

## **Blue Stots: Field Notes**

### **Introduction and Background**

In December 2003 a booklet entitled "The Return of the Blue Stots: An Aspect of Traditional Drama in Yorkshire " was published by Dockside Studios. This booklet was co-authored by Stuart Rankin (SLR) and John ("Chas") Marshall (JM or CM). The material used as a basis for this publication was a combination of:

- Information already printed and/or collected which was largely referenced in English Ritual Drama (Cawte, Helm and Peacock) and the later updates to this index in "Roomer" - the Newsletter of the Traditional Drama Research Group.
- Field notes of original material collected by ourselves during our researches into the Blue Stots Plays.

After publication it was always the intention to gather the field notes together in a presentable format and deposit this original material in suitable libraries or archives, in addition to the copies of the booklet donated at the time of publication.

Note that some information has been received since (and sometimes as a direct result of) the publication of the "The Return of the Blue Stots" in December 2003. The dates in the following pages will indicate this.

Not all of this material is directly relevant to the Blue Stots, but all the material gathered is included for completeness.

The original field notes were mostly handwritten, so these have been subsequently transcribed into digital format. The layout and structure of these handwritten notes varied over time and, as these have been transcribed faithfully, the variations may manifest themselves to the careful reader now that the notes have been consolidated into a single document.

John ("Chas") Marshall  
Knaresborough Mummers  
Harrogate  
September 2010

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## ALDBOROUGH

William Grainge (1818-1895), MSS Parcel 11, deposited in the Harrogate Library.

This handwritten document was difficult to decipher and there are 3 words or phrases which I failed to make sense of – these are highlighted in bold and square brackets. I have assigned this piece to Aldborough though the initial paragraphs are of a more general nature. There is a similar general piece about Sword Dancing mostly the predictable quotation from Olaus Magnus.

CM

### Plough Monday

Plough Monday or Twelfth Day is a festival yet kept up in country villages by upgrown rustics real ploughmen and in town by boys - in both cases called Plough Stotts. Sometimes it is called Fond Plough i.e. Fool's Plough. The gathering of all the village rustics takes place in the evening - we have heard it preceded by the blowing of a horn. And considerable numbers sometimes drag the plough by means of ropes. The plough ought to be held by the man who was last married in the place. One of them is dressed in female apparel with his bonnet gaudily ornamented with ribbons. He carries a box which he does not fail to rattle loudly in the ears of all he comes near. Another is dressed like a zany with coloured face and a long stick with a blown bladder at the end **[of it with]** which he does not fail to let fall with clattering sounds upon the backs of his **[.....]** team. One or two musicians usually attend and thus they parade the villages missing never a house which only some two of them enters (female and clown) then if they received anything it is communicated to those outside when the air rings with their huzzas. If they received nothing they ought to plough up the pavement before the house which they sometimes do or else shout hunger and starvation.

After they have gone round, the village the money is spent in drink and the evening in singing. The performance by town boys is on a smaller scale with a very slight apology for a plough or none at all.

At the village feast of Aldborough near Boroughbridge there is a procession of rustics dressed in the most uncouth attire as short smock frocks stuffed with straw, until they are twice their proper bulk - singular hats and faces smeared black and red – sometimes with masks.

They are generally half a dozen in number and each carries a crook and sometimes a horn and a box of tar. They call themselves shepherds and perambulate the streets of neighbouring villages accompanied by a musician **[performing]** a grotesque dance and soliciting by their clown who rattles a box the contributions of all who are disposed to give: if they cannot get money they have no objection to take it in drink

## **ARKENDALE (SE 3961)**

Knarborough Mummer Graham Bickerdike reported that his Great Uncle (with whom the family are no longer on speaking terms because he is a bad tempered old man) once said that he had played the Doctor's part in a play at Arkendale.

SLR

## **BOROUGHBRIDGE**

**Date of interview:** 15/2/1987

**Informant:** George Wright of St' James's Square, Boroughbridge. Aged 82. Born at Skelton-on-Ure 10/4/1904. His mother had the pub. He worked as a farm lad, a groom and many other jobs before he became the local coal merchant in Boroughbridge. Telephone Boroughbridge 4177.

Mr. Wright was a lively, entertaining gentleman with all his faculties who enjoyed chatting about old times, which he remembered with vivid accuracy though he said he "couldn't remember what happened last Friday!"

Mr. Wright saw a performance of the recently revived Skelton Blue Stots after Christmas 1986 and this name (Blue Stots) sparked off his memory of a similarly named performance he saw in Boroughbridge many years ago. He gave the following details:

The performers were called Plough Stots and comprised 7 or 8 youths (14/15 years old). He only saw them once and estimates it would have been 1910 or 1911 when he was "eightish". They performed around New Year in the streets of Boroughbridge to not much in the way of an audience. They were all local lads whom he knew and remembered three of their names - Lloyd Coates, Cam Watson and "young" Clayton – none of whom are still alive. They dressed up in old smocks, billycock hats with a couple of feathers in and tied their trousers up with string below the knee. (Mr Wright could not remember the name given to the bits of string - not "bow yanks"). Some of them blacked their faces. There was no play, no speeches and no special characters. They sang two or three songs (e.g. Yankee Doodle went to town) and danced about. There was no musician and the dance was not special - they just did what they pleased. They begged for pocket money which they collected from the houses - no recollection of what they collected it in. He "nivver heard tell of anything like it" in the surrounding villages.

He suggested Jim Boyle (about 85 years old) may also remember the performance.

No females took part.

He remembered the main hiring fairs locally were at Ripon and Knaresborough, where the good workers were asked by the farmer "is ta stoppin' on?". The lads asked each other about there lodgings for the past year - "is it a good grub 'ole?" Good food seemed as important as a good wage. About 200 lads attended the Ripon Fair and a deal would be struck with shilling or "God's Penny". The "God's Penny" was considered an irrevocable agreement. These hirings were held at Martinmas (November) but ceased around the 1920's. The larger farms still hired out men until the 1930's - for £75 a year.

Mr. Wright moved to work for Mrs. Lawrence Ellis in Kirkby Malzeard on 20.1.1920 where he knew the Sword Dancers by name - Ralph Wood (Leader), Herbert Waite, Stanley Atkinson, Willy Wise (fiddle), Bill Harrison, Walter Boynton and Jim Gill.

Mr. Wright also mentioned lads going "scrambling" on New Year's Day. The lads would go round shouting and cheering outside the shops. The occupants would throw out a shovelful of nuts. Though one shop threw out pennies which had been heated over the fire beforehand! They also went to the Estate Yard at Alborough Manor where they would each be given a brand new shiny penny by Sir William (?) Lawson-Tancred. This custom died out at the outbreak on the 1914-18 War.

Chas Marshall  
Harrogate

The information about the Plough Stots above does not suggest a play but matches much more closely the description of the dancing in the nearby villages of Aldborough and Roecliffe described in the Hudleston collection. I am not sure about the general availability of the Hudleston collection so I have included the notes given to me by Nigel Hudleston under Roecliffe.

I also recall many years ago talking to folk club regular Derek (I forget his surname) who lived in Boroughbridge. Derek knew someone who claimed to know the Boroughbridge mummings play. Derek hoped to make a tape recording but while his tape recorder was being repaired the gentleman in question passed away.

## **CLIFFORD**

### **Introduction**

On Thursday 4th February 1993 I visited Mike Suggate in Clifford. Mike is a member of Comberbach Soulcakers and his interest in mumming led him to discover what he could about the Clifford Mummers play. What follows are my notes taken during our discussions and I am indebted to Mike for sharing his discoveries so willingly with me. Most of the information was collected by Mike in April 1990.

### **Sources of Information**

There are a number of people in Clifford who have memories of "Niggering", as it was called locally. These recollections confirm the details obtained from four of the men who used to perform. Local people are unfamiliar with the term "Mumming", but do understand the term "Niggering". However modern sensibilities lead people to avoid the latter terminology.

Mike originally spoke to Nigel "Nig" Knight. (Is Nig short for Nigel, or is it connected with "Niggering" as some locals suggest?). He didn't say much about it and was somewhat evasive. However after a few drinks he would recite some of the lines.

Subsequently, a local artist, Don Pemberton, introduced Mike to one of his friends, Ken Sheridan. Ken wrote down the words of the play. Don subsequently rewrote the words before giving them to Mike. It is unclear how this may have affected the play, since Don Pemberton had not taken part. Was the play rewritten to merely improve legibility, spelling and grammar or were other changes made? Mike spent an evening with Ken and Don when the majority of what follows was gleaned.

Later, Mike discussed the play text with "Nig" Knight who added or changed some small details, but confirmed it was generally O.K. Unfortunately, "Nig" had by this time suffered a stroke and communication was not easy.

Another performer, Les Kidd, also lives in the village but he too was somewhat evasive, however Mike still hopes to get into conversation with him. According to Michael Burns "Niggering was soft - it was kid's stuff". Michael's father, Bob Burns, is at 95 the oldest man in the village. He was born and bred in Clifford and remembers the mummers with fond thoughts although he was never one himself.

Ken Sheridan was aged 70 in 1990 and performed in the 1930's. He has since died.

"Nig" Knight performed in the 1950's.

The team members in the 1930's were:

- Billy Knight (who seemed to be in charge)
- Ken Sheridan
- Tommy Farthing
- Les Kidd
- Stan Kidd
- Colin Burbage (who seemed also to run a second team)

The members of these two teams seemed to interchange.

The team members in the 1950's were:

- "Nig" Knight
- Michael Burns

### The Text

<b>Opener</b>	<i>(Knocks?)</i> Open the door and let me in. Stir the fire and make a ring. Shine a light to make it bright, To see these gallant soldiers fight. If you don't believe what I say, Step in King George and clear the way.
<b>King George</b>	In comes I King George, the champion bold, Many great deeds have I done, Standing in a lion's cage waiting to meet my fate.
<b>Slasher</b>	In comes I Bold Slasher, Bold Slasher is my name. Sword and dagger by my side, I swear to win this game.
<b>King George</b>	How can you win this game? My hands are made of iron, My body made of steel, My hands and feet are knucklebone, I challenge you to feel.  <i>(Slasher and King George fight. Slasher falls.)</i>
<b>Slasher</b>	Oh my back. Oh my back.
<b>King George</b>	Ten pounds for a Doctor.            ) Fifteen Pounds for a Doctor.       ) Twenty pounds for a Doctor.        )
<b>Doctor</b>	In comes I the Doctor.

