

The Dorset Ooser



by Daniel Patrick Quinn

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Foreword by the author

Information from previous times, on different generations of human beings and their various modes of existence, is often deeply fascinating. I think this is because previous times are, by their very nature, unreachable, and therefore in some ways sacred. The beings that constructed the great pyramids in Egypt, are thousands of years away from me now, as I write, here in London, in the year 2000. It remains forever impossible for me to reach their world, and this unattainable wish creates a huge wonder and magic in my mind. Because of this magical feeling that I experience, I often romanticise about leaving this time and this place to visit another time and another place. But it is not only faraway worlds such as that of ancient Egypt that are capable of creating this incredible magic. There are plenty of unreachable worlds closer to home, in terms of both space and time. The following account is an example of a closer, but equally magical, world, one less explored than that of the Egyptian pyramids. This world is that of The Dorset Ooser.

What follows is the culmination of a few years' near obsession with a strange mask that few have heard of. This is a book that I simply had to write. The primary aim of this account is to regenerate, as far as is possible with such an obscure beast as the one with which I am dealing, interest and magic in the minds of other people. I hope that the wonder that the history of the Ooser has created in my mind will spill over, albeit temporarily, into the world and the time of the individual who reads the following.

Daniel Patrick Quinn
London, September 2000.
danpquinn@googlemail.com

Introduction

The Dorset Ooser is an item of nineteenth century Dorset folklore, a mask that is now almost lost to this world and to this time. Unfortunately, very little useful information exists about the Ooser today, and as a result, as is the case with some many fascinating historical items, this wonderful folk mask has been somewhat neglected by modern authors. This is not to say that nobody knows about the existence of the mask - most Thomas Hardy enthusiasts have surely wondered what he meant by the word 'ooser', which crops up on two occasions in his works. And several of the older inhabitants in the village of Melbury Osmond recall numerous individuals having researched the mask over the years. However, because of how long ago the events occurred, knowledge of them is undoubtedly diminishing. Every so often, a folklore researcher, or a Dorsetshire historian, comes across the few details about the mask that exist, becomes intrigued, but, because of the lack of useful sources, pursues information on the mask no further. Occasionally someone will write a page on the mask in a Dorset magazine or newspaper. But no authoritative account on the Ooser has until now been given. The longest text on the Ooser up until now was only three pages long. I felt this did not do justice to such a wonderful mask with such a wonderful history. There is more information to be found, if one looks hard enough. And it would be a great shame if this information were not preserved for the benefit of future generations, who might also be intrigued by the tale of the Ooser. This text is not merely about an ugly old Dorset mask. It is about the family who once owned the Ooser, the Caves of Holt Farm, and it is also, to a certain extent, a historical study of the way people lived in rural Dorset during the nineteenth century.

The mask is the owner of a wonderfully curious history. The following is a brief summary of the main events that took place during the nineteenth century with regard to the Ooser itself. The grotesque mask, consisting of a human face with horns, had been owned by the Cave family of Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond, Dorset, for 'time out of mind'. During the mid-nineteenth century, the large, horned beast was kept in the malt house in Melbury Osmond, and seems to have been viewed by many of those living in the village as an object of considerable terror and ugliness. The appearance of the Ooser is, without doubt, shocking, and the expression that the semi-human face conveys is one of horror and despair. Thomas Cave attempted to sell the Ooser in the early 1890s, without success. The mask was advertised for sale in 1891 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries'. Thomas Cave was also communicating with two or three gentlemen during the first few months of 1892, by which time he was living in London. However, it appears that nobody purchased the mask. The story goes that Thomas's brother, Doctor Edward Cave, had the Ooser in his possession when he lived and worked in Crewkerne in Somerset, just prior to the turn of the century. Edward then moved, in 1897, to Bath. Apparently he left the mask in the care of the family coachman back in Crewkerne, and when Doctor Cave asked after the Ooser subsequently, the mask was nowhere to be found. There are two ¹ main theories as to what happened to the Ooser at this point, and at first I had

trouble reconciling them with one another. Sadly, both of the theories are rather lacking in detail. One source states that the coachman admitted having sold it to a stranger, unaware of its value. Another suggests that the Ooser was, by this time, kept

¹ There have been several tentative suggestions over the years as to what became of the mask, but it is only these two theories that have any evidential support from sources whatsoever.

by a Doctor Webber in his Crewkerne loft where it is supposed to have eventually crumbled to dust. Either way, the Ooser's whereabouts are still unknown, and there have been no reported sightings of the original mask for over a century. Therefore it does seem highly likely that the mask has now been disposed of. But what is known about the Ooser? What was the mask used for? Who was it used by? Who made it? What was the mask's significance in Dorset? And what really happened to the Ooser? These are just a few of the surprisingly difficult questions that I will attempt to answer in this account of the mask and its history. But first a few brief words must be said about masks and mask wearing in general.

The history of mask wearing is an ancient one. Whether it is as a representation of good or evil, for religious or non-religious purposes, the very concepts of impersonation and disguise go back many thousands of years to before records of any such activities began. Broadly speaking, the purpose of masks is to accompany, or perform in, ceremonies and other celebratory human events or groupings of special significance. The use of masks throughout the ages has been widespread, and because of this, there is great variation as to what masks have symbolised. The wearing of masks in Ancient Zapotec rituals represented taking on superhuman powers and revealed respect for certain spirits and forces. In Pre-Christian Celtic culture, masks often symbolised fertility and regeneration. Many African tribes use masks to signify the transition from childhood to adulthood, and also to call for rain. And in nineteenth century Dorset, masks were used in Yuletide mumming plays and 'skimmity riding', more of which later. Unsurprisingly, the type of materials used to construct masks is also very varied. Masks have been made from wood and clay and more recently from fibreglass and paper mache. The fact that masks are made from all sorts of materials and for all sorts of purposes is quite simply due to the fact that disguise and impersonation are such fundamental human concepts. Therefore, the use of masks, of one sort or another, will probably continue as long as the human race does.

