ONE of the events to mark the centenary of Elstow School, which was opened in 1874, was the revival last Thursday of the school May Day revelries after a gap of seven years.

School May Day celebrations date back to the founding of the school but were not held regularly until the advent of Mr. R. A. J. Wadsworth ("Waddy" to his friends) as headmaster.

On this page is a facsimile of another revival of the ceremonies — in 1925. It is evident that Mr. Wadsworth was a leader on that occasion. How long it had been since the previous celebrations is not clear.

Bedfordshire Times photographers were there on Thursday to capture the atmosphere of an important occasion and their work — in full colour — is planned for this Friday's issue.

THE BEDFORD RECORD, 5 MAY, 1925. 3

MAY DAY ON ELSTOW GREEN.

[BEDFORD RECORD photograph.]

The photograph shows the May Queen (Laura Caves) being "chained" amid the enthusiasm of her subjects.

OLD-TIME REVELS REVIVED ON ELSTOW GREEN.

THE CROWNING OF THE QUEEN O' THE MAY.

MAYPOLE AND COUNTRY DANCING BY THE CHILDREN.

There was a time very long ago when May Day revels took place on Elstow Green, but how far back that was neither memory nor record tells. Perhaps the weather-beaten walls of the Norman Church, or the ancient red bricks of the Moot Hall could, if they had tongues, tell us, but this secret, like many another equally interesting, they jealously guard. However, on May Day, 1925, these sober old piles looked down once more upon scenes of revelry as happy and whole-hearted as any they could have seen in the days of Merrie England, for there is a movement to bring back to the countryside the simple out-door pastimes of bygone years.

There were differences, of course. It is impossible in these days to get back to the almost primitive simplicity of the Middle Ages. On Friday only the children danced, and they to the music of a gramophone. But it must be remembered that this was only a beginning. Perhaps some day we will all, old and young, dance on May Day as our forefathers did, but that time is not yet. Nevertheless, the spirit of laughing childhood and the lilt and rhythm of music are things of all time, and these were the same on Friday as they always have been and always will be.

The old-time maypole dances were performed to the original airs, and alternated with country dances skilfully adapted for the maypole. The children danced because they liked it. There was no drilling or outside direction jerking in upon the joy of the dance—all that had been done beforehand. If the dancers went wrong—which was not often—they righted themselves, and so the whole thing was entirely spontaneous and natural.

COUNTRY DANCING AND VILLAGE LIFE.

To come to facts, it should be explained that this revival of the May Day festival was the outcome of a desire to re-introduce country dancing into village life. The subject has a place in the school curriculum, and quite a lot is done with it nowadays in connexion with the annual Musical Festival. Neither of these things, however, admirable as they are in their way, is enough. The idea is to give these old dances and games a real place in the life of country people, and it is by such events as that of Friday that this aim will have to be accomplished. The prime mover in this case was Mr. R. A. J. Wadsworth, the school master at Elstow, who was the "producer" of the whole affair, assistance being given by his staff, the parents, and other friends.

The children had unanimously selected Laura Caves, a pretty, bobbed girl of 13, to be Queen of the May, and they made a good choice. But here a sad note must creep in. It was Hood, was it not, who wrote that "There's not a string attuned to mirth but has its chord in melancholy." So it was here. For only recently Laura's mother died, and among the brilliant patterns woven by the pretty maypole streamers there was, to those who could detect it, a hint of a thread of sombre hue. A touching little incident might here be mentioned. Laura asked that her bouquet might be afterwards divided into two parts, so that some of the flowers might be placed on her mother's grave, and the remainder taken to a sick child in the village who could not take part in the revels. This was done.

All day the weather had been doubtful, and a shower in the afternoon caused long faces amongst the children, but towards six o'clock, the appointed hour, the sun was making valiant efforts to pierce the heavy clouds, and did occasionally discover and make the most of a rift between them. A cold north wind was blowing, and this made it a little uncomfortable for those who were not actually dancing, but it did not prevent the assembling of a large crowd, including many who had walked or cycled out from Bedford.

