

In the Merry Month of May

Music, Words and Song for Springtime from 16th and 17th Century Britain

This collection is the second of two books of music, words and song for Spring. There was too much material to fit into one volume, so I've divided it between this book and *This Merry Pleasant Spring*.

There were a wide range of customs and traditions associated with the month of May and of May Day (1st May) itself. Going a-maying/Gathering the May was done on the morning of 1st May, ideally before the sun had risen, and involved gathering any sort of flowering greenery, with hawthorn (also known as may), birch and rowan being considered the best. In his Survey of London, the historian John Stow describes Henry VIII going a-maying: “King Henry VIII... on May-day in the morning, with Queen Katherine his wife, accompanied with many lords and ladies, rode a-maying from Greenwich to the high ground of Shooter's Hill, where, as they passed by the way, they espied a company of tall yeomen, clothed all in green, with green hoods, and bows and arrows, to the number of two hundred; one being their chieftain was called Robin Hood, who required the king and his company to stay and see his men shoot; whereunto the king granting, Robin Hood whistled, and all the two hundred archers shot off, loosing all at once; and when he whistled again, they likewise shot again; their arrows whistled by craft of the head so that the noise was strange and loud, which greatly delighted the king, queen, and their company. Moreover this Robin Hood desired the king and queen, with their retinue to enter the greenwood, where, in harbours made of boughs, and decked with flowers, they were set and served plentifully with venison and wine by Robin Hood and his men, to their great contentment, and had other pageants and pastimes.”

Maids would also wash their faces in dew on May morning – the best dew being thought to be found beneath oak trees.

Every year in each village and parish, a young girl or woman would be chosen to be crowned Queen of the May. She would be crowned with garlands and would ride at the head of the procession.

Maypoles were not the ribbon bedecked poles that we now think of, but quite often just a tree, specially cut down for the occasion and brought onto the village green to be danced around. Maypoles were also erected in London – at Temple Bar and at St Andrew the Apostle (of which Stow says “so called St Andrew Undershaft, because that of old time every year on May-day in the morning, it was used, that an high or long shaft, or May-pole, was set up there, in the midst of the street, before the south side of the said church: which shaft, when it was set up on end and fixed in the ground, was higher than the church steeple”). Maypoles were banned by Parliament during the Civil War.

I've included three settings of Nicholas Breton's poem “In the merry month of May” and two settings (with slight variants on the words) of Richard Edward's “When May is in his/her prime”.

The first records of Morris dancing in England are found in the fifteenth century. Originally a courtly entertainment, it became associated with May. Morris dancers often included stock characters such as Robin Hood (who was also celebrated on May Day as shown in the first quote by Stow), Maid Marian and the hobby horse.

Tamsin Lewis, 2016

N.B. Spellings are idiosyncratic and where possible are taken from original editions.