

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.

This section takes us back to well over 30 years ago when a couple of news items concerning the Ansty May Day event might be described as mildly controversial. We were not able to attribute the source or exact date of some of these extracts but would be delighted to include them if someone can accurately inform us.

Hamlet where a maypole means a February poll



JOAN PARSONS . . . "No changes"

Village fights over lord of the dance

By David Humphrey

VILLAGERS in the tiny Wiltshire hamlet of Ansty will hold a referendum to settle a clash of interests threatening the future of their 500-year-old Maypole celebrations.

Former executive Mr Chris Thomas, the new owner of the Maypole Inn, wants to make the May Day festival big business.

Older residents prefer the low-key approach of past generations.

Now the 150 villagers have been called to a meeting on February 9 to resolve the dispute.

The revelries around the 72-foot-high maypole — England's tallest — date back to when farm tenants of Lord and Lady Arundell brought their sons and daughters to the green to be introduced and to dance.

Every year since then, the 15th-century hamlet has elected a May Queen amid feasting, song and competitions, always held on May 1 in defiance of the official May Bank Holiday which varies.

TRADITION

Mr Thomas, aged 32, wants to open the festival to a wider public, but by tradition the licensee of the pub, which is yards from the pole, has the right to organise it.

It has never been widely publicised, and he believes it could be better promoted to generate more income for the village, once he has moved home of the late Peter Sellers and a favourite with London commuters.

Mr Thomas bought the pub last year from Dorchester-based brewers Eldridge Pope for £60,000, after Mr Ron Parsons and his wife, Jean, who had held the licence for 13 years, were forced to quit.

It is now a free house and Mr Thomas and his wife, Sally, have spent £45,000 renovating it.

Mr Thomas, who once worked in the food industry said yesterday: "The former licensee was chairman of the May Day committee and his wife was secretary and treasurer."

"I gather she has said no one is going to take over the organising from her."

NEW IDEAS

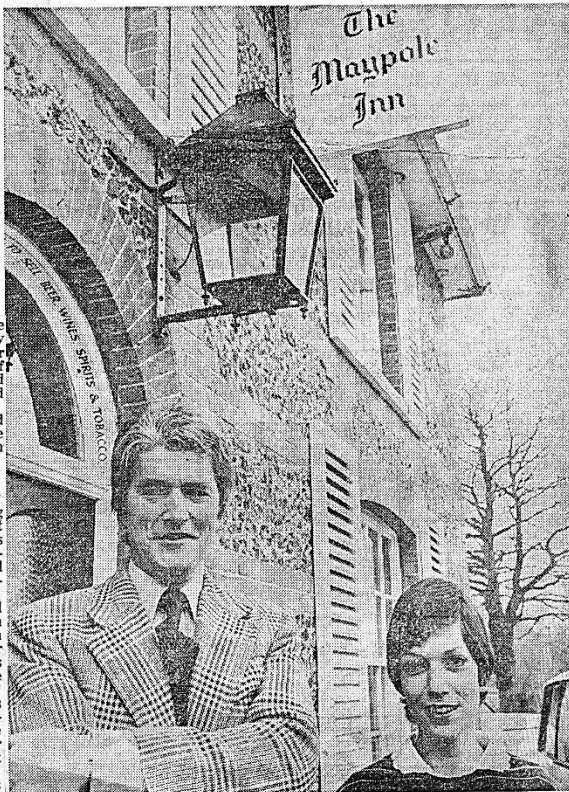
"But there is a strong feeling in the village that new blood and new ideas are needed to make the festival more profitable and place it on a more professional footing."

"We have been accused of seeking to profit from the event but, even though we could expect greater bar takings, our interest is solely in generating more cash for the Ansty fund."

"The people against us are anti-pub, anti-newcomers. They say we have been plotting for our own ends, but it's just not true."

But a defiant Mrs Parsons said: "Mr Thomas is not going to change the village. The May Day traditions in Ansty go back centuries and they can't be changed overnight."

