cotswold dancers do not use blackened faces, these examples reinforce the point that the ritual survival's genie is out of the bottle, and is proving troublesome to recapture. The link with Cotswold, not Border or any other type of morris, is due to the fact that they were the dances being collected at the height of the survivalist theory. Nevertheless, the ideas have become associated with any form of morris, and with mumming.

A strong influence on the early folklorists who ascribed to the theory that morris, mumming and other such activities were the remnants of pre-Christian religious rituals was Fraser's 'Golden Bough', with its elements of fertility rites, ritual human sacrifice, and scapegoat victim. This became associated with the 'death and resurrection' theme of mummers' plays and some sword dances, and likewise is still widely promulgated...

Mumming is a ritual play that is well over a thousand years old. Whilst it is traditionally associated with the Christmas period (Midwinter Solstice), it is said to be linked with pagan rites showing the triumph of life over death (death and resurrection). Indeed, in other parts of the country they are even performed at Easter and All Souls Day (near Samhain)...The principal issues of birth, death, resurrection are pre-Christian and

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<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2005/04/07/allotment\\_morris\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2005/04/07/allotment_morris_feature.shtml)> [accessed January 2006].

<sup>759</sup> Barry Care, Moulton Morris Men, 'Fertility Cake Responses', *Morris Ring Circular* (2011), p. 15.

<sup>760</sup> Stephen Rowley, *ibid.*



possibly pre-civilization. The principal characters can be traced back through recorded history.<sup>761</sup>

...even by supposedly reliable sources:

The central theme of the play is the death and resurrection of the hero. The mumming play possibly evolved from some primitive folk celebration. However, it is most closely associated with the medieval sword dance, which symbolized the reawakening of the earth from the death of winter.<sup>762</sup>

In common with the prevailing theories of his time, T. Fairman Ordish, early champion of folk drama, placed even the term 'mumming' into a survivalist context:

The word "mumming" itself puts us upon the trail of another of its elements, that is, the disguising or masking. The masks were made in imitation of various animals – goats, oxen, deer, foxes, asses and what not ... the wearing of such masks is essentially of savage origin ...<sup>763</sup>

Fairman Ordish's words are curiously echoed in the words of one twenty-first century blackfaced performer:

If the person asking is obviously looking for a 'pagan' explanation I refer to it being a vestige of animal masks.

That survivalist ideas have spread and taken root is shown in this article from a 1981 edition of 'one of the most authoritative and useful publications of theatre studies available today'.<sup>764</sup>

The skin-blackening tradition is both persistent and common to English folk theatre in all its forms...It is one which finds an unmistakable parallel both early and late, for face-blackening is anciently evident in pre-Christian cult practice in Britain, and it continued there until well past the time of the folk theatre's postulated sixteenth-century emergence. Black was long associated with pagan deities and fertility magic throughout Britain, the early pagan priestesses being blackfaced or piebald...<sup>765</sup>

The idea of ritual disguise is now discredited along with other so-called 'survivals'. However, methods of disguise common across Europe – the use of greenery, straw, feathers, ribbons, bells, animal skulls, masks, blackened faces – call into question their derivation and give a tantalising glimpse of how the theory of common origins and survival might have arisen.<sup>766</sup>

Often the word 'ritual' is paired with 'pagan'. The links between paganism and morris, particularly Border morris, were introduced in the previous chapter, and,

<sup>761</sup> <[http://www.wantagemummers.org.uk/about\\_us.html](http://www.wantagemummers.org.uk/about_us.html)> [accessed 27 September 2012].

<sup>762</sup> <<http://www.questia.com/library/music-and-performing-arts/theater/mummers-and-mumming>> [accessed 27 September 2012].

<sup>763</sup> T. Fairman Ordish, 'English Folk-Drama. II', *Folklore*, 4 (1893), pp.149-75 (p. 154).

<sup>764</sup> Project Muse introduction.

<sup>765</sup> Stephen D. Malin, 'Four Doubled Figures in the Origins of English Folk Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 33 (1981), pp. 18-33 (p.19).

<sup>766</sup> See Charles Fréger, *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2012).

like the link between survivalists and Cotswold morris, are very much part of the prevailing spirit of the time:

Border Morris Dancing, although a revival from the late 1960's onwards, has again become a living tradition; as interest in pagan themes also became more popular during the same period, it has worked its way in, if only to add to the air of mystery regarding Morris Dancing in general.<sup>767</sup>

The influence is seen in the names of sides such as Beltane, Hunter's Moon, or Witchmen, and reinforces the perception of ancient origins:

We have been very much influenced by groups such as 'The Wild Hunt', who have taken aspects of Morris Dancing back to its even earlier roots of pre-Christian ritual.<sup>768</sup>

Hutton, who has done more than most to debunk the theory of survivals, sees current interest in paganism and pagan witchcraft, 'far from being an unusually exotic and bizarre response to specific problems of the late twentieth century', growing out of a much older time, representing a distillation of certain notions and needs which had been developing in England and Western Europe since the eighteenth century. 'If it is the child of any single phenomenon, then it is the belated offspring of the Romantic Movement.'<sup>769</sup> If he is correct, then both the Victorians' interest in survivals and modern interest in paganism and witchcraft are on the same continuum.

Clarke and Roberts see more disillusionment with current Western religion and society, and suggest that people are 'seeking to rediscover ancient and lost wisdom', They suggest that 'the concept of a Celtic heritage...is something which has been recreated in modern times as a tool to connect people with their past in times of great change and uncertainty', just as the 'Celtic twilight' movement sprang up at the turn of the twentieth century. They include 'mysticism and paganism' in the broad term 'Celtic'.<sup>770</sup> Their view is echoed by novelist Robert McLiam Wilson in his polemical introduction to *Wilder Mann*:

Plugged in, neurotically wi-fied and G3d as we are, we yearn to re-establish contact with the actual, the primal, the *old*...Everywhere there are strands and networks of revivalisms and reviewings. Ancient skills and lores, dilettante survivalism and how-to historicism... Our dissatisfaction with our mental or spiritual diet is expressing itself despite us...Our souls are crying out for the roughage of the primal.<sup>771</sup>

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<sup>767</sup> <<http://wolfsheadandvixen.wordpress.com/faq/>> [accessed 26 September 2012].

<sup>768</sup> <<http://www.communigate.co.uk/oxford/armaleggan/index.phtml>> [accessed January 2006].

<sup>769</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (OUP, 1999). p. viii. See also *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (Oxford: OUP, 1994) and *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

<sup>770</sup> David Clarke, and Andy Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods* (London: Blandford, 1996), p.14.

<sup>771</sup> Charles Fréger, *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2012), pp.8,10.

Morris dance, mummers' plays, calendar customs and the like provide a safe outlet for these yearnings, providing an impression that there is 'something more' beyond the quotidian for participant and spectator alike.

There are many elements which add to the mystery surrounding folk practices and contribute to this feeling. Aspects include the manner in which some groups arrive and depart as if from nowhere, no-one knowing who they are:

The Long Company perform their traditional play only during the period between New Year's Day and The Festival of Fools (Twelfth Night). The company arrive from darkness, preceded by a band and lantern party, and after the play, disappear back to the dark.

Another side appearing out of darkness is Mr. Fox. The element of mystery played a large part in the formation of this group. The founder told me the idea was prompted after seeing members of blackface teams still in 'disguise' wandering the streets of folk festivals in what could be called their everyday persona, with pushchairs and ice-creams, which, it was felt, detracted from their impact. Mr. Fox goes to great lengths to create an enigmatic effect, from secrecy about membership through a uniform tunic-and-mask appearance to the invention of a mythical backstory to explain the dances:

*It is told that there was a great drought in the West Riding of Yorkshire, at which the multitude of lakes, meres and ponds, for which that region is known, began to diminish and dry up. The squire of the manor of Langsett, Sir Rufus Fox, appointed a week of prayers, to be offered by all his tenants and their families, while processing around Langsett Lake. On the third day of these prayers, an oaken chest was seen in the mire where the lake had formerly been...*<sup>772</sup>

This care is a valued part of the experience for members and audience alike. One long-standing member told me, 'I like the way it's been introduced to try and keep an element of mystery and enigma...we just appear from out of nowhere and go back to nowhere.'

