Great Grinning Gaukums: The Guize Dance Traditions of Cornwall

“Raising Glasney” Lecture 2013 – Merv Davey

Great Grinning Gaukums

Merv Davey
Gorthewer Da

“Great Grinning Gaukum” is the description introducing the Guizers in William Sandys dialect tales. Gaukum is the dialect work for fool and derives from the Cornish word “Goky” / foolish. In his History of Cornwall written in 1816 Polwhele describes the Guize “as a kind of carnival or Bal masque which answers to the Mummers of Devon, and the Morrice dancers of Oxfordshire. In Celtic Cornish ges, means mockery, a jest.” This evening we will explore the story of Cornish Guizing and examine some examples of this tradition as it exists today.

Meanings of Tradition

To start with I would like to offer a slightly different approach to understanding Folk Tradition. Folk tradition is not a fixed artefact from certain period in history; it is better understood as a contemporary process or a social phenomenon that takes place within a community. It is the process whereby a song, a dance, a story, a custom or a combination of all of these is passed on person to person and generation to generation and altered a little each time it moves on. Not only does the narrative and nature of the performance change but so does the meaning that it has for the participants. The prevailing social climate will impact upon the experiences and perceptions of the performers and influence this change. It is like the family Christmas tree, each year it is decorated in a slightly different way, some old ornaments lost some new ones added and what it represents will change as the family grows up and their circumstances change. Understood in this way it can be seen that folk traditions do not really have a single point of origin or invention but rather coalesce from a variety of story lines and musical or choreographic ideas.

But it is the sense of identity that makes tradition more than just an evolutionary process of change, especially in terms of guizing traditions. Six aspects of tradition emerge in relation to identity, which help us to understand Cornish Guizing:

1. has continuity through time
2. is social and communal nature rather than individual
3. defines events and marks the passage of time
4. has cycles of activity, it becomes moribund or inactive at one stage only to be revived and engaged in later
5. is a process where people will select which aspects they will learn, perform and actively transmit
6. Interprets the past in terms of the present (and perhaps the future).
In the interests of realism I would add another factor, to quote from, Jim Carrey’s character in the film “The Mask”, “It’s Party Time”. Dressing up helps people to escape from being themselves, or helps them to be somebody or something else, for a few hours and have a laugh.

There is a tendency amongst folklorists to organise customs and traditions into groups “Mock Mayors”, “life, death and resurrection rituals”, “dragon slaying” etc but this is trying to impose order on a process that is essentially chaotic. What we have in folk traditions is a kind community chest or melting pot of dramatic ideas, choreographic ideas, story lines, lyrics and music, both old and new, into which we dip and pull out material to cloth and create our performance and our meanings.

One example to illustrate the folk process is the way that term “Furry” dance has changed:

1790 *Faddy* Dance  First written - reference The Gentleman’s Magazine
In the 1800s a link was seen with the Rinnce Fada, meaning long dance (rinnce-dance, Fada- long)

1890 *Furry* Dance  Acquired the name of the Feast Day

1901 *Flora* Dance  Antiquarian influence associated the event with the Roman Floralia it also conveniently rhymes with the dialect “Trura”

1977 *Floral* Dance  Brighouse and Rastrick Band / Terry Wogan’s recording of Katie Mosses Floral Dance (originally composed and popular in 1911) 

2013 *Furry vs Flora*?
Raising Glasney (Medieval roots of Guizing))

A potted history
The Norman invasion arrived in Cornwall in 1067 and with it an Earl and Earldom replacing the Cornish Kingdom whose boundaries had been defined by Athelstan as the Tamar some 130 years earlier. The Earl, however, was one Brian of Brittany with a Breton entourage who shared a common Celtic language with the Cornish unlike the Normans or the English. Brian of Brittany’s tenancy was short lived but the scene was set for a halt in the Anglicisation of Cornwall and a flowering of the Cornish language in the form of the Mystery Plays. Whether the Mystery plays represent a cultural renaissance in Cornwall or the Cornish digging their heels in to resist cultural imperialism from over the border matters not to our discussion it is the plays we are interested in and Glasney College was centre stage for the action.

