

ETHNOLOGY

# England Long Ago Had Nudists

## Morris Dances, Horrifying to the Puritans, Were Performed Sometimes Nude and Without Even a Fan

By EMILY C. DAVIS

**T**HEY HAD nudists in Merrie England, long ago. And so, as you might expect, they had a nudist problem.

The nudists of Merrie England went further than the later American variety. They did not stay modestly behind hedges and high board fences on their own strictly private playgrounds. They danced boldly in public and without any fans. The Puritans of Queen Elizabeth's day were shocked, and they spoke their minds about it plainly.

What the Puritans had to say about unclad persons skipping nonchalantly in public is written down in black and white, and vividly told, too. Still, it has never been clear what the Puritans were protesting about. Customs and dances having changed so much in four hundred years, it is difficult to get a mental picture of those Elizabethan social problems.

Nets, for instance, were somehow important and objectionable. "Dancing naked in nets!" exclaimed the Puritan writers, horrified.

But what was a net? And if a dancer wore one would it be naked dancing?

Probably historians a few centuries hence will be asking the same way:

"What was a fan dancer? And could a fan be a costume?"

Now, visible evidence of the four-hundred-year-old nudists has been found in the form of a picture carved in wood. The picture, on an oak panel about 14 inches long, was once a decoration in one of England's most famous old castles.

The wood carver has caught a row of dancers in the midst of a spirited bit of skipping. They are, without much doubt, doing a figure in one of the quaint old morris dances, that enlivened outdoor festivals in England from medieval days on. Six of the seven are wearing picturesque costumes such as morris dancers traditionally wore.

But the little figure third from the left is wearing nothing to speak of. Here, evidently, is a snap-shot in wood that catches the very dance so horrifying to the Puritans.

The panel comes from Lancaster Castle, whence it was removed in the dismantling of some rooms. It is now in private hands.

Lancaster Castle has been restored many times since it was founded by the Normans, and the piece of carving has been pronounced, from the style and costumes, to date from near 1500 A.D., the reign of Henry the Seventh.

This verdict may make the wood carv-

ing the oldest picture of morris dancing preserved in England, where the morris dances are famous tradition fading back into a shadowy and uncertain origin.

The rare carving is attracting attention of experts on the curious customs of our human race. The English Folk Dance and Song Society has published a picture of the oak panel in its official Journal, together with opinions about the meaning of the scene. The Journal has also invited further comment, for the critics so far have found a good deal to puzzle them—particularly that little naked dancer carved in brown wood which brings up a practically lost page of Merrie England's follies.

### "Naked in Nets"

The picture sends the experts delving into Puritan writings. They bring up Fetherston's "Dialog against light, lewd, and lascivious dancing," composed in 1582. Fetherston reached the height of his denunciation in describing the greatest abuse of all which he called "dancers dancing naked in nets."

These net dancers and the rest of the morris crew invaded the churchyards in church time. You can scarcely wonder that the sober Puritans grew shrill in their protests. Here they were, trying to live up to rather difficult, narrow standards in a gay age, and the wildest sort of gayety forced itself right up on their church doorsteps.

Modern researchers find a long and bitterly vivid description of these scenes in the book of "abuses" that Puritan Philip Stubbes wrote.

### Even Around the Church

The morris dancers shame not, declared Stubbes, to come and dance round the church during divine service. Led by a Lord of Misrule, the band of dancers, most of them decked in liveries of green or yellow and with jingling bells tied around their legs and bright handkerchiefs fluttering in their hands, would come wildly dancing round the church "again and again," and then would settle down to lively feasting right in the churchyard.

Modern nudist tactics seem tame beside this street scene of Elizabethan England.

