

# **Cheshire Souling 2017**

**New Influences and Historic Traditions**

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### New Influences and Historic Traditions

#### Introduction: Research Phase

The initial research for the Minerva Arts Soul Play project began via the rediscovery of an important monograph written by Alex Helm in 1968 entitled *Cheshire Folk Drama*<sup>1</sup>. This seminal work was a compilation of previous research by Helm (one of the leading folklorists in the post-WWII era) together with his research colleagues Cawte and Peacock, concerning seasonal dramatic ceremony in Cheshire. At that time Helm proposed that 'a unique form of [...] Folk Play existed in the county until comparatively recently'<sup>2</sup> and that although the form of the action in the play was typical across the many examples he had thus far researched (a hero-style combat play in which one hero was victorious, with the other revived by a 'quack' doctor), there were, across the county of Cheshire, many variations peculiar to the locality in which each play was performed. Helm listed 26 Cheshire towns or villages in which Soul Plays took place, all containing similar stereotypical characters, but all with noticeable degrees of variation: 'One might reasonably guess that the Cheshire Plays have, for some unknown reason, retained a character lost elsewhere'<sup>3</sup>. Helm also stated that many such performances no longer took place in Cheshire and that many Soul Plays ceased in the aftermath of WWI partly because there were few or in some cases no young men to take part:

The final blow came when men did not return from the 1914-18 War and the gangs could not be re-established. It was only when outside interest was awakened that performances began again and still continue.<sup>4</sup>

Such information interested us greatly as a performance-related charitable trust dedicated to the involvement of young people in drama, song and dance, for it appears that by the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Soul Plays were enacted as a rite of passage for young people. In fact, we were soon to discover that (for example in Antrobus)

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<sup>1</sup> Helm, Alex (1968), *Cheshire Folk Drama*, Istock: The Guizer Press

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12

gangs of children sang special verses begging for soul cakes. We felt that a bid to not only revive this tradition but also to re-articulate it by and through 21<sup>st</sup> century children's ideas and voices might create, effectively, a 'new tradition' relevant across Cheshire in the present day, rather than one simply 'preserved' for posterity.

Following our successful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, and to add to Helm's invaluable manuscript, we began making background notes drawn from other important secondary sources. Alexander Howard's *Endless Cavalcade* assisted our understanding of the meanings behind such plays. For example, that they were not only pre-Christian in origin, but also came to be supported by the early Church because of the hold that such festivals had on local communities. Howard also informed us that the old calendars, which were based upon the agricultural and pastoral year, began on what is now the beginning of November: a time when it was believed that natural laws were suspended, and ghosts and demons roamed abroad. Fires were lit, surplus stock slaughtered, and food put away for the dark months ahead. Indeed, via Howard, it soon became clear that many ancient customs had survived in one form or another to the present day: such as (in our case) the All Souls Day/All Saints Day festival on the 1<sup>st</sup> November.

All Souls Day commemorates the faithful who have not found a place in paradise and still linger in purgatory, whereas All Saints Day is dedicated to those faithful dead who have.

### **Soul Plays and Soul Caking in Cheshire**

As in other counties across England, the maintenance of the Soul Plays in Cheshire was/is dependent upon a narrative concerning the restoration of life to a dead man and the appearance of a man in feminine clothes. Another feature of many performances across the county was the parade of the head, in which a horse's skull was mounted on a hobby horse (usually a man covered by a rug or perhaps even an animal skin). Old Horse ceremonies have previously existed across several counties in England, and in Wales the musical battle of 'Pwnco' is still played out in the depths of winter with the 'Mari' – a horse's skull bedecked with ribbons - paraded from house to

house. Such customs might date back to the pre-Christian Samhain festival where a horse was slaughtered at this time of the year.

Funk and Wagnall also confirmed that at this time Soul Cakes were baked for the dead during the festival period. These cakes might be placed on the graves of those passed or given to the poor on behalf of the souls departed. Kennedy noted that these cakes were 'made to a local recipe, and in some areas the cakes were offered to strangers 'to remember the souls of the departed'. Like the sin-eaters at funeral wakes, it was a widespread belief at Halloween that this would release the souls in Purgatory.<sup>5</sup> Of course the use of all kinds of cake on All Soul's Day is widespread across Europe. Across England Soul Cakes tended to be made on 28<sup>th</sup> October, to be eaten on All Souls Day. It was further noted by Funk and Wagnall that close to Cheshire in Shropshire, Soul Cakes were given to visitors who were asked to chant 'a soul cake, a soul cake, Have mercy on all Christian souls for a soul cake'. Children also begged for cakes in the name of the dead or for souls in purgatory. Of course it is not unreasonable to identify the soul with the final breath of life which exits the body at death and Roalfe Cox suggested that a belief existed that the soul could also leave the body during life and become embodied in another animal or a flower bud (the doctrine of transmigration). The soul might then show itself as a flower or a tree, etc. Eleanor Hull stated that as the clock struck 12 complete silence was respected, for this was the hour when the souls of the dead would revisit their earthly homes. Candles were burnt in every room to guide them and there was a glass of wine on the table to refresh them.

