The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance

There is no annual fixed date for the performance of the Horn Dance, a peculiarly English rural custom which is the despair of townsfolk and foreigners. It is always on a Monday and the correct formula is "the Monday following the first Sunday after the fourth of September". The absence of a fixed date always results in little crowds of disappointed and disgruntled visitors coming on the wrong day! It is believed that the dance was performed at the three day Bethelmy Fair, granted to the Abbots of Burton by Henry III in 1226, celebrating St Bartholomew’s Day, August 24th. The correction of the Julian calendar in 1752 moved the fair to the beginning of September, and over the years the three days have become one.

The dancers consist of a band of twelve, and by tradition, usually male. Six men carry the reindeer antlers, accompanied by Maid Marian, the Hobby Horse, the Jester or Fool, a boy carrying a bow and arrow, another a triangle on which he beats time, and a musician, nowadays playing an accordion, but in the past a fiddle. The costumes worn by the dancers are modern. Originally they wore their ordinary clothes, sometimes enlivened with bits of coloured ribbon or cloth sewn or pinned on. Just before Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1887, the daughters of the then vicar of Abbots Bromley, the Reverend JM Lowe, designed and helped make the first set of costumes. These were green tunics with brown spotted sleeves, and blue trousers with brown spots, and the boys wore red velveteen hats. The present costumes were supplied as the result of an appeal in 1997.

Until quite recently we had no way of knowing how old the horns really are and could only guess from the style of the carving on the wooden heads and the character of the ironwork. In 1976, a small splinter of bone from a broken horn was sent to the Department of Geological sciences at Birmingham University, and a carbon dating test gave the age as around 1065. This, of course does not mean the that the Horn Dance is the same age. The earliest reference to the Dance is in Plot’s 1686 ‘Natural History of Staffordshire’ although the dance appears to have been temporarily discontinued during the second half of the seventeenth century after the Civil War when dancing and music were forbidden.

Over the years the Horn Dancers have conducted their own affairs with a refreshing and very English lack of formality. Traditionally the vicar of the parish has always been in charge of the horns; with the consent of an co-operation of the Dancers and the Vicar, the Abbots Bromley Parish Council formally took over the legal ownership of the horns in 1981. But the actual running of the Horn Dance itself remains, as it always has, in the hands of the village, through the leadership of the Bentley and Fowell families.

Extract from “A History of Abbots Bromley” by Ray Shipman 1996