The black faces of dancers also add a dimension of the unknown, or the unknowable. It will be shown below how effective they can be in concealing identity; however, it seems that even a vestigial disguise used to be thought effective:

In one village the dancers used to put the very smallest smudge of black on their faces, and when Cecil Sharp asked one of them why he did so, the answer came promptly: "So that no-one shan't know you, sir."<sup>773</sup>

Other practices were similarly puzzling. Soulcakery were reputed to bury the horses' skulls that feature so strongly in their performance.<sup>774</sup> Was this pragmatic,

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<sup>772</sup> The full story is available on <<http://www.mr-fox.org.uk/history.htm>> [accessed 27 September 2012].

<sup>773</sup> Maud Karpeles, and Joan Evans, 'English Folk Dances: Their Survival and Revival', *Folklore*, 43 (1932), pp.123-43, p. 134.

<sup>774</sup> Correspondence, *Folklore* 67(1) p. 52; Peter Kennedy's 1954 recording of the Antrobus gang (folktrax FTX107); also <<http://www.larchfieldhouse.co.uk/Souling/History.htm>> [accessed 27 September 2012].

to prevent them being stolen by other teams, or a remnant of a Celtic horse-worshipping cult? Or was it a misunderstanding, growing out of the practice of burying a head to clean the flesh off and leave the skull, as recounted to me by one souler? It must have been activities like these which encouraged the early folklorists to place so much emphasis on 'ritual' aspects, leading them into the realms of pagan survivals.

If there are links between paganism and morris, does that make dancers pagans? In my experience, religion and politics are never criteria considered for membership of any folk grouping, as expressed in the 'FAQs' answer below:

Wolf's Head and Vixen have no side policy about religion. We don't need one. It's true, we do get invited to many Pagan events, but, by the same token we have also appeared at traditional activities of either secular or Christian backgrounds. We all have our own individual range of beliefs and these are tolerated in equal measure. Therefore we never have a situation on practice nights where one half sing 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' at the other half sacrificing a goat.

At least, not recently...

Nevertheless, there is a strong spiritual element in participation in folk activities, resonances of something deeper in the cycles of performance. It is what Dommett refers to as '...this need to relate to a near mythological past, what is ritual or magic about the performance of the morris'.<sup>775</sup> It underlies the feeling many followers experience of having to be in a certain place at a certain time, be it longsword dance on Boxing Day, Haxey on Twelfth night, Bacup on Easter Saturday, seeing up the sun on May morning, or many of the other instances that amount almost to religious observance. It is echoed in comments made at the Symposium of the Mummers' Unconvention in Bath, 2011: performance is 'outside time and space', it 'writes into existence the presence of ancestors', gives 'a sense of something coming back' in which 'images of the dead continue to work their power on the living'; above all, it enacts and enables the continuation of the year – 'it isn't Christmas until you lot have been'.<sup>776</sup>

The founder of Wolf's Head, Philip Kane, recognises this aspect. He is quoted as saying "We quite consciously work with ideas of shamanism. It's a form of ritual theatre, a magical space embracing both dancers and audience."<sup>777</sup> Barrand refers to the experience of "being danced," where the music or dance is being performed through you; you are no longer the "performer". "It is not you but the spirit moving through you; something else is directing."<sup>778</sup> This experience has been reported to me by other dancers too.

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<sup>775</sup> Roy Dommett, Sidmouth 2004, on <<http://www.opread.force9.co.uk/RoyDommet/Others/sidmouth94lect.htm#OBSERVEDCHANGES>> [accessed January 2006].

<sup>776</sup> Various Tom Brown, Mike Pearson, Peter Harrop, Graham Clarke speaking at the symposium (from field notes).

<sup>777</sup> Cole Morton, 'Hey Nonny No, No, No...', *Independent on Sunday*, 11 May 2008.

<sup>778</sup> Rebecca Sachs Norris, 'Embodiment and Community', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 111-24 (p. 120).

The sense of magic and ritual referred to by Kane and Barrant is thriving, whether or not the performances themselves are remnants of the long-lost pre-Christian fertility cults and ritual human sacrifices that the general public seems to have accepted as their underlying theme. The pattern of the seasons, the cycles of planting and harvest, of birth, marriage, death: these are unchanging, and the human emotions that lead to celebration at the coming of spring, or the defiance of darkness and the unknown remain. The blackened faces of mummers, Fools, Coconut dancers, Mollys and Border dancers have become absorbed into the general aura of mysticism surrounding folk performance and their power is thus reinforced.

#### 7.4.2 Tradition

'All folklorists grapple with the concepts of community, tradition and identity.'<sup>779</sup> This section attempts to illuminate these concepts within the context of this study.

As previous chapters have shown, the term 'tradition' is often employed by the people who form the subject of my fieldwork. My experience matches that of Thomas, writing about a dance team in America:

As difficult as it is to pin down in theory, in practice tradition remains a focus of discourse in folklore and related fields. For performers and practitioners, use of the term tradition signifies a history, a way of life, an identity. Scores of musicians, dancers, craftspeople, and artists use the term 'traditional' to identify, authenticate, and advertise their work.<sup>780</sup>

It is this aspect of the expression - issues surrounding its common use amongst participants - which I shall consider here. After all, 'can we legitimately ignore the way a group uses a term and still claim to understand the group's folkloric behaviour?'<sup>781</sup>

Shils suggests some people are more responsive than others to the past: 'In any population, there will be a small minority whose responsiveness to the past is great. Such people have a continuous and alert sensitivity to the claims of the past for a continued existence in the present.'<sup>782</sup> This would seem to be confirmed by the opinions of those who actively practise what they regard as features of the past. These remarks are typical of ones I have heard across decades of involvement:

A lot of it comes down to caring about our history and about keeping our traditions alive...I'm not particularly evangelical about it, it's just something I'd be sad to see die out so I feel like I'm doing my bit to keep it alive if I perform it.<sup>783</sup>

<sup>779</sup> Paul Jordan-Smith, and Laurel Horton, 'Guest Editors' Introduction', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 103-09, p.108.

<sup>780</sup> Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (pp. 164-5).

<sup>781</sup> Laurel Horton, 'Material Expressions of Communitality among Dance Groups', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 203-26 (p. 203).

<sup>782</sup> Edward Shils, 'Tradition', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13 (1971), pp. 122-59 (p. 139).

<sup>783</sup> JA, female, age 29, personal communication, 04/01/06.

Years ago I asked a long-standing member of a longsword side, one of only four teams in the country regarded as 'traditional' rather than 'revival', why he danced. He told me that he regarded himself as only a temporary custodian of the dance of his village: it had been passed down and he had inherited it from older men. It was not his right to decide whether it should die out or not, but it was his responsibility to hand it on to the next generation. This informant has a similar view:

I firmly believe (it's not an original thought) that we keep the traditions going in order to reassure ourselves that our future lives will retain the things we love about the past and the present. In other words, that things will go on as they always have, as each generation is succeeded by the next. This is more important than ever in the modern world where things can change so quickly.<sup>784</sup>

Chapter 6 gave many examples of performers referring to tradition in their explanation of blackface, and Section 7.3 showed how, despite the possible influence of minstrelsy on the living memories of early informants, the roots of their belief lie in a different sphere, that of disguise in the face of authority. The manner of disguise then has become a tradition – faces are blackened because those whose actions are commemorated rather than copied blacked their faces too. I say 'commemorated rather than copied' because, despite the reference to defiance of authority above, modern day Molly dancers, Plough players etc. have cherry-picked parts of the activities of their forbears and do not subscribe to the general disreputable behaviour which so often led to the banning of customary events shown in Chapter 4.