## **Soul Plays**

As for the plays, Brody informs us that three actions usually took place in the 'quete' of hero-combat plays. A 'quete' is a term used to denote any kind of perambulatory collection (such as these days 'trick or treat'). First there is a procession of characters, followed by an entertainment, which in turn is followed by a collection. Most Cheshire

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, Peter (1997), 'Sleeve notes to Antrobus Soul Cakers (Cheshire: the last few evenings in October)', in David Wilkins [ed.], *English Customs and Traditions* [track 7], Wotton-Under-Edge: Saydisc Records CD-SDL 425, p. 11

Soul Plays took this form although, according to Helm it seems that on the Wirral peninsular performances at Frankby, Neston, and Bromborough were diverse (at Bromborough, for example the performance was silent) and took place at different times of the year. Brody concurred with Helm that in spite of diversity all Soul Plays in Cheshire were derived from the Hero-Combat form. Brody went on to state that the basis of all English Soul Caking activity was that the spirits of the dead were contained in the soul cakes, so these were taken from house to house therefore making all Soul Plays perambulatory in the 'quiete' sense. Brody further stated that the horse's head in Cheshire became one of the most important features across the county as a (perambulatory) luck bringing event. This is not unlike the aforementioned Pwnco/Mari event in Wales where banter and challenges are exchanged throughout the perambulation. If householders fail to out-sing or out-banter the Mari party, they have to invite them in to bring about good luck to the house. Suggesting at times intense difference and rivalry between villages and town in Cheshire, Brody stated that, at times, horses' heads were even stolen from one troupe by another and quoted a letter to that effect, regarding the stealing of a Warburton head by the Lymm troupe.

Specifically pertaining to traditions and customs in Cheshire, Christina Hole noted that on the feast of Samhain (Halloween) the barriers between the worlds of the dead and ourselves were removed and that this was a much celebrated time. Broomhead also suggested that it was believed that souls still in purgatory were released from suffering for 48 hours at this time of the season, returning to their old homes. On All Souls Day certain men were dressed in black and went through the streets ringing a bell and calling people to prayer, while collecting alms to pay for Masses for the departed. Broomhead also stated that the pagan origins of Cheshire 'hodering' (dressing in the skin of an animal – Kennedy called these people 'Hoodeners') can be confirmed by the Higher Whitley custom of, following the end of the Soul Play, burying the horse's head and holding a funeral service over it. Notwithstanding the above information regarding the Pwnco/Mari in Wales it has been suggested by several writers that the horse's head is not found in any other county's Soul Play, thus making the Cheshire play unique in England.

Our secondary research naturally took us to the Cheshire Record Office where we found several interesting local sources. Hutton's 1953 article<sup>6</sup> concerning Soul Caking confirmed both origins and a central theme while also noting that the chief characters in Frodsham were King George, The 'Violent' (or valiant?) soldier, the 'Doctor', and the 'Old Woman'. Hutton informed us that before the Napoleonic Wars the King George and the Soldier characters were most likely 'St George' and the 'Saracen'. He even suggested that earlier still, these two adversaries might have been the Norse Gods of light and evil: Boldur and Loki. Hutton also confirmed that when rival gangs of soul cakers met, there might be a fight between the two Beelzebub's and that it would be something of a disgrace for one gang should the horse's head be captured, for its capture would mean bad luck. Helm concurred: 'The practice of groups who met, fighting to capture the other's Horse's skull and with it the 'luck', is well known in the county. He continued:

The ceremony of burying the skull after the performances may be a relic of preserving the 'luck' for the twelve months before it could be brought out again. At Lymm, the performers were said to have refused to take a collection because they were out to spread 'luck', not to collect it. [...] As dispensers of 'luck' the gangs seem to have adopted the usual pattern of lawlessness.<sup>7</sup>

Hutton also stated that the recipe for making Soul Cakes had long vanished, but that the more recent customs of baking gingerbread or spiced parkin cake to be eaten on Bonfire Night might furnish us with some kind of a clue. Actually, during our work in Bunbury, sweet Soul Cakes were made, and these were heavily spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg. In his work *Pastures Green*, a memoir written in 1964, the Reverend HA Clarke recalled that a Soul Caking play took place in Guilden Sutton, near Chester. This play, he remembered, was performed by boys in their early teens. Other characters in this play included 'Paddywack', 'Dairydoubt', and sometimes a 'Sailor'. Poignantly, Reverend Clarke also lamented that fact that the play disappeared during WWI, never to return.

