

Something completely different: Rochester Sweeps Festival

The first Sweeps festival of Morris dancing and folk music since 2019. Smaller than in previous years, but it will build up again. Everywhere is quiet as so many people are cautious. These are just a few photographs in no particular order, to celebrate May Day and the May Day bank holiday.



A Sweep. The festival started in the 19th century (and was revived 40 years ago) as a way of giving the chimney boys a day off. Some years local cubs have walked in the Bank Holiday Monday parade as sweeps boys, with smutty faces (cue wittering about offensive blackface, which comes up every year)



Some classic Cotswold Morris. Often danced with handkerchiefs, the dancers wear white trousers and shirts (cf cricket whites) with a waistcoat or alternatively a baldric in side colours.



Clogs and garlands, North West style, although not exclusively so. I have seen North West dances include decorated cotton mill bobbins, from the mills where the dances developed. Some Morris has it's roots in agricultural areas, some in industrial areas.



And some have revived ancient roots from our pre-conquest past. I am pretty certain that this side is Mythago Morris who take the guising of hidden identity beyond face painting to hoods and masks.



Harking back to the old hooded man of legend. And thereby swerving any allegations from the BAME groups of insulting blackface if traditional soot paste or burnt cork is used. Which is why some groups now use green or blue paint.

Left: he's probably a very nice bloke under the mask. I have never come across nastiness among dancers and musicians in 20 odd years of attending the Sweeps. But in costume, drumming, I wouldn't argue with him.

NB, I don't really like tattoos, although many of my friends have them. But look at his outside right leg above his boot. If you are going to have a tattoo The Long Man of Wilmington isn't going to date. He might be neolithic, he might represent Odin, he might only be 16th century, but whatever, he's too old to go out of fashion next week.

Now I know that this side are the Offcumduns of Thanet in Kent, because it says so on their drum.



lected from the counties along the English Welsh border. Often performed at Christmas and in winter months to earn extra money; hence the need for disguised faces, to avoid the eagle eye of their governors and/or the law.



And finally this is a view of the cathedral from the curtain wall of Rochester castle, with the funfair and entertainment on Castle Green in the foreground. Note Eels on Wheels the mobile purveyor of the delicacy jellied eels, much loved in East and SE London, Essex and Kent.

Photographs E Weatherwax England May 2022