Adherents to folk tradition can be broadly divided into those who want to preserve intact the versions of dances or plays recorded by early collectors, and the proponents of changing their practice to make it more relevant to their taste/belief/resources/lifestyle – 'the living tradition', as it is often referred to. For this group, '[T]he past, reified as tradition, is utilized as a resource for, and interpreted in the context of, practical engagement in a present community.'<sup>785</sup> This dichotomy does not lie in long-standing versus more recent teams, but can be traced even within newly formed 'revival' sides. For example, there is a distinctive difference in approach and attitude demonstrated on the introductory pages of the websites of Silurian, a 1969 Cotswold team which became a full-time Border side in 1979, and Shropshire Bedlams, founded in 1975:

Our dances were collected by the late Dave Jones, founder member of the side, assisted by Keith Francis (known as Wilf) a current member and former bagman of the Morris Ring.

Unlike many other sides you will see Silurian are:

100% Male  
Fed up and bored by other Morris Sides  
THE original Welsh Border Revival Side  
Entertaining<sup>786</sup>

<sup>784</sup> TH, male, age 53, personal communication 04/01/06.

<sup>785</sup> Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (p. 174).

<sup>786</sup> <<http://www.silurianmorris.org.uk/>> [accessed 1 October 2012].

When [Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhoden's Tupenny Dish] from Shropshire burst onto the morris dancing world in the mid-1970s, nobody knew what had hit them. They were the first to go round together as companion teams of men and women, and the first to concentrate exclusively on the previously neglected dances from Shropshire, Herefordshire, and Worcestershire – Border Morris. Both groups present radical and revolutionary interpretations of the original dances, along with a large dollop of repertoire specially concocted by team members.<sup>787</sup>

Nevertheless, devotees of both types consider them to be 'within the tradition' and, more importantly, they are regarded as such by other performers and onlookers alike. So, what does the association with 'tradition' and 'the past' provide for modern performers?

As geographical and social mobility have increased, definitions of tradition are moving away from the idea of a localised, inherited body of knowledge or activities to one of a resource from which one can choose certain features to create or reflect a sense of identity. There are various features by which an activity can be regarded as traditional: its link with place; its match with other 'traditional' activities in terms of appearance, sound or feel; its association with other aspects of tradition, and a sense of community.<sup>788</sup>

### **Place**

The links between many teams and their local area are strong. Places such as Haxey and Padstow have such a strong tie with their own tradition that these are never performed elsewhere, and whilst the dances of Bacup and Abbots Bromley may be performed outside the locality they are instantly recognisable. The place of these traditions in their locality is explored further below (see Section 7.5).

Although mummers' plays were widespread throughout England in the past, styles of dance were more localised. Despite the spread of previously 'local' dance around the country, there are still strong associations for many. Tony, founder of Pig Dyke Molly, told me why he regarded what Pig Dyke do as traditional, despite their idiosyncratic, not to say bizarre, modern appearance, by referring to what he understood were features of the Molly dancing tradition in his local area – dressing up in a peculiar manner, painting their faces and going round begging. As he said, 'Essentially, we still do!'<sup>789</sup> It is commonplace for the person introducing a dance to refer to its place of origin: in the case of Cotswold and some Border dances, this extends to the actual name of the village where it was collected. Thus the criterion of a link with place is fulfilled.

### **Looks, sounds and feels like tradition**

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<sup>787</sup> Sidmouth Festival Publicity, cited on <<http://www.shropshirebedlams.co.uk/>> [accessed 1 October 2012].

<sup>788</sup> The thinking behind this section owes much to Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (pp. 169-173).

<sup>789</sup> Interview, 26 June 2012.

Thomas points out that the style of dance looks and sounds different from contemporary performance. In England, the emphasis on live, unamplified music, street performance, and approachability of participants are factors which 'suggest the operation of a value-system that, while it may or may not be associated with the past, nonetheless stands in contrast to that of mainstream society'.<sup>790</sup> Another aspect is the broad range of ages of participants, and the mutual ease and respect they have for each other's knowledge and ability. Second-generation performers are commonplace, and as they mature, marry and have children, the infants are included in festivals etc. Often special activities are provided to entertain the children and teach them the rudiments of music and dance. Especially in dance, it is not uncommon to see performers from primary-school to pensionable age involved. This in turn fosters a different attitude in children brought up with these experiences; it means something different to them from those who revived, adapted or augmented what they themselves discovered or inherited. For the next generation, this becomes the *status quo ante*; put simply, 'this is what we do'. This adds to the impression of a previous age, before the advent of a specific 'youth culture', and of a traditional transmission of knowledge through assimilation.

### ***Associated with other things thought to be traditional***

A group's own tradition is by association placed within a longer period of traditional activity. Very few teams have an unbroken link with the past, but what they do is so similar to those who do have a longer lineage that they too have become accepted. Even the recently revived Border and Molly styles have benefited from this association, having been first performed by people who were already morris dancers and who were able to draw on existing contacts with people and places.

Thomas suggests 'the dance itself seems to be linked by origin to a lifestyle, ascribed to the past but operationalized as an alternative to the modern mainstream...Members of the group exhibit a preference for grass-roots, cooperative and time-honoured ways of doing things.' The link with crafts and general counter-cultural attitude have already been pointed out in 7.3 above. Furthermore, most groups in England are very democratic, with members all equally tolerated and respected. Even eminent performers remain involved at grass-roots level: John Kirkpatrick, despite being a highly-regarded solo performer, still turns out with his Shropshire Bedlams, as anonymous as the rest of the team, and Eliza Carthy continues to brave the January weather of the North York Moors to play for Goathland Plough Stots, a team she has been associated with since she was a teenager.<sup>791</sup>

### ***Community***

To warrant being called a community, a group needs a dense set of relationships rather than a single practice as its common denominator. It needs, moreover, a common attitude among its members toward one

<sup>790</sup> Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (p. 170).

<sup>791</sup> <<http://www.johnkirkpatrick.co.uk/>> [accessed 2 October 2012].

<<http://www.goathlandploughstots.co.uk/index.html>> [accessed 2 October 2012].



another, an attitude of 'concern both for one's integrity and for the well-being of others.'<sup>792</sup>



Eliza Carthy playing for Goathland Plough Stots, 14 January 2012.

The ties binding participants in the activities described in this thesis go beyond simply taking part in a dance or play. The people involved do see themselves as part of a wider community. They become part of a complex network of friendships, relationships, partnerships and 'countless informal networks of interaction and responsibility'.<sup>793</sup>

Norris sees the building up of a community as an adjunct to the physicality of dance, and the subjugation of self to the group: one learns to be 'able to fill a place in the dance in order that the other dancers may fill theirs properly', through which process 'increasing participation and decreasing insistence on ego result in a growing experience of community'.<sup>794</sup> Shoupe too limits the sense of community to the actual time of an event: '*Communitas* is created as dancers embody social,

<sup>792</sup> Paul Jordan-Smith, and Laurel Horton, 'Guest Editors' Introduction', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 103-09 (p.104).

<sup>793</sup> Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (p. 173).

<sup>794</sup> Rebecca Sachs Norris, 'Embodiment and Community', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 111-24 (pp.119, 121).

physical and psychological connectedness' during an evening's dancing.<sup>795</sup> The physical aspect is indeed important. The endorphins engendered by physical exercise make the experience rewarding and improve the mood, maybe smoothing personal relationships. There is an element of physical closeness and actual contact in the figures and turns of dances, and trust involved in the complicated stick actions of Cotswold and Border dances, the linked manoeuvres of rapper and longsword dance, and the sword-play of mummers, all of which can result in injury if not executed properly. These factors reinforce a feeling of group cohesion amongst the performers.

However, non-performing partners and families are not excluded, but participate in social events, informal camps and folk festivals, not to mention the invisible support they provide in helping with costume or transport, and often in forming an audience. Thus they too become part of a community of memory, in which musical cues, actions and places stimulate stories of past experiences which also serve to bind the group together. This feeling of community extends beyond the particular group. As one of Thomas's informants says, 'I feel a sense of community and history shared with people when I dance with them, even people I don't know at a festival.'<sup>796</sup> It is what prompts participants to open their homes to performers from different teams, even different countries, when they are invited to join a weekend of dance or similar occasion. The newcomers arrive as strangers and often leave as lasting friends.

