



*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

## ***Queen of the May - a Grove tradition***

**by Elizabeth Golding**

Forty years ago an old English custom was revived in Grove village. With the ending of World War Two life began to return to normal and leisure time settled into a pattern of freedom, fun and fund-raising. These words may not have had the same connotation then as now, but the Parish Church was falling apart and the vicar and his wife decided that some fund-raising was necessary to rebuild it. What should they start with? Some one suggested reviving the Mayday traditions and very soon a maypole had been found and a May Queen chosen.

On the evening of May 1<sup>st</sup> 1947 the May Queen, attended by four Maids of Honour and a page boy bearing her crown on a velvet cushion, stood on the Village Green awaiting the ceremonial crowning and the entertainment that was to follow. The day had been showery but not too cold and the evening turned out fine. School children, who for weeks had been learning the maypole dances, were in a state of nervous tension. Meanwhile those ladies of the village, who were going to sing the accompaniment to the dances, mentally checked their words as crowds of villagers gathered to watch the proceedings. After a few words of introduction from Mrs Bourne, the vicar's wife who had masterminded the whole event, a Proclamation was read out by octogenarian Mr Wood, who then performed the crowning ceremony. The May Queen and her attendants were handed up into a waiting farm-cart to watch the maypole and country dancing, while members of the church worked their way through the crowd rattling their money-boxes. Then, led by the cart bearing the May Queen, the procession slowly made its way to Wantage where more people turned out to watch and to drop their money into the collection boxes.

On that first occasion, I, then aged fourteen, was one of the maids of honour and the May Queen was Janet Ireson, one of the older girls in the village. We provided our own long dresses and the flowers for our hair. The maypole dancers wore their ordinary school clothes and the ladies who sang the May songs wore whatever they felt was appropriate. An unsophisticated turnout perhaps, but the event was a success and people looked forward to seeing it again the following year.

In 1948 the ladies banded together and turned out ambitiously arrayed as Robin Hood's Merry Men. There was also a fancy dress competition entered by about thirty village children. But the weather was not so kind and, although the May Queen was crowned on the Village Green by Mr Wood, other events moved to the nearby school playground so that people could shelter from the showers.

In 1949 two Flower Girls were added to the Queen's attendants and the event had become so popular that it was held on the Saturday nearest to May 1<sup>st</sup> and instead of the horse-drawn farm cart the cavalcade was transported to Wantage on an open lorry. By 1951 all the attendants wore matching, specially-made frocks and head-dresses and were able to watch the proceedings in state from a decorated platform. The primary school children

performing the maypole and country dances were dressed in traditional white smocks for the boys and coloured skirts with white blouses for the girls. The village ladies, similarly attired, also danced instead of singing for the music was now provided by a gramophone and loudspeaker. If it occasionally broke down who worried? On the way to Wantage the cavalcade stopped at the Cottage Hospital, the May Queen and her attendants walked through the wards saying hello to the patients and those who were able watched the country dancers perform on the hospital lawn.

Mrs Bourne organised her last May Day event - the 25<sup>th</sup> - on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1971. In the grounds of the Vicarage more than 200 people saw 12 year old Jennifer Wright crowned Queen of the May by Mr J C Bagnall, the former surveyor and engineer to Wantage RDC. Mr Bagnall, whose daughter Patricia had been Grove's May Queen twenty years before, thanked the Rev. Charles Bourne and his wife Grace for introducing the event to the village and wished them well in their retirement. After the crowning ceremony, the children gave a display of dancing around the Maypole and other attractions included stalls and many sideshows. I attended this event to see my father crown the May Queen and to watch my ten year old daughter perform as one of the maypole dancers (my mother had been one of the original singing and dancing ladies) and I felt that here was a fitting close to the first quarter century of a tradition.

The change of venue from Village Green to the Vicarage lawn came about when the road junction at The Green was widened and part of the grassed area was lost. With the increase in traffic young children were no longer safe running about there and people were just as happy to crowd into the large Vicarage gardens. It is sad that shortly after the departure of the Rev. and Mrs Bourne the Victorian vicarage was demolished to make room for yet more houses and that the Victorian village school soon went the same way. Nevertheless the tradition continues, although the May Queens and their attendants are all now much younger, being chosen from pupils of the replacement C of E Primary School in North Drive. For some years this became a school event witnessed mainly by parents of the children involved. But now it is incorporated into the annual Spring Fete to which the villagers flock as they did to see the first May Queen on the village green forty years ago.

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