Gwary Myr – Cornish Mystery Plays
Either deliberately or by chance Glasney College was the medieval powerhouse of the Cornish Language and the source of at least two if not all the Mystery Plays which acted as a medium of expression for the Cornish. There are 4 surviving mystery play texts, the longest being the Ordinalia which was written at Glasney College between 1350 -1375. The division between the secular and the religious was less marked in this period and the plays drew their inspiration from a wide range of cultural sources. We have dragons, quack doctors, torturers, demons, knights, Hobby Horses, hints of the green man in the Legend of the rood. We also have very clear stage instructions for the pipers to play loudly and the audience to drink and dance. It is definitely party time and the Mystery Plays paint quite a Breughel-esque picture:

EG: 1504 Beunans Meriasëk

Pyboryon wethugh in scon, ny a vyn
ketep map bron moys the donsya

Now minstrels, pipe diligently,
That everyone may go to dance.
For me the most poignant stage direction comes at the very end of the last recorded mystery play in the Cornish language, *Gwreans An Bys – The Creation Of The World*. Transcribed by William Jordan in 1611:

Minstrels growgh theny pebaMay
hallan warbarthe downssya
Del ew an vaner han *geys*

Minstrels, pipe for us
That we may together dance
As is the manner and the *guise*

This play and these words draw a final line under the Celtic speaking world of medieval Cornwall at the same time they are a portent of what is to come. It is the very last word which provides a thread of continuity through to the present day. “*Geys*, conventionally translated as “custom” also means a jest, a “geysor” being a jester, joker or fool. It is not difficult to see a connection between the Guize dance character of the “*gaukum*” who plays the part of a fool and the medieval jester. The Mystery plays clearly set us on the path to the Guizers.

**Disgysynges for the Daunce**

The Stewards’ Accounts for Lanherne Manor 1466-79 give us our first glimpse of Guizing as it develops from the Mystery Plays. Here are listed items procured for the “Disgysynges” and the “Moruske” of “Lady of Betty” on New Year’s day and include glue, large amounts of paper, bonnets, Holland cloth, buckram and bells. From the materials and context this was evidently some form of festive play taking place within the manor and thus “Moruske” is likely to be a description implying something exotic or “Moorish”. Although often cited as an early reference to Morris dancing there is no evidence of any particular connection with the 19th and 20th Century Morris traditions of the Cotswolds and West Midlands / Welsh Border. Various versions of the term “Moorish” were used as a description of exotically costumed folk traditions all over medieval Europe. A reference in the same accounts some 38 years later to a payment for “the egypcians when they daunsyd afore me” sets a similar scene and reinforces this interpretation. There is just a touch of the glitz of our modern pantomimes here but certainly not Morris in the way presented by dance sides today.

**Parish, church and household accounts:**

- Paper for masques and disgysynges
- Materials for the dancers coats
- Costume for the players, The Friar etc
- The Bells
- The pipers and the minstrels for the dance / play
There are a number of other similar records of minstrels, pipers and players in Cornish parish and church warden’s accounts and they create an impression of a culture where popular village groups travel quite widely with their performances. The players of St Columb are particularly well documented and appear to continue to well into the 17th Century.

The bench ends in Altarnon Church (1530) provide one of the few images of minstrels and dancers we have of this period.

The images are similar to the drawings and description of the “Mattachins” in a French book of dance published in 1598. The description of the costume given with the dance could well have come from the list of materials in the Lanherne and St Columb accounts:

"---------- the dance of fools or Mattachins, who were habited in short jackets with gilt paper helmets, long streamers tied to their shoulders, and bells to their legs.” They carried in their hands a sword and buckler, with which they made a clashing noise, and performed various quick and sprightly evolutions."

Invisibility but not extinction

There is little recorded of Guize dance in the 17th and 18th centuries but one must be careful not to confuse invisibility with extinction. The effect of the reformation was to distance them socially from the clergy and church accounts. Following a series of Cornish rebellions the governance and administration of Cornwall was transferred to aristocracy living well to the East and the English border. Richard Carew, for example, provides us with an apparently detailed History of Cornwall in 1603, but from the safety of the East and without any knowledge of the Cornish Language which was still widely spoken further west.
Great Grinning Gaukums (19th Century)

Nineteenth century Cornwall was fertile territory for antiquarians and folklorists and their work has left us with a very full record of Cornish folk traditions. What they do show is that the Guize Dance was a vehicle for performing and passing on Cornish traditions from generation to generation. Bottrell’s descriptions in particular show that the Guize dance would involve a variety of activities varying from: shallals, which were a noisy, musical (or not so musical) processions; scoot dancing, a form of step dance derived from the footwear of the mining industries; and folk plays. The folk plays sometimes portrayed Cornish legends and sometimes European mumming traditions around St George, Father Christmas etc. As the guizing drew to a close the audience were invited to participate in a dance such as “Turkey Rhubarb” or community singing.
Celto Cornish Movement

The preservation and revival of folk dance traditions in Cornwall in the 20th century are inextricably linked to the Celtic revival generally. Robert Morton Nance was a leading figure in the Revival and followed closely in the footsteps of Bottrel in his interest in what he describes as the “Guize Dance Drolls”.17 It was the performance of just such a Guize Dance Droll, “Duffy and the Devil”, that lead to the formation of the first Old Cornwall Society in St Ives in 1920. After that date societies formed all over Cornwall and were the aspect of the Celto Cornish movement which focussed particular attention upon folk traditions.

