



The Muskham Mummers

Memories from June Suter

Written by Geoff Readman

The Newark Advertiser often prompts memories for many villagers, particularly through its *Remember When* Feature. My memories of life in the village are often brought to the fore by the *25 Years Ago* and even the *50 Years Ago* weekly entries about past events. One recent entry described a theatre performance in North Muskham *100 Years Ago*. It prompted me to reflect on the important contribution that small-scale theatre companies make to the general wellbeing and social health of our local communities. I was already aware that June Suter's mother had been a member of the troupe of Muskham Mummers, who are the featured in this Advertiser entry:

100 YEARS AGO
February 9, 1921

After the entertainment given by the Muskham Mummers at North Muskham £8 has been sent to Newark Hospital and £4 distributed to the local sick.

The aptly named Muskham Mummers of 1921 were not only the predecessors of the current Muskham Players they were also following in the footsteps of generations of villagers who have sustained a strong theatrical tradition in the village; a tradition that has its roots in local performances of Nottinghamshire Plough Plays. However, The North Muskham Plough Play will feature in a separate article on the *Capturing Memories* site.

The Muskham Mummers were founded by Dr. and Mrs. Tibbits, who arrived in North Muskham in 1919. They lived in the schoolhouse, which was attached to the old school at the North of the village on Main Street, now converted into private dwellings. He was Assistant Chief Medical Officer at Shire Hall, Nottingham, and used to visit Nottinghamshire schools and she was a teacher. Immediately after their arrival, they decided to form a concert party which would perform for local charities and good causes throughout the area. They had the benefit of a professional contact in Mrs. Tibbits' sister, who was a singer in Musical Repertory Theatre in London. The Mummers used to get songs directly from her, including 'hit-numbers' from their London shows. My evidence for this is recorded in the written memories of Edith Elliott (nee Bellamy), June Suter's Mother, who became one of the pianists for The Mummers, as well as their solo soprano. In her diary, Edith recalls her first contact with Mrs Tibbits:

"I was asked to go and see Mrs. Tibbits for an audition, as someone had told her I could sing. I sang one or two songs and was chosen to be lead soprano. I remember she got one song for me which ended in Top A and I said 'I can't reach that!' She said 'you reach Top G quite easily and with a little practice you will go one note higher', and I did. When I wasn't singing I used to play for them so that Mrs. Tibbits could take part in a number".

The Tibbits' were not in Muskham for very long, perhaps only until 1922, before they moved to Nottingham. However, their contribution to the Muskham community continued, through the performances of The Mummers.

My own knowledge of The Mummers is confined to three sources: a) a few posed photographs b) the five resolutions from a company meeting and c) June's personal memories of her Mum's stories. We know that the Mummers rehearsed and, occasionally, performed in Woolhouse School. June recalls her Mum talking about the various performances, particularly the one they gave at her Mum's 21st Birthday celebration in April 1922.

There were over 100 people in attendance and June's Grandfather gave a speech at this event, only weeks before his tragic accident on the railway.

Their costumes in the photographs indicate that they were indeed a 'concert party' that would sing, dance and perform short theatrical scenarios rather than a fully-fledged theatre company that would perform full-length plays. Their costumes, which had clearly been made with care and diligence, are reminiscent of pierrots. Pierrots, as shown in the photograph below, were troupes of entertainers that were very popular in the first part of the 20th century, usually performing on the pier or a temporary stage on the beach of seaside towns.



A Pierrot troupe at Scarborough c. 1905

The costumes of The Muskham Mummers were clearly designed to capture the style of the pierrots' renowned costumes. The reason for this was that the design enhanced touring and emphasised the concept of equality, enabling the performers to adopt a range of different characters economically, by simply adding a prop, change of hat or item of additional costume.



L-R Back row: Ira Garner, Harold Phillips-Moul, Edgar Streeton, Norman J. King, Dr. Tibbits
Middle row: M. Charles, Emily Streeton, Mrs. Tibbits, Mrs. Rogers, Edith Bellamy
Front: Kathleen Bellamy

However, as the next photograph indicates, there were occasions when the performance of short scenarios must have been part of their repertoire, but I have no information about what they were. I would hazard a guess at melodramas and comic sketches, written by someone in the company.