The pole at the centre of the storm is weather-beaten and warped and is due to be replaced this year. In the past, new ones have been given by the nearby Wadour Castle estate of Lord and Lady Arundell. Their descendant Mr John Arundell will be asked to oblige this year.



Publican Chris Thomas and his wife Sally, at the centre of the May Day Battle

Origin of Newspaper extracts unknown

These newspaper cuttings show how passionate most Ansty folk were in 1982 (and still are today) about how to look after their May Pole and how to celebrate May Day.

It seems then (as now) most villagers preferred the low key approach — keeping the celebrations 'in keeping' with long standing traditions insofar as they can be met in the modern setting.

The idea of turning 'Ansty May' into an enterprise with new ideas and perhaps an eye on profits did not go down well with some.

To this day the simple 'low key' viewpoint prevails.

Boycott row on maypole D-day

By David Humphrey

TODAY the 200 residents of Ansty, near Salisbury, are to decide how they want to run their 500-year-old celebrations around Britain's tallest maypole.

But last night Mr Chris Thomas, new landlord of the Maypole Inn, just yards from the 72-foot landmark, warned many people would boycott the crucial meeting. He said it was not being held on neutral ground.

He wants the ceremonies better organised to attract bigger crowds and raise more funds for village projects.

Traditionally the festival at which a May Queen is chosen amid feasting and competitions, has not been widely advertised.

Leading the fight against the changes is Mrs Joan Parsons. She ran the May 1 festival for 11 years while her husband, Ron, was the Maypole's licensee until last year.

The parish meeting to elect a committee to run the May Day festivities was arranged in Swallowcliffe village hall nearby, because Ansty has no hall. But now it has been switched to Ansty parish councillor Mr Chris Ridley's home.

Mr Thomas, aged 32, said yesterday: "A lot of people who think the way we do have simply decided not to turn up. The venue has been changed without any consultation and we are all pretty disgusted at this wheeler dealing."

"Tonight's meeting cannot make any claim to be democratic. It's being held in the house of someone who has made clear he doesn't share our views about the Maypole ceremony."

But Mrs Parsons said: "According to the parish council's rules, the outcome of any meeting held outside Ansty itself would not be valid. Mr Ridley's home was chosen simply because it was the biggest place we could find."

"Tonight's meeting will be a fair one open to all."

MAYPOLE DISPUTE SETTLED

The battle of the maypole, which split the village of Ansty into two camps, has been settled, and the centuries-old May Day celebrations seem certain to go ahead this year after all.

Villagers attended a special parish meeting on Tuesday, and after what chairman of the parish council, Mr Alan Beale, described as an "amicable meeting", elected a committee to organise this year's celebrations.

The dispute started when the new landlord of the village's Maypole Inn, Mr Chris Thomas, claimed the celebrations should

be organised by the landlord of the pub and centred on the Maypole Inn, which is close to the village's 72-foot maypole — the tallest in Britain.

Leading the fight against the pub organising the annual celebrations was Mrs Joan Parsons, who, with her husband ran the inn and the festival for 11 years until last year. She claimed the organising should not be left to the licensee, and said the only reason the inn featured before was that she lived there.

Now a new committee has been formed to organise this

year's festivities and the seven members have been taken from both sides of the dispute. Chairman of the committee is Mrs A Fisher-Rowe.

Mr Thomas, who was at the centre of the storm, has been elected secretary, and the treasurer is Mr Chris Ridley, who is also a member of the parish council.

In the coming weeks the committee will discuss this year's festival and will report back with a programme of events to the annual parish meeting next month.

Bygone Days of Ansty

Just over 30 years ago, Ansty's May Pole revelries got 'big coverage' in 'The Guardian' newspaper, no less.

Under the banner 'Darling Buds of May' Guardian correspondent Frederick Harrison came to Ansty to report on the May Day 1987 festivities as a diversion from exploring and reporting on (allegedly) the 'Old Drove Road' that runs across the top of the downs above Ansty.

