

## “Christmas at Uttoxeter: The Guisers Made their Usual Tour”<sup>1</sup>

*Derek Schofield*

Uttoxeter in Staffordshire can claim, I think, to have a group of traditional mummers – called the Guisers – who have a more continuous history with the least amount of influence from the folk revival and the least impact from folklorists, than any other group of mummers.<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that there has been no influence from outside, a factor which will be referred to later. But this is not a contest. For the Guisers in Uttoxeter, the existence of other groups of mummers is an irrelevance – what is important is what they do, at Christmas-time each year.

There are five characters: I Open the Door, St George, Bold Soldier, Doctor and Old Mary Ann. As in other Staffordshire plays, a variation on the usual Beelzebub lines are spoken by a man, in spite of the character’s name. The Guisers perform now in pubs and clubs in the town on Christmas Eve, as well as at a select number of private residences on Christmas Day. I have visited Uttoxeter on Christmas Eve each year since 1979, and once on Christmas Day.<sup>3</sup>

### **Before 1914**

The standard history of Uttoxeter, *History and Antiquities of the Town and Neighbourhood of Uttoxeter*, written by Francis Redfern and published in 1865, with a second edition published in 1886 (but written in 1881), contains no reference at all to the Guisers at Christmastime.<sup>4</sup> The absence of references is not sufficient evidence that the Guisers did not exist in the period prior to 1880. After all, neither of the two histories of the town published in the second half of the twentieth century contain references to the Guisers, even though there is no doubt that they existed at that time.<sup>5</sup>

None of the county or general folklore books that have dealt with calendar customs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries refer to the Guisers, and no references in the various Notes and Queries columns in newspapers have come to light. The first folklore publication to mention them was *English Ritual Drama* in 1967, followed by further publications by Alex Helm, and then Brian Shuel's *The National Trust Guide to Traditional Customs of Britain* in 1985.<sup>6</sup>

Written references have been largely confined to the immediate local area. Newspaper references to the Guisers before 1914 are scarce, but there are references to other customary or perambulatory activities involving performance, at Christmastime: fife and drum bands, carol singers, waits and a Military Band for example.<sup>7</sup>

Redfern did mention singing and begging in a village outside Uttoxeter on All Souls Day in 1862 and 1863, when participants appeared at the Petty Sessions. He also referred to plough bullocks ploughing up a yard in the town.<sup>8</sup>

So why was there no interest in the Guisers? Perhaps the answer lies in two references to the Guisers prior to 1914 that we do have.

The first report – and to date, the earliest reference to the Guisers in Uttoxeter – refers to 1893.<sup>9</sup> Brothers Stephen Udall junior, John and Alfred Udall were summoned to the Petty Sessions for being drunk and riotous, assaulting and obstructing the police on December 23 1893. In court it was stated that they “had been out guising, and had had drink given them.” There is no attempt to explain the term “guising” in the newspaper report, suggesting that the term was so well-known that it did not need explaining.

The second report refers to 1910 – once again, a court report.<sup>10</sup> Under the title “‘Guyser’ who was a Nuisance”, it was stated that Charles Plant, cattle drover of Uttoxeter was drunk and disorderly at Newborough on December 31 1910. It was suggested that the defendant “was an annoyance to the place ... [he] was one of a company of ‘guysers’ who were visiting the place. It was Plant’s 49<sup>th</sup> appearance, and he was sent to prison for one month.”

So, a reason for the lack of references to the Guisers in the general newspaper reports may be because of the unlawful results of the activity and the criminal record of the participants. The two reports do, however, identify two families - the Udalls and the Plants.

### **After 1914**

After the First World War, the newspapers start to report appearances of the Guisers as news items in their own right, rather than as court cases. By the late twenties and early thirties, the local newspaper was reporting the “time honoured visits of the ‘Guisers’” (1929) and “the never failing ‘Guysers’, with their ‘Doctor’ and his ‘Nip Nap’” (1930).<sup>11</sup>

Recognition, perhaps even respectability, came when the Guisers were selected for a live BBC radio broadcast from Uttoxeter on February 10, 1938, in the series *The Microphone at Large*, similar to the later *Down Your Way*. The newspaper reports of this occasion give details of the participants<sup>12</sup> and the broadcast led to the publication of the text of the play for the first time.<sup>13</sup> In 1946, they were again recorded by the BBC, with more information in the newspaper.<sup>14</sup> From before the First World War to the present day, oral recollections provide further details of the Guisers’ activities, although it is sometimes a confusing picture.

### **Participants**

From 1893, we have Stephen, John and Alfred Udall (probably Udale), and from 1910 there is Charles Plant.

