



The Derby Ram



Nonsense song or remnant of prehistoric religion?

by Pete Castle

Over 40 years ago when I first became interested in folk or traditional songs, most people assumed that they were thousands of years old and some, at least, were remnants of an old Pagan religion. Gradually, as we've learned more, the pendulum has swung until, for the past few years, the received wisdom has been that few folk songs are more than a couple of hundred years old and most were written by hack song-writers for broadsides. I would agree that that might be true for the versions we sing today, but their roots, sometimes but not always, can go back much, much further.

You must all be aware of the song, *The Derby Ram*. It is one of the most common traditional songs in both Britain and America. I once met someone who was collecting every version he could find, his collection was well into the hundreds!

I think I first came across it when I was in my early teens and was just starting to play the guitar. Someone gave me a song book: *104 Folk Songs Sung By...* (there followed a long list of names which meant nothing to me at the time although they do now) on Folkways Records. I was not the slightest bit interested in folk songs. I was into The Shadows and later the Rolling Stones, but it was good practice to play through those 104 songs, both the chords and the tunes. One of them was a version of *The Derby Ram*. I thought it was just a silly story with a simple tune and only two chords (three if you wanted to be clever!). It never occurred to me

(or anyone else at that time) that it might possibly be a very ancient and very important survival from the Stone Age!

A few years later I went to college, met folk music, and started to go to folk clubs. I suppose I heard *The Derby Ram* but I don't remember it. It was probably on some of the early folk LPs I bought as well, but it wasn't a song I chose to sing.

In 1978 I went professional on the folk scene but still had nothing to do with *The Derby Ram* - until 1987 when we moved to Derby. At that time, as well as folk clubs and festivals, I was doing a lot of work in schools and it struck me that *The Derby Ram* would be ideal to sing to and with the children. I realised that it was an iconic image locally - there were several statues of it around the city and, of course, Derby County football club is 'The Rams'. That last fact was the only thing the children did know about it. They'd never heard the song before. I soon discovered that very few adults had either, so I learned a version and performed it when I had local bookings, particularly for non-folk audiences. It was especially pleasing when, after a gig somewhere in a remote part of the Peak District, an old chap came up and thanked me for singing it and said it took him back to his childhood when the mummings used to come round and do 'The Tup'.

This reminded me that the song did not stand alone, there is a Derby Ram play too - *The Owd*

Tup - a sort of mummings play which was performed around Christmas time, particularly in the north of the county. It's very simple - a farmer and his wife plus another man wearing a ram's head and fleece. They call for a butcher to kill the ram and after some silliness about where he should stick his chopper, he does. They then pass the hat round and go off to do it again somewhere else. I organised a few performances of it in schools. One of these was affected by an early example of Political Correctness - an optional character in the play is a lad called 'Simple'. We weren't allowed to call him that; he had to be 'Simon'!

The next landmark came in 1993. I was talking to someone about stocking some of my albums in his shop and he said that what he really wanted was a cassette of *The Derby Ram* to sell. I said that would be easy to organise, thinking I would do it myself, but it morphed into a cassette album of local songs by myself, concertina player Derrick Hale, Keith Kendrick and Roy Harris - the last two of whom supplied different versions of the title song. I don't know how many it sold. Lots. We added a couple more tracks and made it into a CD in 2001, and it is still selling.

Over the years I gradually accumulated more knowledge about the song and its background. I realised that in the same area there is a similar tradition with a horse - the song, *Poor Old Horse*, accompanies that and they share verses.

Between about 1995 and 2005 I was one third of the Anglo-Romanian band, Popeluc. We played the traditional music of Maramures in Romania, mixed it with British songs given a Romanian accent, and toured sporadically when we could all manage to be in the same country at the same time! One of the Maramures tunes we occasionally used was one we called, *Ritual Of The Goats*. It was a very simple little march which we added to another march if we wanted something longer. I didn't know much about it at first except that it was part of a Christmas tradition which included a man dressed up as a goat who was then taken around to collect money! In fact, *Jocul De-A Capra* or the *Dance Of The Goat* is so similar to *The Owd Tup* that when you see photographs you have to study the buildings and costumes of the people in the background to decide whether you are looking at the Tup or the Capra!

We discovered many similarities between the folklore of Maramures and England. A lot of them could be traced back to the church and Christianity, but not the Ram/Horse/Goat... Why then should the same tradition exist in places so far apart?

When I wrote my book, *Derbyshire Folk Tales*, for The History Press in 2010, I included an extract from the 19th century antiquarian Sidney Oldall Addy. He lived in Norton, then a village in Derbyshire, now a suburb of Sheffield. He collected many, many songs, stories, rituals and bits of dialect around the area, as

well as excavating archaeological sites and writing a book about domestic architecture. This is what he said:

"Amongst the earliest recollections of my childhood is the performance of the 'Derby Ram', or, as we used to call it, *The Old Tup*. With the eye of memory I can see a number of young men standing one winter's evening in the deep porch of an old country house, and singing the ballad of *The Old Tup*. In the midst of the company was a young man with a sheep's skin, horns and all, on his back, and standing on all fours. What it all meant I could not make out, and the thing that most impressed me was the roar of the voices in that vault-like porch. The sheep and the men were evidently too harmless to frighten any child, and a play in which the only act was the pretended slaughter of an old tup was not in itself attractive."

