

THE VILLAGE GREEN

Village greens are protected areas of land dedicated to sports and pastimes for the people of the locality.

Though Toft village green is relatively small, it has, over many decades, been the scene of Maypole dancing, Morris dancing, the assembly of the local fox-hunt, charity stalls, Plough Monday gatherings, Christmas carol singing, royal jubilee celebrations and other activities.

Plough Monday

Plough Monday is the first Monday after Twelfth Night. It was celebrated by agricultural workers in Cambridgeshire and other eastern counties of England for centuries. It is possible that it dates back to the Viking invasions and the Danelaw (the eastern part of England where the Danish system of laws and customs held sway). Plough Monday was the start of the new ploughing season in medieval times. The day was marked by parading the plough through the streets to raise money.

In Cambridgeshire and Norfolk the ploughboys often performed molly dancing (a type of Morris dancing but wilder and more unbridled) on Plough Monday. Molly dancers customarily blackened their faces to avoid recognition by the powerful landowners. If you did not give money to the ploughboys as they paraded round the village, you were likely to find your front garden ploughed up during the night! Plough Monday had ecclesiastical connections too. There were Plough Guilds, which often kept plough lights burning in the local church and money raised was used to keep the plough light burning. Plough Guilds were banned during the Reformation in 1538.

Toft's Plough Monday celebrations often centred round the village green and the Red Lion public house. Muriel Peach, Toft's oldest native resident (born 17 October 1915), whose parents were the publicans of the Red Lion, recalls in an interview:

“They used to have Plough Monday ... one year we had it at ours¹ and one year they had it down the bottom², and the breweries used to supply so much beer. Beer was tuppence a pint. They used to go round the village with a plough and a whip and that and then they used to have this dinner, roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, all the trimmings. They had a sing-song in the bit where they sell the fish and chips now. They had a stove in it. The wives would do the dinner. Old Mr Badcock used to sing ‘Hi-Hi, clear the way, here comes the galloping Major!’”

¹ *Ours* here is the *Red Lion* pub, now the Tai Yuen restaurant and fish and chip shop.

² Reference to Bottom End; the alternating pub would have been the Black Bull

Maypole dancing

Village greens have been the location for Maypole dancing for centuries. Queen Elizabeth I observed Maypole dancing during her travels round England. The origins of the Maypole are obscure, but it may have arisen from the custom of planting young trees as spring arrived, around which the local people danced. The people celebrated the “Maying”, the bursting forth of new life as spring returned. Muriel Peach (b. 17th October 1915) recalls from her childhood in Toft: “We used to do the Maypole ... we used to have fetes and do little plays in school.” Although the tradition did not survive continuously in Toft, it was revived as an annual event in the 1990s and now forms an important part of the village’s May weekend festivities. The Brownie troupe rehearses and performs complex dances, weaving the coloured ribbons into plaits. Music played on fiddles, concertina, accordion, tin whistles, bodhran drum and guitar is provided by the Toft Session traditional music band. A large crowd gathers each year on the green where the Maypole is erected and after the children have done their rehearsed dances, everyone joins in and dances more informally. Recent years have seen the addition of the Toft Garland to the Maypole celebrations. May garlands have been made in Cambridgeshire and other parts of England for centuries. Percy Rogers, a local man interviewed in 1970, recalls the practice of making garlands in the Toft/Comberton area in his youth:

“And then, Mayday: ‘the first of May is Garland Day, please remember the garland. It only comes but once a year, so please remember the garland!’ Well the garland was two hoops, one put that way, and one put that way. And they was decorated with cowslips, commonly called pagles.³ And they was all tied round these hoops, these little branches and other flowers, if they’d got any, and then little ribbons in between, and they used to cover that over with a white cloth, and they came up to the door and start singing ‘The first of May is Garland Day!’ and if they didn’t give them anything they didn’t let you see the doll in the middle of the garland, you see. And if they give them tuppence, they’d take the cloth off and you could have a look at it.”

³ A Cambridgeshire dialect name for cowslips

Other activities

The singing of Christmas carols on village greens is another ancient English tradition. Christmas carols are sung on the village green in Toft each year just before Christmas at a gathering organised by the Church in Toft. A small bonfire is lit, mulled wine and minced pies are served and traditional carols are sung by all present.

Stalls selling flowers, cakes and other local produce are regularly erected on the green to raise money for the church and for other causes.

The green has seen tree-planting and the construction of a circular bench celebrating royal jubilees, the erection of the bus shelter to mark Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation and a host of other events that have punctuated the life of the village over many decades.



Cake stall. Village Green, Toft, April 1992



C.1905



Toft Village Green: Building the Jubilee Seat 2002

Toft Christmas Carols on the Green 2010







Devil's Dyke Morris Men dance in Toft, June 1994



Toft Village Green: inauguration of the Jubilee
Seat 2nd June 2002