

UK £3.25 • EUROPE €5 • USA \$7 • CANADA \$7

THE LIVING TRADITION

ISSUE 134

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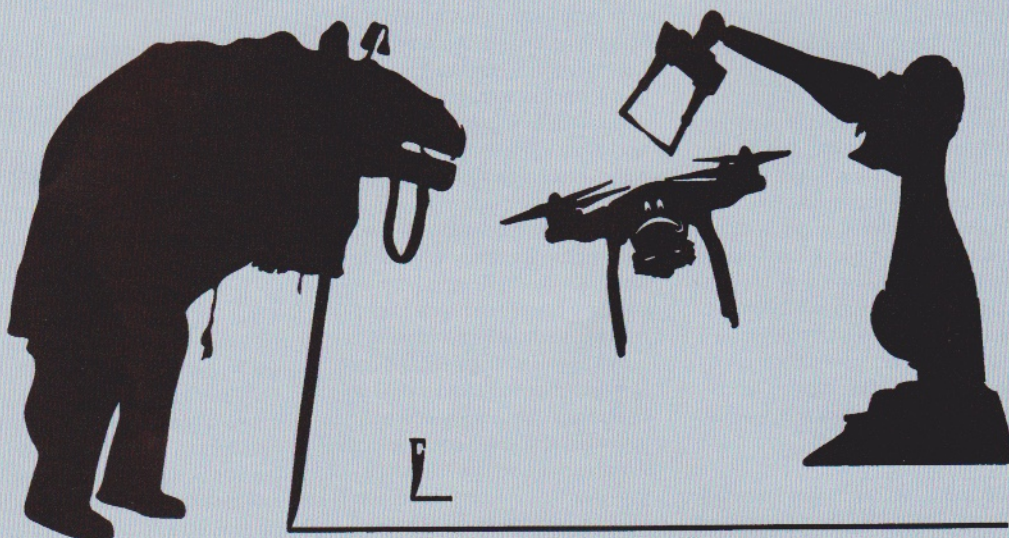
Issue 134 • June/July 2020

In 2006, Faversham Papers published *Discordant Comicals* – *The Christmas Hoodeners of East Kent*. The subject of this annual living calendar custom had not been explored in depth since Canterbury solicitor Percy Maylam published his book, *The Hooden Horse*, in 1909. This yearned updating and supplementing with new knowledge. Reviewers were quick to point out that, along with the publisher's other print-on-demand affordable publications, this comprised fully annotated and indexed un-subedited pages of text stapled together on A4 paper, mitigating the risks, but enhancing the sales potential of such publications.

One critic was Ben Jones, musician and secretary of the St Nicholas-at-Wade Hoodeners, whose father's enthusiasm led to an *Antiques Roadshow* in the village in 1966 using a turn-out-your-attics appeal and discovery of a century-old wooden horse's head on a shrouded pole: a hooden horse. Under his umbrella, Ozaru Books, he prevailed on me to "do the job properly". Ultimately, I agreed to the task, on condition that it be further updated, as the fragile nature of this living tradition is such that new teams start up, whilst others flounder due to lack of interest or members moving out of the area in the interim. His product was a lavishly produced hardback with colour photographs upgraded from the black and white ones in the original.

One buyer was Dash McDonald of the Ramsgate-based Post Workers Theatre who also acts as tutor at Goldsmith's College in New Cross. He liaised with university colleague Nick Mortimer on the subject, comparing it with the recent reprint of Maylam's book. Together, they developed ideas on the subject before aligning it with the plight of Amazon workers at Christmastime. The notion to introduce the custom to undergraduate Design and Masters degree students evolved, brainstorming a drama to bring it into the 21st century, re-imagined in an Amazon warehouse! It didn't end there: he wanted both myself as author and Ben as publisher to do presentations at the college in December 2019, along with journalist James Bloodworth who once worked undercover for both Amazon and Uber, exposing the working practices reminiscent of the unfortunate truck driver featured in Ken Loach's 2019 film, *Sorry We Missed You*. Nick adds that "this was not a 'set project' that students were expected to respond to," but rather part of a 10-week long Calendar

AUTOHOODENING



Genesis of Tradition?

by George Frampton

Graphic: Nick Mortimer

Customs exercise for them "to reimagine British folklore fused with contemporary socio-political concerns."