... the meaning of participation in dance and music groups goes beyond the satisfactory performance of physical movements. Participants often see their dancing as a component of their personal identity, philosophy and lifestyle choices. Experiences off the dance floor may rank in importance with those on the dance floor.<sup>797</sup>

Amongst the most commonly valued of these experiences is participation in a weekend or week-long event which involves staying overnight, whether at a festival or an event organised by an individual team. Camping in tents, motorhomes or caravans is the most frequently found form of accommodation – the hospitality mentioned above is usually reserved for one-to-one team invitations, not these larger events. I suggest that the sense of community formed on these occasions holds overtones of the 'imagined village' of the past, not to say a 'traditional' way of living. Once a camp is set up, cars are usually abandoned and travel is over relatively short distances, undertaken on foot. There are artisan stalls displaying hand-crafted goods, candles, rustic loaves, local cheeses, freshly-cooked meals (even though these are drawn from a world-wide selection); a clog-maker is on hand to deliver orders and undertake running repairs. The beer tent assumes the place of the village pub as provider of beverages, meeting place and venue for informal music-making, while the flimsy tents echo the unlocked doors of the past.

<sup>795</sup> Catherine A. Shoupe, 'Scottish Social Dancing and the Formation of Community', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 125-48 (p.139).

<sup>796</sup> Informant, Anne Elise Thomas, 'Practicing Tradition: History and Community in an Appalachian Dance Style', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 163-81 (pp. 172-3).

<sup>797</sup> Paul Jordan-Smith, and Laurel Horton, 'Guest Editors' Introduction', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 103-09 (pp. 107-8).

Groups of children run around and play, ostensibly unsupervised but in fact watched over by everyone; after all, many there have seen these children grow from birth. Set aside from their daily existence, those in attendance could easily imagine themselves in an idyllic bygone community, one whose values more closely match their own ideal outlook on life and which reflects their own sense of identity subsumed into a larger whole.

### 7.4.3 Disguise and group identity

We may take the function of disguise to be concerned with transforming local people into “strangers”, that is, those who speak and act outside the bounds of normal behaviour.<sup>798</sup>

Chapter 6 showed that ‘disguise’ is the reason most often given for the adoption and continued use of blackface. It was shown in Chapter 4 that most, if not all, customs involved the collection of alms in the form of goods or money. Developing from feudal rights and obligations, they had degenerated into a form of begging, albeit a necessary one:

It is a simple fact that many seasonal customs were little more than formalized begging and what was beer money in a good year might well have to provide daily bread in a bad one.<sup>799</sup>

It was certainly viewed as begging by the nineteenth century:

In this elegant and extensive repository will be found crutches of all sorts and sizes for sham cripples; well-trained dogs for leading clear-sighted blind persons; trumpery for May-day sweeps, and bunter’s Garlands; bells and fittings for morris-dancers; furnished baskets for begging merchants in every line...<sup>800</sup>

Hence there was a need for disguise. Those in work would not wish their employers to know they were collecting money, whilst those who had not secured a position and were reliant on parish relief would be equally anxious that any extra alms were anonymous. Also, the use of disguise enabled a ‘blind eye’ to be turned by more enlightened donors who might well know who was appearing at the door, but could feasibly deny knowledge of their identity to the authorities. Given this, what form of disguise would be available to those with few material possessions? Obviously, the face can be blackened with chimney soot – every home had a fire of some description. Everyday clothes need to be changed in some way: turning inside out; wearing the shirt on top of the jacket instead of underneath; disguising it with scraps of fabric, paper, ribbon; ultimately, wearing someone else’s clothes, especially if that someone else was a woman. Thus, there was a practical reason for the elements of costume that are now regarded as part of a tradition which is to be continued.

<sup>798</sup> Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummings Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78 (p. 171).

<sup>799</sup> A. W. Smith, 'Some Folklore Elements in Movements of Social Protest', *Folklore*, 77.4 (1966), pp. 241-52 (p. 247).

<sup>800</sup> *Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet & Plymouth Journal* (Truro, England), Issue 1024, 08 February 1823.

Can such a simple act as blacking the face really disguise the person beneath to any great extent, or is this just part of the myth? Actually, I myself have held a conversation with a blackfaced dancer who obviously knew me and my family without my having the vaguest idea who he was. Nor is my experience unusual:

I know blacking up can be effective. One year, after performing in a pub one Boxing Day I was speaking to somebody after the performance. After several minutes of discussion, I realised that the man had not recognised me, even though at the time I crewed for him in his sailing dinghy once a week.

It is still very effective as a disguise. You never know when you might bump into friends or people you know from the office. Wandering up to them afterwards and waiting for the penny to drop is always fun.

I showed my 19 year old son, who had not attended the [Mummers' Un]convention, a picture of me (when blacked up) in the procession; he recognised my trousers before he recognised my face.

We have danced in the past ... with a molly dance team whose black and white faces were so good it took ages to recognise them in every day guise later on. This was much to my husband's embarrassment as he had been looking after them for the day at a weekend of dance run by Yorkshire Coast Morris.

Moreover, disguise today is as welcome as it must have been in the past. It is often commented that a crucial period in a young dancer's life is the teenage years, when peer pressure is at its greatest. Performing in disguise is a way of overcoming this difficulty:

When I was 12 at the time when I joined the team the amount of anonymity was something that would appeal to me. Also it was something dancewise I could do that wasn't morris dancing...generally my friends were very – conservative - doing something as extrovert as morris dancing would have been incredibly...er...[get you noticed?] Yeah, in the wrong way!

Even as an adult, it may be pragmatic not to advertise participation too strongly. I was told that the reason for the long ribbons which completely mask the faces of the Long Company (see photograph in Chapter 5) was that an early member was a magistrate who did not wish to be recognised.<sup>801</sup>

Can there be other reasons for disguise? As part of the costume, it demarcates performers from public, especially necessary when performance takes place on the same level as audience. It reinforces team identity, bonding together those engaged in an activity, be it Fool plough, Sweeps' parade or Rebecca riot in the past or play, procession or dance display today. Norris notes how in these performances it is necessary for 'the self to disappear' and become part of the 'pattern that the other dancers are also attempting to embody'.<sup>802</sup> Costume enables this, disguise even more so:

Wearing a black face becomes normal after a while, so these days I would say it has little impact on how I feel - other than reinforcing the

<sup>801</sup> Sue Coe, personal communication.

<sup>802</sup> Rebecca Sachs Norris, 'Embodiment and Community', *Western Folklore*, 60 (2001), pp. 111-24 (pp.120, 118).

obvious bond between the side when out and about. However, when I first started dancing with Silurian (in my early 20's) then it did very much feel like a disguise and allowed you to behave in ways that you probably wouldn't have without the blacking!

Being in blackface can release inhibitions which hopefully will energise the dancers and therefore the dances - it also means no one knows who you are if you go wrong!!

These quotes reveal another side to blackface, one of liminality. In blackface (or other disguise) one steps outside normal existence and becomes 'Other', one of Simms' 'strangers', a state in which actions normally frowned upon may be carried out without inhibition. The debate about whether the use of blackface is even acceptable means the very act of choosing to black up today marks one as standing outside convention.

Historically, in the case of popular dissent the liminality of disguise could serve as a form of legitimisation, allowing the impression of a power beyond everyday normality:

I would like to suggest that during the Luddite uprisings, the followers of Ned Ludd...disguised themselves as strangers partly to avoid detection by the magistrates and partly to appear as the impersonal force of archaic justice.<sup>803</sup>

Nowadays, it enables taking over space in the highway to perform, or storming into a crowded pub and enacting a play in doggerel:

For myself, blacking up is part of the costume, just as much as King George's crown, shield & sword. It marks us out as a separate group & different from others, just like a footballer's shirt or a morris costume. I've always thought that there's something to be said for treating it like dressing up when you're a child - by putting on a costume & hiding your face, you become someone else & can behave differently. Although much of the social licence for me to misbehave in public comes from my attitude, I think an equal amount comes from my audience giving me permission. Blacking up makes that licence easier to grant than a simple costume would.