It was an early example of so called 'Fake News'. His report contained a number of factual inaccuracies which in themselves might have passed muster but his account of what actually went on during the occasion was just plain disagreeable and largely fabricated. Harrison might have meant his approach to be funny but it wasn't.

Frederick Harrison's article was basely written and with notable 'observer' bias. His sarcastic article outlining the Ansty May Day event unkindly mocked the proceedings and the participants throughout. To his mind, it seems his 'copy' was more important than representing the simple facts of a village cultural tradition that has been practised for centuries. Sanitised and perhaps 'not so genuine' some traditions may be these days but this was not an excuse for the 'Travelling Man' to all but rubbish our May Pole celebrations out of hand. There wasn't a 'merrie response' from the Ansty May Day organisers when they read his words as you might well imagine!

One can only hope that 'Old Drove Road' spreads he apparently tabled did not get the same treatment.

More than thirty years on and the Ansty May Day celebrations still continue to entertain the enthusiastic local 'peons'.

It is a long read and it is certainly a different take. See what you think.

Darling buds of May

**From THE GUARDIAN
Saturday May 16th 1987**

**TRAVELLING MAN . . . in which Frederick Harrison is
diverted from his exploration of the Old Drove Road by a
manifestation of Merrie England**

Right- The White Horse Morris Dancers – Ansty High Street, May 1st 1987 on a wet and windy Friday evening.



Pictures from 'The Guardian' 16-05-1987



Left- The Maidens and their haloes of flowers dancing to the tune of 'Jenny Plucks(s) Pears' - a very old Folk Tune.

I USED to think May Day was an affirmation of political convictions. I'm sure it used to be; although I suppose mass rallies in honour of the Profit Motive might be a bit thin on the ground. North of Watford, they might be.

In rural areas, things are a little different. At least, they are in this part of Wiltshire: an enclave of retired civil servants, armed forces personnel, Sloane Ranger weekenders, ancient and not so ancient families, and a raft of local peons to keep the whole thing afloat. Naturally, in such an environment, political convictions have a walk-on part and the cut and thrust of political debate has been subsumed into the transcendent and frequently brutal culture of the W1, jumble sales, local gossip, and of course Morris Dancing. Which brings me back to my recent May Day and the local celebrations in the nearby village of Ansty.

Ansty is the nearest village to the Old Drove Road, where I am presently ensconced in the old Ford Transit with one (still) very urban cat. A picture book village of mainly thatched cottages arranged tastefully around the medieval duck pond of the Old Manor House; it can best be summed up by the following entry in the May Day programme. "Ansty has been inhabited from very early days. The Tisbury and Chilmark quarries were famous, but Ansty were not." Quite.

However, Ansty does have a very big May Pole. "Perhaps the tallest in England," reads the legend modestly. And May Poles, as I discovered, can bring out the worst in people.

The May Day festivities began at 6.30 on a wet and

windy Friday evening. Gathered around the huge May Pole was a small crowd of Barboured, green wellied locals. Leader of the pack was a large impressive middle aged woman wearing hairy tweeds, the aforesaid green wellies, several rows of pearls, and a camouflage flak jacket.

Approaching from the Drove Road, I assumed the festivities included a Tannoy. They did, but that's not what I was hearing. What I heard was the spine chilling basso profundo of Ansty's leader, exhorting local schoolchildren to go through their paces around the May Pole. In a voice like a ruptured Moose, and with that massive confidence borne of many generations of unopposed eccentricity, she directed the proceedings around the May Pole as she probably directed most things in the village: with bizarre efficiency and iron control.

The children from Chilmark school danced prettily around the May Pole and shyly took a bow at the end; then to be swept away and have their goose pimples wrapped in warm sweaters by equally chilled parents. The Moose retired to the nearby local — wittily named The Maypole — probably to down a few yards of ale and consume a side of beef. Meanwhile the May Queen's Procession began from the old Crusaders Hospice — now a semi-derelict garage — on the other side of the Duck Pond. Led by the White Horse Morris Men, a sweet faced kid of 13 had been crowned with a small wreath of flowers — "For the second year running," announced the actual Tannoy, and a dark ripple of muttering spread through the crowd like a

stone dropped in the duck pond.