Upon speaking to him, it transpired Dash had somehow envisaged this 'autohoodening' in a clinical environment populated by drones buzzing around a vacuous warehouse – perhaps a fork-lift trust acting as surrogate horse! When asked what other experience he had of custom in general, I was alarmed that he hadn't heard about the resources of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and Doc Rowe! "Who's he?" was referenced, noting the assistance known to be given to contemporary artist Jeremy Deller when he curated his own 'Folk Archive' exhibition at the Barbican Gallery in 2005. Common ground was now established, and Doc's website details shared. I was gratified to see the great man attend the seminar, together with Paul Cowdell representing the Folklore Society. Naturally, I viewed the project with some scepticism before relenting, taking the attitude that the interacting worlds of Fine Art and Folklore might lead to a greater mutual appreciation, with this particular imagined goal more than just a nine-day wonder – perhaps, the start of something bigger. Above all, this writer is only a commentator – not a policeman!

Ben and I concurred on the nature of post-1966 hoodening as living tradition. Ben initially spoke to me of a non-prescriptive approach to the topic, noting exceptions from interpretations of the custom by other contemporary practitioners. His entrance came from the back of the room draped inside 'Dobbin' – the horse discovered in the attic – with jaws snapping, in an approach which hopefully made the students sit up and take notice at this surrealism! After each Powerpoint example, the speaker (now in his 'pyjama' costume copied from photographs taken by Maylam and later) over-stamped each image chosen with the slogan: 'This is not hoodening!' Curiously, the same treatment was meted out to his own custom at St Nicholas, now in its 54th year, as their modus operandi of scripted play runs counter to anything cited in 'tradition'. The assumption here being an ossified perception of 'tradition' as something definable and static: an unassailable snapshot in time whose reimagination must follow those same particular lines. This was meant as a tongue-in-cheek statement or, at least, I hoped so! Separately, I was told his message was that "anything could be hoodening" in that "there is no single unique unmistakable authoritative

version" of what it is! Confused? He then qualified this with some red lines: it must be entertaining, be located in (East) Kent, happen in midwinter, comprise visits to multiple locations per night, be done by amateurs for largesse, be community-based, and not based on 'other folk customs.'

I chose a prescriptive approach, entering singing the Sturry hoodening song to the tune *Three Jolly Miners* (from the Dungworth carollers in south Yorkshire). As an 'outsider' not from the East Kent community, my definition was of a costumed team celebrating Christmas to a pre-warned audience, utilising a horse's head effigy upon a hooded pole to disguise its bearer, involving song and/or music, and some 'horseplay' in an attempt to elicit money. I also stressed that such a custom must be re-enacted annually at the same time of year to the same specific community to gain the status of 'tradition'. After basically endorsing Ben's red lines, I spoke of exceptions in the twentieth-century revival, highlighting the only 'traditional' song identified by Maylam, performed at the start, which strongly resembles an apple tree wassail chant. Another was the 60-year old September 'hop hoodening' custom evolved by folklorist

Barnett Field to celebrate the hop harvest. Parallels were drawn from characters in similar seasonal practices elsewhere, especially the 'molly' and waggoner, which compare with members of the Plough Monday team at Balsham in Cambridgeshire and Tommy and Bessie of the pitmen's rapper dance in north-east England. As Maylam never identified an exact mode of performance before 1909, the two extant models in the current revival were described: the song and music-making by the Deal team post-1997, and the scripted drama with humorous rhyming couplets chosen by the St Nicholas team after one member in 1966 deigned to write it himself. There is no historical evidence that the mummers play evolved by the St Nicholas and other revival teams was ever in the old tradition. This contrasts with evidence for song and music-making as developed in Deal by an ad hoc band led by Bob Skardon until 1939 (he being the costumed concertina player posing in front of the horse in Maylam's 1909 photograph). Authenticity was enhanced following interviews by the revival team's founder, librarian Gill Nixon with Bob's son Jim Skardon and other Deal residents. Songs identified were Percy French's *Phil the Fluter's Ball* and *The Moon Shines Bright*. The team today wear costumes based on Skardon's. In a nutshell, a broader awareness of calendar custom was used beseeching adoption of some or all of these extraneous tenets. Ben was more parochial based on his authority as the archivist of the local tradition inherent in his hoodening website.

