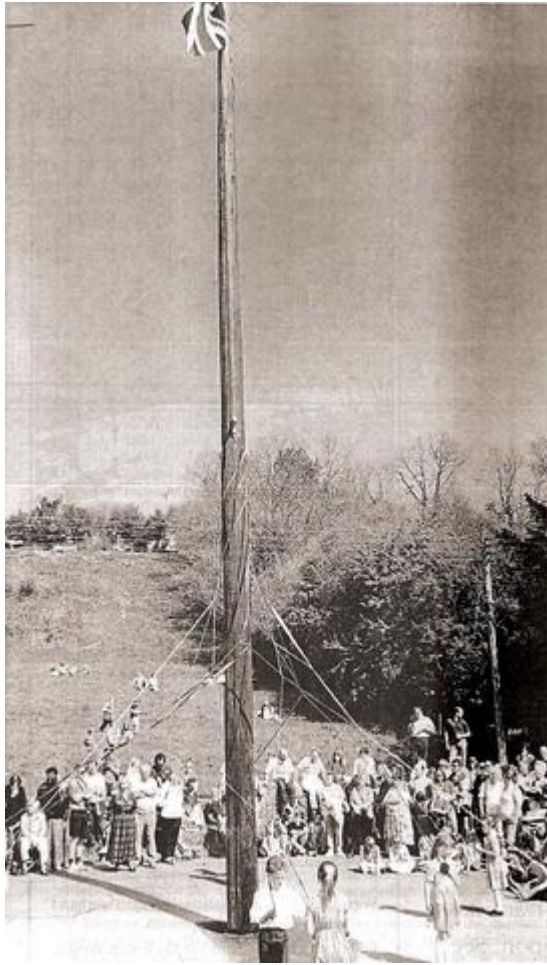


Maypole Mayhem

The maypole at Ansty proves our ancestors knew how to enjoy themselves



Ansty children dance with ribbons

*Come lasses and lads, get leave of your Dads,
And away to the Maypole hie,
For every he has got him a she
And the fiddlers are standing by*
(Traditional song c1670)

Dancing around a maypole was once part of the much larger celebration of May Day, the origins of which are said to go back to an ancient Roman festival dedicated to Flora, the goddess of flowers and fruit.

This was the day, especially in the middle ages, when it was the custom for all ranks of people, in country and town, to go 'a-Maying' and glory in the coming of summer.

People were about early on May 1 to collect flowers and branches, especially hawthorn (hence the name May tree), for the decoration of houses, streets and public areas. Then, one of the prettiest young girls in the area was crowned May Queen and the rest of the day given over to general merriment.

One of the features of these parties was the erection of a maypole in the market place or village green where, duly decorated, it became the focal point of the festivities. The local musicians were called upon to ply their talents as dancing played a large part in the fun. John Ruskin is credited with the comparative recent introduction of children dancing in formation around the pole, each carrying different coloured ribbons suspended from the top, so giving a plait on the pole as the weaved around one another.

As time went on, the sites of the poles became more permanent. There was a famous one that stood in The Strand in London for 50 years until removed, as they all were, by an Act of Parliament in 1644, only to come back into fashion again 20 years later. Today, one of the few remaining maypoles still standing can be found in the village of Ansty between Tisbury and the A30.

A most attractive little parish almost hidden by the surrounding downs and woods, a settlement has existed here for well over 1,000 years. Its narrow, sunken, unmarked lanes disappear away from the main street before appearing to lead off again in every direction, the whole place giving the impression of a human rabbit warren. The village boasts a little church that dates back to the C13th and a large expanse of water adjacent to the maypole which is given the status of only a "pond" by locals. All this was once the property of Lord Arundell of Wardour until the estate was split up and sold in 1946.

The maypole erected in 1982 must have been quite impressive for it is said to have stood 100ft tall and was claimed to be the highest in the country but it has now been replaced as such a tall one was considered dangerous.

Although we live in times of constant flux the maypole committee rightly allows for minimum change; the main street is sensibly closed to traffic on May Day. If the old-timers could return the two big changes for them would be firstly the loss of the Arundell Arms (known latterly as the Maypole Inn) - now a private house - and secondly, an event that used to last all day is now compressed into little more than two hours.

Listen to some of those who can look back at the old times. John Green says "I lived in Ansty and went to Swallowcliffe school. As soon as the weather got better in the spring we started dance practice and looked forward to May 1. A record provided the music and I can see Mrs. Townsend today putting the gramophone on the wall and winding it up. Everyone in the village came. Ansty band played outside the pub and were forever popping in and out for a drink. As it got darker, the band started to wobble around the maypole with more and more people joining in and the circle of dancers got bigger".

Les Parsons also recalls the celebrations: "I didn't do much dancing but my father and grandfather played in the band. I remember the festivities in the field beside the recreation hut when Mrs. Weldon came from Shaftesbury with a small fair and sold gingerbreads, after which we marched with the band down to the maypole and the pub. Grandfather was bandmaster from just after the Great War. There were four or five bandsmen called Parsons, all related. There were a couple of Gurdy and a few Levers. Today there are only four natives of Ansty still living in the village. The maypole has to be replaced every 20 years or so - one only lasted 11 years - but the one we have now has been pickled in preservative like an electricity pole. An American army lorry backing out of the pub damaged one during the war. Old Anstonians always came back for the Ansty May".



Morris Dancers at the Ansty Maypole

Jack Feltham notes: "It was the only thing that happened during the whole of the year, that's why we enjoyed it so much. I don't think I danced so much as larked about the pole.

The village band played at the Beckford Arms once where they got a bit worse for wear. The landlord said afterwards that they played as well on their backs as they did on their feet. May Day kept going all through the war.

Forty years ago there were 107 residences here, now there are only 55 but a lot of people oppose any form of development".



The Ansty Band at Long Farm in 1905

The late Cyril Feltham wrote at the beginning of the century: "Ansty band met in the morning then marched to the local farms for a drink of cider; some drank more than others. After six farms they met up with the Vicar who, headed by the band and flag bearer Grandfather Charles Feltham, marched to Ansty church for the 9.30am service. Henry Feltham fell asleep as the Vicar preached the sermon giving May Day blessings. He woke up and shouted yer, yer - thinking he was at the club dinner. Afterwards the festivities began outside, the band played seated in a farm wagon. Wardour school children danced around the maypole and Mrs. Weldon sold gingerbreads and brandy balls a half penny each. Swinging boats were one penny a ride, increasing to two pennies in the evening. Confetti and water squirts half penny a bag, half penny a squirt.

James Birchall's tent had two compartments; one side was a silent film, the other a shooting gallery. Outside he had a big brass drum that he beat and shouted 'Come and have a shoot at my cock, three pence a shot' - inside, attached to the top of swivel on a long stick, was a cockerel made of tin, if you hit it, it would spin round. Then towards the evening when darkness began to fall, the band formed outside the pub and followed by the crowd, marched round the pole to the tune 'The Oyster Gal' know by the locals as 'Raw Cabbage and Onions'. Then they finished in the pub with a sing song".

Written by Mr. Bernard Pike, a native of Semley, and reproduced here with his kind permission