In 1938, the five men who broadcast were Ernest Udale (58 years old), Charles Plant (70 – a guiser for sixty years), James Plant, Bert Crutchley and George Hodgkinson. G.Plant and H.Campion are also mentioned as guisers in the newspaper report of the broadcast.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1946 BBC recording, the participants were Charles “Bowey” Plant, and his brothers Jim and Harry, Edward Crutchley and Henry Champion. The newspaper report stated that the Plants learned the play from their father (then almost 80) and he in turn learned it from his father. Jim had been a guiser for thirty years. Edward “Ted” Crutchley’s father had been a guiser, and it was stated that Ted had also broadcast in 1938.<sup>16</sup>

But by this time, it was clear from other sources that the participants were Arthur Hodgkinson, Bert Crutchley, Ted Williams, Tod Williams, and Edward 'Algie' Johnson. Remember that the play has just five characters.

The situation appears to be confusing, with so many participants, until it is realised that there was not just one group of Guisers in the town. A 1936 press report stated, "Never a Christmas passes by without Uttoxeter shop keepers and householders receiving a visit from one or more of the town's traditional mummers – the 'Guisers'".<sup>17</sup>

Whilst this press report may not be conclusive about the existence of more than one group, there is plenty of oral evidence of more than one group.<sup>18</sup>

The groups were not, however, mutually exclusive, and it would appear that there was occasional inter-change of personnel between the two groups, and indeed the "cast lists" for the two BBC broadcasts suggests that members of both groups performed together. It may be the situation that there was previously just one group, which then, for whatever reason, split into two.

It is not by any means easy to separate the two groups. In one interview I conducted, I was told that the participants who visited the informants' home every Christmas Day in the 1950s were the Bloors. At the same time they were showing me one of their own photographs which clearly showed members of the Crutchley and Williams families whom I recognised.<sup>19</sup> The Bloors were the family most likely to be mentioned by my informants even though no representative of this family was included in the 1938 or 1946 broadcasts or referred to in newspaper accounts. Many people told me that there was inter-marriage between the families -- the Bloors, Udales, Plants, Hodgkinsons, Crutchleys and Williamses.

Is it possible to make any sense of the mass of information I have collected about the participants? I will try.

The Plant family was headed by Charles, a cattle drover, who was born in about 1865. In the 1901 census, he is listed as a cattle drover living in the town centre, aged 36. He was therefore about 45 when he was the "guyser who was nuisance" in 1910, about 73 (the newspaper said 70) when he took part in the 1938 broadcast, and about 81 when he did not take part in the 1946 broadcast. His father was also reported to be a Guiser.

Charles Plant had three sons, Charles "Bowey" Plant (aged 9 in the 1901 census), James or Jim and Harry (neither of whom were born in 1901). James broadcast in 1938 and all three brothers broadcast in 1946.

In 1949 Harry Plant was quoted in the newspaper as saying that in view of the controversy about carol singing, they would not be performing that year.<sup>20</sup> All the evidence is that a group of Guisers still performed in 1949. This suggests to me that the Plant family had performed until the Second World War, perhaps briefly after the war, but had ceased performing by the 1950s. Bert Crutchley said that the Plants never went out after the Second World War, so that by this time there was just one group.<sup>21</sup>

Members of the Udale family were involved from at least 1893 -- brothers Stephen junior (aged about 27 in 1893, as calculated from the 1891 census), John (about 19) and Alfred (about 21). All three were listed as general labourers in the 1891 census, but were not listed in the 1901 census. John might also have been called Jack, whose nickname was "Blacking Bottle". According to one source, he killed a policeman in about 1910 and went to prison.<sup>22</sup> According to another source it was Stephen, nickname "Stady" who committed a murder.<sup>23</sup>

A Jack Udale from Uttoxeter also lived in Rugeley for a time and took part in the Molly Guisers play there.<sup>24</sup> He is quite possibly the same person.

Ernest, or Ernie, nickname "Bladder", Udale -- probably another brother -- was born in about 1882, was 19 and a bricklayer's labourer in the 1901 census. He was therefore about 56 (the newspaper stated 58) when he was involved, probably as Old Mary Ann, in the 1938 broadcast.<sup>25</sup>

There was also a Dempsey Udale, said to be a performer in the 1930s, although another source said he was not a performer although his father was.<sup>26</sup>

It seems likely that Ernie was the last Udale to take part, and that he did not continue after the Second World War.

Ted Williams and Bert Crutchley, performers until the 1970s, each told me that Ernie was gaoled for poaching, and that the Guisers went out to perform and raise money to pay off his fine and so release him from prison.<sup>27</sup>

The Bloor family was rarely mentioned by the people I interviewed without two descriptions - they were scrap metal merchants from Smithfield Road in the town, and they were gypsies. Indeed, I have been told by different people that the Plants, Udales and Bloors were all gypsies, and also that many of the town's older families were originally gypsies. In the 1938 broadcast, the Guisers were referred to as belonging to "the true old gypsy stock".<sup>28</sup>

The Bloor family was mentioned by the earliest oral memory I have - dating from 1908.<sup>29</sup> Joby Bloor was described as the leader in the inter-war years by one source.<sup>30</sup> He earned a living by selling salt, and/or as a rabbit skin dealer.<sup>31</sup> One source stated that Joby would "get drunk and bugger it up" or else get left behind in a pub drinking.<sup>32</sup> Another source stated that Joby would go round with the Crutchley/Williams group in the 1940s or 1950s, possibly with his ribbons, although not as a performer.<sup>33</sup> There were supposedly several Bloor brothers who were involved in the pre-1914 period, and they were described as "ruffians".<sup>34</sup>

At least four other oral sources give the Bloor family for the period 1914 to the 1920s - one of them speaks of them being "leading lights".<sup>35</sup> Two of the later participants might have been Jack Bloor, Tom Bloor and Jimmy Bloor.<sup>36</sup> In the 1901 Census, there were two Bloor families, living in Smithfield Road. Henry and Eliza Bloor then had 8 children aged 15 to 3 months, including a Thomas, James, John and Job.

