

The Montol Festival 2009

Cornwall's Festival of Midwinter.



An information pack for partners and participants.

What is the Montol festival?

Montol is a festival, now in its third year, based on the Midwinter (From Advent to Candlemas) and Nadelik (Christmas) traditions of Cornwall and in particular the traditions of Penzance. We hold the festival in the week prior to the 21st of December, which in some forms of modern Cornish is called "Montol". The following traditions form part of the festival and we encourage all participants including audiences to adopt these themes.

Guise dancing.

A Cornish tradition similar to the Guising traditions of Scotland. Masked performers prior to the 1970's used to tour the homes and public places of their towns dressed in "Mock formal" costume (IE in mockery of the formal dress of the richer inhabitants of the town). More well off participants would sometimes dress in "Mock rags" or tatters. The participants would perform unique dance and music, sometimes with the addition of a popular play or story from the canon of local legends. The themes of darkness, light, topsy-turvy and opposites were ever present in their performances. In the early 20th century many communities banned the Guise dance parades and performances, and they were lost from the calendar.

The following quote is taken from the William Bottrells important Cornish cultural work "Traditions and hearthside stories of West Cornwall"

"During the early part of the last century the costume of the guise dancers often consisted of such antique finery as would now raise envy in the heart of a collector. The Chief glory of the men lay in their cocked hats which were surmounted with plumes and decked with streamers and ribbons, The girls were no less magnificently attired with steeple crowned hats, stiff bodied gowns, bag skirts or trains and ruffles hanging from their elbows"

"(Guise-dancing) is no more nor less than a pantomimic representation or bal masque on an extensive scale, the performers outnumbering the audience, who in this case take their stand at the corners of the streets. Richard Edmonds Jnr - Writing in Archaeologia Cambrensis (1858) further states.



And further..

“The guise dancers (the same as the guisards of Scotland) may be always seen in the streets of Penzance in the evenings from Christmas-day to " Twelfth-day," going to or from the houses wherein they are permitted to perform, attired in fantastic dresses, and variously disguised. A well-known character amongst them, about fifty years ago, was the hobby-horse, represented by a man carrying a piece of wood in the form of a horse's head and neck, with some contrivance for opening and shutting the mouth with a loud snapping noise, the performer being so covered with a horse cloth, or hide of a horse, as to resemble the animal whose cur- vettings, biting, and other motions, he imitated. Some of these " guise-dancers" occasionally masked themselves with the skins of the heads of bullocks, having the horns on”

Cornish Dance Cornish dancing is well recorded by historians and is popular among many dance groups throughout the region. There are a number of well recorded Christmas and midwinter dances that often shadow or reflect the Midsummer St John's eve performances found in the west of the Country on the 23rd of June.

An example of a Midwinter or Nadelik dance was described by The Western Antiquary or a Devon & Cornwall Note-Book" in 1881.

“Is "dancing round the candles ' at Yuletide common out of Penwith? I have seen a basket filled with sand, candles stuck in it, and the children dancing round it. The appearance is that of a solemnization of the winter solstice, as the Midsummer bonfire (still common, even in 1881) is of the summer solstice.



Traditional Costume & Mask making.

The making of the costume associated with Guise dancing and other traditions. In a visit to Penzance in 1831 the finery and splendour of the Guise dancers was compared to the Venice carnival.

“ In 1831 so many residents of the town took part in the celebration that it was noted that every kind of person was present and the "Bal Masque" that took place rivaled that of the Venice Carnival. For months previous to the merry-making time, preparations are made for the approaching 'carnival;' we can assure our readers that never were the real 'carnivals' ushered in with greater festivities at Rome or Venice, in the zenith of their glory, than is observed here at Christmas. Were many of the denizens of our large towns to witness the making up of the scores of 'sugar loaf,' 'three-cocked,' and indescribable-shaped hats, caps, bonnets, bloomer skirts, leggings, jackets, &c., numberless et ceteras of the most grotesque and pantomimic character, colour, and shape, which goes on in October and November, they would imagine there was to be a bal masque on a large scale, or a pantomime at 'the theatre,' of metropolitan proportions.” www.sacred-texts.com

Our participants base their costume and mask design on this description and from the following research ;

Mask types – Venetian masks were popular during 19th century guise dancing sessions. Other kinds of masks included: distorted animal masks, domino masks and masks with horns of all types.

Venetian mask from left to right. Plague Doctor, Bauta, Moretto, Larva Masks,



Guise dance costume.

The traditional costume for Montol comes in the following kinds: Tatters style or Mock Rags, Mock Formal Bal masque or decorative formal costume of any kind. Please note that costume is never fancy dress and is disguise.



Traditional lantern making.

West Cornwall had a unique tradition of lantern making at Christmas and new year, including the “Christmas bunch” and lanterns made in Jack o’ lantern style with stylised

patterns taken from mythology and scripture carved into them. Examples below.

Robert Hunt Popular Romances of the West of England 1902

“On Solstice eve the 21st of December, secures the bush to the ceiling and taking great care, fastened a red candle inside the bush and light just before midnight then form a ring and dance under the bush welcoming the rebirth of the light and the year. “



Our lanterns reflect these traditions and are made with withy and paper.
The picture below is of our lanterns in 2007.



The West Gallery Music & the Cornish Carol.

Cornish Christmas music was influential in establishing many of the favourite Christmas tunes with which we are familiar today. The First Noel for example was a Cornish miner's carol popularly sung at the bottom of tin mines on Christmas eve. Many of these songs started as folk songs sung in the West Gallery Style and adapted for church use. The

West Gallery style ultimately led to the work of composers such as Thomas Merritt who created many Carols sung in Cornwall. The Montol Singers have been created to continue this tradition. Throughout the festival you will hear the weird tunes of The Turkey Rhubarb Band, also created for Montol, which celebrates the darker side of Cornish Celtic music with a twist.

The Lighting of the Mock.

The Mock is a Cornish adaptation of the Yule log tradition, chalked or marked with a stick man as a symbol of “old father Christmas” or the Christ child, and further back a symbol of the death of the old year and birth of the new. The mock was often the centre of a communities Christmas celebrations.



“In Cornwall, as we are informed by a contributor to Notes and Queries, the Yule log is called ' the mock,' and great festivities attend the burning of it, including the old ceremony of lighting the mock with a brand preserved from the fire of last year.” The Book of Days 1832.

Above all, the Montol Festival is an opportunity to engage as a community in creativity, music, art and song and a celebration of history, togetherness and enjoyment of the night, outdoors and a lighting up of the darkest time of year.