*) It is unclear who exactly  
said these lines and  
whether there was any  
reply made.*

**King George**      What can you cure?

**Doctor**              I can cure the itch, the stitch, the palsy and the gout,  
If this man's got 19 devils in his heart, I'll cast 24 out.

*(Doctor prods around Slasher)*

What's the matter with your back Slasher?  
Take a drink of my bottle.  
Arise and fight again.

**Slasher**              Oh my back is broken, my heart confounded.  
If I ever meet that man again, I'm sure to kill him.

*(Slasher lays flat again and remains until the song)*

**Beelzebub**          In comes I Be-I-Elzebub.  
Over me shoulder I carry my club.  
In me hand a dripping pan.  
Myself a jolly old man.

**Little Devil**        In comes I Little Devil Doubt,  
With me britches turned inside-out.  
Money I want, money I'll get  
If you don't give us money,  
I'll sweep you all out.

**All**                    *(Sing and Collect)*

### **Song**

Sometimes a Christmas Carol.  
Sometimes a mouth organ.  
Sometimes in the 1950's:

Oh Nancy I did see you,                    )  
Down on yonder farm.                    ) to the tune of "My Old  
Picking up new laid eggs                ) Man's A Dustman"!  
And milking cocks and hens.            )

Like this! Like this!  
Bobbing up and down like this.

### **Costume**

Old clothes were worn turned inside-out. The doctor sometimes wore a top hat. Most people remember their faces being blacked, though Ken Sheridan says his was white. (Does this mean not blacked or does it mean his face was whited up?)

## **Time of Appearance**

They went out mainly before Christmas but sometimes after Christmas.

## **Details of Performance**

Their outings took them round houses, pubs and farms where they would perform inside. They would enter uninvited though in many cases they would be both expected and welcome. Other places would be less welcoming sometimes because a visit had already been made by the other team. There seemed to be some rivalry in getting first to the places where the collection was known to be generous.

The performers seemed to swap around their parts in the play and also swap between the 2 teams. If extra performers turned up then extra parts would be "written", though none of these survive.

The older people seemed pleased to see them though some of the children would be frightened.

They travelled to many other adjacent towns and villages such as Bardsey, East Keswick, Collingham, Thorner and Tadcaster. Some of their journeys were made by bus. Sometimes they would be asked to sing on the bus!

## **Collection**

In the main money was collected although sometimes they would be offered food and drink. The collection appears to be one of the primary reasons for going "niggering" and they reckoned they could collect up £4 or £5 a night (in the 1930's). The proceeds were shared amongst the performers.

## **The Performers**

The performers were friends and the play was passed on by word of mouth. Ken Sheridan was between 10 and 13 when he was involved, taking part for about 3 years.

## **Last Performance**

The play was last performed during the 1950's and the reason for its demise is not known. Mike Suggate is hoping to revive the play at Christmas 1993.

CM

21/02/93

## **CONONLEY**

The following information was gleaned on the Knaresborough Mummers Blue Stots tour of Harrogate on Thursday 16th December 1993.

A gentleman in the Tap and Spile recalled seeing Mummers in his youth at Cononley, near Skipton. The performance took place in the kitchen of a farmhouse he was visiting with his parents around Christmas time. (It seems fairly certain that the time of performance was before the New Year). He particularly remembers the kitchen having a solid stone floor. He said he would have been about 7 or 8 at the time, which in turn would have made the year somewhere around 1934/35.

The performers were older than he was at the time, but their exact age was uncertain. Their faces were blackened.

He believes that the farmer's wife was certainly expecting the Mummers to call. There was a play but no dialogue can be recalled. The performance involved St George slaying someone dressed as a dragon. The dragon subsequently came back to life or was brought back to life.

The kitchen fire had been allowed to die down and after the play the performers swept up the ashes from the hearth and took them outside.

CM

18/12/93

## **EAST KESWICK**

Email from Joyce Evans who is involved with the East Keswick local history group:

“Sorry I've been slow in letting you know the name of chap in East Keswick who remembers his father going to Harewood to take part in plays. His name is Derek Illingworth. Address Stone Garth, School Lane, East Keswick, LS17 9DA. Tel 01937 574367

Three generations of Illingworths were butchers in Harewood and East Keswick.”

This email was sent 19 December 2004.

I spoke to Harry Harrop (see East Rigton notes) on 2 Jan 2005. He confirmed that the Illingworths were butchers and were a very old East Keswick family. He reckoned Derek Illingworth would be in his late seventies. This could suggest that his father would be born around 1900.

CM

02/01/2005

## EAST RIGTON

On Wednesday 24 December 2003 I received a phone call from a Mr Harrop (01423-322722) who had just read the article in the Yorkshire Post and remembered hearing his Grandmother talking about Plew Stots (his pronunciation and spelling). It was some coincidence that he happens to have lived in Marton-cum-Grafton for the last 40 years, but he is originally from East Rigton, near Wetherby. Mr Harrop had taken the trouble to contact Mr Hudleston at Cayton Hall who gave him my telephone number.

I hope to speak to Mr Harrop again in the New Year, but this is what I gleaned from our conversation.

Some seventy years ago, he remembers hearing his Grandmother reminisce about going out as one of a gang of "Plew Stots". He was most interested in the name "Blue Stots" which he was certain was a corruption of "Plew Stots". At the time he was living in East Rigton and was sure this is where the "Plew Stots" used to go out from. His Grandmother was born a Lister in East Keswick and married an East Rigton man called Harrop.

She used to be able to recite "all the words", but Mr Harrop cannot remember these but he was sure the characters included "King George" and "Bill Slasher". He recalls seeing similar words in a book and he will try to locate this.

Though he said it was Plough Lads and those in agricultural employment who normally went out, in East Rigton it was his Grandmother and other women from neighbouring houses who did it. He also said it was when she was a married woman, because it was his Grandfather who used to stick his hand up the chimney to get soot to black her face. He thinks she will have been in her twenties and guessed it would have been between 1870 and 1880 when this took place.

He thinks that they wore their husbands' old jackets which they cut and tore to make them look ragged. In fact, Mr Harrop recalls that if he was going out in a scruffy torn jacket, his father would say "You can't go out like that, you look worse than a Plew Stot!"

He cannot remember exactly when they went out, but it was around Christmas-time.

*(East Rigton is quite close to both Thorner and Clifford. CM)*

CM  
24/12/2003

I telephoned Mr Harrop again and managed to glean a little more:

The words he recalled seeing in a book were the words of the Midgley play - these appeared in book by Wilfred Pickles called "My North Country".

His Grandmother died in the early 1940's. He can't recall his father doing the play. He thinks they went out for a copper or a drink and imagines that this was quite a highlight of the year for them. He thinks his Grandfather, who made up the players faces with soot, did each face differently – they were not all the same like a (nigger) minstrel. They wore their husbands' caps with streamers pinned or tied to the back. They also sewed patches on their coats, which made them look like scarecrows.

He did remember some of the lines that were spoken by a character called Beelzebub (Mr. Harrop said he had no idea how to spell this, so I concluded that he hadn't read it in a book since our first conversation):

“Here I am Beelzebub  
Over my shoulder I carries a club  
In me hand a dipping pan  
I think missen a jolly old man.”

Also recalled was a character who carried a stick with something tied on the end of it. This would be used to clatter the baulks and beams in the kitchen ceiling.

CM  
24/01/2004

I spoke to Mr Harrop again (1/02/04). He added that they performed the play in Bramham and Thorner in addition to East Rigton. They walked to the other villages. He also talked again about the character with the stick who had a paper bag or something tied to the end which he clattered on the beams. (Could this really be a pig's bladder? CM)

## HARROGATE

The following article which mentions the Blue Stots appeared in the newspaper the Harrogate Advertiser for Friday, 4 September 2009. Though this seems to be just a reworking of the articles from the Harrogate Herald which were transcribed and included in "The Return of the Blue Stots".

### BYGONE HARROGATE

>> with Malcolm Neesam

## Voices of street criers from long ago

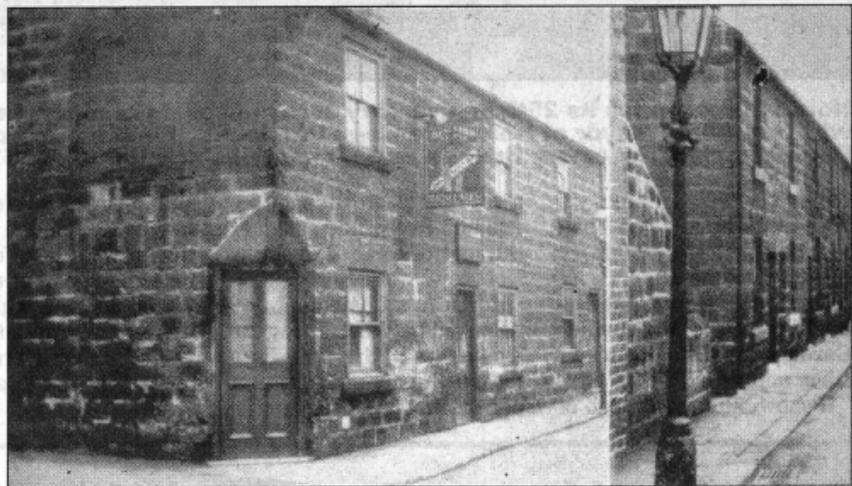
BEFORE the population decided to put up with the stink and noise of petrol-driven vehicles, the atmosphere was not as pure or quiet as might be imagined.

Harrogate, in particular, seems to have had a great number of street musicians and street vendors, who went to some trouble to advertise their trades by means of street cries that were usually unique to their calling. In 1939, the Smithy Hill area of High Harrogate off Skipton Road and opposite Grove House, was made the subject of a large redevelopment programme, which because of the war was implemented only in the 1960s.

The demolition of many houses, factories and streets, including the infamous Denmark Tavern, destroyed a tight-knit community that had once been a natural stamping ground for the street vendor. Here could be heard an Irish falsetto crying "do you want your chimney sweeping today missus?" If missus needed his services, negotiation would take place in the street.

There was old Barney Cawley, who took the contents of a haberdasher's stall around, on a donkey cart (whose donkey was said to have been smarter than Barney), whose perennial cry was "aber-dasher", "aber-dasher."