The account of Soulcakery in Chapter 5 tells how, in some of the groups, Beelzebub 'steals' a pint of beer from a member of the pub clientele and drinks it down before the unsuspecting victim has time to protest. This too is facilitated by the distancing of the performer and by the air of misrule engendered by the performance as a whole – after all, where else would a fight in a public bar be not only tolerated, but greeted with laughter and encouragement? Performance is in a liminal space, outside place and time, and this is supported and emphasised by the use of disguise.

Over time it has become necessary for our dancers to disguise their true identity through the costume and the blacking of their faces. In this way each member of the group is able to go about their normal modern day business in the usual way, but when they come together as Grimspound Border they are free of that existence and in the costume of their ancestors the power is unleashed.<sup>804</sup>

<sup>803</sup> Norman Simms, 'Ned Ludd's Mummings Play', *Folklore*, 89 (1978), pp. 166-78 (p. 167).

<sup>804</sup> <<http://www.grimspound.org.uk/background.html>> [accessed 1 October 2012].

## 7.5 Why is blackface tolerated or accepted?

The previous section focused on reasons performers might use blackface, touching on issues of tradition, community and liminality. These people, acting within a like-minded community, see their actions as justifiable, their references to tradition and disguise offering a sufficient explanation for their black faces to allow them to continue the practice. The category I referred to in 7.2 above as 'Traditional' can be described in this way. Those in Bacup and Padstow who participate in the activities I call 'Transitional' offer similar explanations, but I propose to suggest some further reasons why the practice continues to be tolerated in these places where, I believe, as in the case of the 'Imitation' of the Zulus in Lewes, the town has a bearing on the continued use of black faces.

The Zulus are the First Pioneers, the lead-out group, of the Borough Bonfire Society in Lewes, where on November 5<sup>th</sup> occasionally a 'smuggler' with a blackened face can also be found. The smugglers' faces appear to be individual choice, and by no means do all smugglers adopt blacking. The Borough Society states that its smugglers used to wear face masks but no longer hide their faces, whereas the Southover Society declares: 'Historically, the Bonfire Boys of old would wear a striped Guernsey, white trousers, black boots, and a mask of charcoal blacked around their eyes. They were trying to avoid identification by the authorities that were attempting to stop the Lewes celebrations on the Fifth.'<sup>805</sup> Probably it 'feels' right to some of the smugglers to black their face, reflecting their early history and accentuating the association with smoke and fire.

The Zulu costumes were adopted in 1949 and are part of a Lewes Bonfire tradition of fancy dress that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century:

As the need for disguise declined the striped jerseys of the 'Smugglers' gave way to a range of costumes. Initially worn by Society officers to distinguish them, by 1861 costumes included Bedouin Arabs, highwaymen, soldiers, sailors, clowns and North American Indians.<sup>806</sup>

The costumes of the first and second 'Pioneers' and the smugglers are very closely tied to the identification and loyalties of each Bonfire Society. Given the history of Bonfire in the town, it is not difficult to imagine the resistance and confrontation that would occur were any changes to costume imposed from above for perceived reasons of 'political correctness'. In this case, it is the history of the town and its long-standing association with Bonfire that allows the blacking up of 'Zulus' to continue.

The second town I want to consider is the home of the Britannia Coconut Dancers. Here too I believe there is an issue of identification, but in this case it is the identification of the town with its local custom. Bacup, a town in Rossendale near the Lancashire border with West Yorkshire, suffered from deindustrialisation

<sup>805</sup> <<http://www.southoverbs.com/costumes/smugglers.html>> [accessed 4 October 2012].

<sup>806</sup> <<http://www.cliffebonfire.com/history.html>> [accessed 4 October 2012].

following the decline of its cotton mills, but the remaining buildings in the town centre led to it being declared a Conservation Area of Special Architectural and Historic Interest. In the face of declining prosperity and urban decay, the Coconut Dancers have become one of Bacup's tourist attractions, with frequent references to them in the town's streets and publicity material. Obviously with this amount of local capital invested in the dancers, any unwelcome associations linked with the



Coconut Dancers in Bacup: events flier 2011; section from plaque of local information; railings of Memorial Garden in town centre.



blacking would be at the very least an embarrassment to the local authorities. Instead, the team's black faces are turned into a further connection with Rossendale's past, referred to as a link with the local coal mining industry. In Bacup it is the official identification of the town with the dancers that means their black faces are accepted.

The third of the towns to be considered is Padstow, home of 'Darkie Day'. Official reaction to this last remnant of a once widespread minstrel tradition has already been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Padstow is better known for its May 1<sup>st</sup> Obby Oss, and on that date, as for much of the summer, the town is inundated with tourists. Although the day is the most important day of the year for Padstonians, it is also one when the town is so busy there is hardly room for 'Oss to dance properly. Darkie Day is not so busy, partly because of its timing (Boxing Day and New Year's Day), and maybe also because of its surrounding controversy. Bendix, in a study of the William Tell play in Interlaken, Switzerland, suggested that performance was 'an affirmation of local and national cultural identity in the face of seasonal mass foreign invasion', despite the fact that the play might prove offensive to the town's 'upper-class German or Austrian guests'.<sup>807</sup> I propose that something of the same spirit is present in the people participating in Darkie Day. The lack of publicity, the fierce protectiveness, the statement that local people had no problem with the practice, the 'take it or leave it' attitude I found, even the CPS finding that locally 'greater annoyance is shown towards those who would seek to ban rather than permit this rather eccentric custom';<sup>808</sup> all these

<sup>807</sup> Regina Bendix, 'Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions for Whom?', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 102 (1989), 131-46 (pp.132, 140).

<sup>808</sup> <[http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/padstows\\_darkie\\_day\\_or\\_mummers\\_d](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/padstows_darkie_day_or_mummers_d)>



aspects suggest that this is something Padstonians perform for themselves rather than for show. It is an expression of their local independence in the face of the encroaching influence of incomers, and they do not care if their enactment is regarded as offensive by 'outsiders'. In Padstow it is the identification of the people with their locality that resists change and leads them to accept blacking up, despite its strong links with the minstrelsy decried elsewhere.

In these three cases the location of the blacking up tradition has a bearing on its acceptance. There remains one instance of 'Imitation' that has to be considered – the character variously known as 'Turkish Knight', 'Turkey Snipe' 'Black Prince' and so on in Mummers' plays. Here I believe the blackface is accepted because the imitation is never intended to be realistic. In the context of the play and its multifarious costumes, it is just one caricature amongst many, like the false noses and stereotypical clothing of other characters, and so appears to be regarded as less offensive than in other cases.

Thus the reasons for tolerating, or accepting, blacking up can be influenced by wider considerations than simply 'tradition'. In those cases where a blacking tradition is strongly linked to a small area, local identity and the local economy can also play a part.



Padstow Old 'Oss, May 1 2012.  
(Note the crowd stretching all the way down the street behind.)

## 7.6 Why are changes happening, and accepted?

If blackface is tolerated or accepted even by 'the authorities', as the last section implies, why is it rejected by some teams and individuals who have chosen to modify the disguise, or paint their faces with other colours instead? And why are these changes accepted alongside 'traditional' blackface?