Over the next few years a large amount of information about Cornish Guizing was recorded and published by the Old Cornwall Society movement.18 Unlike their antiquarian predecessors the Old Cornwall Societies were not content to simply record these traditions as curios from a bygone age. They saw these traditions as the building blocks for a new Cornwall that was culturally distinct and above all Celtic.19 They saw these traditions as something to nurture and participate in and most, if not all, the Guizing customs extant today owe their continuity to this enthusiasm.

The Celto-Cornish movement had parallels with and was encouraged by sister movements in the Celtic World especially Wales and Brittany. They were also close contemporaries of the early English Folk Song and Dance Society movement lead by Cecil Sharp. Interestingly they were much more community based than their somewhat hierarchal English equivalent. The EFDSS were the more powerful establishment organisation, however, so their perception of what was “traditional” and “English” was the received common sense. Not a big deal for the relatively small folk movement of the first half of the 20th century but these parallel folk universes did collide to some extent with the coming of the populist folk movement in the second.20 There was (and perhaps still is) a sense in which the imported Morris traditions competed with indigenous ones to represent folk tradition in Cornwall.
Some examples of Guizing which illustrate the process of tradition

**Hal An Tow - continuity**

The Old Cornwall Societies were instrumental in regenerating interest in the “Hal An Tow”. This interest was focussed on preserving the custom as part of Cornwall’s distinctive cultural heritage and careful reflection took place on how this might be achieved. “The Hal An Tow” was but a memory recalled by older Helstonians by the 1930s. The Old Cornwall Society researched and revived the tradition by cross referencing these memories with written accounts and comparison with the Padstow Obby Oss.

Hal An Tow Timeline:

- 1660 Song known to Nicholas Boson
- 1790 Reference in Gentleman’s Magazine
- 1890 In decline
- 1930 Revived by Old Cornwall Society
- 1960 / 70s Performers largely children
- 2013 Community performance

Some Images of 1930s + 40s (courtesy of Helston Museum)

Today
Padstow Mummers – Meanings

Recalled as a mummers play in 1890s by informants of James Madison Carpenter in 1930s – his transcription is held by Padstow museum. It included singing and a step dance to the popular song Tom Bowling. We do not know of origins beyond this date but recollections of people participating as children between the wars: Cork blackened faces and songs like Old Daddy Fox and Nipper Nopper; are consistent with recollections of Guizing elsewhere in Old Cornwall journals.

In 70s and 80s influenced by Black and White minstrels – wide range of popular tunes played including minstrel songs. Conflict with changed public perception of minstrels has caused some distancing from this in recent years. There remains some anger that a Padstow tradition is being singled out whilst other black-faced traditions are not commented on.

The author participated in 2006 and saw no evidence of anything that could be described as “inciting racial hatred” within the meaning of the act. There was some feeling that media attention had encouraged people to emphasise justification of the event. There was also a sense in which the people of Padstow were claiming back their own territory from the realm of tourists and second homers. In a way this might be interpreted as exclusivity, but if so it was directed at “outsiders” and at worst the “English majority over the Tamar” rather than any specific ethnic minority group.

Against this background some interesting views were expressed on the meaning of the event:

- This is a local tradition that has gone on for a long time
- A slave ship was wrecked off Padstow and the villagers blacked up to confuse the slavers and help the slaves escape
- The custom has merged with other things over the years and any offensive language associated with minstrel songs has been removed.
- It’s just face painting and dressing up in funny costume
- It is a fertility rite for midwinter.
- It is something to do with miners or people black with coal dust from the cargo ships
Bodmin Play and the Halgavor Court

The Bodmin Play is one of the few traditions to make it into Richard Carew’s 1602 History of Cornwall. He explains: “The youthlier sort of Bodmin townsmen use sometimes to sport themselves, by playing the box with strangers, whom, they summon to Halgavor.................to be solemnly arrested for his appearance before the mayor of Halgavor, where he is charged with wearing one spur, going untrussed or wanting a girdle or some such like felony. After he has been arraigned and tried, judgement is given in formal terms and executed in some ungracious prank or other. Now and then they extend this merriment to the prejudice of over credulous people ‘pursuaduing them to fight with a dragon lurking them into Halgavor .......into the mire.

