

## Forage Friday: May Day, Springing Towards Summer... Friday 1 May 2020

Welcome to Forage Friday: May Day, Springing towards Summer ... as we share our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Today is May 1<sup>st</sup> which, from medieval times in the European calendar, has been known as May Day and is the celebration of the mid-point between spring and summer focussing on growth and wellbeing. So, although the weather in the last few days has had a slight autumnal feel, we are going to celebrate the day with a forage through our collections and a look at some May Day celebrations in previous times.

Historically, there have been as many different names for the celebration of this time of year as there have been different cultures. There are references to Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all celebrating this time of year, as did the Celts with their Beltane/Beltain festival throughout Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. These observances probably originated in agricultural rituals, being performed to protect the livestock and to encourage the growth of crops and the health and wellbeing of the communities.

We are going to look at May Day celebrations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the borough, when local celebrations included the gathering of wildflowers and green branches, the weaving of floral garlands, the crowning of a May King and Queen. We know that villagers would congregate on greens and commons to set up a decorated May tree, or maypole, around which people danced. Music would be played and merriment would follow!



Although not an historical account as such, the author W. Harrison Ainsworth wrote in great detail about the May Day celebrations on Tottenham Green in his acclaimed novel *The Star-Chamber; An Historical Romance*, published in 1854. [The book is available to read online](#), and below is an extract talking about the May Day festivities on Tottenham Green.

“All the youths and maidens of Tottenham and its vicinity, it appeared, had risen before daybreak that morning, and sallied forth into the woods to cut green boughs, and gather wild—flowers, for the ceremonial. At the same time they selected and hewed down a tall, straight tree—the tallest and straightest they could find; and, stripping off its branches, placed it on a wain, and dragged it to the village with the help of an immense team of oxen, numbering as many as forty yoke. Each ox had a garland of flowers fastened to the tip of its horns; and the tall spar itself was twined round with ropes of daffodils, blue-bells, cowslips, primroses, and other early flowers, while its summit was surmounted with a floral crown, and festooned with garlands, various-coloured ribands, kerchiefs, and streamers. The foremost yokes of oxen had bells hung round their necks, which they shook as they moved along, adding their blithe melody to the general hilarious sounds.

When the festive throng reached the village, all its inhabitants—male and female, old and young—rushed forth to greet them; and such as were able to leave their dwellings for a short while joined in the procession, at the head of which, of course, was borne the May-pole. After it, came a band of young men, armed with the necessary implements for planting the shaft in the ground; and after them a troop of maidens, bearing bundles of rushes. Next came the minstrels, playing merrily on tabor, fife, sacbut, rebec, and tambourine. Then followed the Queen of the May, walking by herself—a rustic beauty, hight Gillian Greenford,—fancifully and prettily arrayed for the occasion, and attended, at a little distance, by Robin Hood, Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, the Hobby-horse, and a band of morrice-dancers. Then came the crowd, pellmell, laughing, shouting, and huzzaing—most of the young men and women bearing green branches of birch and other trees in their hands.

The spot selected for the May-pole was a piece of green sward in the centre of the village, surrounded by picturesque habitations, and having, on one side of it, the ancient Cross.”



Tottenham High Cross, from the late 1700s

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Although we no longer celebrate May Day with a maypole in Tottenham Green, celebrations do still happen in the borough at schools and in local parks as this [article in the Ham & High](#) about May Day in Muswell Hill shows. [This article](#) also mentions (scroll down half way) the May Day festivities in Queen's Wood, Highgate (you even get to see the movement of dancing around the maypole!) as well as memories from Stroud Green in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. May Day was also chosen as the day to [open the rebuilt Alexandra Palace in 1875](#), for the second time following the devastating fire after its initial opening in 1873.

The images below of maypole dancing are from the archives at Bruce Castle from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Maypole dancing in Downhills Park as part of the Coronation Day festivities for Queen Elizabeth II, in 1953.  
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)





Maypole dancing at Bruce Castle Museum in 2007

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Other forms of dance have also played a large part in May Day celebrations, perhaps the most notable of which would be a form of English folk dance, [Morris Dancing](#). The dancers perform choreographed steps in groups, accompanied by musicians and to rhythms tapped out with the sticks they are holding and bells worn on their shins. Other implements are incorporated into the dancing such as handkerchiefs, tobacco pipes and swords. There are references of Morris Dancing happening at parades and fairs as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and you will often see them at local festivals and events today, as our photos below show. If anyone is interested in taking some lessons (after lockdown of course) then [Cecil Sharp House \(home of English folk music and dance\)](#), runs some classes!



Morris Dancers at the Tottenham Community Festival and Carnival outside Bruce Castle Museum, 2009  
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

We also have these marvellous photographs from Harry Stone from when he was a member of the Tottenham Folk Dance Club from c.1971. As the array of costumes in the middle photograph below shows, they covered all manner of folk-dancing forms – we can see Morris Dancers (with blue crossed braces) and a [May Day Hobby Horse](#) costume (at far left). The Hobby Horses were also a traditional part of the celebrations on May Day, often being linked to the Morris Dances.





Tottenham Folk Dance Club [1970s]

From the collection of Bruce Castle Museum & Archive. © The estate of Harry Stone

Alan Swain's website <http://tottenham-summerhillroad.com> has a wealth of material about Tottenham, including an extract from the memories of [Annie Chase \(b.1892\)](#) who grew up in Tottenham during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Annie gives an account of her mother telling her about May Day celebrations in Tottenham Green in the mid-1800s, watching maypole dancers and mentioning to her how the chimney sweepers "were always the star turn and they used to play [Jack-in-the-Green](#)".



