

NEWSLETTER

Number 71

Blossoms and Buffoonery ...

Embracing England's May Traditions

As the first buds of May appear across the English countryside, they carry with them the echoes of a thousand years of celebration. May Day in England is more than just a spring holiday; it is a resilient cultural tapestry that has survived religious upheaval, industrial revolution, and the shifting tides of social morality.

A millennium ago, May Day was inextricably linked to the Gaelic festival of Beltane and the Roman Floralia. For the medieval villager, the start of May marked the "triumph of summer over winter." It was a time of deep superstition and joy, focused on ensuring the fertility of the land and livestock.

Central to these early celebrations was the "Bringing in the May."

At dawn, villagers would head into the woods to gather hawthorn blossoms and greenery to decorate their homes. This period also saw the rise of the Green Man—a folkloric figure covered in leaves representing the cycle of rebirth—and the legendary Robin Hood, whose tales of rebellion and nature became synonymous with May Day festivities in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The Maypole is perhaps the most enduring symbol of the English spring. By the Tudor era, these tall wooden pillars, often decorated with garlands and streamers, were the focal point of every village green. King Henry VIII himself was known to ride out from Greenwich to "go a-maying" with his court.

However, the celebration faced a dark period in the 17th century. To the Puritans, the Maypole was a "stinking idol" that encouraged "lascivious dancing" and un-Christian behaviour. In 1644, under Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, Maypoles were banned across the country. It wasn't until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660—often called "Merry Monarch"—that the poles were re-erected, including a massive 134-foot version in London's Strand, signalling the return of traditional English life.

As the centuries progressed, the celebrations became more formalised. Morris Dancing, with its rhythmic stepping and clashing of sticks or handkerchiefs, became a staple of the holiday. These dancers were often accompanied by the "Jack-in-the-Green," a man encased in a towering conical frame of foliage, a Victorian reimagining of the ancient wood-spirit.

The 19th century also popularised the crowning of the May Queen. While the tradition of choosing a village beauty existed for centuries, the Victorians transformed it into a choreographed pageant of innocence and floral elegance, often tied to school celebrations and local fairs.

In the 20th century, May Day took on a dual identity. While the 1978 introduction of the May Day Bank Holiday solidified its status as a day of rest, it also became associated with International Workers' Day. Yet, in many corners of England, the ancient ways persist. From the "Obby 'Oss" festival in Padstow to the dawn singers on Magdalen College Tower in Oxford, the English people continue to welcome the sun.

For over a thousand years, May Day has served as a reminder of our connection to the seasons. Whether through the intricate ribbons of a maypole dance or a simple sprig of hawthorn, we continue a tradition that has survived a millennium, celebrating the enduring hope of a new spring.



Copyright A.W. Moore

A Journey Back in Time: The Magic of the Battlefield Line

If you ever find yourself wandering near Bosworth Battlefield, you might stumble upon a charming piece of railway history that almost didn't survive. The **Battlefield Line Railway**, running between Shenton and Shackerstone, is more than just a heritage track; it's a survivor story built on community spirit and a lot of bricks!

Shenton Station, the line's southern terminus, has a bit of a "secret." The building you see today isn't actually the original! By the 1930s, the original station had fallen into a sad state of repair, with rotten floorboards making it unusable. Most of it was demolished before British Rail officially closed the Ashby & Nuneaton Joint Railway in 1970.

The current building was actually rescued from Humberstone Road in Leicester. It was bought for just £1, dismantled brick by brick, and moved to Shenton to serve as an information point and terminus. Today, the only original piece of Shenton left is the small rectangular lamproom sitting opposite the platform.



At the other end of the line lies **Shackerstone Station**, once the bustling nerve centre of the railway. Opened in 1873, the line was a workhorse for the local economy, hauling coal from North West Leicestershire and bricks from Market Bosworth. It wasn't all heavy lifting, though—the station even saw royal visitors heading to Gopsall Hall

While passenger services stopped in 1931, the line kept hauling freight until the 1960s. Thankfully, it

didn't disappear forever. Today, Shackerstone serves as the headquarters for the Battlefield Line and houses an incredible museum. With over 3,000 items of railwayana, it's one of the most unique collections in the country.