Bloodworth described the Amazon and Uber working practices where each operative's workload is monitored using a machine-generated strict algorithm, in which staff sickness, comfort breaks and holidays are penalised. Very Orwellian! A brainstorming session then ensued, and a little time allowed for questions - no student making enquiries nor any active contribution in session. A static display was posted but received little attention. Doc Rowe interrogated as to why a play had to be used, to which it was reiterated that it didn't; it was only the initiative by the St Nicholas team using this model. From a speaker's standpoint, it was difficult to gauge the students' response. However, I am assured some were taking pen and paper notes, whilst others recorded the event on their smartphones. Technology, eh? This was all a strange new vocabulary for these

20-year olds to absorb, and they were given four days to design and perform something that met with McDonald and Mortimer's brief.

Doc said he'd intended to revisit Goldsmith's later in the week, but it was Caroline Oates who videoed the result on her phone on the Thursday, which proved rather intriguing. Upon the drive back to Thanet on the Monday, Dash speculated that the significant number of Hong Kong students attending might use this as an opportunity to highlight their own island's troubles as reported in world news in Autumn 2019. However, the end result showed none of this, and the brief was stuck to. Although Mortimer assured me the students' efforts were 'collaborative', their input had obviously been supplemented by lines from the ubiquitous Christmas St George play where each actor enters with the lines "I comes I ..." Each was dressed in a cardboard box costume bearing a cogwheel logo. The 'horse' was replaced by a cardboard box construct with a head bearing jaws made to open and shut and identified as 'the scanner' - holder of the wicked algorithm! There was nothing of drones flying anywhere! The play started and finished with a self-composed song to the *Three Jolly Miners* tune, heralding the action, also using rhyming couplets, and a death-and-resurrection theme. The chip in the scanner malfunctioned, so "Is there a technician to be found ...?" Pleas for a replacement chip to be modified by the cogwheeled operatives to facilitate a more sympathetic functionary were met; scanner revived; all ended happily ever after!

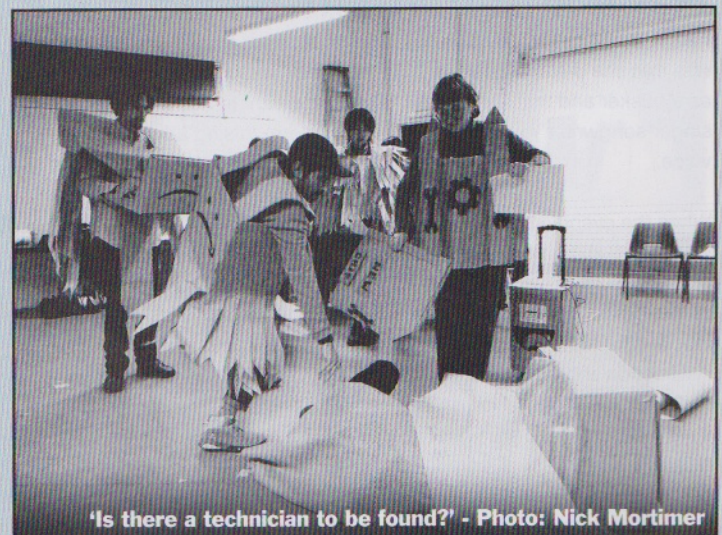
So, is this likely to be the start of a new 'tradition?' The main problem inherent in the brief is that for it to be annually sustainable, it must mean something to the community entertained. The actors understood this given the 'laboratory-controlled' environment, as did the audience in the video. In science, hypotheses can only be formulated once the same experiment is successfully repeated. However, there may be no intention to stage it again next year - yet! To do so, using a new intake of students, is fraught with the problem of introducing the same unfamiliar concepts imparted to the class of 2019. As was wryly commented, success in this task may earn a first-class degree; failure, a footnote in passing in any third edition of *Discordant Comicals* - or not!



'Dobbin' the St Nicholas hooden horse - Photo: George Frampton



The wicked scanner - Photo: Nick Mortimer



'Is there a technician to be found?' - Photo: Nick Mortimer