

Portsmouth Mummers Had Rhyme and Reason

"The City That Cares"

FOR centuries the Church of Saint Thomas Becket played an important part in the communal life of Portsmouth. Raised to the dignity of a cathedral a quarter of a century ago it increased its influence, and this has never been more apparent than at the present time.

Matrons of the five Portsmouth hospitals will be in the Cathedral with parties of nurses to receive gifts for the children who will be in their care at Christmas. The Women's Voluntary Service and members of the Old People's Welfare Committee will also be present to receive gifts for old people.

CHRISTMAS is coming, the pigs are getting fat, please to put a penny in the old man's hat." Do children in Portsmouth still repeat that rhyme as Christmas comes along? It used to come into their young heads in the same mysterious way as hoops and marbles appeared in their right hands as birds gather twigs for nests at the proper time without knowing why.

By RICHARD ESMOND

Some old people of Milton and Eastney at least remember them; the tall hats decked with ribbons, the gaily decorated dress, the fearsome weapons; and even some bits of the play, especially the fights and the brave boastful words. Beelzebub and King George and the doctor are not forgotten.

What is this Christmas mumming? Dickens is rightly remembered for his part in the revival of the Spirit of Christmas. Insofar as Yuletide is looked on as the children's festival and the open heart and hand to those less fortunate than ourselves, his great genius worked wonders. But people in the England of old knew well how to keep the festive side of Christmas, and mumming was one of their ways of doing so.

Here are some extracts from the mummer's play given in a south country village less than 30 years ago. Father Christmas is a sort of Master of Ceremonies who introduces the characters. Imagine then, these sons of the soil in their tall hats garlanded with ribbons and flowers, some of them armed with wooden swords. Imagine, too, the rich country dialect with its open vowels and strong r's, the free gestures and the fierce mock fights. The time might be almost any century of a thousand years.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: Walk in, King George. KING GEORGE: In comes I, That man of courage bold. With broadsword in my hand, I took a bag of gold. It was who fought the fiery dragon. And brought him to his slaughter.

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From here, after the wonderful healing by the doctor, hints of history are fewer, and the sort of foolery that would appeal to the rustic mind of long ago takes a larger share of the play, until the end comes with less of certainty and more

of fury and foolery. Perhaps the beginning of the mumming was always better remembered than the end.

So on with the play. FATHER CHRISTMAS: O King, O King, what hast thou done? Thou hast killed some mother's son.

Is there a doctor to be found To heal this man who deeds his name on the ground here. KING GEORGE: There is a doctor here.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: What is his name? KING GEORGE: Peter Grey. FATHER CHRISTMAS: Walk in, Peter Grey.

PETER GREY: Ah! Did I hear someone call me Peter Grey? My name is Doctor Grey and I am a man of great renown. FATHER CHRISTMAS: And where did you travel for your learning, my doctor?

PETER GREY: I travelled all up plum pudding lane, over beef-steak stilt where there were wooden satires and leather bells and black-puddings for bell ropes. FATHER CHRISTMAS: Did you cured any man?

PETER GREY: Yes. I went a further and met an old 'ooman. I said good morning to her, but the saucy old dame wouldn't speak. So I gave her a wooden leg and I gave her a gentle kick into a farmyard where winds never blow, cocks never crow, and mice do no harm.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: Anything more? PETER GREY: Yes. I went to a house drenched with candles and lined with penny loaves. I kicked the maid and out came the door. I asked her name, and she said her name and a crust of best ale. Meat all scraps and nothing at all the matter, gave good thanks and down went the platter.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: Have you cured any man? PETER GREY: I cured old Jack Kittle-drum's wife sick of the palsy in all four corners of the county and she died. If there's any man can do more let 'un walk in.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: I don't think 'un cured his wife's your life to cure this man? PETER GREY: £50. FATHER CHRISTMAS: £100 will I give unto thee, if thou cure him.

Peter Grey examines Turkish Knight and says: PETER GREY: Hokum-pokum-hokum! Arise, dead man, and fight not again! KING GEORGE (touches him with his hand for the first time): It seems questionable whether Turkish Knight is to be grateful for his killing or his curing.

However, there come in later a character called "Bold and Smart," who says, among much else, "I'm the merry little lad to either fight or sing. First comes Christmas and then comes Spring. And another known as the Grenadier. These two also fight, and the loser is cured by another doctor called Tom Pinnick.

TOM PINNICK: I can cure a pig with the murrain. FATHER CHRISTMAS: How do you do that? TOM PINNICK: I cut off his head and bury 'un. FATHER CHRISTMAS: Any more?

TOM PINNICK: I can cure a magpie of the stich. FATHER CHRISTMAS: How do you do that? TOM PINNICK: Cut off his head, and throw 'un in the ditch. FATHER CHRISTMAS: Anything else? TOM PINNICK: Yes. Bring me an old man six years dead; Seven years buried, and eight 'un's grave.

If he's got one sound tooth 'un's head, I'll give 'un one of my silver pills. And maintain his life to save. He cures the fallen man by saying: Now look alive, Jack. Take this little knock-knock. Swallow down a tin-knock. An sing a merry song."

So with more fighting and curing and fooling they come to an end, and shuffle off to the next village. It will be noticed by students of English, that the dialogue is almost wholly, simple Saxon English, such as can still be heard in the everyday talk of country people. That, and the hearty delivery of the rich accents of the south country folks, and the vigorous action all seem to fit the occasion, and make the hearing of the Christmas mummers an experience. The usual finale is looked for in the bottom of a mug, and is not unsuitable to the season.