Whether you're there for the history, a cup of tea in the Station Tea Rooms, or to browse the souvenir shop on Platform 2, the Battlefield Line is a brilliant escape. It's a perfect reminder of how a few dedicated people (and a £1 building) can keep history steaming ahead!

The Hawthorn: Heart of the British Hedgerow



As May arrives, the British countryside is transformed by the "May-tree," or Hawthorn. For centuries, its frothy white blossoms have signalled the definitive end of winter, earning it a central place in UK folklore.

Traditionally, bringing May-flower into the house was considered a long held tradition — a superstition likely linked to the blossoms' distinct scent, which medieval people associated with the plague.

Beyond myth, the Hawthorn is a historical cornerstone of the landscape. During the Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries, millions were planted to create "living fences."

Today, these ancient hedgerows remain vital corridors for wildlife and enduring symbols of our rural heritage.

The Children of Appleby

Anne Sillins. Recalls childhood in the village just after the Second World War

It was the end of the Second World War and everyone wanted to celebrate, men, women and even the children. Men and women in our village of Appleby Magna danced in the streets. Women had special tea parties, some of them held in the grounds of the Appleby Grammar School. At these everyone would contribute and enjoy this celebration. We children were not to be left out of the happy time. Someone, somewhere in the village of Appleby, someone with a very kind heart arranged for a travelling group, which was a very small midway, to come and entertain the children. This was a group of perhaps five people who came to Appleby and set up their rides. The area selected was a wide portion in Bowleys Lane. Here the lane had a small 'pull out' or bulge, about half way along its length. Word of this midway spread quickly through out the village, and we children gathered.

This small fun fair came with several children's rides, and after a short while even an ice cream wagon with bells ringing. This was an altogether gentler and smaller celebration event, just for we children. There was the traditional round-about, helter skelter, swing boat and a booth where the little ones could try their luck at the Coconut Shy.

The boys especially enjoyed the Coconut Shy as they tried to win a novelty gift. This midway was just for we the village children, oh what a gathering of community spirit it was. No tea tent or homemade jams and cakes for sale, just children running everywhere and having a good time.

The round-about, this classic ride at our midway was just a place for we children to stand and hold on tight as the wooden circle turned slowly around on its axis. One adult stood to one side and it was he who propelled the ride and it was he who gently brought it to a stop.

We also had a Helter Skelter another classic midway ride, but ours was small. A lighthouse-like tower with an external spiral slide was very popular. We climbed the inside stairs and descended the slide on mats. From the top before our descent we enjoyed a bird's eye view of Bowleys Lane, our family standing below staring up at us with smiles. Down we slid with

squeals of joy from each of us, this gave us such a thrill.

A swing boat ride, which was historically known as 'shuggy boats' was a ride where we propelled our selves. This boat-shaped gondola would swing us back and forth as we riders pulled on the ropes which hung down close to our hands. As we were all young, none of us could produce much speed, but what fun it was to swing even for a little while.

We all tried to hit a coconut as they sat balanced on top of a cup-like stick. This was throwing or shying hard balls at the coconuts. It was a fun thing to 'have a go' for the girls, it was very popular for the young lads, only a few boys actually did win a novelty.

Towards the end of this happy afternoon, a small van arrived, parents smiled as they read the name on the outside of this van. Each of us were given two tickets which were for a free, yes free, two ice cream sandwiches. Our Mothers held on to the two tickets as we continued to enjoy the rides. No one wished to lose those tickets and I believe not one of us missed this special treat. The ice cream van continually rang its bells which for we children added to the excitement. I did hear a few older Grannies mutter, "I wish he would stop that infernal ringing or we will all go home with headaches."