My personal interest in the Dorset Ooser mask began when, just casually flicking through the pages, I saw a picture of the mask in a book² on witchcraft. The book gave remarkably little information on the Ooser, but the appearance of the strange mask, and its incredible name, intrigued me. Little did I know what a huge effect my chance encounter with this odd picture would have on the next few years of my life. I decided to write to several libraries and other similar institutions, and see what information I could lay my hands on. The Guildhall Library in London was the first to reply, and the curious information it gave served only to heighten my enthusiasm. It mentioned a family, the Caves, of Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond, and that the whereabouts of the mask were currently unknown. The mention of people and a place in connection with the Ooser, and that the mask was missing, certainly encouraged my imagination. My interest in the Dorset Ooser gripped me so strongly that I had no other choice but to arrange to have a few days in Dorset, during October 1996, in order to further investigate the Ooser. I convinced a friend, Jav, to join me on my expedition, and he agreed. I hoped to find some other sources of information on the mask that might add substantially to what I already knew. Furthermore, I desperately wanted to visit Melbury Osmond to take some photographs of Holt Farm and the surrounding area.

Melbury Osmond is a small, beautiful village, located about six miles south of Yeovil. There are three Melburys in all; Melbury Osmond, Melbury Sampford and the fantastically named Melbury Bubb. The "Melbury" entry in the "Concise Oxford

² See Hughes, P., *Witchcraft*, Penguin Books, 1965, pages 110 and 111, plus photographic illustration.

Dictionary of English Place Names” lists the village name as Saxon, meaning a multi-coloured hill, which could well be a reference to nearby Bubb Down Hill. The origin of the “Osmond” in the village name is less certain, but the most accepted theory is that the name comes from the eleventh century Saint Osmund, Bishop of Sarum ³. It is nineteenth century Melbury Osmond with which this book is primarily concerned. Even today, a great deal remains of that time. Until 1995, when it was untimely chopped to pieces, the great Melbury Oak stood by the main road entrance to the village, and it had stood there for well over three hundred years ⁴. My good friend Mrs Engley drove us northwards along the wonderful A37 from Dorchester up to Melbury Osmond. The signs modestly decorated with the words “Melbury Osmond” genuinely excited me. We finally arrived in the village, parked the car near the church, and made our way to the northerly part of the village, known as Holt.



Fig. 2. The narrow lane from Melbury Osmond village to Holt.

As I wandered along the narrow lane to Holt, I imagined the Ooser being carried along the very same village lane beneath the very same oak trees. It was incredible to think that the Dorset Ooser had once been here, in this space that my body was now occupying. The village seemed almost eerily quiet and the dull autumn sky above us gave the land beneath a timeless and eternal quality. Even the photographs I took on that October day partly succeeded at capturing the magical feeling that enveloped the village. This magic to which I refer was not external; its origins were inside me, among a multitude of powerful and excited thoughts and sensations, thoughts and sensations that are regenerated every time I look at the photographs taken on that day. Despite this romanticism, I must admit that if I had been present in Melbury Osmond when the Ooser stalked the streets, despite finding

³ See Barter, C.H.S., *Melbury Osmond – The Parish and its People*, Shadwell Keenan Ltd, October 1996, page 4.

⁴ As Major Barter explains, the huge Melbury Oak was unnecessarily destroyed by the authorities in 1995 in order to make way for road-widening of the A37.

the mask very curious, I do not believe it would have made such a great impression on me as it does now, over one hundred years away. This is because the past is untouchable and mysterious. You cannot gain full access to it. It is not *here* and it is not *now*. There lies much of the charm of researching the past. There are essentially two quite different realities; what actually happened all those years ago, and our modern perceptions of what might have happened. The present, perceptual, reality is the collection of sources that we can use today to help lead us to some sort of knowledge about the past. The second reality is actually what happened in Dorset during the nineteenth century. The second reality is a lost reality, and all we can do is hope that the present reality resembles, as closely as possible, the past reality.

After having pondered these thoughts for a while, I found that I had reached Holt, my final destination of the 'research holiday'. Although there was nobody at home at Lower Holt Farm, I managed to find Mr. E.W.S.Green, to whom I had written several weeks previously, at Higher Holt, flanked by a savage-looking pack of dogs. Mr Green suggested that we contact Mrs. Stenhouse, of North End Farm, whose family had apparently been living in Melbury Osmond for many generations. Although Mrs Stenhouse had heard of the Ooser, she phoned her cousin, Muriel, whom she thought would be the best person to contact in the village. Muriel was very interested in the Ooser, but could not add to my collection of information. We also spoke with David and Margaret Courage, but perhaps inevitably, little could be added, in terms of facts, to what I knew already. I was slightly disappointed, although I did not expect to find in Melbury Osmond anything substantial that others before me had not unearthed. None of the inhabitants of Melbury Osmond would have been alive when the Ooser graced the village with its presence, so I could not have realistically expected to learn anything new. The only living things today that had been witness to events I could no longer find out about were the huge oak trees standing above me. Nevertheless, my 'research holiday' had been very enjoyable, and also deeply memorable. I wrote and received several more letters over the following months, but at this point I felt I had found all the major information that there was to find. So I put my Ooser folder away.

Three years later, during a tidy up, I looked through the information I had collected those years ago, and my interest in the Ooser was regenerated. I decided that it would be a terrible waste not to organize the information I had found, and write an account on the Ooser, since there was no definitive one available. I forced my research onwards, and this is the result.

My query regarding the Dorset Ooser was published in the 'Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset' journal, in March 2000, volume XXXIV. Again, I thought it unlikely that I would find out any important new information, but I thought it was worth a try. I desperately wanted to locate the photographic archives of the Chaffin firm of Yeovil, in order to determine when the two Ooser pictures had been taken, and if there had been a third or even a fourth picture. I also wanted to find out all I could about the Crewkerne carnival procession that Doctor Webber's coachman referred to. I wondered if any readers had pictures of, or information about, this procession, which occurred sometime around the turn of the century, and if so then a further picture of the Ooser might well be amongst the crowds. I was, however, later told that the newspapers of the time had not yet begun to include photographs with their articles. Therefore it would be unlikely for me to find a third picture of the mask, even if one had existed. Despite the lack of replies, I thought it wonderful that the Ooser had now

been mentioned in 'Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset'⁵ over one hundred years apart.