This cry was exchanged occasionally for "any hoil, lamp hoil", which he kept next to his collection of pots, pans, and buckets, all



Smithy Hill's Denmark Tavern in 1936. (S)

drawn by the smart donkey.

There was 'Fish Joe,' from Knaresborough, who specialised in herrings and mackerel, and whose cry was "Fresh herrin, white mackerool O." If prices were low, he would cry in a bloodthirsty voice: "Fresh herrin, all alive O, bring awt a big dish, fresh herrin, twenty for a shillin, fresh herrin." When the herring season closed, Fish Joe would have "big bloaters, mild as milk, luvrly Finny Addock, four a penny."

There was the fighting "parson", who pushed the local rag and bone cart, crying "rag-bone, rag-bone, bring out your rag-bone" and who doubled as a War Cry seller.

He had a preaching bent, and fights would break out in the Denmark Tavern when he attempted to deliver hell fire sermons.

Yeast was sold by Joe

Clapham and his two boys, who carried it round in baskets, in the days when all bread was made at home - "Yeast-ah - Yeast -ah, buy fresh yeast-ah". Newspaper vendors avoided Smithy Hill, as few of the residents could have afforded the luxury of a paper.

There seem to have been visits by an ancient troop of mummers from out of town, called the Blue Stotts, who put on street entertainments including a traditional play called The Pace Egg, which called for morris dancing, tin whistles, and actors dressed as Beelzebub, slasher, clown and St George.

They entered Smithy Hill to the words "Room, room, gallants, give us room to sport, For to this room we wish now to resort, Resort and sing our merry rhyme, For remember, good sirs, it is Christmastide."

The time to cut up goose

pies now doth appear, And we are come to act our Merry Christmas here".

This was followed by lines extolling the virtues of old England, Christmas and St George, and in conclusion, St George appeared to the words "I am St George, that noble champion bold, Who with my trusty broading sword Won ten thousand pounds of gold."

In a final fight, St George overcame the lurid slasher. Professional street musicians could sometimes be heard, but they usually had bigger pickings in Low Harrogate. By the time these memories were set down after the Great War, few could recall what once had been commonplace. I can remember the cry of the rag and bone man could be heard in East Park Road as recently as 1960, but he may have persisted longer in other parts of town.

## **HAXBY**

The Haxby Plough Stots Play was revived in January 1987 by the Haxby and Wigginton Scouts under the guidance of Peter Walls, a school teacher aged 53. Mr. Walls' uncle, Tom Pulleyn, aged 81 used to perform the play when he was a youth and it was from him that the necessary information was obtained to allow the play to be revived. This revival was reported in the Northern Echo on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> January 1987. Mr Walls and Mr Pulleyn were traced as a result of this article and were interviewed together in Haxby on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1987.

It was apparent that Mr Walls has questioned Mr Pullen in great details on previous occasions concerning the play. During the interview Mr Walls was always more definite about the facts than Mr Pulleyn. Mr Walls has delved into the Haxby village history and this is how he came across the play. He is obviously used to research work and has gathered together a certain amount of background information concerning Mummers Plays e.g. Arthur Raistrick's article in "the Dalesman" and R J E Tiddy's book. It is difficult to ascertain how this information may have influenced him.

Mr. Walls supplied a copy of the words of the play as dictated by Mr Pulleyn and also 3 copies of photographs taken in the 1920's by a Mrs G T Richardson of Haxby. Mr Pulleyn had the original photographs with him during the interview.

### **Some Problems**

Mr Pulleyn always referred to the performers as "Plough Boys" and to the custom as "Plough Boying". It is suspected that Mr Walls used the term "Plough Stots" as a result of his research into the background material. He was particularly aware of the Goathland custom.

A particular source of confusion was the dates when the play was last performed. Mr Walls maintained that it was last performed in 1922 and that the photographs were taken in this year. However, Mr Pulleyn was born in 1906 and says that he did the play for about five years after leaving school. This would imply that the play was last performed around 1925. The cast included five characters in later years, whereas the photo only includes four. It would be safer to conclude that the play was performed by Mr Pulleyn during the early 1920s.

The script supplied by Mr Walls includes the character Izee ("In comes I Zeelzebubs"). However, Mr Pulleyn was adamant that the line was "In comes Eizelsebugs"

### **The Village**

Haxby is situated a few miles north of York and has undergone much residential development in recent years. It was smaller and more compact

when Mr Pulleyn was in his teens. He reckoned that would be about three dozen dwellings in the village in the 1920s. To the north of Haxby is Haxby Moor where there are a number of farms which were visited by the Plough Boys.

### **The Cast**

The cast comprised four characters: King William, Doctor, Izee and an unnamed character who fought King William. The parts were played by Harry Blouse, (?) Hartley, Frank Pulleyn (Tom's elder brother) and Tom Pulleyn respectively. The script includes a fifth ("Little Wit") character which Mr Pulleyn maintains was added later by the four of them to suit John ("Shake") Watson, who was described as a bit "simple-minded". Mr Pulleyn also maintains that they made the lines up themselves. The performers were in their teens. Mr Pulleyn left school at fourteen and remembers that he didn't do it while he was at school. He did it for about five years or so. There was no female character and no recollections of girls ever having taken part.

### **Transmission**

The play was orally transmitted and not written down. As one performer "dropped out" another "dropped in". The performers would get together for a couple of nights at each others houses for rehearsals and then go out on the first Monday in the New Year - Plough Monday.

### **The Style of Performance**

The villagers obviously expected the Plough Boys saying such things as "are you going Plough Boying tonight?" and "don't forget to visit us on Monday". Equally the Plough Boys would ask other residents if they wanted a visit - some replied "yes" while other replied with an emphatic "no"! They would always knock on the door before entering and then would go in one at a time delivering their own lines as they went. The performances were always indoors - never outside.

Mr Pulleyn recalled, with much amusement, that they sometimes sent "Shake" into houses where the occupants had declined a visit from the Plough boys. They would knock on the door and "shake" would march down the hall reciting his lines only to be met by an irate farmer who would turf "Shake" out, giving him "a crack on the nut" for his trouble.

Mr Pulleyn reckons they used to do about 20 performances in all around the village and the farms on the Moor. They travelled around by bicycle.

Mr Pulleyn recalled and recited the whole play with ease, saying that was all of it - there was no more. Only one verse of the song was sung at the end to the tune of "Villikins and Dinah" (See - The Seeds of Love Page 211). There was no dance although did "jig about" in time to the song sometimes bumping into each other with their shoulders.

## **The Collection**

A collection was made at the end of the performance but they mainly were given a drink or a bit of cake or cheese. Occasionally they would be given a silver three penny piece.

## **The Costumes**

All the characters blacked their faces with soot, though the doctor's make-up seemed to be limited to a few smudges and a moustache.

The costumes, which can be clearly seen in the photographs, were made up of "any old rubbish" and "owt to look daft", as Mr Pulleyn described it. They did not sew strips of ribbon or cloth on their jackets, but in the photographs Zeelezebubs appears to have his jacket inside out.

Only King William carried a "sword", which was either a stick or a poker, not a real sword. He was "killed" during the play with a blow from a fist on his shoulder. Mr Pulleyn drew attention to the line "Me fists are made of knucklebone and that you've got to feel".

When questioned about the pieces of string which were tied below Zeelzebubs' knees, Mr Pulleyn said they were called "Massey Harris - Massey Harris band". He described how it used to be used for binding sheaves, so it was definitely some kind of binder twine, presumably made by Massey Harris.

## **The Length of the Tradition**

Mr Pulleyn could not shed much light on how long the tradition had been maintained. He "dropped into" the play when someone else stopped doing it, so it was going before he started. He did not remember any older relatives saying that they had done it.

Mr Walls met Mike Cook (with Fishergate Lads Longsword team) outside York Minster and had got into conversation. Mike said that the recollections of one of his relatives suggested that the Haxby Plough boys were going out before the Great War.

The play came to an end in the 1920s when a new bobby (policeman) moved into the village. When he first encountered the lads he asked "what are you lot doing?" "We are Plough Boys", they replied, "we have been doing it for years". He accused them of begging and asked to see their permit. Of course, they had no permit and that put an end to it. Apparently the carol singers did not suffer the same fate!

## **The motives behind the play**

When asked why they took part, Mr Pulleyn said "because it's a custom - it's always been done". When pressed, he agreed that the gifts they received were also an incentive!

## Miscellaneous

Mr Pulleyn had not heard of similar performances in neighbouring villages not had he heard of the Haxby sword dance. Mr Walls had the impression that someone once told him that Dunnington had had a Plough Stots play, but he could remember no more.

Mr Pulleyn did not remember a hiring fair, but when it's function was described he said "Oh, Martinmas Day - we just did it amongst ourselves". Mr Walls said that there was a hiring fair in Pavement, York.

The similarities between the 1937 Yorkshire Evening Post article and the Haxby Play were pointed out, but Mr Pulleyn had no idea of anyone he knew with the initials H.J.S which appeared at the end of the article. (There were several references recorded in English Ritual Drama to information in the Yorkshire Post. When we inspected the newspapers there were additional articles/letters which were not recorded in ERD, presumably because no specific location was referred to. See the particular article written by H.J.S. below.)

Mr Walls has written an article about the Haxby Play and this should appear in the Christmas issue of the Dalesman. (**Later note:** The article appeared in an article "Plough Stotting at Haxby and Goathland in December 1987 issue of The Dalesman pages 728-730)

J Marshall  
July 1987

This is a transcription of the play text sent to me by Peter Walls:

Haxby Plough Boys Play (Plough Stotts)  
Mummers Play

- 1st Man** In comes I who's never come afore  
With my great 'eard and my great wit  
I've come tonight to please you all
- Izee** In comes I Zelzebubs (*see note 1*)  
And o'er me shoulder I carry a club  
In me hand a frying pan  
I think myself a jolly old man  
Jolly old man although I be  
I've got three sons as jolly as me  
If you don't believe in what I say  
Step in King William and clear the way
- King William** In comes King William  
King William is my name  
With a sword and pistol in my hand  
I'm sure to win the game
- 2nd Man** To win the game you are not able  
Me back's made of iron, me belly's made of steel  
Me fists are made of knucklebone  
And that you've got to feel  
Mince Pies hot, mince pies cold  
I'll knock you to the ground  
Before you're ten days old
- (Combat - the King is killed)*
- 2nd Man** Where's the little doctor?
- Doctor** I'm the little doctor
- 2nd Man** How came you to be the doctor?
- Doctor** By my travels
- 2nd Man** Where have you travelled?
- Doctor** Hittle-te Pittle-te France and Spain  
Round to me mother's back door again
- 2nd Man** What did you see there?
- Doctor** Little pigs running with straws in their duffs  
Shouting "Anybody wants pork today?"

