



Dedham's Maypole 1948. The children include Gillian Southgate, Billy Reason, Jane Coe , Richard Wilding

Mayday Celebrations

Many older people will still remember the excitement of May Day in Dedham when they were young. Every year the Primary School children (and sometimes others at Littlegarth School in the village) would dance round a Maypole put up on the Recreation Ground. Maureen Floyd (née Stiff) has a clear memory of the whole day. She recalls the path behind the school teacher's house (now the Old School House) which led round the side of the school building in School Lane through to the playing field. The classes took it in turns to learn the dances and many practice sessions in the school yard were needed to get them right. There were severe reprimands for children who failed to pay attention and made mistakes, causing tangles in the elaborate patterns woven by the bright ribbons they held in their hands. Having completed an intricate

multicoloured web, the children then had to reverse their steps and systematically undo it all again.



The Maypole near the Duchy Barn in the 1950s. Headmistress Miss Hooker is on the left.

In the afternoon the crowning of a new May Queen took place on the playing field near the apple trees which grew behind the Vicarage garden or in the garden itself. If their parents had any lilac out in time or other flowers to

decorate the May Queen's throne the children would take them to school in the morning and there was great excitement preparing for the afternoon's ceremony. The previous year's May Queen would be the one to crown her successor, who was seated on a floral throne attended by her maids of honour with a small boy bearing the crown on a ceremonial cushion.



Yemisi Opebiyi , Nigerian foster-daughter of Mrs Eagle, was Dedham's first non-English May Queen. Here she is being crowned by Louise Edwards in the Vicarage garden, probably 1950s

Britain's May Day celebrations are believed to have their origins in Roman times with dancing around decorated trees to celebrate the arrival of spring fertility. In folk tradition the Maypole can symbolise a tree and the May Queen may represent Flora, the Roman goddess of flowering or blossoming plants. If Dedham had a Maypole earlier it would have been banished in the seventeenth century when the Puritans suppressed

all May Day ceremonies. A revival took place on the Restoration of Charles II but it is possible that the tradition here dated only from the great renewal of interest in local traditions and folk dancing in the late nineteenth century.



The previous year's May Queen crowns her successor in the 1950s. On the right are her attendants and the pageboy carrying the cushion used for bearing the floral crown.

The May Day celebrations here were well established by 1936 when regular correspondence began to be exchanged between the teachers and pupils of our National School and the Dedham County Day School in the USA. Each letter from our children was addressed to a certain American child, who read it aloud to the class and among other accounts of English activities, the pupils in Massachusetts loved the descriptions of their English May festival and the birds and flowers they saw on their way to school. The Parish Magazine for June 1941 records that each child at the US

school gave up a week's pocket money to pay for sending a box containing eighteen and a half pounds of milk chocolate, a huge treat in food-rated Britain, to be distributed among the pupils of our Junior School. The Dedham, Mass. Gardening Club sent them flower and vegetable seeds for their gardens. Dedham schoolmistress Miss Mabel Nye formed a friendship with Miss Grace Hine her opposite number in Dedham, Mass., who paid at least two visits to our village after the War. The ever-popular roundabout next to the present play area is the last surviving piece of a splendid set of robust playground equipment generously donated to the

children of Dedham, Essex by the people of Dedham, Massachusetts after the war.

Does any reader remember when the May Day celebrations here came to an end? Did they continue until 1973 when the Primary School moved to Parson's Field?

For illustrations I am indebted to both Maureen Floyd and the Eley family. If any other readers have memories or photographs they would be prepared to share, I should be delighted to hear from them.

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Miss Grace Hine from Dedham, Massachusetts with headmistress Miss Wenda Hooker and pupils on a visit to Dedham School in September 1969.