It would appear that the Bloor family was very well known in the town, that the family was large, that they were heavily involved in the Guisers until the 1920s, possibly into the 1930s. Their influence must have been strong for so many people to have referred to them, right into the 1980s.

Members of the Williams and Crutchley families have performed for the longest recorded period of time.

From at least the 1940s (but possibly from the 1920s) until the 1970s, two half brothers were the mainstay of the Guisers.<sup>37</sup> Edward (Ted or Teddie) Williams (born about 1906) was also known as Edward Crutchley. Some time after his birth, his mother married Mr Bert Crutchley senior, whom Ted regarded as his father. Mr and Mrs Bert Crutchley senior had at least six more children, including Bert Crutchley junior (born c.1911) and Alec. So Bert junior and Ted were the Guisers -- as was their father -- and some reports suggest that their brother Alec occasionally performed, as well as another Crutchley -- Clem or Clemmie.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that Bert Crutchley senior performed in the 1938 BBC broadcast, and Ted Williams (listed as Crutchley) in 1946.

Ted Williams and his wife had 11 children, including four sons Edward (Tod), Sidney, Cyril and George. Tod and Sid both became regular members of the Guisers after the Second World War. Tod has been a Guiser since about 1945 and continues today as the Doctor, aged 76 in 2001. Sid was a Guiser from the mid-1950s until 1991, when ill health forced him to retire. He died in 2002. Cyril and George have both taken part in the Guisers, but only occasionally. Ted, Bert, Tod and Sid performed with Edward 'Algie' Johnson, a family friend, who started in about 1941.

George Hodgkinson performed in the 1938 recording. There was an Arthur Hodgkinson – usually referred to as “Old Arthur” -- in the Guisers until the mid-1950s, and he was succeeded by Sid Williams. Arthur and George may or may not have been related, and George might have been in the other group. Interestingly, the Molly Guisers in Rugeley referred to earlier, also included members of a Hodgkinson family, which again had connections in Uttoxeter.<sup>39</sup> There was some confusion from my informant about whether the name was Hodgkinson, Hodgkison or Hodgkiss. Also worth investigating is the fact that the Stone play was collected by W. Wells Bladon from a James Hodgkiss.<sup>40</sup> The Rugeley and Uttoxeter plays are very similar, although the Stone play is very different.

Two further names are Reg Shepherd, a friend of Ted Williams, who performed for a few years possibly in the 1930s or 1940s, and Henry Champion, “the youngest of the quintet and the only comparatively newcomer to the party” in 1946.<sup>41</sup> He was possibly the same person as “H.Campion” listed as a guiser at the time of the 1938 recording, although I cannot be sure he was in the Williams-Crutchley group.<sup>42</sup>

In the early 1970s, both Ted and Algie retired due to ill health. For two years the Guisers did not go out at Christmas. The revival Uttoxeter Hearts of Oak Morris Men goaded the Guisers back into action by threatening to do the play if the Williams-Crutchley family did not re-start. One of Tod and Sid's sisters, Doris, was married to Graham Arnold, who had already been the Guisers' driver on Christmas Day. He agreed to join, as did the 16-year old son of Sid's friend Robert Waddington (also called Robert). Graham and Robert replaced Ted and Algie.<sup>43</sup>

Robert continued for a few years, and Bert Crutchley retired in 1980. Then, in different years, several family members took part, including Tod and Sid's two brothers, Cyril and George, and their nephews. Several friends performed for a couple of years each -- Roy Sedgwick and Mick Wainwright, and also Tom Chambers from Darlington. I almost took part one year and felt as if I was letting them down when I resisted. Robert Borsley, nephew of Tod and Sid, joined in 1982 for a few years, then left but re-joined in 1994. Eventually, Graham's two sons Robert Arnold (started 1983) and Dean Arnold (1988) joined. The current Guisers are therefore Tod Williams (Doctor), Graham Arnold (Bold Soldier), Robert Arnold (Old Mary Ann), Dean Arnold (St George) and Robert Borsley (I Open the Door) -- a consistent line-up since 1994.<sup>44</sup>

Although some of the participants have not been related, the main criterion for membership is the family. When I asked who would be the next person to join the Guisers, Bert Crutchley replied, “It's bound to be one from the family, bet your life”.<sup>45</sup>

To conclude this section on the participants, the membership of one group appears to have been the Plant, Udale and Bloor families. Perhaps initially dominated by the Bloors, then by the Udales and then, by the 1930s, by the Plants (father and two or three sons, plus Ernie Udale and Joby Bloor). Then, when Charles Plant senior stopped or died, the group collapsed.