...culture is in a constant state of reformation, it is constantly evolving and adapting to the conditions within which it exists. Folk music as a form of cultural production works in the same way, traditions survive in practice as living traditions, through constant recontextualisation and evolution.<sup>809</sup>

It cannot be denied that Britain now is a more multicultural society than ever, and a range of ethnicities and self-identifications is acknowledged by officialdom. Along with this acceptance has come a growing awareness of the need to respect difference, and part of that respect is the avoidance of giving offence. Some performers recognise that a blackened face may be regarded as offensive, and so have decided to adjust the practice. Often this has been as a result of personal contact, as recounted in Chapter 6. For Paddington Pandemonium Express, that contact was in their local urban community; with Wayzgoose, it was a family connection; Warburton's young Beelzebub worked amongst ethnic minorities, while for Pig Dyke it was Tony Forster's earlier encounter with a chance stranger that led him to rethink his blacking up. This is in no way intended to suggest that performers who continue to black up are unaware of its implications and the possibility of misinterpretation of their intentions, let alone that they deliberately set out to cause offence. In their case, respect for the continuation of the tradition is the most important factor, and they rely on limiting negative reactions by explaining this wherever opportunities arise.

As to why changes have been accepted, it is again part of the 'living tradition'. It has often been pointed out that Cecil Sharp, and by implication other collectors, only saw the dances on a limited number of occasions or even just the once, and so their records cannot be taken wholly as 'how things were':

When Sharp came along the entire tradition was almost dead, and so he did not see the vital interchange of ideas at competitions, fairs, and Whitsun ales where morris men had once regularly convened. He found isolated teams and individuals and extrapolated back from this state of affairs...<sup>810</sup>

For much of the twentieth century some performers, especially dancers of the Cotswold morris collected by Sharp, regarded his notations as the 'right' way to execute the dances, though there were always those who took a broader view:

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<sup>809</sup> Caroline Lucas, 'The Imagined Folk of England', in *New Territories in Critical Whiteness* (University of Leeds, 2010).

<sup>810</sup> John Forrest, in Anthony G. Barrand, Roy Leonard Dommett, Ivor Allsop, and John Forrest, 'Comments on John Forrest's "Here We Come a-Fossiling"', *Dance Research Journal*, 17 (1985), 34-42 (p. 41).

For over seventy years now, the revival has gone from being under the protection of a 'morris is for men only' organization called the Morris Ring and the somewhat inflexible guidance of the upper-class-dominated English Folk Dance and Song Society to a fully-fledged popular activity for men and women. ... *What* and *how* people now dance as 'morris' is even more diverse than it used to be. There is an active concern to discover what people used to do (what was 'traditional') but it is now treated more as a starting point and a reservoir of ideas which once worked than as a constraint to growth. With so many people involved, new ideas are inevitable...<sup>811</sup>

These comments were written a quarter of a century ago, and the degree of diversification has continued, even accelerated, during that time. To some extent this is part of a natural evolution, but also there is evidence of the influence of creolisation resulting from exposure to other cultures and increased globalisation:

Creolization is cultural creativity in process. When cultures come into contact, expressive forms and performances emerge from their encounter, embodying the sources that shape them, yet constituting new and different entities. Fluid in their adaptation to changing circumstances and open to multiple meanings, creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and transformation...<sup>812</sup>

I shall give four examples of change along a spectrum of evolution from adaptation to creolisation, yet all linked in some way to English 'tradition'.

Mythago Morris incorporate another traditional activity, storytelling, with their dancing:

The dances are in the Border style of Morris dancing. ... There are, we believe, only 4 recorded, traditional, Border Morris dances - all the other dances have been made up in a similar style. We have carried on this living tradition by adopting and adapting dances we have seen and tying them together with a story. The stories are traditionally English; mainly pre-Christian. They combine narration, dance, music and occasionally song...<sup>813</sup>

Flash Company have altered their style to include music from wider popular culture:

Flash Company were formed in the year 2000 from musicians and dancers from all walks of life. Many had danced traditional Morris for many years and wanted to update the tradition to bring it to a new audience in a manner that people could relate to. In order to do this, we have taken some 'traditional' dances and also written several of our own but perform them to more modern music, such as blues, jazz and rock and roll. In no way is this meant to detract from the traditional teams that exist all over the world, but we do feel that people can find some familiarity in the music, and will stop to watch and find out more.<sup>814</sup>

The next group, featured in Chapter 5, have drawn on less precise sources:

<sup>811</sup> Anthony G. Barrand, *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>812</sup> Robert Baron, and Ana C. Cara, 'Introduction: Creolization and Folklore: Cultural Creativity in Process', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 116 (2003), 4-8 (p.4).

<sup>813</sup> <<http://mythago.org.uk/>> [accessed 6 February 2012].

<sup>814</sup> <<http://www.flashco.net/>> [accessed 6 March 2012].

'Four Hundred Roses' is a group of dancers from Leeds, Bradford, Keighley and surrounding areas. We first came together in late 2005 in a series of experimental workshops run to explore the possibilities of combining UK folk music and dance with Tribal style bellydance. Tribal bellydance is a dance form that seeks to recreate a feel of a communal / ethnic dance form without belonging to any real-world ethnic grouping.<sup>815</sup>

The last example is the closest to a real mix of cultures:

AfroCeilidh is a Great Night Out! Come on your own, or with a group of friends, and you'll soon get involved in this unique, multicultural approach to English barn dance, ceilidh ...errrr.... whatever you want to call it. The band brings together a stunning array of exceptional talents who keep tradition relevant, intercultural and most definitely 'made in England'... The African beats are guaranteed to set even the most churlish foot a-tapping. They kick in as soon as caller/melodeon Roger starts helping you find your way through the easy English figures. ... *"It shouldn't work. That it does is an indication of the musical intelligence behind this band and the fact that there is a maturing of the meeting of cultures in this country which bodes well for the future."* Mike Gavin, *English Dance & Song*<sup>816</sup>

Set against this range of change, and alongside the Goth crossovers demonstrated amongst others in sides such as Raving Maes or Wolf's Head and Vixen, it is not surprising that changes in colour and style of facepaint are readily accepted by most. There are some who disapprove:

I have to say that some of the more elaborately painted sides would be better off practising their dancing for the few hours they spend putting on their makeup.

However, in groups like Pig Dyke or Boggart's Breakfast (below) those 'hours' now represent a strong element of the side's appearance and an expression of individuality within the team, in addition to the fact that facial decoration is developing into an English folk art in its own right.

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<sup>815</sup> <<http://www.fourhundredroses.org.uk/>> [accessed 6 March 2012].

<sup>816</sup> <<http://www.jigsreels.com/banddetail.php?ID=99>> [accessed 13 September 2011].





Boggart's Breakfast (photos courtesy of S. N. Bater).

## 7.7      **Fakelore, Folklorism, or just Folk?**

Mummer, Morris dancer, Bonfire Boy; blackfaced, barefaced, or coloured: what is the status of the activities described in this thesis from a folklorist's perspective? It is self-evident that they are not the same as the events and practices they are claimed to spring from:

First, those elements of the past selected to represent traditional culture are placed in contexts utterly different from their prior, unmarked settings... in these new contexts [they are not] quite the same things that they were in other settings; juxtaposed to other objects, enmeshed in new relationships of meaning, they become something new. Second, these newly contextualized pieces of tradition take on new meanings for the researchers, craft-workers, dancers, spectators, and consumers who participate in folklore activities. ...Finally, the invention of tradition is selective: only certain items (most often, those that can be associated with a "natural," pre-industrial village life) are chosen to represent traditional national culture, and other aspects of the past are ignored or forgotten. In sum, traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present. Tradition is not handed down from the past, as a thing or collection of things; it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present.<sup>817</sup>

Over the years, folklorists have suggested various terms to describe the new 'traditional' formations. Dorson coined the term 'Fakelore', and used it to refer to creations that were then passed off as genuine folklore, most notably stories and suchlike.<sup>818</sup> It could be argued that some of the newly invented dances and plays fall by default into this category. Hobsbawm and Ranger referred to 'invented tradition', pointing out that often new introductions are used to promote or reinforce a feeling of nationalism, for instance the Scottish kilt, or the elaboration of rituals surrounding British royalty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>819</sup> In the context of this thesis, it is the place of morris and mumming as part of a redefinition of 'Englishness' in the face of Scottish and Welsh political devolution that could be applied.

