

# Bygone Days of Ansty

This series 'Bygone Days of Ansty' looks at the more recent past as outlined by local newspaper cuttings and other articles carefully saved and cherished by some long standing Ansty villagers and their families.

Here is an excellent article concerning our Ansty Maypole that appeared in 'Wiltshire Life' in May 1998 reflecting mainly on times past but with an eye on the present.



Wiltshire Life magazine cutting from Mrs. M Feltham, Ansty

*Come lasses and lads, get leave of your  
dads,  
And away to the Maypole hie,  
For every he has got him a she,  
And the fiddlers are standing by.  
(Traditional song circa 1670)*

DANCING AROUND a maypole was once part of the much larger celebration of May Day, the origins of which are said to go back to an ancient Roman festival dedicated to Flora, the goddess of flowers and fruit.

This was the day, especially in the middle ages, when it was the custom for all ranks of people, in both country and town, to go 'a-Maying' and glory in the coming of summer.

People were about early on May 1 to collect flowers and branches, especially hawthorn (hence the name May), for the decoration of houses, streets and public areas. Then, one of the prettiest young girls in the area was crowned May Queen and the rest of the day given over to general merriment.

One of the features of these parties was the erection of a maypole in the market-place or village green, where, duly decorated, it became the focal point of the festivities. The local musicians were called upon to ply their talents as dancing played a large part in the fun. John Ruskin is credited with the comparative recent introduction of children dancing in formation around the pole, each carrying different coloured ribbons that were suspended from the top, so giving a plait on the pole as they weaved around one another.

As time went on the sites of the poles became more permanent. There was a famous one that stood in the Strand for 50 years until removed, as they all were, by an act of Parliament in 1644, only to come back into fashion again 20 years later.

Today one of the few remaining maypoles, still standing, can be found in the village of Ansty, between Tisbury and the A30.

A most attractive little parish almost hidden by the surrounding downs and woods, a settlement has existed here for well over 1,000 years. Its narrow, sunken, unmarked lanes disappear away from the main street before appearing to lead off again in every direction, the whole place giving the impression of a sort of human rabbit warren. The village boasts a little church that dates back to the 13th century and a large expanse of water adjacent to the maypole which is given the status of only a "pond" by locals. All this was once the property of

## MAYPOLE MAYHEM

The maypole at Ansty proves our ancestors knew how to enjoy themselves. By Bernard Pike.





Photos by: Aain Morse

Lord Arundell of Wardour until the estate was split up and sold in 1946.

The maypole erected in 1982 must have been quite impressive for it is said to have stood 100 ft tall and was claimed to be the highest in the country, but now it has been replaced, as such a tall one was considered dangerous.

Dancers are often imported from surrounding villages to perform around the pole but today Ansty is said to be training its own maypole party again.

Although we live in times of constant flux the maypole committee rightly allows for minimum change, but the main street is now sensibly closed to traffic on May Day. If the old-timers could return the two big changes for them would surely be: firstly the loss of the Arundell Arms

(known latterly as the Maypole Inn) which is now a private house and secondly, an event that used to last all day is now compressed into little more than two hours.

Listen to some of those who can look back at the old times:

John Green says: "I lived in Ansty and went to Swallowcliffe school. As soon as the weather got better in the spring we started dance practice and looked forward to May 1. A record provided the music and I can see Mrs Townsend today putting the gramophone on the wall and winding it up. Everyone in the village came.

"Ansty band played outside the pub and were forever popping in and out for a drink. As it got darker the band started to wobble around the maypole with more and more people joining in

and the circle of dancers got bigger."

Les Parsons also recalls the celebrations. "I didn't do much dancing but my father and grandfather played in the band. I remember the festivities in the field beside the recreation hut when Mrs Weldon came from Shaftesbury with a small fair and sold gingerbreads, after which we marched with the band down to the maypole and the pub.

"Grandfather was band master from just after the Great War. There were four or five bandsmen called Parsons, all related, then there were a couple of Gurd and a few Levers. Today, there are only four natives of Ansty still living in the village. The maypole has to be replaced every 20 years or so - one only lasted 11 - but the one we have got now has been



Opposite: Ansty children dance with ribbons. Top: Morris dancers at the Ansty maypole. Left: Ansty Manor. Above: Ansty church.



*'As it got darker the band started to wobble around the maypole.'*

pickled in preservative like an electricity pole. One got damaged by an American army lorry backing out of the pub during the war. Old Anstonians always come back for the Ansty May."

Jack Feltham notes: "It was the only thing that happened during the whole of the year, that's why we enjoyed it so much. I don't think I danced so much as larked about the pole. The village band played at the Beckford Arms once, where they got a bit worse for wear. The landlord said afterwards that they played as well on their back as they did on their feet.

"May Day was kept going all through the war. Forty years ago there were 107 residences here, now there are only 55 but a lot of people oppose any form of development."

The late Cyril Feltham wrote at the

beginning of the century: "Ansty band met in the morning then marched to the local farms for a drink of cider, some drank more than others. After six farms they met up with the vicar who, headed by the band and flag bearer Grandfather Charles Feltham, marched to Ansty church for the 9.30am service. Henry Feltham fell asleep as the vicar preached the sermon giving May Day blessings, he woke up and shouted 'yer! yer!' thinking he was at the club dinner.

"Afterwards the festivities began outside, the band seated in a farm waggon played for dancing. Wardour school children danced around the maypole and Mrs Weldon sold gingerbreads and brandy balls a half penny each. Swinging boats were one penny a ride, increasing to two pennies

in the evening. Confetti and water squirts half penny a bag, half penny a squirt.

"James Birchall's tent had two compartments, one side was a silent film, the other a shooting gallery. Outside he had a big brass drum he beat and shouted 'Come and have a shoot at my cock, three pence a shot', which meant: inside on a long stick attached to the top on a swivel, was a cockerel made of tin, if you hit, it would spin round.

"Then towards the evening and darkness beginning to fall, the band formed outside the pub and followed by the crowd marched round the pole to the tune 'The Oyster Gal' known by the locals as 'Raw Cabbage and Onions'.

"Then they finished in the pub with a sing song." □



Top: Across the field to the old pub.



Left: Raising the maypole ready for dancing.

Above: The Ansty band in 1905 at Long Farm.

Photos Courtesy of: Pat Harnshere