Membership of the other group was dominated by the Crutchley and Williams families - Bert Crutchley senior, his son Bert junior and step-son Ted Williams, plus perhaps Alec Crutchley and Clem Crutchley. Arthur Hodgkinson, Reg Shepherd, 'Algie' Johnson all took part, perhaps Henry Champion, followed by Ted Williams's sons and now grandsons.

### Costume

Alongside the absence of references to the Guisers in histories, folklore studies and notes and queries publications, is the complete lack of photographic evidence prior to the 1950s. This hinders a study of costume, and again, oral testimony and occasional newspaper reports have to be used.

A pre-1914 published memory stated that they had "dark trousers, hats and decorated themselves with paper trimmings. Some of them had black faces."<sup>46</sup> A recollection of about 1908 describes feathers in their hats and of them being "painted up".<sup>47</sup> Another memory from the 1915-25 period is of them either wearing masks or blacking up,<sup>48</sup> and another refers to "weird clothes and faces blacked" in the 1920s to early 30s.<sup>49</sup> Later memories do not mention black faces.

Two features run through almost all the pre-1940 memories -- ribbons and feathers.

The earliest memory I tape-recorded was from a Mrs. Mabel Smith who lived in the town up until the First World War, but who then moved away and did not see them again. She told me that they "wore kind of a smock (cow gown), trousers tied below the knee. They wore like a small top hat, and from that dangled all kinds of coloured paper, imitation ribbons ... coloured paper ribbons ... papers, rosettes".<sup>50</sup>

Other comments include "black suits and top hats decorated with bits of coloured paper streamers" in about 1920;<sup>51</sup> and "a few ribbons pinned on their hats and turkey feathers. Perhaps some of the ribbons attached to their jackets" in the 1930s.<sup>52</sup> Feathers were placed inside the hat bands.<sup>53</sup>

Nowadays, the guisers have jackets with long, coloured silk ribbons permanently attached. The hats are ornate and are decorated with rosettes, feathers and ribbons down the back. Tod takes greatest pride in his outfit with an additional waistcoat of ribbons so that the ribbons flow right the way round the body. Bert Crutchley used to decorate the arms of his jacket with silk.

In the past, and possibly up until the 1970s, they used coloured crepe paper, although in the post-1945 period silk ribbons were increasingly used. The paper and/or silk ribbons were only attached specially for Christmas (paper would probably last no longer than one Christmas period, given the weather and the distances travelled on foot and probably they would not have been able to afford to keep a jacket just for guising). Ted Williams senior continued to wear crepe paper because, he explained, it was easier to replace when it got dirty when he fell to the floor after the fight.<sup>54</sup> In the past, not as many ribbons were used, and a larger proportion of them were attached to the hat. Ted Williams senior explained to me with disgust that the other group would sometimes go out in the *News of the World*, meaning that they would attach newspaper to their clothes, rather than crepe paper or silk ribbons.<sup>55</sup>

In 1946 it was reported that George Hodgkinson, who was on the 1938 broadcast, "always liked to look well and would spend as much as £2 or £3 on ribbons and roses".<sup>56</sup>

William Everett reported to Alex Helm that they were called the "Feather Guisers" and that they were dressed from head to foot in feathers.<sup>57</sup> When they appeared on

Granada Television in 1964, Alex Helm could see that this was not true.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Tom Chambers recalls that when Ted Williams was jostled in a crowded pub or if the paper was displaced, he would say, “watch out for my feathers”.<sup>59</sup>

No-one suggested that the performers dressed, in any sense, in character, with the exception of Old Mary Ann. One recollection from the 1914-1920 period was: “Old Mary Ann a 'real character' dressed as a woman, in long skirt and black straw hat”.<sup>60</sup> Bert Crutchley, who played the part of Old Mary Ann until 1980, suggested that prior to him taking on the role, Old Mary Ann was dressed in a skirt, but that he wouldn't dress in that way.<sup>61</sup>

Variations in the accounts of costume can be explained by the existence of more than one group, although there is sufficient similarity to suggest that the differences were not considerable.

### **Route**

Even allowing for more than one group, the distances travelled and the geographical area covered were astounding.

It seems certain that the Guisers always performed in the town itself. The earlier press cutting quoted above suggested that they performed in the shops -- this was confirmed by Ted Williams senior<sup>62</sup> -- and in people's homes. In the working class areas of the town they probably performed “door to door ... in the street”,<sup>63</sup> as well as in the public houses.

The town of Uttoxeter lies slightly to the south-west of the confluence of the Tean and Dove rivers, at a bridging point, with the River Dove providing the boundary between Staffordshire and Derbyshire. The next bridging points are between Sudbury and Draycott-in-the-Clay to the east, and Rocester then Ellastone and Mayfield and Ashbourne to the north.