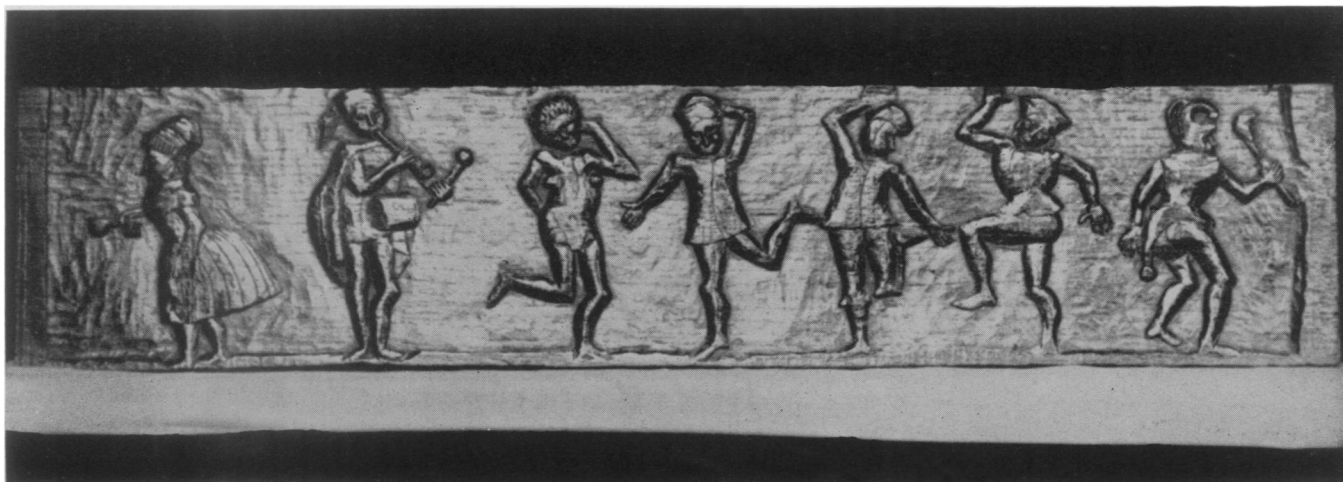
Were they merely trying to tease the Puritans—those wild merry-makers?

The Puritans took life so seriously



A RELIGIOUS PRACTISE

*Dancing naked in nets was the equivalent of fan dancing in Elizabeth's reign. This wood carving from an old English church shows what the nets may have been. The woman riding a goat symbolizes sins to be avoided by churchgoers.*



that they were fair game for humorists. But in this case it seems that there was a traditional reason for what looks like perverse mischievous behavior—reveling in a churchyard with a service going on inside.

A clue is given by Miss Anne G. Gilchrist, who has summed up what she and other English critics think about the situation in the folk dance journal. She finds in the accounts of English churchwardens of 1508 and onwards, in several parishes, that the churches spent money on morris dancers' clothes for parish festivals and pageants.

"So," concludes Miss Gilchrist, "the invasion of the church on Sunday by a troop of revellers which was denounced by the Puritans in later times may at first have been countenanced especially as, from what Baxter recalls of the custom in his boyhood, the dancers in their 'antic' dresses and jingling bells seem to have remained during the reading of common prayer before hastening back to their play."

But would players airily dressed in nets have been welcome at church? Even those, Miss Gilchrist believes.

"It seems possible," she writes, "that these practically nude performers may originally have been allegorical figures in a pageant, and thus the 'abuse' of the Puritans might once have had a moral 'use' whose serious significance had been lost by time."

#### Like Fleshings

Sir Edmund Chambers, authority on Elizabethan drama, has commented on the oak panel from Lancaster Castle. He says that the nets that shocked the Puritans may have been semi-transparent, and somewhat like the skin-tight, flesh-colored suits known as fleshings in modern theatricals.