During March, I also wrote to several newspapers in Dorset and Somerset to see if any readers could help me in my project. Notably, both the Western Gazette and the Dorset Echo offered to print an article about my quest, offers that I of course agreed to. In response to one of the articles, Major Charles H. S. Barter wrote to me, very kindly enclosing a copy of his book, or, as he puts it, 'monograph', about Melbury Osmond, entitled "Melbury Osmond – The Parish and its People". Major Barter also put me in touch with a former Rector of Melbury, who had lived in the village as a child, Canon Linley D. Blathwayt. He told me that he recalled hearing the Ooser being talked about a few times over the years, but nothing particularly significant came to mind. I also contacted Margaret Courage again, who kindly wrote to me with information of the two Cave family graves in Melbury Osmond churchyard.

On April 30, 2000, I visited Melbury Osmond once again. As I stepped off the train at Chetnole railway station, a wave of excitement came over me. I was back in the county of Dorset, that incredible county that contains not one single stretch of motorway, and the hot sun was shining down upon me. The lush green that surrounded me made a welcome change from the claustrophobic grey of London to which I had grown familiar. I made my way towards the A37, through the tiny hamlet of Stockwood. To the left of the road, I could see the small chapel where Thomas Hardy's grandmother had once worshipped.

When I finally reached Melbury Osmond, after a good half-hour of walking, I made my way along the lane to the churchyard to examine the graves. William Cave, the father of Emma, Thomas, and Edward, is buried there, as are other Cave families that lived in the village during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many of these people, if not all of them, would have known the Ooser very well indeed. I then continued through the village to the watersplash, next to which stands Chapel Cottage. The Ooser had been kept on this site during the mid-nineteenth century, when a malt house stood there.

I then walked back through the village and back along that same lane I had walked some years before to Holt. Higher Holt had not changed, but Lower Holt was barely recognisable, having been extensively renovated. I then walked back to the village in order to visit David and Margaret Courage. Margaret mentioned that not many of the older generation that had been in the village when she first moved there were comfortable talking about the Ooser. Even during the 1960s, it seems that the Ooser was still regarded as an evil or terrifying figure by many who wished it were not associated with their quiet, picturesque Dorset village. However, the Courages had known one old lady who used to laugh a great deal about the Ooser. But the majority of the older generation certainly viewed the mask with suspicion. Margaret also showed me several old photographs of Melbury Osmond village, and explained to me that Thomas Cave, once owner of the Dorset Ooser mask, had actually lived in the house where she now lives.

The thought that Thomas Cave had actually wandered the same garden that I was now sitting in was quite incredible. And, of course, the mask itself may well have been here too, on this very spot. My imagination was running wild, just as it had done

⁵ The journal was founded in 1888, and one of the most valuable pieces on the Ooser was written in 1891, by the then Dorset Editor, Canon Mayo.

a few years previously. Margaret also revealed to me that an inhabitant of Melbury Osmond owned a modern ooser mask, more of which later.

During June 2000, after having consulted various Wills left by the Cave family, I set off on yet another ooser-related expedition. This time, I visited a small town named Wye, just east of Ashford, Kent. I managed to locate the grave of Thomas Cave and his wife, Matilda, in the churchyard by Wye College, where Thomas had been Vice-Principal previous to his death in 1929. And during July 2000, I located the grave of Thomas's younger brother, Doctor Edward Cave, in Lansdown Cemetery, Bath.



Fig. 3. The grave of Doctor Edward Cave in Lansdown Cemetery, Bath.

I searched the overgrown graveyard by Beckford's Tower⁶ but since many of the neglected headstones were crumbling apart, I began to fear that I would not be able to locate Edward's grave. Most of the gravestones in Lansdown Cemetery looked as though they had not been visited for more than fifty years. My fears grew and grew as I checked each lonely slab. I slowly made my way over to the last far corner of the graveyard. Several graves lay there, all names and dates hidden by long grass.

I moved towards a gravestone and lifted up the long strands of grass. I read the message. 'In Loving Memory of Edward John Cave'. I had found it at last. Edward was buried here, in the far corner, next to an old stone wall. Looking over the wall, I was presented with a magnificent view of the city of Bath below.

This marked the final chapter in my research. I had traced the Cave family throughout their lives, and now I had finally found the one last resting place, the one

⁶ William Beckford (1760-1844), a wealthy and eccentric man, commissioned Henry Edmund Goodridge to build the tower in 1827. Lansdown Cemetery was once part of an impressive mile-long landscape that reached from Lansdown Crescent to Beckford's Tower.

last episode, of both of the two Cave brothers, Thomas and Edward. I wonder if they even considered that a century on in time, and a book might be written about them and their curious mask.

Descriptions of the Ooser's Appearance

In terms of appearance, the Dorset Ooser was an utterly unique mask. The extraordinary features of the face are so wonderfully imperfect and distorted, that it would be virtually impossible to produce a mask today that looks even reasonably similar to the original. Indeed, all modern oosers that I have seen have fallen short of capturing the intense and terrifying gaze that the original Ooser so importantly emitted. The most impressive modern ooser is that belonging to the Wessex Morris Men, yet even their mask seems unquestionably friendlier than the original.

The hollow, painted mask was huge, measuring over two feet across. The Ooser was constructed from wood, and therefore would have been very heavy and cumbersome indeed. As I have already briefly mentioned, the Ooser had a shocking and vivid semi-human facial expression, particularly the fear-inspiring, agonising eyes, which peer ahead in great terror. The appearance of the Ooser is certainly one of deep, other-worldly despair. Undoubtedly, this horrific expression is what originally ignited my interest in the mask. And so essentially, it is the troubled appearance of the Ooser that is responsible for this book ever being written.