PROCESSION TO THE GREEN.

The children met at the school and marched to the Green in procession. They made a pretty picture. First came the pole, borne by several boys, with other children carrying the ribbons. This was followed by the Queen's throne, decked with leaves and brightly-coloured blossoms, and by her crown, carried on a crimson cushion by Jean Crouch. The Queen herself came next, a regal figure in white, her train carried by Charlie Prudden and Clarence Cooper. The bearer of her bouquet of daffodils, narcissi, and other spring flowers was Eileen Barrs and Harry Fox, as the "Archbishop" who was to crown the Queen, was also there, with the Herald (Phillip Keep) and a bevy of maids of honour carrying branches of almond blossom. After these came the main body of children, numbering nearly 200, all in gala dress and carrying branches decked with paper blossoms of every shade. They marched down the historic street, almost brushing with their branches the house where John Bunyan used to live. The column of children was watched by an admiring crowd, while many who considered it prudent not to face the chilly wind stationed themselves at their windows to see them go by.

On their arrival at the Green the first business was the erection of the maypole. The strong arms of half a dozen boys made light of this task, and there was a great outburst of cheering as the white pole, with two little Union Jacks fluttering above the circlet of flowers at the top, was hoisted in the centre of the circle.

THE CORONATION.

Then came the stentorian voice of the Herald calling for silence. "The Queen is coming. Make way for the Queen!" As her majesty was escorted to her throne under the ribbons of the Maypole the sun, as if in obedience to the Herald's command, came out from behind the clouds, and when the "Archbishop" crowned her Queen of the May the scene was flooded with mellow light. There was a shout of "The Queen is crowned!" and another outburst of mighty cheering, which continued while her majesty was presented with her garland and was borne in triumph round the circle so that all her subjects could see their Queen. She then took her seat upon the throne, mounted upon a crimson dais and, with her maids of honour grouped around her feet, proceeded to watch the revels. Before these started, however, there was a little speech by the Herald, who expressed the thanks of the Queen and said she promised to do her best to reign as a queen should, and to bring happiness and joy to her subjects.

THE DANCES.

By the Queen's command the children then began their revels with "Selenger's Round," following this with "Barber's Pole," "The Old Mole," "Jenny Pluck Pears," "Peascods," "Ropes," "Haste to the Wedding," "Spider's Web," "If all the world were paper," and concluding with plaiting in various methods. The crowd looked on admiringly as the children tripped in and out, weaving intricate patterns with the streamers of red, yellow, blue, and green and getting them untwined—marvellously enough—just as the music stopped. Every dance was loudly applauded and the praises heard on every hand—whether in the homely vernacular of the villagers or the more polished phrases of school teachers who had come out from Bedford to see the display—were obviously sincere.

All too soon the dancing was finished, but before the return to the school cheers were given for Mr. S. H. Whitbread and Mr. W. Crouch for allowing the festivities to be held on the Green: to Mr. R. Jeakins, who supplied the pole; to Mr. Alan Prudden, Mr. E. Crouch, Mr. Cooper, and others who had helped in various ways. Mr. Wadsworth then stepped forward and called for three cheers for the weather, which were perhaps the loudest of all! He appealed, too, for financial support of the school games fund, declaring that he was "stoney-broke" and could not supply the dancers with silk stockings: acknowledged the help he had received from his staff: and told the parents (to their immense gratification) that the children had been bricks.

The children re-formed into procession and, headed as before by the maypole, returned for dismissal to the school yard, where the homeward bound visitor caught a glimpse as he passed of a mass of animated and scrambling youngsters, all chattering excitedly and waving their blossoming branches in the last scene of a merry and memorable May Day.

Other pictures will appear in next Friday's BEDFORDSHIRE TIMES.

Beautifully finished photographs of the May Day Festivities may be obtained at THE BEDFORDSHIRE TIMES Office, Mill Street, Bedford. Postcards 4d. each. Enlargements from 1/3 each.