



Castleton Historical Society

INFOdoc 2

The Ancient Castleton Garland Ceremony

Castleton Garland Day is held on 29 May each year (unless that date falls on a Sunday, when it takes place the day before – or the day after!)

The date was known as Royal Oak or Oak Apple Day, which commemorated the restoration of King Charles II to the throne in 1660 and on that anniversary many people still wear a sprig of oakleaves. For some, the huge Garland that is placed over the head and shoulders of the Garland King, represents the oak tree in which the King hid after his escape from the battle of Worcester. The garland ceremony has a number of elements and some of its origins may go back to Celtic festivals that celebrate the rebirth of nature after its winter sleep. The Celts believed that the spirit resided in the head and this may explain the size and placement of the Garland.

Other people, including S O Addy who, writing in 1901, thought that the Castleton Garland may be a form of the 'Green Man', a figure central to European festivals for centuries, celebrating the fertility of crops and all living things. More recent research by folklore historian Roy Judge suggests that it is a Jack-in-the-Green, a garland worn by a man, created by London chimneysweep apprentices in the 18th century to attract donations from onlookers in the tradespeople's May parades.

Whatever its origins, the Garland Ceremony nowadays has close links with St. Edmund's Church. The first written reference to it is said to be in the Churchwardens' Accounts for 1749 when 8d was paid "*for an iron rod to hang ye ringers Garland in*". Before 1897, the Church bell-ringers toured the village with the Garland, performing a Morris dance and taking a collection that they shared amongst themselves. After 1897 they still kept the money, but village schoolgirls did the dancing!

The 1749 mention of "ye ringers garland" may be a reference to a hand held garland that was displayed in church in the years before the ringers copied the larger Jack-in-the-Green type.

For a short time at the start of the 20th century, the ceremony became more of a pageant or carnival. The maypole was introduced and village girls performed ribbon dances around it.

In 1940, the organisation of the ceremony was taken over by the Garland Committee and the proceeds from the collection now covers the costs of the ceremony, most notably the hire of the horses for the Garland King and his Consort.

The Oldest Costume

The oldest Garland King's costume in the Museum was a coachman's coat and hat. The coat was turned inside out and decorated with rosettes, ribbons and "May bunches". It dates from the early to mid-1800s (possibly as early as 1790) and was used in the ceremony until around 1897. George Watts, coachman to Dr Winterbottom of Castleton, wore the coat for many years before 1871 and subsequently it was worn by his successor as Garland King, Tom Hall.

In 1897 Mr Hall got a new regal-looking costume which fitted the idea that the main figure in the ceremony was Charles II. Over time, the man who carried the Garland became known as The Garland King. In 1957 the new female Consort was given a similarly glamorous costume in place of the comic outfit of her male predecessors.

The Ceremony

The ceremony begins around 6.00pm with the Garland King (wearing a feathered hat at this stage) and his Consort visiting the outer parts of the village, to advertise that the parade will soon be starting.

Earlier in the day the frame of the garland is decorated with seasonal flowers and the maypole erected in the Market Place. Since 2014 boys as well as girls have been allowed to dance, the boys in smart clothes and the girls in white dresses pinned with bunches of flowers. Everyone awaits the arrival of the King (now wearing his Garland and hidden from view) and his Consort at one of the local public houses (a different one each year). The Castleton Silver Band plays the Garland tune and the King and Consort set off, followed by band and dancers, to the eastern edge of the village. On their return, the procession stops at each of the public houses for "refreshments". When the round of the pubs is complete, the Garland (minus its "top knot", known as the "Queen") is hoisted to the top of the Church tower and displayed on one of the pinnacles. It remains there for a week or so, until the flowers have wilted. (The practice of protecting buildings and their inhabitants from evil or danger by "decking" them with greenery was an ancient tradition that was revived in the late 18th century).

In the Market Place, the band plays a variety of traditional tunes and the Garland children perform a sequence of dances and create complex patterns with the maypole ribbons. The end of the Ceremony is marked by the King laying the "Queen" on the War Memorial and the band playing the "Last Post". (This custom was first described in 1926).

Finally everyone does the Criss Cross dance as they follow the band back to their traditional starting point on Mill Lane.