Uttoxeter is a market town, serving the surrounding agricultural economy, formerly with large livestock and cheese markets. It largely missed out on the industrial revolution, whilst neighbouring Derby, Burton and Stoke expanded. A canal to the town was closed when the railways came. A local ironmonger's shop expanded into manufacturing agricultural machinery and as Bamfords became the town's largest employer before going into liquidation in 1980. A member of the family founded JCB, based in nearby Rocester and now also in Uttoxeter, and with a workforce drawn from the town. Another employer in the past was the dairy depot, and Elkes Biscuits continues as an important employer.<sup>64</sup>

To the north-east, they visited Marston Montgomery (1930s), Cubley (probably 1930s), Doveridge (1920s, 1930s), Sudbury (1930s). South of the Dove, they visited Draycott-in-the-Clay (1914-20, 1920s), Newborough (1910 and later), Birch Cross (1930s?), Marchington Woodlands (1920s), Marchington (1920s until the present day), Gorsty Hill (1920s?), Hound Hill (1920s), High Wood (1930s).<sup>65</sup>

South of Uttoxeter there is Abbots Bromley (1930s and 40s), Scounslow Green (1930s?), Willslock (1920s and 30s), Loxley (1930s). South-west of Uttoxeter they visited Grindley, Gayton, Amerton and Stowe -by-Chartley including the Cock Inn at Stowe (about 1908 -- sometimes walking, sometimes getting the train back).

East of Uttoxeter, they visited Leigh (1914-25, and probably later), Tean (1920s and 30s), Fole (1920s), Beamhurst, including the Cock public house (1930s), Stramshall (1920s and 30s), Hollington (1915-25, 1930s), Croxden (pre-1914), Farley (?) and Cauldon Lowe (?).

North of Uttoxeter, there is Rocester, Denstone, Ellastone, Wootton (1920s and 30s) and Thorpe, north of Mappleton, which is north of Ashbourne (1920s and early 30s).

In these locations, they would visit farm-houses, cottages, public houses and the large houses. The latter included Chartley Hall - home of the Congreves, Wootton - home of the Unwins (who gave the Guisers £5 ie £1 each - a considerable sum),<sup>66</sup> Loxley Hall - home of the Sneyd Kynnersleys, Sudbury Hall - home of the Vernons, and Highfields Hall - home of Judge Ruegg.<sup>67</sup> With some of these large houses, transport would be sent to collect the Guisers.<sup>68</sup> Performance would be in the kitchen or outside the back door in the farm-houses.<sup>69</sup>

I said earlier that there were two groups of Guisers -- well in fact, at one time there was a third group. The members were not connected with any of the other families, and included Fred Parker (a Uttoxeter character and amateur local historian who loved writing to the newspaper), Bernard Carter, Harry Fenton and Percy Smith. They went out as young men for a bit of fun -- Fred maintained that his father (Phillip Parker) and grandfather had been guisers. Fred said that they kept away from the established groups, did not go round the town and visited Cheadle, Freehay and Tean one year and Marchington and Draycott the next year. Fred also used to perform the play solo when asked. This was in the 1930s.<sup>70</sup>

Ignoring the Fred Parker group, the Guisers travelled to all points of the compass, up to a radius of 5 to 7 miles as the crow flies (12 miles if we include Thorpe and Caudon Lowe).

The area covered by the Guisers from the north to the west, included several places where indigenous plays have been reported -- Rocester, Alton, Caldenlow, Cheadle and Upper Tean. Texts exist for the two latter locations - Cheadle and Upper Tean - and there is a resemblance to the Uttoxeter play.<sup>71</sup>

The Guisers walked all the way, certainly performing on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day, and quite probably for a period of about two weeks starting before Christmas, and continuing until the New Year. They did not always return home each evening, sleeping in farms, barns and under hedges.<sup>72</sup>

Until the 1960s, they performed all day Christmas Day, travelling out to the large and prosperous houses past the racecourse and out to High Wood and Marchington, including the pub in that village. They continue to perform on Christmas Day morning, visiting perhaps up to half a dozen houses. In the 1980s they were still visiting the home of Henry Bamford (Chairman of Bamfords) and Lt Col William Bagnall (a solicitor from Burton). The Bamfords told me, "it wouldn't be Christmas without them", so much so that one Christmas Day, when the Guisers failed to appear, the male members of the Bamford family dressed up in the crepe paper remains of the Christmas crackers and decorations, and armed with copies of the play text which they had transcribed some years earlier, they walked down the drive of the Bagnalls and performed the play, much to the amazement of all concerned. This is in contrast to Henry Bamford's memory of the 1920s when his father paid the guisers to go away.<sup>73</sup>

The Guisers also continue to perform the play on Christmas Eve to sometimes enthusiastic audiences, in a selection of pubs and clubs in the town.<sup>74</sup>

The earliest memory I have recorded is from 1908 when A. Collier referred to the guisers from Uttoxeter as "Molly Guisers".<sup>75</sup> Fieldwork elsewhere in the county suggests that Molly Guisers performed a dance, and two Christmas press reports from Rocester in 1910 and 1913 refer to dancing. In 1910 the newspaper reported, "...and

the old custom of 'Molly Dancing' was revived by a band of merry-makers", whilst in 1913, "Morris dancers were also engaged in 'tapping the sticks' to lively tunes".<sup>76</sup> Is this the same activity as the Molly Guisers, did they perform a play, is it the Uttoxeter group? Rocester was one of the villages visited by the Uttoxeter Guisers.