Folklorism is the use of folklore outside its original setting, often for the purposes of tourism. An example is the use of the legend of Robin Hood to justify and promote a visitor centre in Sherwood Forest. The idea was first expounded by German folklorist Hans Moser in 1962. He identified three strands: performance of folklore outside its original context; performance by members of a different social class; and invention or creation of folklore for a purpose outside that of any known tradition.<sup>820</sup> He also referred to the way in which folklore was influenced by the findings of academic folklorists. It is easy to see how these strands appear in the events described in the preceding chapters. The visits, dance and mumming, while in some instances still relating to their original backgrounds in terms of place or time of year, often occur in other circumstances such as folk festivals. The people taking part are not the labouring classes identified by many early collectors, but

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<sup>817</sup> Richard Handler, and Jocelyn Linnekin, 'Tradition, Genuine or Spurious', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 97 (1984), 273-90 (p. 280).

<sup>818</sup> Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 40.

<sup>819</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>820</sup> Venetia J. Newall, 'The Adaptation of Folklore and Tradition (Folklorismus)', *Folklore*, 98 (1987), 131-51 (p.131).

mostly members of the middle class who can afford the time and travel needed to pursue their hobby. The purpose of the original perpetrators can only be guessed at; nowadays the reasons for continuation are as various as the people participating. Enjoyment, interest in and respect for tradition, entertainment, the chance to dress up, the opportunity to collect for charity, all play a part. It has already been shown how the dance attached to Bacup interacts with the local tourist economy, and the same benefits can be seen for the locations of the folk festivals that span the summer months, or even for individual pubs that welcome local performers.

Newall suggests that 'Folklorismus provides escapist therapy, because it holds out the promise of the simple life, genuineness, an atmosphere of anti-world', and in cases 'it has helped people to a sense of their own value by promoting their identity...at a time of rapid social and cultural change.'<sup>821</sup> These ideas are both relevant; the attraction of the 'simple life' has been referred to above (7.4.2) and the question of what constitutes English identity is again current. However, the term folklorism, along with its earlier version *folklorismus*, has largely been abandoned with the growing realisation that 'Folklorismus and folklore are often complementary and overlap; it is not always easy to separate them'.<sup>822</sup> For example, Newall's study of Up-Helly-Aa demonstrated how invented tradition/folklorism has become genuine folk festival.<sup>823</sup> Moreover, Moser's early suggestions that all aspects of folklore should be studied whatever their derivation are now more generally accepted than when he promoted his ideas.<sup>824</sup>

Not long after Newall's Folklore Society address on Folklorismus, Warshaver attempted to 'construct a schema in order to semanticize what happens when hegemonic academic folklore theory and practice are transformed into a cultural product and professional activity of a different instance.'<sup>825</sup> He propounds a 'triadic sequence' for the postmodernisation of folklore. The first level is the original lore produced by a given folk; the second level is folklore as an object of knowledge, studied and interpreted by academics; the third level, 'abstract reconceptualization and denotative reconstitution of second level constructs of first level folklore which reproduces (objectivates) first level folklore...' bears traits Warshaver regards as postmodern.<sup>826</sup> However, the influence and interplay of academic knowledge is recognised:

Although an ideal distinction between high (academic) and popular culture can be made, a material examination of the sphere of the third level subverts any unequivocal attempt at schematic demarcation of the third from the second level. That this is so is due to the way postmodern folklore not only reproduces first level folklore as it is constituted by

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<sup>821</sup> Venetia J. Newall, 'The Adaptation of Folklore and Tradition (Folklorismus)', *Folklore*, 98 (1987), 131-51 (pp.138, 133).

<sup>822</sup> *Ibid.*, p.146.

<sup>823</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>824</sup> See, for example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Mistaken Dichotomies', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 101 (1988), 140-55.

<sup>825</sup> Gerald E. Warshaver, 'On Postmodern Folklore', *Western Folklore*, 50 (1991), 219-29 (p. 219).

<sup>826</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.



second level folklore but also from the way it quotes, excerpts from and replicates elements of second level programmes for perception.

This has been seen in the way practitioners of folk have embraced the ideas of the early folklorists regarding ritual survivals. By Warshaver's theory, 'first level folklore is recast from an object of knowledge into an object of consumption; postmodern folklore is folklore commodified'.<sup>827</sup> Its value lies in 'its ability to create new possibilities of experience and meaning-affects for the self-fulfillment of third level re/producers and their customers.'<sup>828</sup>

Each of these terms – post-modern folklore, folklorism, invented tradition, fakelore - has attempted to demarcate between 'genuine' and 'spurious' folklore. Ultimately, within the context of the activities forming the subject of this thesis, they all relate to the same thing – the continuation, adaptation or appropriation of elements of 'known' folklore mediated through the work of collectors (old and new) and adopted into the environment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The resulting 'traditions' themselves become folklore for the next generation of collectors and folklorists alike. This cycle is essentially what is referred to as 'the living tradition', and any other terminology is superfluous to those taking part. After all, '[t]hose taking part in it do not see folklorismus as such'.<sup>829</sup> The way in which all of these elements – tradition, academia, personal meaning, revival - are combined and melded into a new creation is best described in this summary of the inspiration behind, sourcing, and current performance context of a contemporary mummies' play:

I had dinner one night with a group from Somerset who had read Alan Brody's book, enjoyed the idea of an ancient rite – one of their company was interested in Wicca – obtained a text they liked – via the web – from a village in Cumbria, and performed each year as part of a revived wassailing tradition in the rural village to which they had retired.<sup>830</sup>

## 7.8 Conclusions

'The past is constantly receding.'<sup>831</sup> This truism is less of a problem for disciplines other than folklore, with its emphasis on orality and the physical manifestation of 'traditional practice'. The art of collecting always seems to be of material that is, like Percy's ballads, 'saved from the fire', rescued just in time from elderly informants. The items so collected are regarded with reverence for an authenticity they may not always hold, for what Abrahams calls 'a vital connection with some

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<sup>827</sup> Gerald E. Warshaver, 'On Postmodern Folklore', *Western Folklore*, 50 (1991), 219-29 (p. 223).

<sup>828</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>829</sup> Venetia J. Newall, 'The Adaptation of Folklore and Tradition (Folklorismus)', *Folklore*, 98 (1987), 131-51 (p.147).

<sup>830</sup> Peter Harrop, 'The Mummies Unconvention in Context', *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 3 (2012), 77-82 (p.80). The book referred to is Alan Brody, *The English Mummies and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>831</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, 'Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (1993), 3-37 (p. 11).

spiritually pure resource'.<sup>832</sup> Yet, as we have seen, memories change, accounts differ, collectors are selective about what they record, and even photographic evidence cannot be relied upon to be typical of what it purports to illustrate. Because of the dominance of the minstrel tradition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the age of the people who gave evidence as to their recollections of mumming, Border Morris, Molly dancing, and associated customs, it is impossible to discount altogether the influence of minstrelsy on contemporary blacking up performance, even though it is at one remove. The surprise would be if such a popular and widely-accepted trend had not had an effect at a time when traditional customs were increasingly frowned upon for the aberrant behaviour they seemed to sanction. Nevertheless, what can be asserted despite this association is that, far from being an important element, minstrelsy is definitively not the reason why performers today black up, as was shown in Chapters 5 and 6. The effect of minstrelsy can be compared to other trends which have left, and continue to leave, their mark (for example, the widespread pagan/Goth influence today). Winstler Morris even numbers a pierrot, successor to the minstrels in popular turn-of-the-century entertainment, among its characters. However, the incorporation of blackface might have been more easily accomplished because it was already a familiar part of tradition: 'There was a folk tradition of face blackening...which invited awe or ceremonial respect and at times, no doubt, provoked laughter.'<sup>833</sup> Numerous examples of its use were included in Chapter 4; it is these which form a frame of reference for performers today, as shown in the earlier parts of this chapter.