The number of people involved is very impressive for a small village like North Muskham - there are some 23 names on these photographs and minutes combined. In her diary, June's mother also recalled some of the roles and composition of the group:

Solo soprano – Miss Edith Bellamy

Chorus and Drama – Dr. Tibbits, Mr. & Mrs. Harry Clipsham, Mr. Ira Garner, Mr. Harold Phillips Moul, Mr. Edgar Streeton, Mr. Clem Charles, Mr. Norman King, Miss King, Miss M. Charles, Miss Emily Streeton, Mrs. A. Rogers, Miss Kathleen Bellamy, Mrs. Abbot.

Pianists-Mrs. Tibbits and Miss E. Bellamy

The rather splendid costumes were bought or made by individual members.



L-R Kathleen Bellamy, Clem Charles, Miss Florence King, Norman King, Mrs. H. Clipsham, Harry Clipsham, Mrs. Tibbits

The Mummers were certainly well-intentioned with regard to their aims and priorities. The following minute is a record of one of their meetings. It provides clear evidence of their determination to ensure that none of their members profited personally from the performances and that all funds were donated to worthy causes. Their five resolutions reflect a highly committed and principled group of performers who were determined to raise funds that would contribute to the financial and social welfare of local communities and needy organisations.

Performances are recorded by June's Mum as being taken 'as far afield' as Laxton and Ossington!

AT A MEETING OF THE MUSKHAM MUMMERS HELD IN THE SCHOOL AT NORTH MUSKHAM, ON WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 28TH 1923, THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTIONS WERE MADE:-

1. "That the Party carry on, as formerly, with the intention of helping financially, any cause considered deserving in their opinion."
2. "That no member shall benefit financially, nor shall any member be expected to give anything except his or her services, (unless by mutual agreement) all expenses to be paid out of the party funds."
3. "That the party makes no charge for giving an entertainment, asking only, that the body for whose benefit the entertainment is given, pay the expenses incurred."
4. "That any member of the party resigning, do so in writing, and that on the enrolment of a new member, the same shall signify his or her adherence to these resolutions, by adding his or her signature to the list appended."
5. "That the party retain all rights of ownership of staging, curtains, music, costumes, cash in hand, and any other properties now held, or which may be acquired, by the MUMMERS, and in the event of the dissolution of the party, dispose of all properties in whatsoever manner they consider advisable."

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, BEING MEMBERS OF THE MUSKHAM MUMMERS, ENTIRELY APPROVE OF THE RESOLUTIONS HEREWITH ATTACHED.

LADIES

Nora A. Smalley
Frances M. Rick
Fiona Rogers
Madeline M. Charles
Lilian Clipsham

GENTLEMEN

George Rick
Harry Clipsham
Sidney Smalley
E. Worthington
Thomas E. Charles
Clement R. Charles

One should not read too much into the minute of a single meeting, but there is a subtext that suggests that this was a meeting to reaffirm company priorities and agree how the group would operate in the future. Perhaps the departure from the village of Dr and Mrs Tibbits in 1922 had created some uncertainty? Nevertheless, as their first resolution states, they were determined to “carry on, as formerly”.



Clem Charles and Miss Florence King

The Mukham Mummers were, as June’s Mum describes, a concert party that would include songs, dance and simple theatrical scenarios. They would all play parts that suited their ability and personality and, as reminiscent of the increasing number of concert-parties that were popular in the early part of the twentieth century. They were composed of family members and friends who shared a belief that theatre, in all its forms, has the capacity to sustain the wellbeing and raise the spirit of human beings.



L-R Back row: Ira Garner, Harold Phillips-Moul, Clem Charles, Norman King, Harry Clipsham, Edgar Streeton, Dr. Tibbits. Middle row: Mrs. Abbot, Mrs. Clipsham, Mrs Rogers, Miss Florence King, Edith Bellamy. Front row: Kathleen Bellamy, Mrs. Tibbits, Emily Streeton

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