The following is Canon Charles Herbert Mayo's 1891 description of the Ooser from 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries', of which Canon Mayo, of Longburton Rectory, was the then Dorset Editor.

The object itself is a wooden mask, of large size, with features grotesquely human, long flowing locks of hair on either side of the head, a beard, and a pair of bullock's horns, projecting right and left of the forehead. The mask or ooser is cut from a solid block, excepting the lower jaw, which is movable, and connected with the upper by a pair of leathern hinges. A string, attached to this movable jaw, passes through a hole in the upper jaw, and is then allowed to fall into the cavity. The Ooser is so formed that a man's head may be placed in it, and thus carry or support it while he is in motion. No provision, however, is made for his seeing through the eyes of the mask, which are not pierced. By pulling the string the lower jaw is drawn up and closed against the upper, and when the string is slackened it descends.⁷

The above description is a particularly valuable one, since it is contemporary with the original Melbury Ooser's existence, and is, in fact, the earliest known description of the mask to have been published⁸. Mayo's description is also very detailed. He must have either examined the mask himself, or else been given the information by Thomas Cave, since inspection of the photograph that was included along with Mayo's description in 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' could not have provided such detailed information as is given above. However, Canon Mayo's

⁷ See Mayo, C.H., Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset – "The Ooser" vol. II Part XVI, December 1891, page 289. Rev Mayo was the then Dorset editor for the journal.

⁸ To my knowledge, the first ever time the word 'ooser' was featured in print was in William Barnes' "Glossary of the Dorset Dialect", published in 1863.

description does leave out a few important pieces of information regarding the appearance and construction of the mask, namely the following points.

A rounded boss was situated in the centre of the forehead, just above the huge eyes. There is no obvious or immediate explanation for this curious 'lump', although it has been supposed by some to represent a 'third eye'. Some Eastern religions believe that the human body's highest source of power, supernormal sight and clairvoyant vision is located in the space between the eyebrows. However, there are absolutely no sources whatsoever to suggest that the Ooser was connected with any Eastern religions, and it does seem highly speculative, to say the least, to suggest such. The Ooser's 'third eye' therefore remains a peculiar mystery.

In a newspaper article of 1918⁹, Emma Cave, whose family had previously owned the Dorset Ooser, suggested that the wearer of the mask looked out through the mouth since the eyes were not pierced. This is highly plausible because even if the eyes had been pierced, the size of the mask would have made it impossible for the wearer to see out of both holes simultaneously.

In a magazine article on the Ooser by Frank Thorne, the author adds that 'the horns were painted red and one was straight while the other was curved forward'¹⁰. He also says that the eyes too were painted red. Examination of the two photographs of the mask leads me to the conclusion that one of the horns is indeed curved forward, but I am unable to ascertain the colour of the horns and eyes. However, because his source of information is correct about the position of the horns, it is not unreasonable to believe him in regard to the other points he makes about the Ooser's appearance. Thorne first heard of the Ooser from his 'great uncle Frank', who apparently saw the original Ooser in Melbury Osmond as a young man. Great uncle Frank also suggested that the face might once have been painted white.

It has been suggested that whoever wore the Ooser over his head may have also worn a calfskin cloak. William Barnes (1801-1886) suggests this in his definition of the term 'Ooser' which was included in his 1863 'Glossary of the Dorset Dialect'. Since Barnes's piece of information is from the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the Dorset Ooser was still in existence, it must be accepted as reasonably reliable information. Examination of the information given in the newspaper article of 1918 leads me to believe Emma Cave was unsure if a calfskin cloak was worn in addition to the mask. This is simply because even the Cave family themselves did not know of any instances when the Ooser had been properly used for its intended purpose other than for frightening children away from the malt house. This of course leads directly onto the question of how old the mask itself actually was. The Cave family had owned it for 'time out of mind', but seemed rather puzzled as to the intended original purpose of the mask. This lack of knowledge on the Cave's part certainly suggests that the mask was of a considerable age. Ultimately, we will never know for sure whether or not a calfskin cloak was worn in addition to the original Ooser mask, yet, today, when the modern ooser belonging to the Wessex Morris Men is used in ceremonies, a calfskin cloak is worn along with the mask.

H.S.L.Dewar actually questioned whether the head itself was the Ooser, or whether it was the wearer, who may have worn other items of disguise, who was given the name. Sadly, the answer to Dewar's query is, I suspect, an unobtainable one

⁹ See West Sussex Gazette, June 13th, 1918, page 3.

¹⁰ See Thorne, F., Dorset Life magazine – "Of Masks and Mockery. The Dorset Ooser", December 1987, page 60.

now. Because this information is now lost to the past, the term “Ooser”, for me, refers to the mask itself, not the wearer or any additional costumes. I suppose there are two different Oosers in this sense, anyway. For those individuals today who read about the Ooser, it is the disappeared mask that they read about. They know nothing in real terms about the mask ever being worn, other than what they read. An Ooser for the modern reader, myself included, is simply a curious mask. For those who lived in Melbury Osmond during the early nineteenth century, the word “Ooser” may well have conjured up images of a man wearing the mask, possibly dressed in additional clothes, such as animal skins. So, in terms of perception, the Ooser has been two distinct entities over the past few centuries. When I talk of the Ooser, I talk of the mask itself.



Fig. 4. The original Dorset Ooser mask.

Thankfully, two wonderful photographs of the Ooser exist. The first is a close up, at a slight angle, of the extraordinary features and unique despairing gaze. The second photograph is from further away, the Ooser staring straight at the camera, and clearly not wishing to adopt a more friendly expression. In this picture the mask is shown supported on a small ornamental table. Examination of the two photographs leads me to the conclusion that they were both taken on the same day, and therefore by the same photographer. The position of the hair is identical in both pictures, as is the general condition of the mask. It is clear in the second photograph that the mask had been fixed at the base to a wooden rest, indicating that it had not been worn for some time. The two photographs were taken by John W. Chaffin and Sons of Yeovil¹¹, probably at their Yeovil studio at 6, Hendford, sometime between 1883 and 1891. Various detailed information can be gained by examining the original photographs. I have counted the teeth, which are small and spaced apart from one another, and find that there were twenty, ten on the upper and ten on the lower. A small chain can be

¹¹ See Kelly's 1895 Directory of Somerset, pages 494 and 661.

seen in the second photograph, running from the base of the beard to the surface of the supporting table, although I am unsure what the purpose of this is.

