

Elstow May Festival

- A Brief History



In 1968, Bedfordshire changed from the Primary/Secondary system to Lower/ Middle & Upper schools and Elstow Primary School lost its three top years. It was felt that, without the older pupils, they would be unable to stage the event and so the festival stopped for 5 years.

In 1974, the festival was re-introduced by Elstow Lower School, albeit on a much smaller scale and with only young children, aged up to 9 and using a considerably smaller May pole on the school's playing field, rather than on the green. The school managed to run the festival until 2000, when curriculum pressures forced them to stop.

The Festival was revived by the Reverend Jeremy Crocker, rector of Elstow Abbey, in 2006. Rather than the school having to organize everything, various people from the church and village became involved in the organisation of the event. The present day festival is different to Bob Wadsworth's production, in that there is a funfair, a fete and performances by various guest musical, cheerleading and dancing groups. It is, in fact, now much closer in its character to those May events which provided the inspiration for John Bunyan's 'Vanity Fayre' in "The Pilgrim's Progress". The festival still includes the old coach conveying the May Queen in procession from the old village school to Elstow green and a group of children (from the new Elstow Lower school) carry out a few Maypole dances around a somewhat smaller maypole. Sadly, there are far fewer children involved and no Jesters, Heralds or 'doves' or decorated boughs. But the event still provides a great deal of fun for all the family.

We are not sure of the sources of some of the earliest photographs on display in this exhibition (and on our website) – we would love to find out, if anyone knows? Many of those from 1942 to the 1960s were taken by Drake Sadler, a photographer commissioned annually by the school. Others were taken by local newspapers and various private photographers. To see our (still-growing) archive of photographs, visit; <http://s1330.photobucket.com/user/moothallelstow/profile/>

If you can identify any of the people in any of the photographs in this exhibition (or in the on-line albums), do please contact cliverarnold@btinternet.com

Celebrating May Day pre-dates Christianity and probably originated as a pagan festival, a fertility rite, performed to ensure a good harvest and a bit of spring-time jollity. Each year, a "May Queen" would be chosen and crowned and then celebrants would dance around a Maypole and, at night, bonfires would be lit. The Maypole had a crown at the top, with streamers or ribbons hanging from just below. Pairs of boys and girls (or men and women) stood, alternately, around the base of the pole, each holding the end of a ribbon. When the music started, they would weave in and around each other, boys going one way and girls going the other, until the ribbons were woven together tightly around the pole and the merry-makers all met at its base. The phallic symbolism of the pole and the nature of some of the dances, have, throughout history, rarely been openly acknowledged, but are obvious. The movement of those ribbons around the pole, as the dances took place are also said to represent the motion of the sun.

Although the Catholic Church attempted to ban most rites associated with the pagan May holiday, Rogation processions often incorporated elements from those festivities, in an attempt to supplant their pagan origin. These ceremonies, however, had exactly the same goals: the offering of prayers for good crops (not to mention, the chance for young men and women to meet!)

The rise of [Protestantism](#) in the 16th century led to increasing disapproval of May Poles and other May Day practices, because Protestants viewed them as idolatry and therefore as being immoral.

No-one knows for how long Elstow has held May Day festivals but there were certainly 'fairs' held here, at the beginning of May during the days of the Elstow Abbey (1078-1539) and they held a charter to hold markets here in May. The Abbey's fairs were large, commercial affairs, which covered all the fields around the Abbey and would have attracted traders and shoppers from all the surrounding counties. Whether there was maypole dancing during the days of the Abbey is unknown but, in John Bunyan's

day, when the puritan government banned Maypoles in 1652, Elstow was one of the places which chose to ignore the ban.

After 1889, there is little or no mention of Elstow May Day and the tradition appears to have lapsed for some thirty years - until 1925, when the headmaster of Elstow School, Mr R.A.J. Wadsworth (or "Bob") re-established the festival. In that year, the event attracted a crowd of over 1,000 people. We know quite a bit about how this event ran during Bob Wadsworth's time. The chief organizer of the dancing was Miss Dorothy Pestell, the school's music teacher. So popular were the dances, that the school was often invited to take the pupils to perform at other locations.

Elstow's May Festival ceremony was performed on the first Thursday in May at 3pm – mainly for retired people and housewives - and then again at 6pm, for those who had been at work or school during the day. Each year, the May Queen was selected by the girls in the school's top year. They were not always Elstow village girls, as the school also served the Cosmic Avenue and Ampthill Road areas, as well as the villages of Cople, Cotton End, Haynes, Harrowden, Willington and Wilstead. In the days leading up to the Festival, the children and their parents were all involved in the preparations - making flowers out of red, white and blue crepe paper and fixing them onto twigs and boughs.

On the festival day, Elstow's High Street (which was then the A6 main highway) was closed to traffic – so that the children could safely process from the school to the green and then, later, back again. The May Pole was carried - all the way from the school, and back - by six of the oldest and strongest boys. A coach with crepe flowers carried the May Queen, two train bearers and the Coachman/ Herald, who was dressed in riding boots, top hat and a red tunic. Again, it was the school's oldest boys who provided the 'horsepower' to pull the coach and all its passengers. Following the coach walked the Maids of Honour, the Jester and the remainder of the school's children, each carrying their colourful decorated boughs.

On arrival at the green, the pupils would enter an arena surrounded by 100s of spectators. The bearers would take the Maypole to a pre-prepared spot, move it to an almost upright position and then slide it into a tube which had been set into the ground. The children then, seated in circles around the May

Pole, stuck their boughs of flowers into the ground – to symbolize the springing up and flowering of May blossoms.

The Herald would then make a short speech, introducing the May queen and announcing that she would now process to her coronation. Proceeded by her Crown bearer (carrying the specially-made crown on a red cushion), the May Queen would descend from her coach and her train held up by her two trainbearers – a small boy and girl, processed to her throne, set beside the Maypole. Once enthroned, she would be crowned by the previous year's May Queen. She then made a speech, welcoming the people present and then requested "messengers of peace" - the signal for four boys to release four 'doves' from two cane baskets. The 'doves' were actually white homing pigeons and the idea was that the birds released during the afternoon performance would return to their roost, ready for re-use in the evening - but Bill Wagstaff always kept a few 'spare' birds in reserve!

After the coronation, the children performed a variety of dances around the May Pole, so that its coloured ribbons created different, often intricate, decorative patterns - either radiating out from the crown at the top, or tightly wound around the pole itself. Practically all the School's pupils would take part in the event - if not in the dances, carrying out tasks like selling programmes. Usually, one or two boys would be dressed up as Jesters and would lark about throughout the proceeding, trying (and often succeeding) to make the audience laugh. At the end of the dancing, members of staff or soldiers would take open blankets around the crowd of spectators, who would throw in coins. The money collected was, during wartime, given to military charities and then, in later years, to the school fund.

The fame of Elstow's May Festival spread rapidly, attracting considerable interest from local newspapers and photographers. In 1932, for example, it was reported that 'crowds of people came from all parts of the county' and, in 1935, all ten of the previous May queens were present at the opening ceremony. The Festival continued even through the years of World War II and, in 1945, celebrated its 'coming of age' in the presence of its 'first' (i.e. from 1925) May queen, Laura Caves. In 1948, headmaster Bob Wadsworth retired but the festival continued and, by 1952 was attracting a combined audience (across the two performances) of ten to twelve thousand people.