Several informants did refer to a dance -- "a jig, a kind of dance",<sup>77</sup> and "They did dance it yea. They always used to be moving around a bit and they used to do a sort of half circle and back again. ... Yea, they used to do a sort of circular shuffle, it was rhythmic really like Morris dancing."<sup>78</sup> One of the features of the Guisers' performance today is the constant walking up and down. Is this a remnant of a dance from the past?

### **Some Conclusions**

1. The title of this paper -- a quote from the 1931 newspaper -- proved to be appropriate, given the emphasis here on the participants, routes and locations in which the play was performed.
2. In spite of the absence of written references in local histories and folklore studies, there is a considerable amount of information in the newspapers and in oral sources. This contrasts with the one or two line references or bare texts with no other information, which make up a large number of *English Ritual Drama* references. The historical information about the Guisers in Uttoxeter is massive in comparison.
3. This information reveals the names of participants, and has allowed genealogical research which has been a feature of Morris dance research, but not - so far - a significant feature of drama research. This research has revealed the importance of family relationships in this play tradition, but there is more research to be done.
4. The existence of more than one group of mummers in the same community may not be unique in urban areas, but is there evidence of it happening in other parts of the country? There are comparisons to be made with Morris dance traditions in Bampton and Abingdon for example, as well as with the Padstow Obby Oss, particularly to explain why more than one group existed in the same community.
5. The distances travelled and the number of communities visited were remarkable. Financially it must have been worthwhile, but was this a feature of other play traditions? If so, then, nationally, to what extent are separate references to different neighbouring villages referring to the same play tradition?
6. Continuity of performance up until the present day has also allowed a study of the development of such aspects as costume, performance venues, participants, again in contrast to the one-off references of many of the play locations.
7. In spite of all this historical information, there is still work to be done -- census returns, parish registers, further oral memories, family searches (particularly the Bloors, Udales, Plants and Hodgkinsons) and household accounts, records and diaries of the large landowners, as well as textual analysis and comparison.

In the meantime, this paper must serve as an interim survey of the "usual tour".

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to the following people: Eddie Cass and Duncan Broomhead for their encouragement. Tom Chambers and Ken Allan, who first visited Uttoxeter to see the Guisers ten years before I did (ie in the late 1960s). I am grateful to them for their help and friendship.

My friend the late Dave Bathe, who was collecting information about plays in Derbyshire in the early 1980s. The closer he got to the county border, the more memories he collected about Uttoxeter, and several of my references came from Dave.

Above all, thanks are due to the Guisers themselves, past and present.

---

## Notes

All interviews and letters are in the Derek Schofield collection, unless otherwise stated. Copies of all letters to Dave Bathe were passed on to me by Dave and are also in the Derek Schofield collection.

Census returns were consulted at Staffordshire Record Office in Stafford. It should be recognised that where the ages of people are different in the newspaper accounts and census returns, either record may be inaccurate.

<sup>1</sup> 'Christmas at Uttoxeter', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 30 December 1931, p. 3d.

<sup>2</sup> There are now only six groups in England with a history dating back before the 1940s, including the Guisers from Uttoxeter, see Eddie Cass and Steve Roud, *Room, Room, Ladies and Gentleman... An Introduction to the English Mumpers' Play* (London: EFDSS, 2002), pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Photographs, videos and other information are in the Derek Schofield collection.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Redfern, *History and Antiquities of the Town and Neighbourhood of Uttoxeter, with Notices of Adjoining Places* (Hanley: Allbut and Daniel and London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co). First edition 1865, second edition 1886.

<sup>5</sup> W.G.Torrance, *Following Francis Redfern* (Uttoxeter: The Author, no dates), ten volumes; Jon Edmunds, *A General History of Uttoxeter* (Uttoxeter: Uttoxeter and District Civic Society, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> E.C.Cawte, A.Helm and N.Peacock, *English Ritual Drama* (London: The Folklore Society, 1967); Alex Helm, *The English Mumpers' Play* (D.S.Brewer and Rowman and Littlefield for the Folklore Society, 1981) pp. 1, 42; Alex Helm, *Staffordshire Folk Drama* (Ibstock: The Guizer Press, 1984 ); Brian Shuel, *The National Trust Guide to Traditional Customs of Britain* (Webb and Bower, 1985), pp. 12, 173-4. Both books by Alex Helm were published posthumously.

<sup>7</sup> *Uttoxeter Journal and North Staffordshire Advertiser*, 27 December 1876 ("fife and drum band played appropriate tunes on Christmas Day and 23 December"); 'Uttoxeter: Christmas Celebrations', *Derbyshire Advertiser*, 29 December 1911, p. 9f (Leighton Ironworks Military Band, town band and 'The Waits' singing carols).

<sup>8</sup> Redfern, 1886, p. 355-6.