Who was the person or persons who came up with this surprise and which provided this special day for the children of Appleby? I never heard their name. Perhaps someone still living in the village remembers the organiser or organisers who located this midway and the ice cream van filled with delicious ice cream sandwiches. I send blessings and thank them after all these many years.

Whether villages called it, a fête, a fair, a feast, a festival, a funfair or a fundraiser, the English village fair is indeed a very rural tradition. Even today people gather and join in, as we are all seeking a get together with friends and neighbours, a little fun and some entertainment. We stand or sit in the summer heat and sunshine and swat at the ever present buzzing insects. We wear our summer clothes, a sun hat and just enjoy our community. As I get older I search for memories such as this occasion. That one special day at the end of the war, I relate and pass on to my grandchildren and their families. You can't buy memories like that no matter how hard you try and they will always be special to me and to others who enjoyed such a day.



Copyright A W Moore

Crimson Fields

Mick Byrne gave a talk to the Local History Cafe in Appleby Magna ...

Last month Mick Byrne visited the Local history cafe. Having taken early retirement in 2013, he became a Volunteer Guide at the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas and continued to build up a strong knowledge and interest in Military History. He gave a talk entitled Crimson Fields

Mick started by saying that The Great War is often remembered for the mechanical slaughter of the trenches, yet amidst the mud and blood, a quiet revolution was taking place. The conflict demanded medical innovation on an unprecedented scale, driven by the courage of nurses and surgeons who operated under fire. Their legacy did not end with the Armistice; it laid the foundation for the modern medical profession.

At the heart of the medical effort were the women who braved the chaos of the Western Front. The Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) provided the professional backbone, but as casualties mounted, they were joined by thousands of Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) members. These volunteers, often young women from civilian backgrounds, moved from simple bedside care to managing complex wounds in high-pressure environments.

Further forward were the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY). Operating closer to the front lines than almost any other female unit, they served as ambulance drivers and first responders, bridging the gap between the point of injury and the casualty clearing stations. Together, these women challenged the societal norms of the era, proving that the "weaker sex" possessed the steel required for the front line.

Mick reminded the Cafe members that the war produced figures whose names have become synonymous with sacrifice. Edith Cavell, a British nurse in German-occupied Belgium, became a global symbol of courage. Her commitment to treating all soldiers—regardless of nationality—and her role in helping Allied soldiers escape led to her execution, a moment that galvanised the world. On the battlefield, Noel Chavasse stood out as the only man to be awarded the Victoria Cross twice during the Great War. A surgeon and Olympian, Chavasse repeatedly ran into no-man's-land to rescue the wounded, eventually dying of injuries

sustained while tending to others. Similarly, John McCrae, the Canadian surgeon who penned "In Flanders Fields," channeled the exhaustion and grief of the medical corps into poetry that still defines our remembrance today. The cost of service was high; Nellie Spindler, a staff nurse, remains one of the few women buried in a British military cemetery in Belgium after being killed by a shell during the Battle of Passchendaele.



The sheer volume of trauma forced surgeons to pioneer techniques that remain standard today. The "Thomas Splint," popularised during the war, drastically reduced mortality rates from fractured femurs by stabilising the limb. Surgeons developed early forms of plastic surgery to treat horrific facial injuries and refined blood transfusion methods that saved countless lives.

Perhaps most importantly, the war saw the birth of the "Golden Hour" concept—the realisation that rapid evacuation and immediate surgical intervention were the keys to survival. The triage systems and mobile surgical units developed in 1916 are the direct ancestors of our modern emergency departments and trauma centres.

As we look back at the Great War, we recognise these nurses and surgeons not just as witnesses to tragedy, but as the architects of modern healing. Through their bravery and brilliance, they ensured that out of the devastation of war came the gift of life for future generations.



www.sirjohnmoore.org.uk

Sir John Moore
Foundation Heritage
Centre

**THE NEWSLETTER IS
EDITED BY**

Andrew Moore

Contact us via email

museum@sirjohnmoore.org.uk