NELSON'S COLUMN (BY OUR NAVAL CORRESPONDENT)

THE primary role of 802 and 825 Squadrons which returned from Korea to Portsmouth to-day in the light fleet carrier Thebesus, was to support ground troops, particularly in the coastal areas. In this work they launched between them 16,000 rockets, and dropped 4,000 bombs. But 802 Squadron commanded by Lt. Cdr. P. H. London distinguished by being the first naval squadron engaged in air combat over Korean territory, resulting in a MiG fighter being shot down by a Sea Fury. No. 825 Squadron is commanded by Lieut.-Cdr. C. K. Roberts, and between them the two squadrons flew a total of 6,000 sorties, and on one record day made 123 sorties operating from the light fleet carrier Ocean, now relieved by H.M.S. Glory.

The squadrons set a very high standard in safety and efficiency, and this was achieved by good all-round team work and whole-hearted co-operation between ship and squadron departments. The ship's company was frequently closed up at flying stations from dawn to dusk, and work on aircraft often proceeded throughout the night. Next objective is Christmas leave!

"Air" Secretary WITH Admiral Lambe (Flag Officer Air) since the day when he commanded the fleet carrier Illustrious towards the end of World War II, Captain (S) A. J. Pack is to continue with his chief as secretary in Admiral Lambe's new appointment as Commander-in-Chief, Far East Station. Captain Pack was presented to the Queen during Her Majesty's recent visit to Air Command at Lee-on-Solent. Senior Engineer Mr. Norman Berry who recently retired from the Admiralty's tug service in Portsmouth Dockyard, succeeded the late Mr. Arthur Pipe as senior engineer and supervising engineer to all Dockyard tugs and mooring vessels in 1949. In my report of presentation made to Mr. Berry on his retirement, I inadvertently stated that he had been senior engineer since 1928. Mr. Pipe succeeded Mr. Woodmore in this position in 1932.

JOHN CITIZEN'S DIARY

THOSE who wonder why there is a need for Portsmouth Family Welfare Association, when so much is done by the State, would only have to attend a typical Case Committee meeting, states the annual report of the Association.

After hearing its deliberations and all the work which each case involves, they would be convinced that the Association does supply a real need, and that the State cannot do without voluntary workers. Unluckily, owing to the changes brought about by modern conditions, the number of suitable people who have the leisure and the means to do voluntary work is rapidly decreasing. Visiting is an important part of the work, and demands tact and skill. The Association appeals for more workers with the necessary skill, leisure, and zeal to assist in its valuable work in Portsmouth.

Pat On Back

IT is not often realized how very fine a service is performed by those who take into their homes, or who make homes for children who have lost their parents, or who may have been unwanted, or committed to the care of a home by the Courts. It is therefore encouraging to note that the finest possible tribute has been paid to foster parents and by none other than the young persons themselves. During the past year, 24 such young persons reached the age of 18 and therefore passed from the legal care of the Portsmouth Children's Committee. No fewer than 23 of them have

elected to stay with their foster parents. As the annual Committee report points out, it is not only a tribute to the foster parents, but also to the Committee's boarding-out officers.

Irish Birthright

IRISH exiles in Portsmouth are not only getting together at their club under the auspices of the Portsmouth Irish Society, but they are also developing junior branches, which interest young folk in music, dancing, and drama. Members are being encouraged to enlist their children in the junior sections so that they may, says the Society's latest news letter, "grow up to learn something of Ireland and the cultural heritage that is theirs by right of birth, despite the accident of having been brought up away from Irish shores."

M.P.'s New Job

MR. GEOFFREY STEVENS, M.P. for Portsmouth, Langstone, will be available to interview constituents in the offices of the Conservative Association, Hall Place, 20, South Street, Havant, next Friday, between 5.0 and 7.0 p.m. By the way, Mr. Stevens has been appointed Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Association Finance, Trade, and Industry Committee in the House of Commons for the next session.

If It Fits

IT seems that about half the people in Portsmouth who find a solitary glove lying in the road are induced to keep it for themselves rather than give it

QUOTED You cannot cleanse your heart with tears. Richard Chenevix Trench.

to the Lost Property Office in Kent Road, Southsea. The police have dealt with no fewer than 100 reports of gloves lost in the last few months. They have had nearly as many handed in, but seldom do two descriptions fit. There must be a great many people in Portsmouth who work single-handed, for to what other use can a single glove be put?

Skin Deep

THE definition of a sausage was given to Portsmouth and Southsea Rotary Club at their meeting this week by one who should know best—the City Analyst (Mr. A. L. Williams). "In my view the answer is, something edible in a skin," he said, "and the contents of the skin may be a mixture of meat, vegetables, cereals and even fish. Most of us use the unqualified word 'sausage' when we mean a meat product made from beef or pork," he added, "and the law only protects the housewife if she asks for beef sausage or pork sausage."

Good Spirits

WITH the proximity of Christmas, it was pleasing to learn from Mr. Williams that spirits are rarely adulterated, but sad to say visits are made to the public houses, and a double whisky is demanded in the ordinary way. The legal minimum strength is 65 per cent. proof spirit; and this is quite generous because most brands of whisky are bottled at 70 per cent. proof spirit," he said.



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