<sup>9</sup> 'Uttoxeter Petty Sessions Wednesday: Guising and its Results', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 3 January 1894, p.5d.

<sup>10</sup> 'Uttoxeter Petty Sessions: "Guyser" who was a Nuisance', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 11 January 1911, p. 2a.

<sup>11</sup> 'Christmas at Uttoxeter: How the holiday was celebrated', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 1 January 1930, p2e; 'Christmas at Uttoxeter', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 31 December 1930, p. 3c.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Uttoxeter Broadcast: Programme Fixed for February 10th: Guisers May be Included', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 5 January 1938, p. 3a; 'Uttoxeter "On the Air"; Impression of Scene in the Studio; Programme Surpasses Expectations', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 16 February 1938, p. 3a.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Uttoxeter Guisers: Full Version of Broadcast Play', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 23 February 1938, p. 4b.

<sup>14</sup> 'Uttoxeter Guisers: BBC Broadcast', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946, p. 1c; 'St George and the Dragon: Uttoxeter Guisers Playlet', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 1 January 1947, p. 4a.

<sup>15</sup> See *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 5 January 1938 and 23 February 1938.

<sup>16</sup> See *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946.

<sup>17</sup> 'Christmas at Uttoxeter', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 30 December 1936, p. 3c.

- <sup>18</sup> For example, interviews with John P. Mellor, 24 August 1982, and with Mrs C.E. Jackson, 23 July 1981.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Mr Henry Bamford and Mrs Marion Bamford, 2 July 1981.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Christmas at Uttoxeter: How the Holiday was celebrated', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 28 December 1949, p.2g.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Bert Crutchley, 2 February 1980.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with John P. Mellor.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Fred Parker, 6 April 1982.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Mr and Mrs Charlie Wood, 30 January 1982.
- <sup>25</sup> *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 February 1938. Interview with John Hoptroff, 31 March 1979.
- <sup>26</sup> Telephone conversation with Doug Fowell, 4 January 1982; letter from Tod Williams, no date, circa. January 1982. Tod Williams stated that although Dempsey Udale was not a guiser, his father was.
- <sup>27</sup> Interviews with Ted Williams senior, 10 April 1980; and Bert Crutchley, 20 April 1979.
- <sup>28</sup> S.P.B. Mais, *Britain Calling* (London: Hutchinson, nd), p.64.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter from A. Collier, 11 January 1982 to Dave Bathe.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with John P. Mellor.
- <sup>31</sup> Interviews with John Mellor and Fred Parker.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Fred Parker.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Tod Williams, 26 January 1980.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Mrs Mabel Smith, 15 February 1982.
- <sup>35</sup> Letter from Margaret E. Hodgkinson, 20 January 1981 to Dave Bathe. The other three references are interview with Mrs C.E. Jackson; letter from Mr H. Tooth, 31 January 1982; letter from Mrs E. Poulson to Dave Bathe, 26 April 1981.
- <sup>36</sup> For Jack Bloor see interview with Fred Parker. For Tom Bloor see interview with Bert Crutchley (1979). For Jimmy Bloor see interview with Ted Williams senior.
- <sup>37</sup> The information in this and the next paragraph comes from interviews conducted with the following members of the family, as well as information told to me over a twenty-year period. Interviews with Ted Williams senior; Bert Crutchley (1980); Tod Williams and Sid Williams, 1980. Also see 'Keeping in the 'spirit' of guising', *Uttoxeter News*, 26 January 1977, p. 8d-h.
- <sup>38</sup> Interviews with Fred Parker and with John Mellor.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with Mr and Mrs Charlie Wood.
- <sup>40</sup> W. Wells Bladen, 'Notes on the Folk-Lore of North Staffordshire, chiefly collected at Stone', *The Annual Report and Transactions of the North Staffordshire Field Club*, XXXV, 1900-1, pp. 167-174.
- <sup>41</sup> For Reg Shepherd, see interview with Ted Williams senior. For Henry Champion, see *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946.
- <sup>42</sup> *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 5 January 1938.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview with Graham Arnold, 31 March 1979. 'Guisers Back after Lapse of Three Years: Big Welcome for Revived Tradition', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 2 January 1974, p. 2fg; 'Guisers Make a Welcome Return to Uttoxeter', *Uttoxeter Times and Echo*, 4 January 1974, p. 1abc. Although the *Uttoxeter Advertiser* states that the Guisers had not performed for three years, there was a report that they had performed in 1970 ('Christmas at Uttoxeter', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 30 December 1970, p. 5d: " 'The Guisers' made their usual round"), so the only years that they did not perform were in 1971 and 1972.
- <sup>44</sup> Personal observation.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with Bert Crutchley (1980).