**2nd Man** Can you cure this man?

**Doctor** Yes, shove a little jiff jiff up his little sniff sniff  
Rise up Jack and beg.

*(Prods King up backside with a bottle - King is resurrected)*

**All Sing** I am an old Roger with me rags and me tags  
For the sake of the money I wear these old rags  
Me hat it's an old 'un and me boots are all worn  
Me breeches are wroven me stockings are torn

*(See note 2)*

**All Say** Patronise the Plough Boys please!

Note 1 - Beelzebub. Sometimes the line was Izie, Izie, Elzebub

Note 2 – The tune is a well known one. I think it is called “Villikins and his Diannah”

CM sent a copy of this play text to Nigel Hudleston who wrote the following letter in reply, dated 18.7.87:

Thanks for the play – it seems v. common version. (King Wm. has escaped from a N. Irish one.) Italy and Sicily are in their usual muddle. Dr. claimed to have been to the main medical centres Padua (N Italy); Salerno (S Italy: as part of Naples' "Kingdom of 2 Sicilies", they called it Sicily; even Dante called S Italian dialect "Sicilian"); Montpellier (some one gave that name to a street in Hgte.); & Seville (Moorish drs.) Yes! Tune no doubt "Villikins and Dinah" (words c. 1860 by Mayhew?); other words to it include the Irish "Fair Fanny Moore" (or "Cod Liver Oil") and the English "A farmer there was in this village did dwell" (common all over the Commonwealth – N Z version alleged similar – Australian version awaited with interest). Mr Pulleyn would be a member of a well known York family – originally from Nidderdale – of builders. I was at school with one, we were distant cousins. We once got sent from Ripon to a Pateley junk shop for a photo of Ripon Mummers. It had been torn in halves, was just going in the dustbin, so we were just in time. Mary took photos of plays and other customs all over.

I'm glad you tied up Aldbro with a version by Grainge. It fits in with everything. I didn't say with a lady there but of course the genesis story is not intended as history just psychology. I once asked a fellow student (Indian) if he regarded all the Bagavad Geeta as serious history. Reply "no, it is a process which is always being unfolded in the mind of man". Obviously the tree also means Eve herself, ("my love is a fair apple tree with 2 apples", see Gaelic/Irish love poetry, passion); the serpent is no doubt phallic, a well known symbol.

Yrs sincerely  
Nigel H.

These are scanned copies of the three photographs of the Haxby Plough Stots referred to earlier. The three photographs in my possession are themselves copies, so no doubt some detail has been lost, but these are still important early visual records.





During the Knaresborough Mummers tour of Knaresborough Pubs on Saturday 23/12/89, the performance of the Blue Stots play evoked the memories of one of the audience.

An elderly man (estimated to be in his mid 60s) said he remembered his father performing the play in Haxby when the man was a young boy. His mother also knew the words but she did not ever write them down for him before her death.

Assuming the man was between 62 and 67 years old and his memories of his father were from his childhood (say 5 to 10 years old) then a potential range of performances could be between 1927 and 1937.

He did mention the name of Ellis who we took to be the possible leader/organiser of the players.

Unfortunately the man and his party left before we could establish anything further but this provides further confirmation of the Haxby play.

CM

25/12/89

**Transcript of the article from the Yorkshire Post referred to above:**

THE YORKSHIRE POST, MONDAY JANUARY 11 1937  
(ERD Reference - NONE)

The Plough Boys' Play: A Version recorded.

Today, the first Monday after Twelfth Day, is the festival of the plough.

For many centuries the first Monday after Twelfth Day has been devoted to custom of the plough. Particularly in the North of England this day, which marked the resumption of work in the fields after the Yuletide festivities, was made a holiday with its own rites and ceremonies.

"Plough-bullocking," the procession of the plough through village streets, revelry in motley garb, and a final carousal at night all marked Plough Monday.

Most important of all was the Plough Boys' Play, which is still performed in some villages in the North and East Ridings. For centuries the words of this play have been handed down from father to son, and no trace of it in written form has ever been discovered.

This version of it was taken down a few years ago from a family whose predecessors had acted it from memory for many generations. It comprised four actors, who blacked their faces and borrowed their "properties" from the household wardrobe.

The characters (in order of appearance) are Beelzebub, King William, Old Roger and the Doctor.

**Beel:** In comes I, Beelzebub.  
On my shoulder I carry my club,  
In my hand a dripping pan,  
Think myself a jolly old man.  
Jolly old man may I be,  
I've three sons here as jolly as me.  
If you don't believe me what I say,  
Slip in King William and clear my way.

**King:** In comes King William, King William is my name,  
My sword and pistol in my hand, I'm sure to win the game.

**Old R.:** Win the game you are not able,  
My back's made of iron, my belly's made of steel,  
My finger's made of knucklebone that'll make you feel.  
Mince pies hot, mince pies cold,  
Knock a fellow down afore I'se ten days old.

*(knocks down King William)*

Who killed that man?

**Doc:** You did.

**Old R.:** Who sends for a Doctor?

**Doc:** No Doctor to be had.

**Old R.:** Ten pounds for a Doctor.

**Doc:** No Doctor to be had.

**Old R.:** Fifteen pounds for a Doctor.

**Doc:** No Doctor to be had.

**Old R.** Thirty pounds for a Doctor.

**Doc:** I'm a little Doctor!

**Old R.** Who taught you to be a Doctor?

**Doc:** By my travels.

**Old R.:** Where did you travel?

**Doc:** England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain  
And back to Grannies back door again.  
A little pig running up and down the street  
With a knife and fork in his hand,  
Shouting "Who wants pork?"  
I've a little bottle here,  
My Grandmother gave me  
A thousand years ago.  
Take a yard down yer throttle  
Jack, rise and beg.

*(King William comes to life)*

**All:** I am an Old Roger with me rags and me bags,  
For the sake of the money I wear these old rags.  
Me hat is an old one, me boots are all worn,  
Me breeches are roven, me stockings are torn.

Occasionally, instead of King William the "hero" was St. George, Old Roger was sometimes known as The Slasher. Various interpretations

of the story have been offered, the most probable being that which suggests that it portrays the yearly wax and wane of nature. It may, of course, have had some obscure political significance, the meaning of which has now been lost.

H.J.S.

## HELPERBY/BRAFFERTON

On Saturday 26 December 1987 we chatted to a Mr Arnold Moss at the Farmers Inn at Helperby. He had come to see the Knaresborough mummers perform the Blue Stots because he recalled the villagers doing a play some years ago. Fortunately we managed to talk to him before the Knaresborough gang arrived and we were able to confirm that he had not seen them before.

Mr Moss is a parish councillor and we estimated that he was in his late fifties. Though he had not actually taken part in the play he remembered a number of things about the performances.

1. The performers were known as Blue Stotters.
2. They last performed around 1944/45.
3. They were youths of about 16 years of age. They were no longer at school.
4. There were about 4 in the team.
5. They had their faces made up so that you could not recognise them. When pressed, Mr. Moss decided that their faces were black and/or blue.
6. They wore hats and had "swords and things".
7. They went round the village before Christmas visiting both pubs and private houses. They were not specially invited - indeed they were thrown out on some occasions. Mr Moss quoted "I'll be the first to enter in". To which the landlord retorted "and you'll be the bloody first to enter out!".
8. The organiser was a Mr Albert Ploughman, now deceased. "He were good at that sort o' thing."
9. Mr Moss was convinced that the play was done earlier than 1944/45 by older villagers and that it was from these that the lads has learnt the play. Mr Moss could think of two of these older inhabitants that are still alive - one being his uncle who is about 76/78 years old.
10. They collected money - "there were money involved and they spent it over the bar".
11. Mr Moss had no recollection of a song or a dance.
12. Mr Moss recalled the following lines:  
"I comes I old Doctor Brown  
The best old doctor in the town  
To stir up the fire and make a light  
For in this house there'll be a fight"
13. During the Knaresborough Mummers performance Mr Moss was seen to be speaking some of the lines. Notable the Doctor's lines:  
"Igglety, Pigglety" and "Back to me grandmother's front door again".
14. Afterwards, Mr Moss said he remembered the character King George.

Mr Moss said he would try and find out more and took my phone number. His is Harrogate 360336.

J Marshall  
December 1987

Mr Moss did find someone who used to perform the play, a Mr Horner - "Ossie" Horner, who still lives in the village. At my request Mr Moss asked Mr Horner if he would be prepared to meet me and have a chat his recollections. In spite of being told how valuable his memories might be, Mr Horner said he didn't remember very much and was at a time of life when he didn't want to remember such things.

Although this particular lead seems to have come to a dead end the village could still yield more information given time.

March 1988

On Bank Holiday Monday, 28th December 1992 the Knaresborough Mummers gave an unscheduled performance of the Blue Stots at the Golden Lion in Helperby. (It may be important that this was unscheduled because it meant that no posters had been put up in the pub). Carol Johnson noticed a gentleman at the bar remark "It's Blue Stotting - I used to do that".

Afterwards Chas Marshall chatted to the gentleman concerned. His name was Mr. Pickering of 1 Baulk Avenue Helperby (Tel. 360310). He agreed to discuss the matter at a later date, but in the short time available the following information was gleaned.

Mr. Pickering had participated in the Blue Stots some 40 years (later modified to 50 years) ago when he was about 16 years old. There were 3 in the gang - himself, his brother in law Bernard Smithson and Albert Ploughman. The characters were Enter In ("Open the door, I enter in"), a second unnamed character who fought Enter In and Doctor Brown (the character played by Mr. Pickering). He called the performance "Blue Stotting" and it took place on New Years Eve. They blacked their faces with soot and went round the houses - "frightened them to bloody death - we did". They also seemed to appear at the Dance Hall where a New Years Dance was in progress.

Apart from black faces, they carried small wooden swords which they had made and seemed to wear some sort of headgear. Although Mr. Pickering remarked with some mirth that on one occasion he had worn ladies knickers (not his mother's!) and said that they were "bloody cold".

The play was learnt from his brother-in-law's father who must have been 50 to 60 at the time. The old people, he said, enjoyed it.