We came across 15 photographs of Soul Caking held in the Cheshire Record Office in Chester. Most of these were of the renowned Antrobus Soul Cakers and were taken in

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<sup>6</sup> Hutton, CB (1953), 'The Soul Cakers', *The Cheshire Historian 3*, Cheshire Rural Community Council

<sup>7</sup> Helm, Alex (1968), *Cheshire Folk Drama*, Ibstock: The Guizer Press, p. 11

1956. A letter also exists in the Cheshire Record Office from the BBC to the Antrobus Soul Cakers for their permission to place a sound recording of their performance at the Wheatsheaf Inn on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1955 into the BBC performance library: the princely sum of £5 guineas was offered, and the Antrobus gang duly agreed! Additionally, we came across photos of both the Comberbach and the Higher Whitley horse heads. There was also a physical copy of a script for the Comberbach Soul Caking play, dating from 1926, together with a Rudheath version, a Sandiway version dating from 1949, a Weaverham version from the same year, a Warburton 'Soul Applers' play [?] from 1950, a Lymm version of a Soul Caking song from 1931, an Antrobus hand-written version, and an Antrobus and Seven Oaks copy of 'James Wright's Version' from 1932. Interestingly, Alex Helm lists the Antrobus and the Seven Oaks plays separately.

## **Audio**

We also found five minutes (5'15") of archive audio from 1954 (not at the Cheshire Record Office) featuring the Antrobus Soul Cakers recorded by Peter Kennedy of the EFDSS<sup>8</sup>. This recording includes is a commentary by the Soule Cakers leader, Wilfred Isherwood alongside parts of the play and songs performed by members of the Antrobus Gang<sup>9</sup>. Further, two identical copies of a 45rpm vinyl recording were uncovered in the 'Fred McCormick Collection' housed at Liverpool Hope University. These rare discs were undated and did not carry a record label but were named on the sleeve enclosing the discs as: 'The Soul Cakers of Cheshire'. The recording contained a narrative of the Soul Play and four songs or part-songs. We are quite sure that this was another recording of the Antrobus Soul Cakers, but that it perhaps dates from a later piece of field work. We have now digitised this important source and as part of our project it has been sampled by electroacoustic composer Wendy Smith for her new composition.

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<sup>8</sup> English Folk Dance and Song Society

<sup>9</sup> Wilkins, David [ed.] (1997), 'Antrobus Soul Cakers (Cheshire: the last few evenings in October)', *English Customs and Traditions* [track 7], Wotton-Under-Edge: Saydisc Records CD-SDL 425

## Audio and Oral History

Following our attendance at a Congleton History Society event in which we introduced the Soul Play project on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2017 we were very fortunate to meet and interview Angela Kirk's mother Phyllis. Phyllis's father Matthew Hollinshead of Cloud Hill Farm (born 1894) was involved in a surviving (i.e. post-WWI) Soul Play in the district which visited houses and farms and also two public houses in Swettenham near Congleton. This play also used a (black) horse's head but was neither listed nor discussed by Alex Helm, although he does mention Soul Plays being performed in Timbersbrook and Astbury, both villages also close to Congleton. Phyllis was able to sing her father's variation on the soul caking song, which was melodically close to that of the Antrobus Song, but contained several important lyrical, melodic and character-based variations (in the latter case Lord Nelson, Jack Tar, and Tossopot). After a friend, Harry Johnson of Stockport, had contacted the producers of the Seamus Ennis-presented radio show *As I Roved Out* to inform them of Matthew's 'Soling Song' [sic]. Matthew was recorded discussing and performing the Soul Play introductory song (he was an accomplished accordionist) by the BBC; this was broadcast in 1953. To our great delight Phyllis still had a cassette re-recording of her father's performance and we were able to digitise this for her. We were also allowed to make a copy of Harry Johnson's letter to Matthew informing him that he had contacted the BBC, and this can be found in the appendix at the rear of this monograph.

And so, to the project; it was fascinating, funny, enjoyable and highly rewarding. We hope that Soul Plays will not only continue to be enacted by the preservationists across the county of Cheshire, but that those we were involved in creating will be re-enacted and re-articulated through time so that these important rites remain an active part of young Cheshire life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Bibliography**

It should be noted that many of the texts listed below are rare archive sources and have been found in the following collections:

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2. The Fred McCormick Folk Music Archive held in the Popular Music Resource Centre at Liverpool Hope University

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