

way of her mother. I did nothing about it at the time because they all disappeared off to the next class and I didn't see her again. I've wondered since whether I should have told someone. What would you have done?

The third incident was a very positive one—one of those pleasing events which mean that you have possibly made a difference to someone's life. Perhaps it's why we do it. It was with the oldest group of students. A girl of about 14 or 15 came in looking rather suspicious, cool, unimpressed—you know the way they are... you have to prove yourself before they'll participate. I sang and got them to join in the chorus of Hopping Down in Kent and explained about it being about the East End Londoners coming down to Kent to have a paid holiday in the hop fields and just slipped in the fact that Gypsies also participated. At this she sat up and started to pay a bit more attention and then, a bit later on still, when I asked if anyone had any questions or anything they wanted to say about anything we'd done so far she got quite enthusiastic and said that she was really interested in Gypsies because her father was one. They often had family get-togethers, she said, when people sang songs and told stories, and she always felt embarrassed because she didn't know them. Now she would go and find out more about it and about her heritage.

Bingo!

## SHOES TO KEEP THOSE FEET A-DANCING...

### THE STRASBOURG DANCING PLAGUE OF 1518

*A convulsion infuriated the human frame....Entire communities of people would join hands, dance, leap, scream, and shake for hours... Music appeared to be the only means of combating the strange epidemic... Justus Hecker (1795-1850),*

The motif of magic shoes which make the wearer dance to exhaustion, or magical musical instruments or tunes which cause you to dance until the music eventually stops, are common ones in folk and fairy tales. Could there possibly be a real-life source for the idea? John Waller has just published a book which suggests there might be. (*A Time to Dance, A Time to Die: The Extraordinary Story of the Dancing Plague of 1518*. Icon Books. ISBN 978-1848310216) I haven't read the book, although I hope to get a review copy for next time, but I have heard various mentions of it on the radio. The topic sounded interesting so I did some re-



search to see what it was all about.

It seems that in July 1518 a woman called Frau Troffea began to dance wildly in a street in Strasbourg. She continued to dance non-stop for somewhere between four to six days. Within a week 34 other people had joined her and within a month there were around 400 dancers most of whom eventually died from heart attack, stroke, or exhaustion.

This couldn't have been an isolated incident, or the first such case as there was a Greek word for it—choreomania. An earlier occurrence took place in Aarchen, Ger-

many in June 1374 when “the populace danced wildly through the streets, screaming of visions and hallucinations, and even continued to writhe and twist after they were too exhausted to stand.” There were other occasional cases from the 14th to the 18th century in the Netherlands, France and Germany and in the 19th century in Madagascar. It was sometimes called St John’s Dance or, more commonly, St Vitus’ Dance.

Christian legend says that invoking the wrath of St. Vitus could provoke compulsive dancing or that dancing before an image of St. Vitus would imbue good health for the following year. However, Saint Vitus’ dance was usually a term used for epilepsy or Sydenham’s chorea which causes brief, irregular muscle spasms. (In my childhood we were often accused of ‘having’ St Vitus’ Dance if we were fidgety.) It is unlikely that either epilepsy or chorea would be responsible for mass dancing though as they would not cause sustained movements in a mass of people.

There have been various theories as to the causes over the years. One of the most common is ergot, a mould that grows on rye. Eating bread tainted with ergot can lead to delirium, hallucinations, and seizures but not “coordinated movements that last for days”.

Other people have suggested that the dance was part of an “ecstatic ritual of a heretical sect” but it does not seem that the dancers ‘wanted’ to dance, they were ‘forced’ to. The theory which has now gained most acceptance is that it was a form of mass hysteria perhaps caused by the hardships of the times—famine, plague, wars, bad weather... the medieval equivalent of ‘Rave Culture’ perhaps?

Various ‘cures’ were attempted to no avail: religious ceremonies were held to exorcise the demons thought to be causing the mania; people prayed to St. Vitus for aid, and he soon became the patron saint of the dancers. It was believed at the time that the organised properties of music could heal both body and soul so musicians attempted to bring order to the wild caperings by accompanying the dancers.



An engraving of three women affected by the dancing plague by Henricus Hondius the Younger (1573-1610) after a pen and ink sketch by Peter Brueghel the Elder who witnessed a similar scene near Flanders in 1564.

### IMPONDERABLES...

1. If you take an Oriental person and spin him around several times, does he become disoriented?
2. If people from Poland are called Poles, why aren't people from Holland called Holes?
3. Do infants enjoy infancy as much as adults enjoy adultery?
5. If love is blind, why is lingerie so popular?