Addy then quotes the song and describes how the ram is killed before saying: "...the ballad went on to tell how and for what purpose people begged for his bones, eyes, teeth, hide, etc., but I cannot remember more of it. However, in a version printed by Jewitt (*The Ballads & Songs of Derbyshire*, 1867) they beg for his horns to make milking pails, and for his eyes to make footballs. And a tanner begs for his hide, which is big enough 'to cover all Sinfin Moor'. Here we have a ballad describing the slaughter of a being of monstrous size, and the uses to which his body was put. Now when I first read the *Edda*, and came to the passage which tells how the sons of Bor slew the giant Ymir, and how, when he fell, so much blood ran out of his wounds that all the race of frost-giants was drowned in it, I said to myself, 'Why, that's *The Old Tup*' and when I read further on and found how they made the sea from his blood, the earth from his flesh, the rocks from his teeth, the heaven from his skull, it seemed to me that I had guessed rightly. *The Old Tup* was the giant Ymir, and the mummings of my childhood were acting the drama of the Creation."

Problem solved, I thought. *The Derby Ram* must be Viking. It made perfect sense, especially as Derby was in the part of England settled by Danes and Vikings. The Julbock (Yule Goat) is still part of Swedish Christmas celebrations and you can buy small ones in Ikea! But how about Maramures? The Vikings were great traders but you can't get to Maramures by boat, it's surrounded by mountains!

More research led me to discover that another very similar tradition used to happen in Germany and there are people of German origin in Transylvania so perhaps it was the Anglo-Saxons rather than the Vikings who spread the tradition...

More research. More similar customs and rituals in Hungary, Russia, Sweden, just about everywhere. In some it's a ram, in others a goat, a horse, a stag... in fact, just about any large animal seems to have been used by different peoples. What stays the same is that it is a mid-winter festival and involves a group of mummings taking the creature around the village and, probably, its sacrifice.

At this point I dared to think: could it be a tradition that is so old it pre-dates our splitting up into different nationalities? This would account for all those mentioned above and also include the Kentish Hooden Horse, the Welsh Marie Lwyd, and even the Abbots Bromley horn dancers with their reindeer horns. (It was only in the 19th century that they moved their dance from Christmas to the present date in September.)

This would make it a very old tradition indeed! Some commentators have said that most traditions only go back a century or two but dressing up as animals is far older. In the seventh century St Aldhelm was reported to have been horrified by revellers wearing animal costumes, especially stags, and just a short while later, around 700CE, Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: "To those who go about at the Kalends of January garbed as a stag or an old woman, taking the form of beasts, clad in the skin of beasts and assuming the heads of beasts; who transform themselves into animals, three years penance, for the thing is devilish." So it has been happening for well over 1500 years.

And we can go back even further: The Gundestrop Cauldron is a large, silver bowl found in Denmark in 1891. It was made in what is now Bulgaria in the 2nd century BCE. Amongst all kinds of wild beasts it shows a stag with antlers and beside it a man sitting cross legged on the ground also with antlers on his head.

My final step on this journey and in my theory that *The Derby Ram* might be preserved prehistoric religion comes from an archaeological dig at Star Carr in East Yorkshire. On a site which is 11,000 years old (so Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age and built when England was still connected to

The Darby (sic) Ram

as published by Llewellynn Jewitt in *The Ballads & Songs Of Derbyshire, published 1867*

As I was going to Darby, Sir, All on a market day,
I met the finest Ram, Sir, That ever was fed on hay.

Daddle-i-day, daddle-i-day,
Fal-de-ral, fal-de-ral, diddle-i-day.

This Ram was fat behind, Sir, This Ram was fat before,
This Ram was ten yards high, Sir, Indeed he was no more.

The wool upon his back, Sir, Reached up unto the sky,
The eagles made their nests there, Sir, For I heard the young ones cry.

The wool upon his belly, Sir, It dragged upon the ground,
It was sold in Darby town, Sir, For forty thousand pound.

The space between his horns, Sir, Was as far as a man could reach,
And there they built a pulpit, For the parson there to preach.

The teeth that were in his mouth, Sir, Were like a regiment of men,
And the tongue that hung between them, Sir,
Would have dined them twice and again.

This Ram jumped o'er a wall, Sir, His tail caught on a briar,
It reached from Darby town, Sir, All into Leicestershire.

And of this tail so long, Sir, Twas ten miles and an ell,
They made a goodly rope, Sir, To toll the market bell.

This Ram had four legs to walk on, Sir, This Ram had four legs to stand,
And every leg he had, Sir, Stood on an acre of land.

The butcher that killed this Ram, Sir, Was drowned in the blood,
And the boy that held the pail, Sir, Was carried away in the flood.

All the maids in Darby, Sir, Came begging for his horns,
To take them to coopers, To make them milking gawns.

The little boys of Darby, Sir, They came to beg his eyes,
To kick about the streets, Sir, For they were football size.

The tanner that tanned its hide, Sir, Would never be poor any more,
For when he had tanned and retched it, It covered all Sinfin Moor.

The jaws that were in his head, Sir, They were so fine and thin,
They were sold to a Methodist parson, For a pulpit to preach in.

Indeed, Sir, this is true, Sir, I never was taught to lie,
And had you been to Darby, Sir, You'd have seen it as well as I.

the Continent) they have found several deer skulls trimmed and shaped so that they can be worn on the head, and with holes drilled in them so that you could tie it under your chin.

Is it at all possible that a mid-winter ritual from the end of the last Ice Age, which involved dressing up as a beast and processing around the countryside, developed over the millennia into a play and then, much more recently the dialogue was transformed into, or supplemented by, a song? Think of that next time you sing it!

Pete Castle: folk singer and storyteller, author and editor of *Facts & Fiction* storytelling magazine.

Pete's books: *Where Dragons Soar, Animal Folk Tales Of The British Isles; Derbyshire Folk Tales; Nottinghamshire Folk Tales* are all published by the History Press. They and the CD of *The Derby Ram* are available from Pete's website: www.petecastle.co.uk