The Chaffin photographic firm of 6 Hendford, Yeovil ¹², was established in 1862 by John Chaffin (c1827-1885) and continued under his son, John Tarver Chaffin (1856-1919). Other sons operated a branch at 65 East Street, Taunton. Both photographs are superb. They provide rich information on the appearance of the Melbury Ooser, and are, perhaps, a strong reason why any interest in the mask still exists. We are incredibly lucky that the Ooser was photographed at all. Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace Chaffin's photograph archives, and am unable accurately to date the two photographs that do exist. All that I am able to say with regard to when the photographs were taken, is the following. Firstly, on the back of Dorset County Museum's photograph of the Ooser, there is a list of awards that Chaffin's firm had won. The most recent date was 1883. Secondly, a photograph of the Ooser was included in 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' of 1891. Thus the mask must have been photographed at some point between these two dates. With regard to locating Chaffin's archives to determine a date, this seems a hopeless task at this late stage. What is more, according to a local historian of Yeovil, many of the photographic plates of the late nineteenth century firms were destroyed and very few exist today. Apparently, the original photograph plates were sometimes used as greenhouse panes since they were a particularly suitable size. If this is true, then someone in Yeovil, during the early part of the twentieth century, may well have been growing cabbages just underneath a glass pane of the grotesque Ooser.

¹² The property is currently owned by Bradford and Bingley Estate Agents.

From Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond to a Doctor's Loft in Crewkerne

How long is a hundred years? 'Ten decades' and 'One thousand and two hundred months' both seem inadequate responses. What does 'a hundred years' really mean? From one perspective, a century seems an eternity. Indeed, sometimes an hour seems an eternity. Each second, slowly, painfully, being born, living 'for a second', and then dying, giving way to the next in the long, long line that stretches ahead to the horizon and far beyond. And yet from another perspective, a hundred years seems nothing but an irrelevance in comparison to the whole vastness of time itself. Nothing but a minor blip in the inconceivably massive life of the universe. But the real question here is how close are we to events that took place a century ago? And are we able to get closer to these past times or are we uncontrollably slipping further and further away from them? Of course, the simple answer is that we are indeed continuously moving further and further away from past events, as far as what we call 'time' is concerned. And these events are ultimately unreachable to us, now. But surely knowledge and concentrative imagination can at least help us to reach out towards these other times. Surely someone who knows about a particular century-old event today is in many ways closer to the actual event itself than someone who knew nothing of the event as it occurred. That is why, despite the obvious impossibility of our being in Melbury Osmond during the nineteenth century, I believe that concentrating the human imagination on the small fragments of information that have survived this hundred-year journey, can, to an extent, transport us back there temporarily. And so back we go, over a hundred years, to rural Dorset, where a curious mask lay in wait for a victim inside a village malt house.

As 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' of 1891 reveals, the Dorset Ooser was kept in the malt-house in Melbury Osmond during the mid-nineteenth century. The then Dorset editor of the journal, Canon Mayo, wrote that 'the present owner remembers its being kept in an old malt-house in the village of Melbury Osmond, where it was an object of terror to children who ventured to intrude upon the premises'¹³. During this time, the Ooser was stored in the malt house as a sort of early form of intruder alarm system. It is not surprising to discover this, since the appearance of the Dorset Ooser would certainly do a good job of dissuading persons from entering the building. So, the mask's use at this stage was simply to scare away mischievous children. Indeed, the Dorset-born author Thomas Hardy once told an acquaintance that the Ooser could be compared to a 'bogeyman' called in to frighten naughty children into obedience¹⁴.

The mask was definitely owned by the Cave family of Holt Farm at this point, since in 1891 they admitted having owned the Ooser for 'time out of mind'. This certainly means that they would have been the owners of the mask during the middle of the nineteenth century. But when exactly was the mask stored in the malt house? All I have said so far is that it was kept there during 'the mid-nineteenth century'. Sadly, there are no sources that tell us exactly when the Ooser was left there. Thomas Cave could remember the mask being stored in the malt house, and he was born in 1858, so it must still have been there in the 1860s.

¹³ See Mayo, C.H., Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset – "The Ooser" vol. II Part XVI, December 1891, page 290.

¹⁴ See Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, 10th January 1935, page 7.



Fig. 5. Chapel Cottage, Melbury Osmond. Once the site of the village malt house where the Ooser had been kept during the mid-nineteenth century.

The Ooser must have been quite well known in Dorset at this point, because the Dorset poet and philologist, Reverend William Barnes, included a definition of the term in his “Glossary of the Dorset Dialect” of 1863. He described the Ooser as ‘a mask with grim jaws, put on with a cow’s skin to frighten folk’¹⁵.

During 1875, a villager named Henry Childs applied to Melbury House’s Lord Ilchester, the principal local landowner and employer, for permission to use the former malt house, where the Ooser had been kept, as a Chapel¹⁶. This might lead us to believe that the mask would, at this stage, have been taken elsewhere. Indeed, there is once source that states that the mask was at Lower Holt Farm at around 1875. In January 1935, a cousin of Thomas Cave, Mr B.W. Milward, of Sawbridgeworth, Herts, wrote in to the Dorset County Chronicle describing his own encounter with the Dorset Ooser. Mr Milward wrote that in about 1875, he visited Holt, and ‘first saw the ‘Ooser’ which gave me a sudden fright by meeting my cousin, Tom Cave, in the garden with it over his head in the dark’¹⁷. This certainly supports the suggestion that the mask was taken from the malt house to Holt, when the building was to become a Chapel. However, an ambiguous quote in one of Hardy’s works might well be taken as a suggestion that the Ooser remained in the malt house even when the building had become a Chapel, and therefore had been only temporarily taken to Lower Holt. In Hardy’s short story entitled “The First Countess of Wessex”, which was set in Melbury Osmond, he refers to ‘the Ooser in the church-vestry’¹⁸. Given that what

¹⁵ See Barnes, W., *A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect*, 1863, page 73, or 1886 edition, page 85.