#### SHOCKING!

*Nudist dancers shocked the Puritans of Queen Elizabeth's day. This carved oak panel from Lancaster Castle is pronounced visible evidence of the dancing that horrified the Puritans. Left to right are shown a man clowning as Maid Marian and taking up money for the dancers; a piper; a nude dancer; three dancers in quaint costumes with jingling bells, and a fool.*

Something of the sort can be seen in wood carvings in English churches that date back to the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. These carvings show nude men and women riding on goats, stags, or geese, and some are attired, or rather adorned, in nets, one with wide meshes plainly carved. The figures are explained as symbolic, representing sins to be avoided.

These nets may be similar to the nets that veiled, or failed to veil, the morris dancers. Doubtless, such figures as those carved in the churches paraded in the flesh when moral lessons were illustrated by morality dramas.

#### The Original Godiva

In the oak panel with a nude dancer on it Sir Edmund sees a hint of the mysterious old story of Lady Godiva. Perhaps in the early days of the morris dancing there was a processional or folk dance featuring a lady dressed only in her hair—a lady who was expunged—to use Sir Edmund's word—before the written records of the morris dances began. Some such bit of medieval pageantry, he says, was undoubtedly back of the Lady Godiva story. It came to be embroidered into a history of a noble woman who sacrificed her pride by riding unclad through the streets of Coventry to save her city from oppression.

The little nude dancer carved in brown oak seems a long way from the Lady Godivas that you may see in art and pageantry today. She hasn't even a flowing mantle of bright hair—only a short curly shock on a boyish head.

That shock of short hair means that the nude dancer was a boy, masquerading as a girl, in the opinion of most critics. The morris dancers, like play actors, were generally men, in those days. Just as the roles of Juliet, Cleopatra, and Ophelia in the Shakespearian plays were acted by young boys, so the Maid Marian character in the morris dance—doubtless Lady Godiva, too—was considered a man's job.

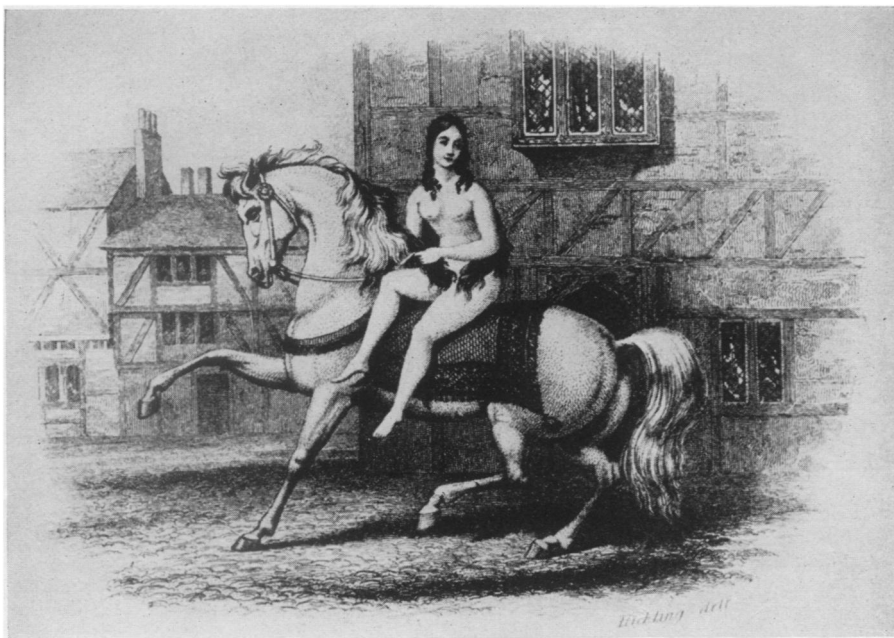
It is a man dressed up as Maid Marian in the extreme left of the row of dancers in the oak panel. He is dancing the part grotesquely, mincing out to take up a collection with a ladle, from the people looking on.

Because men usually took the feminine roles in such productions, it is thought that naked nets may have been costumes to give dancing boys the appearance of girls.