After a gap of some 100 years the Bodmin Riding was revived in 1974 and with it a version of the Halgavor Court in the form of a re-enactment of the Hanging of the Mayor following the Cornish Rebellion of 1497. The connection between the play and the Riding is to some extent conjectural in Bodmin’s case but there are precedents elsewhere. Over a period of 30 years the event and the play has taken many forms and inspirations, not the least of which was rumours of an escaped puma or large cat that became the “Beast of Bodmin Moor”.

In 2003 a new version of the play was introduced which uses the idea of the custom of Halgavor Court as a vehicle to comment on contemporary issues much as did the Medieval miracle play of St Meriadoc. Despite modern interpretive creativity and vision of a future Cornwall, the play nevertheless has continuity with the traditions of the past and uses these as a medium for comment. In particular the use of masks, bizarre costume and the creation of large hairy pantomime “beast” are anchored firmly in Cornish guizing tradition.

The Beast of Bodmin becomes the spirit of Cornwall who is hunted, captured and tried by a jury of Bodmin dignitaries (The Ragadasiow – forefathers) lead by Justice Jan Tregeagle, for crimes against the (English) establishment. Witnesses are summoned in the form of historical figures such as Flamank and Angove (leaders of the 1497 rebellion) and contemporary characters such as Miss Minx a television personality with a second home. The outcome, with the support of a vociferous campaign on the part of Bodmin children to “free the beast”, is the exoneration of Cornwall’s spirit in the form of the beast and the castigation of the establishment.
Living Traditions

I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive list of contemporary Guizing traditions in Cornwall but here are a few more examples:

**Padstow Obby Oss (Courtesy of Padstow Museum)**
St Ives Guizers
Penzance

Penglaz

Turkey Rhubarb Band
Giant Bolster – St Agnes

Polperro Mock Mayor
Great Grinning Gaukums: The Guize Dance Traditions of Cornwall

“Raising Glasney” Lecture 2013 – Merv Davey

Great Grinning Gaukums
These records are all held at the Cornwall Record Office but usefully collated in Sally L Joyce and Evelyn S Newlyn, *Early English Drama: Dorset and Cornwall Societies*, 2013), for detailed discussion of this.


16 See Merv Davey, "Disgysynges for the Daunce", *Old Cornwall Journal Spring 2013*, (St Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 2013), for detailed discussion of this.


For Example:

1470-1 Bodmin: Paid to the players in the Church
1505-6 Bodmin: Paid to the dancers and minstrels
1522-3 Stratton “recevyd of the Egypcions”
1550 Poughill: “Paid to the kynges etterlude plaers”
1550 Camborne Churchwardens accounts “Paid to the Piper In the play”
1565-6 St Breock: “payed to Lydwan dauncers” (Between 1566 and 1591 players an dancers from Grampound, St Eval, Feocke and St Mawgan are mentioned as well as those of St Columb)
1571-2 St Ives, “Payd to the pypers for there wages”

These records are all held at the Cornwall Record Office but usefully collated in Sally L Joyce and Evelyn S Newlyn, *Records of Early English Drama: Dorset and Cornwall*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999)

12 Thurstan C Peter, *The green book of St Columb: Supplement to Journal Of Royal Institution of Cornwall* 1912. Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro, 1912, citing St Columba the Virgin Churchwardens Accounts Cornwall Record Office: P/36/8/1. The records start in 1584 and Peter shows there is evidence that the play was still being performed in 1616.

13(1961) pp91-125


9 H.L.Douch, "Household Accounts at Lanherne", *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*,1953, pp25-32, citing Sir John Arundell’s Stewards Accounts Royal Institution of Cornwall, Courtney Library: HK/1 7/1


16 Turkey Rhubarb is a dance for couples performed for the finale of the Madron Guize Dance. See: Alison Davey, Merv Davey, and Jowdy Davey. *Scoot Dances* p 135.
17 Robert Morton Nance “Redruth Christmas Play”, *Old Cornwall* Vol 1, (St Ives, Federation Of Old Cornwall Societies,1926), pp. 29 - 32.
19 Robert Morton Nance, “Introduction”, *Old Cornwall, (April 1925)*, vol.1, no.1, p. 2, urges Old Cornwall Society Members to build a —new Cornwalll from the memories and fragments of the old. Thus the Societies motto “Cuntelleugh and Brewyon us gesys na vo kellys travyth”
23 Richard Carew,”Survey of Cornwall”, 1602 book 2, notes for Trigg Hundred
24 Pat Munn *Bodmin Riding and other similar Celtic customs,* (Bodmin, Bodmin Books Ltd, 1975).