¹⁶ See Townsend, Rev J.C., *Melbury Osmond - Its Church and People*, 1960. The Chapel was registered at Beaminster on 8th May 1875.

¹⁷ See Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, January 24th 1935, page 7.

¹⁸ See Hardy, T., *The First Countess of Wessex*, in *A Group of Noble Dames*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1912, pages 40-41.

Hardy says about the mask's location is true, which I am sure it is, since his mother, who lived in the village as a child, would have given him such information, there are two possible ways to understand this. His mention of a 'vestry' could either refer to a room within Melbury Osmond church itself, or alternatively, to the Chapel just down the lane. Given that the mask had been kept in the malt house, which then became the Chapel in 1875, it seems most likely that Hardy is referring to the Chapel, and not to a room within Saint Osmund's Church itself. Therefore it seems highly plausible to argue that the mask continued to be kept in the malt-house even after it had been converted into the Chapel, and that the mask had only temporarily been taken to Lower Holt.

The 1794 malt-house building was situated by the water-splash in the village, and now forms part of Chapel Cottage, which has been a holiday dwelling in the village since 1971¹⁹. According to Dewar, as well as having been, more recently, the Chapel, a button factory also existed on the very same spot at one time. Such a suggestion is quite plausible since many inhabitants of Melbury Osmond were involved in the manufacture of horn buttons and plated buckles during the eighteenth century²⁰.

What else of nineteenth century Melbury Osmond? According to H.S.L Dewar's invaluable article on the Ooser, 'it was often told in Melbury that a stable-hand was so frightened by the mask that he leapt through a window and 'so injured himself that his life was despaired of'²¹. Whose window we will never know. In his article, he mentions other information given to him by Mr Kenneth G. Knight of the Melbury Estate Staff. Dewar also states that the Ooser 'used to be brought to the door of the tallet (hay-loft) of a barn to terrify the children of the village should occasion call for it'²². Of course, the problem with Dewar's information is that very few, if any, of the people he spoke to would have been alive to witness the events they spoke of. Any information about the Ooser would have been given to them by previous generations. Therefore, despite being a good source of information, the evidence Dewar collected would have been more reliable had he obtained it from someone who actually witnessed the events themselves. Only the huge oaks and the grey clouds above the village had remained from that time to Dewar's time. All the human relics of that age would have died decades earlier.

If the Ooser was guarding the malt house during the mid-nineteenth century, then where were its owners, the Cave family, and what were they doing? Northwards, along the narrow lane, past Pimperne and North End, is the place known as Holt. There are two farmhouses, Lower and Higher Holt, and a mill, Holt Mill. Both farmhouses were originally built in the seventeenth century, and later altered during the nineteenth century. Higher Holt Farm is at the top of another narrow lane, and from the top, there are magnificent views towards Bubb Down Hill. The Cave family

¹⁹ See Barter, C.H.S., *Melbury Osmond – The Parish and its People*, published by Shadwell Keenan Ltd, October 1996, pages 52 and 74.

²⁰ See Hutchins, *History of Dorset*, 1774.

²¹ See Dewar, H.S.L., *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural history and archaeological society: The Dorset Ooser*, vol. 84, 1962, page 179.

²² See Dewar, H.S.L., *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural history and archaeological society: The Dorset Ooser*, vol. 84, 1962, page 179.

had been living and farming at Lower Holt for many years. But what is Holt like today? Mr Green, of Ilchester Estates, wrote to me in 1996 that Holt had been 'extensively renovated' over the previous couple of years. The buildings at Holt did indeed undergo several major changes in 1994. Lower Holt was completely renovated. And at Higher Holt, two out-buildings next to the early seventeenth century farmhouse were demolished, and one of the barns was converted into an aircraft hangar. An accompanying grass landing strip was also made, in the fields just north of the farmhouse²³. Yet despite these obvious modern changes to Holt, a great deal of the rustic nineteenth century atmosphere remains. The area retains much of what would have existed when the Cave family lived there.



Fig. 6. Higher Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond.

Census information and various Dorset Directories of the nineteenth century have led me to discover the following. In 1861, the owners of one of the cottages at Holt were William Cave (1812-1875) and his wife, Sarah Swaffield Cave (1828-1898), both born in the village. William Cave had been farming in Melbury Osmond for many years²⁴, and it seems unquestionable that both he and Sarah were from families who had lived in Melbury Osmond village for many generations.

²³ See Barter, C.H.S., *Melbury Osmond – The Parish and its People*, Shadwell Keenan Ltd, October 1996, pages 70 and 71.

²⁴ See *Post Office Directory of Dorset and Wiltshire*, 1849, page 2683. Under Melbury Osmond, William Cave is listed as farmer and maltster, and I suspect that he had been farming in the village most of his life. On the same page, two of Sarah's relatives are mentioned; John Swaffield, a baker, and Thomas Swaffield, a farmer.

With regard to William's ancestors, in 1801, there was a linen weaver of Melbury Osmond named Thomas Cave²⁵. Graves in Saint Osmund's churchyard reveal that there were several Cave families living in the village during the mid-eighteenth century.

The 1861 census lists William and Sarah as having three children, Emma Cave (1856-post 1935) Thomas William Cave (1858-1929), and Edward John Cave (1860-1934). And it is this Thomas and this Edward that would later become most associated with the Dorset Ooser and its subsequent disappearance. Their father, William Cave, died on 25th April, 1875, and his grave can be found Saint Osmund's churchyard, in Melbury Osmond, at the south side of the church, where there still stand two graves of the Cave families of the village. The graves, which are next to one another, are quite ornate and therefore the Caves must have been reasonably wealthy people. It is also interesting to note that very few gravestones of the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century still remain in Saint Osmund's churchyard. And even William's grave is becoming increasingly worn, and it is actually quite hard to make out his name. William Cave is mentioned on one side of the four-sided grave on the left of the photograph below.