He also mentioned that they performed at the neighbouring village of Tholthorpe which they reached by walking.

There was some confusion over the proceeds of the collection. He said on one occasion that they collected no money - only free drinks. On another he said they collected for charity.

He was pleased to see the tradition still going and kept remarking how he had "never seen that lad for fifty years nor more".

He thought that their version was different (i.e. the words) and that they didn't have "all that razzmatazz" at the end (i.e. the dance, music and song).

Albert Ploughman is now deceased, but his brother-in-law is still alive and they are to get together to try and remember the rest of the words.

CM

29/12/92

I later contacted Mr Pickering who now had discussed the play with his brother-in-law Bernard Smithson. I arranged to meet Mr. Pickering at the Golden Lion in Helperby on Thursday 21st January 1993. These notes were taken on this occasion.

### **Play Text**

**1st Man  
(No Name)** *(played by Albert Ploughman)*  
I open the door. I enter in.  
I hope the game will soon begin.  
Stir up the fire and make a light,  
For in this house there'll be a fight.

**2nd Man  
(King William)** *(played by Bernard Smithson)*  
In comes I King William.  
King William is my name.  
With sword and pistol by my side,  
I'm sure to win the game.  
You Sir, I Sir.  
Take my sword and die Sir.

*(King William makes to stab the 1st man, who falls dead)*

Oh dear, oh dear, what have I done?  
I've killed my brother's only son.  
Ten pounds for a doctor.  
No doctor to be found.

**3rd Man  
(Doctor Brown)** *(played by Norman Pickering)*  
In comes I old Doctor Brown.  
The best old doctor in the town.

**2nd Man** How came you to be the best old doctor in the town?

**3rd Man** I travelled to Italy, France and Spain,  
Back to my Grandmother's back door again.  
I can cure the itch, the stitch, the gallop and gout,  
And if this man has 19 spirits in him, I can cast 20 out.

*(Doctor administers a bottle to King William)*

So rise up Jack and give us a song.

**All** *(1st man stands up and they all sing a verse of a song - usually a Christmas Carol such as Silent Night - two of them were in the Church choir.)*

I suspect that the play may have been a little longer than this and that some of the above lines may not have been spoken by the characters suggested.

## **Costumes**

All had faces blackened with soot from the back of the fire. This was difficult to wash off and also burned their faces. They wore coats turned inside-out and hats (a beret for example) if they could lay their hands on them. The first man carried a stick as a poker ("stir up the fire"). The second man carried another stick or a home-made wooden sword. He also carried a toy gun in his belt if one could be found. The Doctor carried a black bag containing an empty bottle.

## **Performers Names**

They called themselves Blue Stotters.

## **Style of Performance**

They performed in the houses, where they would walk straight in without knocking (in those days, of course, the doors would be left unlocked). They also went to the farms and pubs. The villages of Tholthorpe and Myton-on-Swale were also visited on foot.

Some people would say "don't forget to come to us". Others would not be pleased by their intrusion and the first man to enter would be met with "Aye you buggers, and you'll soon be out an' all!" On one occasion they were ejected from a house, but Mr. Pickering was in no doubt as to why. The occupant was busy cutting his toe nails with his socks still on - a feat made possible by the numerous holes in his hosiery through which his toes peeped!

They also performed, by special invitation, at the Football and Cricket Club dances which were held on Boxing Night and New Years Eve. They would not be let in until after midnight.

Mr Pickering was amused by the frightening effect they had. At one house in Tholthorpe they caused a lady to drop all her dinner plates.

The older folks, he said, were pleased to see them and Albert Ploughman's grandfather would always laugh his head off.

## **Age and Occupations**

The performers were in their mid-teens, aged between 14 and 16. Two were employed in the building trade and one in farming.

## **The Collection**

They collected mainly money although they were occasionally offered drinks. The collection was made in a wooden box and the proceeds were for the Football and Cricket Club. Apparently the parson tried to "knuckle in" for a bit for the Church but was unsuccessful.

## **The Length of the Tradition**

They only performed for a couple of years in 1946 and 1947. Mr. Pickering believes that no-one else in the village did it after that. It was not done during the Second World War. Mr. Pickering was actually born in Hull and evacuated to Helperby in 1939 and consequently has no knowledge of what may have happened before.

I asked about Ossie Horner (see notes from Arnold Moss 26.12.87). Mr. Pickering knew Mr. Horner and thought it likely that he could have been a Blue Stotter. Mr. Horner was in his eighties when he died a few years ago and it is feasible that he could have performed before the First World War when he was a teenager.

## **Transmission**

Bernard Smithsons' father William used to talk about what he did as a lad and as a result taught the gang the play. They learnt it by heart and practised at the Smithsons' house until they were ready to go out. William Smithson would have been about fifty and would have performed before the First World War if he had done it as a lad.

## **Other Information**

Mr. Pickering thought that they were the only ones Blue Stotting in the area and had no suggestions on other places to search for information.

An unsolicited suggestion made by Mr. Pickering was that Blue Stotting was something to do with Michaelmas and the Hiring Fairs because they used to perform during November. This contradicted what he had already indicated about the time of performance. When questioned he said that they went out before Christmas as well as Boxing Day and New Years Eve. When I suggested that he meant Martinmas, he agreed that was what he meant.

I mentioned that we may write a booklet on the Blue Stots. Mr. Pickering said he would like a copy!

CM

21/01/93

Knarborough Mummers Blue Stots Tour 27 Dec 2003 in the Oak Tree Public House. Met Mr David Whorley who remembered the 3 who used to do the local play:

Albert Ploughman who was nicknamed "Got".  
Norman Pickering ("Nodder")  
Bernard Smithson ("Nadger")

He particularly remembered Doctor Brown – apparently he said to his wife as the play was proceeding that the next in would be Doctor Brown. He estimates that his memories are from about 50 years ago. The 3 players have all since died. He recalled odd snatches of the dialogue – "Open the door, I enter in" and something about "a fight" and "stirring up the fire". Mr Whorley also recalls that Albert Ploughman was a good comedian – better than many of those you see on television now!

Mr Whorley gave me his telephone number (360377) and I will contact him in the New Year to see if he has remembered any more. I doubt that we will learn anything new, but this is all good corroborative information.

CM

28/12/2003

## MARTON-CUM-GRAFTON

I was advised of a photograph after the publication of "The Return of the Blue Stots" booklet by Chris Little on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2004. This image (reference PH110-21) was discovered in the Unnetie Digital Archives on North Yorkshire County Council's website at <http://www.northyorks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=13212> . The photograph is described as "mummers group photograph, Grafton" - my enquiries to NYCC have revealed nothing further. I did wonder if it is possible to locate the spot where the photograph was taken and perhaps identify any of the people. Mary Hudleston collected our information on the play from William Curtis, Corner House, Marton-cum-Grafton in 1962. These notes tantalisingly reveal that "in the photograph Mr Curtis is wearing a hat in which he was married - 45 years ago". I wonder if this refers to this same photograph and was he married 45 years ago or was the photo taken 45 years ago!

Here is a thumbnail of the photograph (order forms for printed copies can be found on the NYCC web site):



## NUN MONKTON

Dave Burton, a tree surgeon living in Newby Street Ripon (tel. 01765 601866), came along to some Ripon City Morris Dancers practices. In conversation he mentioned seeing photographs of his father and grandfather dressed as morris dancers in smocks and clogs in the village of Nun Monkton near York. He thought that the photographs were in the possession of his Aunt, Mrs Sargood of 1 Laburnum Grove, Bilton, Harrogate (Tel 505354). At his suggestion I spoke (by telephone) to her on Wednesday 21 April 1999.

Mrs Sargood is in her 80's and seemed quite coherent and remembered more as we talked. I left her my address and telephone number in case she recalls more later. The following is what she told me somewhat rearranged into a more logical order:

Captain Whitworth wrote a play which re-enacted the history of Nun Monkton. This play was performed at the Priory (a large house in Nun Monkton?) and was written down, though not published in any official form. Mrs. Sargood said it was called a mosque (perhaps she meant masque). It was only performed once as far as she remembers before the war (WW II) and reckons this was in the 1920's when she was a young girl. The play included both morris dancing and maypole dancing (Nun Monkton still has a village maypole). Her father played the violin for the morris and Mrs Sargood was in the maypole dance. She remembers Dave's father (Reg) and his grandfather taking part in the morris dance.

It took place in the summertime. She does not recall the dancers wearing clogs, but does remember smocks, bells round their ankles and hats of some sort - like a Robin Hood hat, she says. They carried sticks and she remembers this especially because these were clashed together. She also says they plaited the sticks together at the end of the dance. (Difficult with sticks - could this really be sword dance? This is very close known sword dancing locations).

She does not think she has any of the photos. She said Reg would have taken these. Reg died a while ago and she can't think of anyone else who might remember anything.

CM  
21/04/99

PS Could this have any connection with the early days of the morris revival or with the Cowper's dancing classes which certainly took place around York - even Poppleton?

## **ROECLIFFE (SE3766)**

After a performance of the Blue Stots at the Crown Hotel, Knaresborough, just before Christmas 1983, a man in his late 50's said that his father had taken part in a similar play at Roecliffe. I subsequently made contact with the old man (who must have been in his 80's) but his memory was poor and apart from confirming that he had indeed been in something, with a black face, he was unable to remember anything else.

(Mr Proctor Tel. 867895)

SLR  
Feb 1984

The following is a transcription of some typed notes of unknown date kindly given to me by Nigel Hudleston of Cayton Hall, South Stainley:

Information from Frank Wynn, Roecliffe, nr. Boroughbridge, Yorkshire. First farm on the right as you go in. Family born there for several generations. Aged approx 65

-----

Men from this village did it about Christmas and went around other villages. They dressed themselves all up in old clothes and blacked their faces and such like. They had lots of bits of ditties they sang 55 years since.

Called themsevles (*sic*) Blue Stots, and danced.

-----

Information from Henry Wilson (in his 70's) next door to Wynn.

Plough stots.

It wasn't really a dance, but it was a (*sic*) well as they could dance.

At the end they all said Bo(r) or Ba(w). (As in Aldborough Shepherds)

'They threaded themselves between the others' (Apparently a hey) (N.B. A hey was described in old accounts of Aldborough Shepherds) 8 or 10 of them as a rule.

Took place more or less from Christmas to the New year. BURTON LEONARD and BISHOP MONKTON. They had some songs, but we did not take much notice.