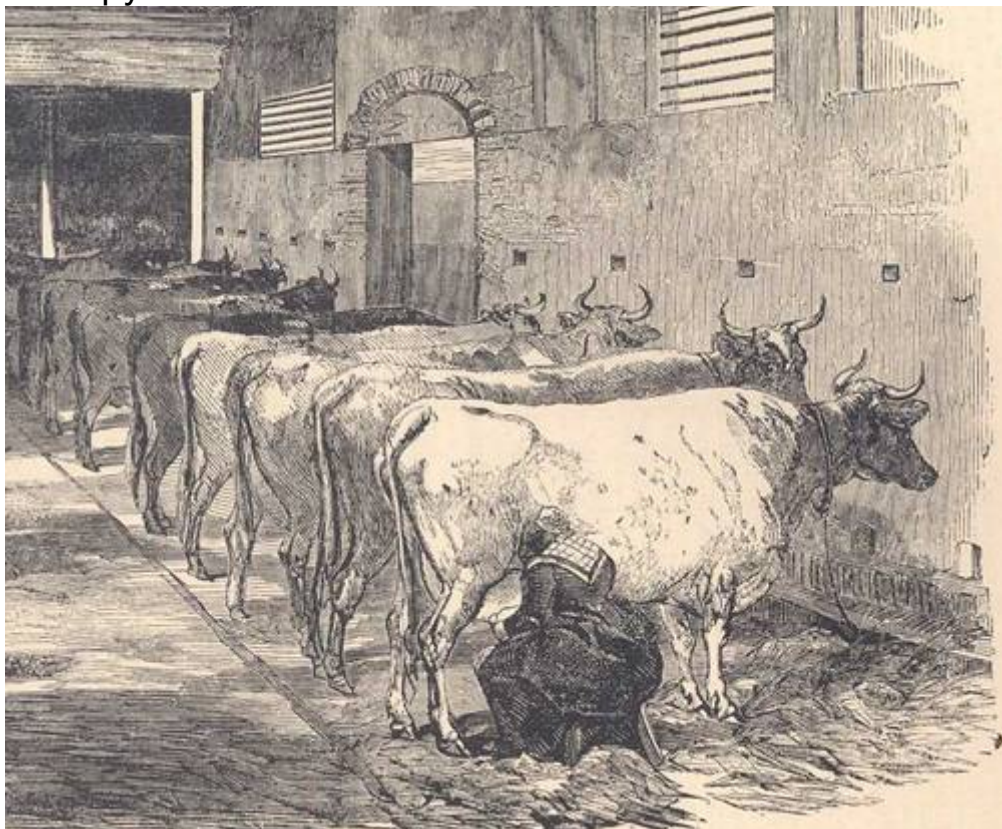
An 1863 depiction of a May Day parade featuring a Jack-in-the-Green (wikicommons, accessed May 2020)

So, here we have another May Day ceremony with the Jack-in-the-Green, which involves a wicker or wooden frame decorated with green foliage and worn by a



person as part of a procession. They are often accompanied by musicians and are said to have developed out of a tradition that was first recorded in the seventeenth century, which also involved milkmaids decorating themselves for May Day.

[Samuel Pepys, in his diary](#) recorded how he attended a London May Day parade in 1667 in which milkmaids had "garlands upon their pails" and were dancing behind a fiddler. Being a milkmaid would have been a relatively common and sought-after job for young, unmarried women in Tottenham in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the land surrounding the village was farmland and often put to dairy use. The maids would have played a large part in the May Day festivities as both Atkinson and Pepys noted above.



A milkmaid at Friern Manor Dairy Farm from the *Illustrated London News* - 11 June 1853 (detail)  
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



Cattle outside the Tottenham Cemetery in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

In art, young women and girls were often depicted as personifications of flowers, or Spring and Summer - as these two prints or paintings by Beatrice Offor show. They might also be crowned as the May Queen, and dance around the maypoles and behind musicians in the May Day parades with garlands in their hair.



From left to right, *Cherry Blossom* and *Maidenhood*, by Beatrice Offor.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

From the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional May Day celebrations declined in the UK, and May 1<sup>st</sup> became more associated with honouring workers' rights and the labour

movement. This [poster from 1974](#) (from the harringayonline.com website) invites people to attend a 'May Day Anarchist Picnic' and was organised (and the poster was handwritten!) by Dave Morris. There was music, mass football, tug-of-war and Punch and Judy shows - but no maypoles.

Perhaps, whilst we are still under lockdown, we can still link the day to the earlier association of celebrating and encouraging the health and wellbeing of our community, especially at this time.

To keep you or your families busy too and to have a bit of fun, we are attaching another Activity Wordsearch here – this time on the theme of Spring.

And we would love to hear from you if you have any memories of May Day celebrations in Haringey (or the previous boroughs of Hornsey, Wood Green and Tottenham) you might like to share with us.

We are particularly interested in any other May Day traditions in your family or community that we have not mentioned here – were there particular cakes baked for the day, special meals prepared? Were you ever a May Queen or King or did your family carry out other traditional activities on 1<sup>st</sup> May? Do you remember dancing around maypoles or running behind musicians in parades? We know that some schools celebrated May Day by setting up maypoles for their students to dance around – did your school do that? (It was pretty good exercise too!) If you have any photographs, please do send them to us and we can upload them to our online gallery.

Enjoy the rest of your May Day (at home) and stay safe.

From us all at Bruce Castle

Best wishes

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