Fig. 7. The two graves of several Cave families in Saint Osmund's churchyard, Melbury Osmond.

William is the last generation of the Cave family to be buried in Melbury Osmond. His wife and children all moved away from Dorset towards the end of the century. Although his sons, Thomas and Edward, are the two individuals most connected to the Dorset Ooser from today's perspective, it is highly likely that all of the Cave families of Melbury, if not all of the families in the entire village, would have witnessed the Ooser first-hand. Indeed, it is still not known, and probably never will

²⁵ See Barter, C.H.S., Melbury Osmond – The Parish and its People, Shadwell Keenan Ltd, October 1996, page 11.

be known, which member of the Cave families of the village originally came to own the mask. Did they construct it or buy it or were they given the Ooser? The answer to such a question is lost in the mists of time. The individuals now buried in Saint Osmund's churchyard took this answer, and many others, with them.

Higher Holt passed through several owners during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the Cave family remained the owners of Lower Holt Farmhouse throughout. After William's death, his wife, Sarah Swaffield Cave, took charge of the farm. In 1880, whilst still farming at Lower Holt, Thomas William Cave bought Bridge Cottage in Melbury Osmond. He rebuilt the house and lived there, off and on, until 1894.

The 1881 census lists Thomas Cave, then aged 23, as Farm Manager of Lower Holt. At this time, the Cave family farmed 404 acres of land and employed quite a number of workers. Whilst living and working at Lower Holt, Thomas Cave branded his name, "T.W.CAVE" at Lower Holt Farm. Apparently he used a sheep brand dipped in sheep dip or possibly hot tan. The name was visible on the side of the house in the granary and was burnt on corn bins inside. Lower Holt farmhouse is actually now known as The Granary.

By the 1891 census, Thomas Cave was the head of Lower Holt Farm. His mother, Sarah, had by this time moved elsewhere. Thomas Cave's younger brother, Edward, does not appear on either the 1881 or 1891 census. This means that he was not living in Dorset at these times. During 1881, he was almost certainly being educated away from home. We know that he later became a doctor, so this seems very likely indeed.

By 1889, Doctor Edward Cave was already part of a practice, Webber and Cave, in Crewkerne in Somerset, and he got married early in the year. He was a partner with a Doctor William Woolmington Webber (1856-1916)²⁶ who lived on Sheepmarket Street. Doctor Cave was living on Church Street, Crewkerne. The 1891 census lists him as still living on Church Street, but his wife had since died, and he had been left a widower, at the young age of 31. William Webber was also still at the same address, but his street had actually changed its name from Sheepmarket Street to the shorter Market Street, the name that remains today.

At some point between 1883 and 1891, the Dorset Ooser was photographed by J.W.Chaffin and Sons of Yeovil. It could be that either Thomas Cave took the mask from Melbury Osmond to Yeovil, or perhaps that his brother, Edward, took it there from Crewkerne. Either way, with hindsight, it certainly seems that the Cave family were having made a picture or two of the Ooser, before subsequently offering it for sale. It could well be that as the Cave family all went their separate ways, leaving Melbury Osmond for good, nobody really knew where to store the mask, and perhaps nobody any longer wanted the responsibility of storing such a cumbersome, yet fascinating, item. The Ooser was written about in 1891, in 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries', when Thomas Cave, still working at Lower Holt at this point, advertised the mask for sale to 'a lover of objects of local antiquarian interest'²⁷. Several months later, during February 1892, by which time Thomas Cave was living

²⁶ William Woolmington Webber, LRCP Edin., is listed in Kelly's 1883 Directory of Somerset, as Surgeon and Medical Officer and Public Vaccinator to the Nos. 1 and 2 Crewkerne Districts of the Chard Union (Workhouses) at Sheepmarket Street, Crewkerne.

²⁷ See Mayo, C.H., Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset – "The Ooser" vol. II Part XVI, December 1891, page 290.

at 86, Cannon Street, London, he was in correspondence with three gentlemen who were interested in purchasing the mask. However, one of these gentlemen later disclosed that Thomas Cave had offered the mask at a price of fifty Guineas²⁸. Nobody bought the Ooser, however, and Edward Cave took charge of the mask in Crewkerne.

Although spending time at Cannon Street, London, during 1892, Thomas Cave still had property in Melbury Osmond. But by 1894, all of the Cave family of Melbury Osmond had left the village. Thomas Cave sold Bridge Cottage to a Henry Miller in 1894. Henry Miller went on to add a small building, on the side of the house nearest the road, as a cobbler's shop.



Fig. 8. Lower Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond.

At this point the Ooser was in the possessions of Doctor Edward Cave in Crewkerne. In 1897, Doctor Cave moved from Crewkerne to 20, The Circus, Bath, where he lived and worked for many years. He was at the same address in 1919, but by 1923 he had moved several doors down, to 16, The Circus, Bath²⁹. Doctor Edward Cave left the Ooser in Crewkerne, apparently with his coachman. A Doctor Meyrick-Jones replaced Doctor Cave in his partnership with Doctor William Woolmington Webber. Some time later, when Doctor Cave asked after the mask, it was nowhere to be found.

The main enquiries into the disappearance of the Ooser took place in 1935, just months after the death of Doctor Edward Cave. These enquiries were recorded in the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper. An old lady named Elizabeth Ramsden, of Beaminster, began the 1935 enquiries. According to her research, Doctor Webber, who it would seem had re-employed Doctor Cave's coachman following his departure

²⁸ See Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, June 1917, vol. XV Part CXVIII, page 214.