As the most common response amongst the general public hearing about blacking up is 'Oh! The Black-and-White Minstrels!' it follows that there is a need for wider education in the actual context for blackface performance. This could be achieved in several ways. Performers themselves could clarify their situation individually in conversation; an announcer could make reference to the background (although this would become tedious with repetition for audience and performers alike); explanation could be included in handouts, or provided on team websites. In fact, all of these methods are already employed, but all suffer from the same limitation - that they will only reach people who are interested enough to stay and watch, or to seek out information.

There are signs that the media may be starting to rethink their attitude to blackface performance in the activities described here. In 2006 *The Guardian* newspaper expressed support for English folk traditions, including 'the wild and animistic Border Morris and Molly dancing, with blackened faces, colourful dress and sticks', seeing the 'recent resurgence of English traditions [as] perfectly compatible with modern multiculturalism.' In 2010 the Britannia Coconutters were featured on BBC4's 'Still Folk Dancing ... After All These Years' as one of England's 'living folk dance traditions in action', in contrast to the BBC's earlier refusals to include blackface teams on their programmes (see Chapter 6.1). In reaction to an objection

<sup>832</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, 'Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (1993), 3-37 (p. 13).

<sup>833</sup> G. F. Rehin, 'Harlequin Jim Crow: Continuity and Convergence in Black-Face Clowning', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9.3 (1975), 682-701 (p. 687).

to a Mummers' play for which 'some of the parts require the performers...to black up', the *Telegraph* printed an article giving the 'disguise' explanation:

Certainly, the cartoonish blackface of the Black and White Minstrels is abhorrent today, as is the idea of a white actor such as Laurence Olivier slapping on the boot polish as Othello. Yet for our village mummers – as, presumably, for the Chelmsford morris men – the make-up has nothing to do with race. Instead, it is about disguise: a centuries-old method of ensuring that the players are protected (if only symbolically) from recognition by their peers, or the gentry whose homes they are invading. Just as the play itself echoes ancient, pre-Christian rituals of death and resurrection, so its trappings echo the moment during the festive season when the social order would be turned upside down, and the Lords of Misrule would reign. ... But crying "racism", and lodging objections on behalf of those who have never objected themselves, does no one any favours.<sup>834</sup>

*The Telegraph's* article shows how the 'disguise' theory has itself now become part of the folklore of the traditions in question. Even if it was never part of, or the whole reason for, the original mummers, Molly dancers and Border Morris men blackening their features - and I fear it is too late ever to discover the truth of this - it is the reason now current amongst performers and the one provided to the general public. It echoes the reply first given to Cecil Sharp when he asked why the dancers had black smudges on their faces: 'So that no-one shan't know you, sir.'<sup>835</sup> The inclusion and widespread acceptance of the 'disguise' justification for blacking up, whatever its original provenance, parallels the way that ideas about 'pagan origins' have permeated thinking for so many years that they are now inextricably linked with any vaguely appropriate custom in the minds of many participants and most of the public, despite the denials of academics who have studied the matter.

Opinions about matters of racism are generally strongly held and not easily susceptible to change. Given the limited opportunities for education to the contrary, it is unlikely that those people who see in blackened faces only a reflection of racial stereotypes will make sufficient contact to discover any alternative explanation, and will continue to find them offensive. Hence some teams have amended their 'disguise' to alternative or vestigial colouring to avoid this situation. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly some within the folk world who are so fiercely defensive of their Englishness and their traditions that they refuse to be concerned that others could be affronted by their actions. Between these extremes lie the vast majority of the dancers, mummers, and others who value English folk traditions and who, for whatever reason, wish to continue to pursue activities they are loth to let disappear, yet who are equally anxious that their reasons for blacking up are not misunderstood. There are examples to show that black people themselves are not offended by the blacked-up faces when they learn the reasons behind it, but the

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<sup>834</sup> Robert Colvile, 'Morris Men in Race Row? It Just Doesn't Ring True', *The Telegraph* 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9002640/Morris-men-inrace-row-Itjust-doesnt-ring-true.html> [accessed 11 January 2012].

<sup>835</sup> Maud Karpeles, and Joan Evans, 'English Folk Dances: Their Survival and Revival', *Folklore*, 43 (1932), 123-43 (p. 134).

small number of black followers of English folk again limits the numbers exposed to explanation. Thus 'spreading the word' may be a slow process.

Hopefully, as racism gradually becomes less of an issue in society, as memories of the Black-and-White Minstrel Show recede and instead the identification of blackened faces with disguise becomes established, as the cultures of England grow ever more diversified but the traditional culture of England becomes more greatly valued as one amongst many, the continuation of this centuries-old practice will cease to be problematic for anyone and will become just another of the weird and wonderful features of the English year.

## **7.9 Summary and Suggestions for Further Research**

I have attempted in this work to offer to enthusiasts in the folk world a more complete explanation of why some people find blackface offensive, and simultaneously present a different point of view about blackface to those who object on the principle that it is unequivocally racist in practice.

Chapter 1 of this thesis introduced the research questions and described the methodology employed along with a presentation of associated ethical issues. The next two chapters provided a necessary background for people unfamiliar with the position of black people in Britain. Chapter 2 gave an account of the history of black people in England from mediaeval times to the present, while Chapter 3 looked at the significance of blackness in folklore and at specific demeaning ways in which black people have been portrayed over centuries. These two chapters taken together explain why it should be accepted that racism is a problem, and behaviour that is racist should be challenged and rejected.

Changing focus, Chapter 4 gave numerous instances of the use of black faces in the past, finding a variety of examples, including disguise in acts of social disorder and in many traditional customs which had degenerated over years into forms of begging. Chapters 5 and 6 moved to the current situation, documenting and illustrating instances where blackface is employed today together with variations within the same sort of activities, and giving participants' own responses. This final chapter has attempted to discuss some of the issues raised in their answers and place them in a wider folkloric context. The conclusion was reached that the reason given for face blacking is that it is in imitation of the traditional disguise of those labourers current performers purport to follow, though other factors such as community, licence and liminality play a part. Together, the chapters address and answer the research questions raised in the Introduction.

Nevertheless, there are ways in which the findings of this thesis could be improved or extended. The most obvious of these would be a study of what ethnic minorities think about blacking up within English folk customs, both those who have no knowledge of the practice and those who are introduced to explanations as provided here, to determine whether there is any difference in their opinions. Also, a longitudinal study of a particular group's practice, following every performance

over a period, would begin to answer questions about the reliability of information gleaned from intermittent observation. I attempted this in a small way with my visits to Warburton Souling Gang, which yielded interesting results.

I intentionally cast a wide net for this research, but had not appreciated just how much would crowd for my attention. I did not attempt to examine the history of blackfaced performers in circus shows and fairgrounds, an aspect which would repay attention. There would be benefit too in focusing on a smaller area within the folk world, in terms of geography or type of performance, or in a study assessing audience reactions to two contrasting styles of practice – for example, the Herga Mummers with their black faces and the white-faced Stony Stratford Mummers. Further investigation into the relationship over time between ‘officialdom’ and a long-standing tradition such as Lewes Bonfire or Padstow Mummers’ Day would also prove fruitful.

The use of the internet has been a feature of this work, not only to contact and follow up current performers but also to search old newspapers and the fieldwork various enthusiasts have made available. With the increased digitisation of archives many more insights can be expected from these sources.

I conclude with two thoughts. The first was voiced by an earlier researcher in a broadly related field. I can identify with her hesitancy faced with the range of the task in hand:

The subject is both wide and elusive, the field is practically unworked and, even if all available evidence were collected, it is doubtful whether any certain conclusions could be drawn. All I can hope to do is to bring together the somewhat scrappy material which I have been able to collect and to examine the problems which it raises, without claiming for my information completeness or coherence, still less for my suggestions a certainty, which is for the moment unobtainable.<sup>836</sup>

The second I overheard on one of my field trips:

Child:           Why have they got black faces?  
Mother:          It's all part of the fun.

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<sup>836</sup> Enid Welsford, *The fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 56.



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