

MAY DAY

OVER fifty years ago May Day was celebrated to a greater extent in our Bedfordshire villages than it is today. The country people — mostly the children — used to go round the villages, bedecked with garlands of spring flowers; singing the traditional May Song; and, knocking at the cottage doors, they would then ask for pennies and halfpennies.

The May Song dates from

very early times, and is sung in many other counties besides Bedfordshire. We reproduce here the version which was observed in Bletsoe. Biddenham and Bromham had a similar rendering.

We are indebted to Miss K. Campion, of Souldrop, a member of an old and well-known Bletsoe family, for kindly lending us the picture of the Bletsoe "Mayers", and also the words of the following song:

MAY SONG

The first of May.
My dear, I say,
Before your door I stand.
It's nothing but a sprout
But it's well set out
By the works of our Lord's
hand.

Come, think of us,
For May is here,
And here we do begin
To lead our lives
In righteousness
For fear we should die in
sin.

If we should die,
And die in sin,
And go where sinners mourn.
It would have been better
For our poor souls
If we had never been born.

So take a Bible in your hand
And read the chapter through,
And when the day of judgment comes
The Lord will think of you.

The first of May
Is our garland day,
So please remember our garland.
We don't come here
But once a year,
So please remember our
garland.

I have a little bag
On my right hand,
It is lined with a silken
string;
And all I want
Is a little more silver
To line it well within.

Bletsoe May Garland Song

This picture and song were supplied to the Bedfordshire Times in 1960 by Miss Kate Campion, who was born at Bletsoe Castle in 1883, and lived there until 1916. The song is similar to other May Songs collected in nearby villages, but the words have clearly been rewritten with a religious slant, possibly to counter concerns over the pagan nature of May revels. This suggests that the girls may have been rehearsed by one of the gentry who had an interest in the revival of folk music, song, and crafts that was taking place at the time, possibly a member of the Campion family. Altering the words of traditional songs was, unfortunately, a common practice among Victorian song collectors (cf. alterations by the eminent collector, Revd Sabine Baring-Gould).



May Day long ago! In quaint but pretty frocks and garlands a party of girl "Mauers" at Bletsoe cluster solemnly and intently before an ancient camera to "watch the birdie". The group includes Edith Armstrong, Edith Surridge, Lizzie Lamb, Nellie Lamb, Emily White, Lucy Robinson, Nellie Robinson, and Annie Church.

Bletsoe May'ers, c1898 This photograph appeared with a short article and the words of the Bletsoe May song in the Bedfordshire Times of 29 April 1960. Edith Armstrong (left) was born in the spring of 1889 and would have been about 9 years old at the time this photograph was taken.

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Bletsoe May'ers with garland at Bletsoe Castle, c1909

Outside the front entrance of Bletsoe Castle, with the garland they carried from door to door, singing the May Song and collecting money.

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