<sup>46</sup> Denis Stuart, ed. *Croxden, Staffordshire: A History of the Parish* (Keele: Department of Adult Education, University of Keele, 1984, p. 89. Childhood memories of Christmas time were recalled by Dorothy Wood, born 1895.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from A. Collier to Dave Bathe.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Margaret E. Hodgkinson to Dave Bathe.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Dorothy Birch, 10 January (no year, probably 1981) to Dave Bathe.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mrs Mabel Smith.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Mrs E. Powlson to Dave Bathe.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Mrs C.E. Jackson.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Mrs A. Whittaker, 22 June 1982.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Tom Chambers, 28 June 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Ted Williams senior. Other information on recent costume based on personal observation, personal photograph collection and copies of earlier photographs (some from the newspapers) in the possession of Graham Arnold and Tod Williams. Copies of some of these photographs are also in the Derek Schofield collection.

<sup>56</sup> *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946. Quotation from Jim Plant.

<sup>57</sup> 'Staffordshire Guisers' Plays' information from William Everett, Alex Helm Collection, Volume VIII. The item is annotated "1954?" Also reported in Helm 1984, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Item in programme 'Scene at 6.30', broadcast 24 December 1964 on Granada Television. The programme was broadcast in the north-west of England (and therefore was seen by Alex Helm in Congleton in Cheshire) but could not be received in Uttoxeter.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Tom Chambers.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Mrs L.E. Harris, circa January 1982 to Dave Bathe.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Bert Crutchley (1979).

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Ted Williams senior.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Mrs Mabel Smith.

<sup>64</sup> See Torrance, Edmunds. Also Julia Smyth, *Uttoxeter in Times Past* (Chorley: Countryside Publications, 1983).

<sup>65</sup> References to the various locations are as follows. Plant refers to *Uttoxeter Advertiser* 25 December 1946. All the sources, mainly interviews and letters, are listed elsewhere in the footnotes with the exception of: Allen: interview with Arthur J. Allen, 27 March 1982; Prince: letter from Gwen Prince, 11 May 1981 to Dave Bathe; Perry: letter from Mrs Elsie Perry, 9 November 1949 to Alex Helm, in Helm Collection, Volume I, pp 89-90; and Richards: email from Eva Richards in New Zealand, 15 July 2002.

Marston Montgomery:	Prince, Plant.
Cubley:	Ted Williams interview.
Doveridge:	Mellor, Powlson, Plant, Crutchley 1980.
Sudbury:	Mellor, Plant, Crutchley 1980.
Draycott-in-the-Clay:	Allen, Harris, Plant, <i>Uttoxeter News</i> 26 January 1977, Crutchley 1980.
Newborough:	<i>Uttoxeter Advertiser</i> , 11 January 1911; <i>Uttoxeter News</i> 26 January 1977, Crutchley 1979.
Birch Cross:	<i>Uttoxeter News</i> 26 January 1977.
Marchington Woodlands:	Bagnall, Powlson, Plant, Crutchley 1980.
Marchington:	Mellor, <i>Uttoxeter News</i> 26 January 1977, Crutchley 1980.
Gorsty Hill:	Richards.
Hound Hill:	Plant.
High Wood:	Bamford, Jackson.

Abbots Bromley:	Mellor, Fowell, Crutchley 1980.
Scounslow Green:	<i>Uttoxeter News</i> 26 January 1977, Crutchley 1979.
Willslock:	Jackson.
Loxley:	Mellor.
Grindley:	Collier.
Gayton:	Collier.
Amerton:	Collier.
Stowe-by-Chartley:	Collier.
Leigh:	Tooth, Plant.
Tean:	Plant.
Fole:	Whittaker.
Beamhurst:	Mellor.
Stramshall:	Mellor, Plant.
Hollington:	Mellor, Hodgkinson.
Croxden:	Stuart.
Farley:	Perry in Helm collection.
Cauldon Lowe:	Perry in Helm collection.
Rocester:	Mellor, Plant.
Denstone:	Plant.
Ellastone:	Plant.
Wootton:	Plant.
Thorpe:	Birch.

<sup>66</sup> Jim Plant, quoted in *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with John Mellor.

<sup>68</sup> Jim Plant, quoted in *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946.

<sup>69</sup> For example, interview with Mrs C.E. Jackson, and personal observation.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Fred Parker.

<sup>71</sup> See Helm 1984.

<sup>72</sup> Jim Plant, quoted in *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 25 December 1946, p1c. Ted Williams senior quoted in 'Keeping in the 'spirit' of guising', *Uttoxeter News*, 26 January 1977, p. 8d-h.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews with Mr Henry Bamford and Mrs Marion Bamford; and with Lt. Col. William Bagnall and Mrs Bagnall, 30 January 1982.

<sup>74</sup> Personal observation, each year from 1979 to present date.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from A. Collier to Dave Bathe.

<sup>76</sup> 'Rocester', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 28 December 1910, p. 4e; 'Rocester', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 31 December 1913, p. 5b. A reference in 1908, "The chief item of interest to the younger folk during Christmas has been the parties of 'Guysers' that have invaded the different houses" may or may not refer to an indigenous village group. It should be noted that the reference is to "parties" rather than a single group: 'Rocester', *Uttoxeter Advertiser*, 30 December 1908, p. 5d. Helm, 1984, p. 54 refers to a former performer in Rocester, George Cliffe.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Mrs Mabel Smith.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with John Mellor.