Yankee Doodle was a song (N.B. as in Aldborough)

Wilson was a member of the Burton Leonard band.

-----

Information from the Blacksmith, Roecliffe.

They just formed up and started singing and threaded in and out one another. Carried sticks about the length of a broom handle. Either a broom handle or they got one out of the hedge. They mostly wore a smock to their knees if they could get them. Some of the oldest farmers wore smocks. White or a light colour.

Generally started off from the Crown Inn. Resembled plough boys in their smocks. His mother was a Wiltshire woman come from near Devises, and she said they wore them about there.

## SHADWELL

During the Highside Longsword Boxing Day performance in 2002 at the Henry Jenkins in Kirkby Malzeard, I met Marjorie Whittall who said she remembered the Thorner Mummers. I said I would telephone her in a week or two when she had had chance to speak to relatives to see what else could be remembered.

Mrs. Whittall lived for a long time in Harrogate, but visited her relatives in Thorner regularly. She now lives in Kirkby Malzeard. Tel 01765 658538.

I spoke to her on the telephone during January 2003. She is nearly 83 and seems to have a good memory especially for dates and numbers. However she was a bit of a chatterer and it was difficult to keep the conversation on the mummers! Unfortunately her contacts had been unable to really add much more to her memories which are as follows:

Her uncle, Fred Ford who lived in Thorner, worked at a branch of Preston's the butchers in Shadwell. When he was about 19 or 20, in about 1929, one of the Shadwell Mummers came into the butchers all dressed up. Fred asked what it was about, only to discover that the mummers were one short and he got roped in on the spot! (Not so different these days! CM)

There were about 8 of them and they visited the big houses to perform – Field Head House (by appointment!) and Bramham Park were mentioned. They all dressed up – she could remember one as a Black Bear, one as a Policeman, one as a Clown and one had stick with a horse's head on. They wore wide beige trousers with ribbons tied on. Ribbon was cheap in those according to Mrs. Whittall. She also mentioned that Uncle Fred had a pair of clogs and thinks that they sometimes did a bit of clog dancing as part of their performance.

CM  
Jan 2003



Who shed his blood for England's Queen.  
England's Queen, of France and Spain,  
Aye, round the world- and back again.  
And if you don't believe one word I say,  
Step in, Bold Slasher, and clear the way.

- Bold Slasher**     *(Enter Bold Slasher)*  
I'm a brave soldier, Bold Slasher is my name,  
Broad sword and buckle-belt, I mean to win the game.
- King George**     You mean to win the game?
- Bold Slasher**     I mean to win the game.
- King George**     You are not able.
- Bold Slasher**     Able? My back is made of iron,  
My breast is made of steel,  
My hands and feet are knuckle-bone,  
And that I'll let you feel.
- (He strikes King George, who falls back into the arms of the Fool.)*
- Fool**             Doctor, Doctor, ten pounds for a doctor.
- Doctor**           *(Off)*  
No doctor at that price.
- Fool**             Twenty pounds for a doctor.
- Doctor**           *(Enter the Doctor)*  
I'm the little doctor.
- Fool**             How came you to be the little doctor?
- Doctor**           By my travels.
- Fool**             What's your travels?
- Doctor**           Italy, Sicily, France and Spain,  
Round the world and back to old England again.
- Fool**             What can you cure?
- Doctor**           All sorts.
- Fool**             What's all sorts?
- Doctor**           The itch, the stitch, the gallop, the gout,

The plague within and the plague without,  
If there be seven devils in this man,  
I can bring seventy seven out.

**Fool** Can you cure this man?

**Doctor** What is the matter with this man?

**Fool** The plague within.

**Doctor** *(producing a bottle)*  
Here, Jack, take this bottle,  
And ram it down thy throttle,  
And arise and fight!

*(He gives King George a drink from a bottle, and he recovers)*

**All** *(The players then stand in a row and chant...)*  
Oh, gentry; oh gentry all stand in a row  
We bid all ye ladies farewell.

CM and SLR sent a questionnaire to Tom Dearlove to solicit further information. Here are the questions and the replies.

1. Did the Skelton Blue Stots ever perform in towns or villages other than Skelton e.g. Ripon or Boroughbridge?

No.

2. Were the costumes (father's clothes) ever worn inside out?

No.

3. Was any special headgear worn?

Old trilby hat, cap or bowler hat – whatever was available.

4. Were the performance always outdoors?

Yes.

5. Did they rehearse before going out?

No. Everyone learned the complete play and rehearsed it as we walked our first performance at Newby Hall, a distance of about 2 miles.

6. What was used to blacken their faces?

Soot

7. Do you know from conversations with older members of the community, when and where the main hiring fair for the village was held? (Martimas?)

Hiring Fair recollected by Mr A Dearlove aged 89 years. Fairs were held in Martinmas week at Ripon and Knaresborough, the latter being the larger and most important. Lads would travel from Skelton and other villages by train from Boroughbridge. Fare was about 9d return. When a man was hired the farmer sealed the bargain by giving him a hiring penny or fest, usually ten shillings (50p) often less if the farmer was reputed to be a "bit mean". The wages for 1 year of Mr Dearlove were as follows:

Age 14 years (1904) Farm Lad £7

Age 23 years (1913) Top Grade Horse Man £30

8. Was a dance or song ever used during the play?

No

9. Have you ever heard of a character called Beelzebub or a female character in the play?

As a boy I remember my grandmother (died 1942 in her seventies) reciting the following lines in connection with the Blue Stots:

“In comes I, Beelzebub  
And in my hand I carry a club”

But these lines were not in the play as I knew it.

10. Have you heard of similar performances in other towns or villages nearby?

No. Except Ripon where the sword dancers still go round on Boxing Day?

11. What weapons were carried by the performers and how was King George killed?

No weapons unless King George had a wooden sword. In those days village boys barely got pocket money so anything they required for the play had to be scrounged or made from ready to hand materials e.g. wooden sword. King George was killed by a blow from the fist viz “My hands and feet are knucklebone and that I let you feel”. Bold Slasher then strikes King George

## Introduction

On New Year's Day 2002, the revival Skelton play was performed as usual. As the performers walked down the street at the north end of the village, a gentleman came out of doors and said "I am a brave soldier, Bold Slasher is my name". The performers made the acquaintance of the gentleman, Mr Eric Leake, and passed on the information to me when they arrived at the Black Bull in Boroughbridge later that day. I contacted Mr Leake (Telephone - Harrogate 323120) and arranged to interview him on Wednesday 20 February 2002. The details recorded at this interview follow.

## The Interview

Mr Eric Leake was born in Skelton on Ure in October 1920 and has lived in the village all his life. He was 81 years of age, at the time, but in spite of a few health problems (including bronchitis and glaucoma) he seemed to be very bright and mentally alert. He began working life on a farm at the age of fourteen but since worked mainly in the building trade, though he seems to have done a bit of casual farm work from time to time. This is what he recalled of the Skelton performances:

They called themselves Blue Stots or Ploo Stots. Mr Leake didn't know the origins of the name.

There were about six teenagers in the group that went around, though he wasn't sure if they all participated or had speaking parts. The only characters he remembers are Bold Slasher or Bold Soldier (this is the part that he used to play) and the Doctor. Tommy Needham played the Doctor. He remembers Frank Walker, Frank Bassett and his brother Harold also performing. He does not remember the whole play but can recall the following lines which all occur after his "entrance":

**Bold Slasher** I am a brave soldier,  
Bold Slasher is my name,  
Broadsword and buckle belt  
I mean to win the game.

**A N Other** You mean to win the game?

**Bold Slasher** Yes, I mean to win the game.  
My back is made of iron,  
my breast is made of steel,  
My hands and feet are knucklebone  
and that I'll let you feel.

*(there is a fight and Bold Slasher falls to the ground)*

**A N Other** Doctor, Doctor, ten pounds for the doctor.

**Doctor** I be the little doctor.

**A N Other** How came you to be a doctor?

**Doctor** By my travels.

**A N Other** What's your travels?

**Doctor** Italy, Sicily, France and Spain,  
Round the world and back to old England again.

**A N Other** What can you cure?

**Doctor** All sorts.

**A N Other** What's all sorts?

**Doctor** The itch, the stitch, the gallop, the gout,  
The plague within and the plague without.  
If there be seven devils in this man,  
I can bring seventy-seven out.

*(administers a bottle to Bold Slasher)*

Here, Jack, take this bottle,  
And ram it down thy throttle,  
Arise and fight.

**All sing** Oh Gentry, Oh Gentry, all stand in a row,  
I bid all ye ladies farewell.

(Mr Leake was unable to recall the tune for this last item)

He used to follow the Blue Stots around when he was younger and this is how he learnt the words – he has never seen it written down. People dropped into the play as others dropped out. He said he performed for around five years from about 1931 to 1935, which rather contradicts his other statements that he started when he was 12 and continued until he was 14, when he started work. He had to stop performing when he started work because in those days he didn't have Boxing Day off work as holiday

They performed only on Boxing Days and they would have a run-through early in the morning.

When asked why he did the play, Mr Leake said, "You just did it. It was a tradition. It was handed down".

They performed at Newby Hall and the outlying farms (Low Moor, Givendale Grange, Great Givendale and Little Givendale) in the morning, returning to Skelton about lunchtime. They then performed several times in the street,

including outside the Black Lion public house – they couldn't go in, as they were under-age. Most of these performances were outdoors, though they did perform inside at Newby Hall on some occasions. These journeys were done all on foot and Mr Leake reckons they must have walked about 5 miles.

They wore (their own) old and ragged clothes, sometimes with just a few ribbons attached. They did not turn their coats inside out. The Doctor wore a bowler to denote his trade and carried a little bottle. Bold Slasher also sometimes wore a bowler - it was the nearest they could get to a helmet. They also carried wooden swords. Their faces were blacked with soot from the chimney mixed with some water. He remembers reaching up the chimney to get the soot. Apparently it stung their faces to begin with, but they got used to it! It also took some shifting off when they had finished. His mother played war with him when he got back and she would sometimes have to scrub his face! He thinks they blacked their faces for disguise and to be a bit more entertaining.

They collected money in a tin and the collection would be shared out at the end. Sometimes they got mince pies and a coffee. If there were guests at Newby Hall they might get a ten bob note in their collecting tin from Major (then Captain) Compton. Mr Leake remembers once at Givendale the farmer's wife asking for whom they were collecting. Mr Leake replied "for waifs and strays". "Who are the waifs and strays?" enquired the farmer's wife. "Well", retorted Mr Leake, pointing to his companions, "these are the waifs and I am one of the strays!" Whereupon half a crown was put into the collecting tin.