#### Nudism For Men Only?

Whether England's nudist dancers were men only, or whether there were women who took such roles also, remains to be explained. It is strange that so little was written about them. Only the Puritans grew sufficiently agitated to go on record about the situation, and that was rather late in the day. The wood carving from Lancaster Castle, much older than the Puritan writings, shows that nudist dancing was no brief flash but an affair that lasted somewhere near a century.

It makes you wonder whether modern interest in nudism will last as long. The pendulum has already begun to



### LADY GODIVA

*The nudist dancer on the Lancaster panel sheds light on the mysterious old story of Lady Godiva. A lady dressed only in her hair who danced in early medieval pageantry was the beginning of the Godiva story, says one critic.*

swing back a little, it appears from the most recent views of physicians.

The modern nudist cult has prided itself on its scientific soundness. Sunlight on the skin has great health value. In the high snowy mountains of Switzerland, physicians have demonstrated that the sun cure would work wonders for tuberculous children. In warm sunny lands where children play out of doors, children are less often weakened by the bone deformities of rickets.

#### Too Much Sunshine

But doctors have begun to warn against overdoses of sunshine. One physician of the Albany Medical College said that merely exposing hands and face to the moderate sunlight, such as occurs in the latitude of middle New York State, is sufficient to protect a child against rickets.

This physician, Dr. Arthur Knudson, was not speaking from general observation. His view is based on his experiments with rats. When he shaved a mere one-eightieth of the surface of a rat's skin and bared that portion to the sun's rays, there was greater healing of rickets than when the whole animal was exposed. The sun, by this experiments, can do its protective work for adults or children in summer by moderate exposure as well or better than by the wholesale nudist method.

*Science News Letter, August 11, 1934*

RADIO

## Wireless Printer Writes Messages For Police

**A** NEW radio system developed by W. H. G. Finch of Hasbrouck Heights, N. J., enables police radio cars to receive departmental messages, by radio printers, similar to those of stock tickers or teletype machines.

The main criticism of police radio—that there was no assurance the particular car desired received the message, and that there was no permanent record—can be circumvented by the device. Police can receive the messages above the din of traffic and without strict attention to the message at its time of reception.

In describing the apparatus in the current issue of *Electronics*, it is declared that high secrecy can be secured by the system. It is possible to scramble the signal and have it automatically decoded at the mobile receiver and printer in the police car.

*Science News Letter, August 11, 1934*

PUBLIC HEALTH

## Typhoid-Stricken Circus Permitted to Travel

**T**HE circus will come to town. Interstate travels of the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Combined Circus need not be interfered with in spite of the outbreak of typhoid fever among circus personnel, the U. S. Public Health Service has decided.

Dr. K. E. Miller, officer of the Service, has investigated the outbreak, in which over 40 cases have been reported, and found that there were no carriers of typhoid fever among the performers or the food handlers of the circus troupe. Consequently the federal health authorities feel that there is no danger to the public health in permitting the circus to continue on its travels. However, they have notified the state health officers of Indiana and Pennsylvania, where the circus makes its next stops, of the outbreak.

An epidemiologist of the Michigan State Health Department is with the circus, studying the outbreak with a view to finding out where it originated. The first knowledge of it came while the circus was in Michigan. From the his-

tory of the outbreak, officials suspect that the circus personnel contracted the disease from contaminated milk.

Typhoid fever is caused by a bacillus. Its source is either some one who has the disease or else what scientists call a carrier. This is a healthy person who has recovered from the disease but still carries the disease-causing bacilli and discharges them from his body.

Polluted drinking water, milk, ice cream, oysters from polluted sea water, and fly-contaminated or carrier-contaminated foods are responsible for almost all traceable cases. A recent Canadian outbreak of over 600 cases was traced to cheese made from milk from producers whose families had typhoid fever.

Inoculation with heat-killed typhoid bacilli gives immunity to the disease which lasts for several years. This is generally recommended for persons who are travelling, particularly if they are going into rural areas where there is not adequate control of water and milk supplies and sewage.

*Science News Letter, August 11, 1934*