With the arrival of the Morris Men, all in white and waving white hankies as they danced to avoid the puddles, the main business of the evening began. That is, the murderously competitive enactment of spring by the White Horse Morris Men and the Dorset Triumph Folk Dancers — motto, we do it with bells on.

The White Horse men pranced energetically in formation. Large, mainly bearded, clearly out of condition, and not one a day over 40, they went through a lively routine with sticks, cracking them fiercely together above each other's heads in a staccato of sound. It was all very macho, very impressive, and I wondered how they managed to miss each other's fingers given that several dancers had their eyes closed in apparent ecstasy. In fact they didn't always miss, as occasional agonised yells and muffled curses indicated. Accordions wheezed, bells jangled, and the whiplash crack of the sticks echoed back from the steep sides of Ansty's little valley, providing an appropriate background to the cries of pain. One must indeed suffer for one's art. Eventually the Morris Dancing finished and, white hankies clutched gamely between fingers rapidly turning blue, the White Horse men pranced in formation towards the pub.

"And now!" announced the Tannoy, "the Dorset Triumph Folk Dancers." And so it came to pass that a group of large men dressed in shag rugs, green tights, and all wearing straw hats appeared mysteriously by the May Pole. According to the Tannoy, the Dorset Triumph team was

"famous all over Europe in Dorset." And indeed, they were — as the Tannoy announced several times to the mounting fury of the White Horse men — on their way that very night to France to perform in a festival.

The leader of the group stepped forward and made a little speech about the significance of May Day and its deep roots in English cultural history. The May Pole was apparently a male. I looked up at the huge phallic pole thrusting aggressively against the murky overcast sky and wondered what a female May Pole looked like.

The first dance was announced: "Jenny Plucks Pears." I suddenly developed a wheezing cough as a solemn line of shag rugs stepped delicately through the puddles in tight formation. They were joined by The Maidens, in full green skirts, flowered bodices, and haloes of rapidly disintegrating flowers. Given that no one would see 30 again, I was impressed by the ability of the group to suspend disbelief among the crowd.

The dance concluded and the group pranced delicately off to one side. There was a silence, and then wave of applause swept through the crowd. For whatever reasons, Dorset had triumphed. Sour faced and muttering Wiltshire White Horse men were emerging from the pub as once again the Tannoy announced the Dorset team's impending visit to France.

Encouraged by all this, Dorset Triumph moved into what became the highlight of the evening. A man without a shag rug but wearing a hand-made bush of berries and flowers on his head moved

forward and crouched — foetus like — in front of the May Pole. Another man wearing the now familiar shag rug and glasses leapt forward dramatically over the coyly prone Bush. Weaving as sensuous a circle as a short sighted fourteen stone man can, Earth Spirit — for it was he — whirled around the Bush until eventually. . . Of course! The birth of spring was being enacted before our very eyes. The deeply strange symbolic enactment of Spring Awakening by two large bearded men continued. The Bush began to rise — and this was particularly impressive — slowly, haltingly at first, and then with more and more vigour. In fact he pranced around so energetically his Bush fell off, but undeterred, Spring sprang about the May Pole to the immense satisfaction of those members of the crowd not yet in the pub.

The dance finished to wild applause and as the White Horse men moved in ominously on the partisan Tannoy — which once again had announced Triumph's impending trip to France — the remnants of the crowd began to break up. And then, like some inexorable force of nature, Moose bounded out of the pub. Trailing people after her like iron filings behind a magnet, she made for the May Pole. "Everybody! Dance! Dance around the May Pole!" she commanded. And who could not obey? Not me. Men, women and children, all of us joined hands and soon the entire crowd was whirling around the huge pole, now draped with flowers and coloured ribbons in a dance which had suddenly stopped being ersatz and laughable.

As the shouts and laughter of the crowd echoed off the steep sides of the valley and across the village, it became something else. Something much older and genuine. Spring had arrived in Ansty.