Mr Leake certainly remembers the play as a child before he was a performer, indeed it was following it around that taught him how to do it. It also continued after he stopped performing (when he started work) but only until about 1938/1939 when the outbreak of World War II put a final stop to the tradition.

Mr Leake has seen the Ripon Sword Dancers in Ripon Market Place and thought there may have been some sort of performance in Markington. He also remembers Tom Dearlove very well – he used to live opposite. It was from Tom Dearlove that we first got the details of the Skelton Play. Tom Dearlove performed for a couple of years immediately before the war.

### **Footnote**

This account provides a remarkable consistency with Tom Dearlove's recollections. The only differences worthy of note are the change in the character that is "slain" and the fact that the final lines may have been sung.

CM  
20/02/2002

For some reason I have managed to lose the exact date of this next piece, but I am sure it was the late summer/autumn of 2007.

Covering email from John Burrell

Chas,

I spoke with a charming lady who had seen the website whilst re-searching the name Dearlove.

I've told her you might be in touch - but I wasn't sure whether or not this is the same ground that Mike Dearlove (her cousin I believe) had gone over.

Her Dad, Les Dearlove, can still recite parts of the play - he is 81 and lives in Northallerton now. Even if it is already known, I thought it might be useful to talk to him as he remembers some of the other players that took part when he did it, and maybe find out his recollections of what took place and the social conditions.

She was really chuffed to have discovered this thread to the past and I think deserves a bit of a follow up. If you are busy, I wouldn't mind following it up as I could do with the experience of research (if you can tell me what I should be doing!!!)

Cheers

JB

Dear Sir

Please forgive me for e-mailing but I am not sure who to contact. I have just read an article about the Blue Stots by Stuart Rankin/ Chas Marshall with reference to the Blue Stotters in Skelton on Ure in 1938/39 and the Knaresborough Mummers re-enactment. My name is Michelle Dearlove and my father Leslie is Tom Dearlove's younger brother. On reading the article I phoned to tell my father I had read about Uncle Tom and he was a little put out as it was in fact him who played King George being aged 14 and not Tom who would have been aged 16. My father being born in 1926 played the part for the last two years, before the war ended it, when he was 13 and 14 and he not only remembers playing the part but proceeded to recite it down the phone word perfect! Quite impressive I thought as he was 81 in July. Tom Dearlove who is Mike Dearlove's father, had played the part on prior occasions. The other 3 people (boys) in 1938/39 were according to my Dad, George (Podge) Robinson, Ken Calvert and Lenny Needham. We believe Ken Calvert is still alive but not sure about the others. I would be grateful if you could tell me who to contact with regard to this. I had no idea my father had

even done this when he was younger and am grateful I found the article and been able to share it with him.  
You can contact me via e-mail or by mobile. (07967 452120)  
Many thanks for your time

Michelle  
01765 698924

Michmash66@hotmail.com

Les Dearlove 01609 777575  
Northallerton

I did contact Michelle and agreed that I would send her the standard Blue Stots questionnaire to see if we could glean any more. I did post Michelle a questionnaire but nothing more came of this. But during our conversation she mentioned that her father had said that there was a unique aspect of their Blue Stots performance – he remembers that they travelled round with gas masks!

## **SNAITH**

Mr S Martin, 11 Braeside Gardens, Acomb, York, remembers as a small boy being frightened by visiting "Blue Stots" or "Plough Stots".

Mr Martin was born in 1915, his father was a railway signaller who moved about a lot, but he remembers the Plough Stots visiting their house at Temple Hirst about 6 miles from Snaith on two successive years. He is not sure, but thinks it might have been before Christmas, rather than after. Not sure of date, but he started school at this time, so early 1920s seems likely.

They had blackened faces and carried swords. Costume not remembered but they looked "strange". They came into the station yard at Temple Hirst which had five houses, formed a ring and performed. Songs remembered, accompanied by a fiddle, possibly a dance, but no recollection of a play. No plough. After performance they knocked on doors of houses and collected money. Then they went into the village. Mr. Martin thinks that they were all members of the same family, but is sure they came from Snaith.

SLR

09/04/1979

The following information was gathered at the Wellington Inn at Darley during the Knaresborough Mummers Nidderdale Tour performing the Blue Stots. The informant thought the name had been stolen from his birth place and was at great pains to point out the name should be Plough (pronounced Plew) Stots. The Mummers have had similar accusations regarding “stealing” material when performing in Ripon!

The informant was Mr David Booth (presumably the father of the landlord) who was born in 1911 and brought up in the village of Rawcliffe Bridge near Snaith. His recollections were of his school days so it would be possible to conjecture a date of about 1920. He remembered a group of people touring around the villages who were called Plough Stots. They came from Snaith and toured the villages and large farm houses in the area on foot. Rawcliffe, Rawcliffe Bridge, Airmyn, Carlton and East and West Cowick were specifically mentioned.

The group were all members of the same Snaith family called Clayton – as far as he could remember. There were 15 in the family altogether but only 10 or 12 actually toured with the Plough Stots. They performed some sort of play – there were words but he took no particular notice of them. They did not have black faces. He did not remember the costume other than some kind of ribbon or frills. They wore clogs – there used to be a clog sole factory in Snaith according to Mr Booth. (I later confirmed this - The Clog Mill was established in 1901 on the site of an old corn mill. It was the main employer in Snaith producing over 10,000 pairs of clogs per week.)

At first he suggested that they performed in early spring but when he got excited about Plough/Plew and Ploughing/Plewing he decided it was earlier in the year when the land was being ploughed. Definitely post Christmas.

This account regarding the family of 15 shows a remarkable consistency with the account in the Peacock Collection and with Sid Martin’s account collected by SLR.

JM  
31/12/1989

## **SOUTH CAVE**

On 29<sup>th</sup> December 1989 I was sent a reference from Trevor Stone. This referred to a book entitled "The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave – Life in a Yorkshire Village 1812-1837" published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press. This records everyday activities in the East Yorkshire Village of South Cave including references to Plough Boys. For example on the pages referring to these dates:

Thursday 15 January 1829  
Wednesday 30 December 1829  
Tuesday 5 January 1830  
Wednesday 5 January 1831  
Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1832  
Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 1833  
Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> January 1834  
Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> January 1834  
Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> January 1836

## **SPOFFORTH (SE3651)**

After a performance of the Blue Stots on 5/1/80 at Marton-cum-Grafton, an elderly lady volunteered the information that she had seen something similar as a child a Spofforth.

Could give no further information, but thought it was after the end of the 1914-1918 war.

SLR

January 1980

## **STUTTON GROVE**

In the parish of Stutton-cum-Hazlewood near Tadcaster.

From my father Cyril Marshall, a native of Tadcaster, on 24.12.1982.

Mr Marshall recalls conversations between his older relatives, his mother Alice Marshall and grandmother "granny" Horne in particular.

Around Christmas time (probably before Christmas) the Blue Stotters came round in much the same way as the carollers do now. The Stotters were a group of children, both boys and girls, who visited houses of friends and relatives in order to perform a small item of entertainment. The performance took place inside the houses and consisted of a song or little play. The children were dressed in improvised costume (e.g. an old dress) and sometimes made up their faces with goose fat and charcoal. After their performance the Stotters would be given refreshments such as parsnip wine and a piece of cake. Mrs Marshall took part as a child so this would be before the First World War since she was born in 1897 approx.

"Granny" Horne was a farm worker at Millington near Pocklington and moved to the Tadcaster area as a result of the Michaelmas hirings at York.

## TOLLERTON

The North Yorkshire Village Book was compiled by the North Yorkshire Federation of Women's Institutes from notes and illustrations sent in by Institutes in the County. This mentioned the following for Tollerton:

"It is known that up to the late 1800's a Stot Play was performed in the village on Plough Monday. Plough "stots" dressed in bizarre costumes went from house to house. They depicted Beelzebub, St George, a Clown, a Doctor, Slasher and Devil Doubt. Eventually Beelzebub knocked out the Clown and the Doctor was called upon to administer a restorative!"

I contacted the North East Federation of Women's Institutes (Ripon 01765 606339). They put me in touch with Mrs Bowes of Cottage farm, Tollerton (034-73-398) who in turn put me in touch with Miss Barbara Thompson (Tollerton 476). Miss Thompson supplied the information about the Stot Play which was used in the North Yorkshire Village Book.

Apparently the teachers and pupils of the village school collected information from old people in the village during the 1940's for a book. Miss Thompson thought it was unlikely that any copies of the book would now be easily found. The old people remembered the Stot Play being performed and Miss Thompson's mother (born in 1904) remembered four lines from Beelzebub:

In comes I Beelzebub  
And over me shoulder I carry a club  
In my hand a dripping pan  
I think meself a jolly old man.

The farm workers were the ones that did the play and they took it round the village. Apparently "a gentleman from West Yorkshire" said that the Beelzebub rhyme was incomplete. He added the following:

A jolly old man I seems to be  
Me brother Tom's as big as me  
Born last night at work in the morn  
First thing he ate was a roasted tater  
Boiled in a leather tin saucepan  
If you don't believe these few words I say  
Enter Little Devil Doubt and clear the way.

It seems as though the old men in the village remembered the Clown and St George and that "the gentleman from West Yorkshire" suggested the others. This would explain the apparently anomalous appearance of Little Devil Doubt in this area - a character commonplace in the Chapbook plays of West Yorkshire.

JM  
05/04/1992

## TOPCLIFFE

Collected and collated by Jim Coulson. The notes supplied by Jim follow:

Collected via Margaret Josephs now living in Thirsk; with information supplied by Richard Almack (also originally from Topcliffe), and Mrs Josephs' brother, who supplied some words taken down by a Ewart Barnsingham from a Jack Bowen in 1964.

Richard Almack actually performed the play in 1928 or 1929, when he was nine years old.

### Notes on Dress

Players wore old jackets turned inside out and some form of headgear ("an old cloth cap four sizes too large") and baggy long trousers tied above the knee with "Billy Band". Faces would have been blackened with soot, on top of lard – "to make it shine".

### Timing of the Play

Done around Christmas time (time variable?). Performed from house to house, and the players would simply knock the door and enter uninvited.

**Beelzebub**      (*Enter carrying a pan*)  
In comes I, Beelzebub  
On my back I carry my club  
In my hand a warming pan  
I think myself a jolly old man

**Fool**            (*Enter*)  
In comes I who never came yet  
With my big head and my little wit  
If you don't believe me, what I say  
Step in King George and clear the way

**King George**   (*Enter*)  
I am Saint George, the valiant man  
Who spilled his blood for England's land  
Merrie England's crown is my aim  
and I mean to win the game  
My back is made of iron  
My belly is made of steel  
My hands are made of knacker-bones  
And that I will let you feel

*(He has a scuffle with Beelzebub and is knocked to the ground)*

**Fool**                   Illy Billy Bonga Bowse  
Is there a doctor in the House?  
Five pounds for a doctor

*(No reply)*

Ten pounds for a doctor

*(No reply)*

Is there any man who can cure him?

**Doctor**                *(Enter)*

Yes!

**Fool**                    What's thy cure?

**Doctor**                The lps, the switch, the gallop, the gout  
The plague within, the plague without  
There are nineteen evils in this man  
And I can knock twenty-one out

**Fool**                    How canst thou?

**Doctor**                Here Jack, I have a bottle of medicine  
In my right hand waistcoat pocket  
Take some of this niff naff  
And shove it down thy chiff chaff  
Rise up bold Jack and fight again

**All sing  
(or chant)**            There was a little nigger  
And he grew na bigger  
So they put him in the Wild Beast Show  
He jumped thru the winda  
And he broke his little finga  
So he couldn't play the old banjo

This final song is interesting – it was also used by the Border Morris Dancers in Broseley, Shropshire – see “The Morris Dance in Hereford, Shropshire and Worcestershire”, E C Cawte, JEFDSS No 4 1962. Is this a popular song of the times which has been adapted quite independently by the performers in these two areas because if its suitably due to the fact that they are blacked up?

An informant (who preferred to remain anonymous) watched a performance of the Topcliffe play at the Angel Hotel in Topcliffe on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 1991. The play, as collected by Jim Coulson, was performed by Wakeman Mummings of Ripon. The informant watched with obvious delight and mouthed some of the words, most notably the Doctor's lines "and shove it down thy chuff chaff". I spoke to him immediately afterwards and learnt much contextual performance details though I avoided specific questions about the play text.

### **The informant**

I subsequently discovered that his name was George because he was given the part of King George. This was confirmed by his friends who called him George. He was born in 1922 and has lived in Topcliffe for his entire life. He said that they did the play as "kiddies" but when pressed he reckons he first took part when he was about 8 and continued until he was about 17. This covers the period from 1930 to 1939 – some time later than the period covered in Jim Coulson's notes.

### **Transmission**

At first George suggested the play was learnt at school but then said they rehearsed at someone's house. The text was not written down but sorted out at the rehearsal. He implied that a certain amount of reworking took place but the text was clearly transmitted orally.

### **Style of Performance**

The play was taken from house to house where they would knock and be invited in. The introducer would walk in and start saying his lines, the others would wait outside until they received their cue. It was made quite clear that the villagers expected the players to call and that the tradition was well established. They were also allowed to perform in the village pubs (there are currently three) and they walked to perform at other nearby villages such as Rainton. The performances took place in the evenings from Christmas Eve up to New Year. George was most concerned that the play should not be performed after New Year's Day because that was "when the tradition finished".

### **The Collection**

They collected cake, cheese, pop (or ale when they were older) and money. They collected for themselves, not charity as nowadays (as he assumed). The collection was shared out amongst the performers. George was at pains to point out that they were poor and had little pocket money – he said he was from a family of 13.

### **Costumes**

They had their faces blacked. Firstly they put on a layer of cream, Vaseline or lard on which they rubbed burnt cork. Soot from the chimney was added last.

George said they never put the soot directly onto their faces otherwise “your face would come up”. They dressed in character and not in inside out coats or tatter jackets. King George wore a crown made of cardboard which was painted in yellow or gold. Others would wear bowlers or top hats. The Doctor has a doctor’s bag and would be dressed up “posh” in a dark suit and dickey bow.

### **The Name of the Performers**

George used several similar names in the interview – “Nigger Boys”, “Niggers” and “Nigger Minstrels”. This begs the questions – Did they black up because they were called “Niggers” or did they call themselves “Niggers” because they were blacked up? (Compare with Clifford). He also suggested that they were called the “five little nigger boys” because there were five of them and that was the name of the song at the end.

### **A Song and Dance**

George said they always finished with a song and a dance. He could not remember the words of the song but when prompted he agreed it started “there was a little nigger ...”. I did not press any further. He said it was the same song every year. The dance did not seem to have any particular form and I gained the impression that it was improvised around the talent available. He described it as being like “hop scotch” and that they linked arms. Sometimes one of the performers could do a bit of tap dancing. The music was provided by a concertina or a 2 or 4 stop melodeon. Definitely not a piano accordion. These instruments were borrowed.

### **The Text**

I made no particular reference to the text of the play but George did volunteer two lines from the Doctor’s speech (each line given independently):

“And shove it down thy chiff chaff”  
“Rise up Jack and fight again”

He commented that he could follow the play (as the Wakeman Mummers performed) and knew who would come in next. He said it was the “official version” that was performed. Such comments on accuracy are pleasing, but must be used with caution – the play had certainly been bulked out in parts from the original notes to my knowledge. However the implication must be that the general structure and spirit was correct. George left feeling very pleased that the Topcliffe play lived on.

### **Other Customs**

George also mentioned “howling” or “hollering” at Christmas which seems to be a scramble for sweets and nuts thrown from windows to the children. Hot money was also thrown from a shovel after being heated over the fire.

Wearing of gloves was considered to be cheating. Compare with  
Boroughbridge Plough Stots – interview with George Wright 15/02/1987)

### **Postscript**

George also mentioned a certain amount of fun when they performed at the village doctor's house and there was a call for a doctor.

George seemed sure that other villagers would also remember the play and certainly Jim Coulson has other leads to follow.

JM 01/01/1991

On the Knaresborough Mummers Blue Stots tour on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> January 1991 at the Ship Inn Aldborough. A lady member of the audience remarked that it was about 40 years since she had head that play. When questioned she said it would have been AFTER the Second World War at Topcliffe. She was estimated to be 55/60 years old.

JM

05/01/1991

Letter written on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1991 from H M Gavigan of 5 Swale View, Topcliffe, YO7 3RN:

Dear Mr Marshall

I do recall your visit to Topcliffe and I have got your letter, but not being a Topcliffe native, I've only got to know what I then picked up from 1918 to perhaps the 1930s. Well before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War started, and it was such a surprise to me to see someone interested enough to try and get to know more about the old Yorkshire Custom. I only remember children and youths performing around Christmas time. Doors were rarely locked those days and of what I remember in this village people used to remark "look the niggers are about". It was considered a bit of pure lively fun those days, but there were a few "meanies" who would perhaps accept 2 or 3 children in, then chase them out with a stick or slipper or anything, poker if it was the handiest. The older youths used to of course take that as a challenge and plague them more. I've asked my neighbour about his youth, he remembers going out with the gang and performing but little else, said he had to go out to work at 13 years. I understand he was the youngest of a family of 5. His mother was a widow and had to go out to work herself to support them, there was no out of work pay, or widows pension those days or 10 shillings a week pension for 70 years old age, so we sure live in much better standards today. I recall my own mother in about 1912 grousing ever so, because coal had gone up to 1/6 a cwt. Now about the mummers of what I recall. First, one would break into the room where the occupants were, saying "Here comes I Beelzebub in my hand I carry a club", somewhat brandishing the "club" about and still talking (but what I cannot remember). Then another one would come in and say his "bit", then another one, still saying some recitation, they two, would pretend to have a scrap, one would fall to the ground, then, a call for a doctor, then another one or two would come in, and still reciting till it was finished, by which time all inside, the family would by this time all come to see the commotion and enjoy the fun and usually recompense the performers with a drink and mince pie and a few coppers, orange or apple or whatever was available, usually there would be a couple of trusted carriers outside with a "fish bass" or two to carry what was collected. Then as sharp as possible they would be off to the next house, not always next door, because in the village there could be 2 or 3 gangs going around and it all helped to add to the spirit of Christmas. These kids used to black their faces either with coal dust, burnt cork also dress up in funny clothing to disguise themselves and next morning if you saw some of them you knew they had been out "niggering" because they had forgotten to wash their faces clean. Another laugh for us. I've heard some say that some families would collect enough for a pair of plimsolls, which ran according to size from 2/11 per pair to 3/6 to 4/11 quite helpful to the very poor. I am afraid I could not tell you any more if you called, however I hope this may help.

Yours sincerely

H M Gavigan

Subsequently I have noted that this letter indicates some interesting features:

1. A suggestion of a couple more characters over and above the basic four at the end of the play. Also trusted carriers for any collection.
2. The existence of several gangs in the village.
3. The money collected could be used to supplement family income.
4. Confirmation of the black faces and the name "niggering".
5. Performance indoors as part of a house to house tour.

## **Appendix 1: Blue Stots: List of standard queries**

Early on when we started to discover people who remembered doing the play we developed a series of standard questions to help us with our enquiries. This is the first list of standard queries:

1. By what name were the performers known?
2. How were the performers dressed? Hats, coats, ribbons, tatters?
3. What if anything did they carry in their hands by way of props?
4. Did they wear any "make-up" on their faces?
5. At what time of the year did they perform - before or after Xmas?
6. Where did the performances take place - inside, outside, houses, pubs, halls, farms or even other villages?
7. When did the last known performance take place?
8. How many years previously did performances take place?
9. For how many years did the same performers take part?
10. What age were the performers?
11. How many characters were there?
12. What were the characters names?
13. What words did the performers speak?
14. What action took place?
15. Was there any music, song or dance?
16. How did the performers come to be involved?
17. How did the performers learn their lines?
18. What did the performers receive - money, drinks, food?
19. What was done with any money collected?
20. Have you heard of any similar performances in other villages?
21. Are any other performers still alive and can they be contacted?
22. Were the performers invited or uninvited to perform?

23. What was the reaction of the onlookers to the performance?
24. If beyond school age, what were the occupations of the performers?
25. Why did they do it?
26. Do any photographs of the performers exist?
27. Who fought and who was killed?
28. Did females ever take part?
29. Where there any female characters in the play?
30. Do you know why the tradition ended?