²⁹ See Kelly's Directory of Somersetshire for 1919 and 1923.

to Bath, then took charge of the mask in Crewkerne. The coachman told Mrs Ramsden that he remembered the Ooser hanging in the loft of Doctor Webber's house in a poor condition, apparently now having lost the horns. Doctor Webber's coachman, Lawrence³⁰, wore it in a carnival in Crewkerne and it apparently scared many of the people. According to Mrs Ramsden, the coachman said that "the hair was coming out in tufts".³¹ Approximately two years later, a man called one day and asked Lawrence about the Ooser, which was by this time beyond repair, probably suffering from extreme woodworm. Sadly, Lawrence was unable to remember the identity of this man who called about the mask. Mrs Ramsden also mentioned, in her letter to the Dorset County Chronicle in March 1935 that Doctor Webber's house was where the new Crewkerne Post Office now stands. She stated that when Doctor Webber's house was pulled down in order to make way for the new Post Office, no sign of the Ooser was found. In 1935, the Post Office was situated at 20 Market Street³², and this could, consistently with the directory entries and census information, be where William Woolmington Webber lived.

Mrs Ramsden does not suggest that Lawrence sold the mask, but rather that it simply fell to pieces in Doctor Webber's loft. However, other sources suggest otherwise. In 1962, Mrs N.H.Marshall, daughter of Doctor Edward Cave, wrote in a letter to Roger Peers, the then Curator of Dorset Museum, in which she explained that her father had told her as a child that the Ooser mask had been sold by the coachman, thinking it of no value. One source from 1940 goes further in detail, stating the following.

Some years ago when they moved from Crewkerne it was left behind with other property and stored in a loft. Later it could not be found, and a groom admitted that a man from "up Chinnock way" had asked to buy it, and he, thinking it rubbish, had let him have it. It was not known why the stranger bought it or what he intended to do with so peculiar an object, since, from the groom's description, he did not appear to be a collector of curiosities. All inquiries at East Chinnock proved entirely fruitless; the Dorset Ooser has not been heard of since and is probably lost for ever³³.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to ascertain the source of the comprehensive information given above. The author, Christina Hole, did not leave any clues as to where she gained such details. I have been unable to discover any mention of the Ooser in any of the books listed in her bibliography. The only record of the 'groom' having been contacted was Mrs Ramsden's 1935 inquiries that certainly do not include any reference to Chinnock, nor does it even say for certain that the groom ever actually sold the mask.

³⁰ I have been unable to trace this man, Lawrence, and the source does not reveal whether this was his Christian name or his surname. I suspect it was his surname, as I have been told that Lawrence was a very common surname in the village of Merriott, just outside Crewkerne.

³¹ See Oates, C., and Wood, J., *A Coven of Scholars*, FLS Books Archive Series 1, 1998, page 41.

³² At the moment, 20 Market Street, Crewkerne, is occupied by insurance brokers.

³³ See Hole, C., *English Folklore*, Batsford, 1940, page 161.

So was the Dorset Ooser ever sold to a stranger, or did it simply crumble to dust? Since both alternatives have sources to support them, I think perhaps that both happened. That is, the mask may well have been sold in a terrible condition. This would account for both sources. This surely makes the most sense, because there seems to be no reason why Doctor Edward Cave would lie to his daughter about the fate of the mask. And why would Lawrence, the old man interviewed by Mrs Ramsden, make up a story about the mask falling to pieces? It is quite reasonable to believe that the mask, which even then was considered very old indeed, eventually succumbed to woodworm, especially having been left lying around in barns and lofts for decades.

Ultimately, there is no concrete way of determining whether or not it was sold. It must be said that it seems very likely that the mask was sold, given that the Ooser could not be located when Doctor Cave asked after the mask. It sounds as if the coachman either threw the mask away because of its poor condition, or that he did indeed sell the mask to a stranger. Or perhaps he told Doctor Cave that he had sold it, when, in fact, he had simply thrown it out. But whatever happened to the mask, there seems little hope of locating the Dorset Ooser today. Unless the mask was repaired somehow by an unknown new owner, it appears highly probable that the Ooser was disposed of during the early part of the twentieth century, and will therefore never be seen again. Despite many optimistic comments in the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper in 1935, the Ooser was never found and placed in a corner of the Dorset Museum. Several institutions have, more recently, advertised in the hope of finding the Ooser, and none have been successful. The Curator of Dorset County Museum at Dorchester acknowledges the mask as an 'elusive beast', and I personally doubt very much that the Dorset Ooser still exists. However, it is inevitable that on one future day, 20 Market Street will be knocked down. It is by no means impossible that a trace of the mask will reveal itself, a piece of matter that used to be part of the Ooser, lying there amongst a heap of rubble and waste material.

But what became of the Cave brothers subsequent to the loss of the mask? Thomas William Cave went on to become Vice-Principal of Wye College, then known as the South East Agricultural College, near Ashford in Kent. He also gave lectures on Veterinary Science. When he died in 1929, the Annual Reports reported that 'the College has sustained a great loss in the death of Mr. T. W. Cave. Mr. Cave was appointed Head of the Veterinary Department of the College in January, 1902, and Vice-Principal in 1920. One of the most able of teachers, he enjoyed the respect and affection of his students' ³⁴. Thomas William Cave is buried, alongside his wife, Matilda, in Wye Churchyard, Kent.

³⁴ See South East Agricultural College Annual Reports, 1929, page 13.



Fig. 9. The grave of Thomas Cave in Wye churchyard, Kent.

Doctor Edward Cave remained in Bath until his death in 1934. When I visited his neglected, overgrown grave at Lansdown Cemetery, it was hard not to imagine how the scene would have looked 66 years ago. Would the old stone wall that overlooks the city have been there then? Who watched as they lowered the coffin in? Was the sun shining? When was the last time Edward thought about the Dorset Ooser?

And when was the last time Edward thought about his brother? Did Edward ever desire more than what life gave? He and Thomas lived their lives, happened to own a strange mask, lost it, never saw it again, lived a bit more, and then died. Stop. Did he ever wish that he had talked to Thomas in a better way, a truer way? A way that acknowledged that they were only fulfilling various futile social roles beneath an immense and unfathomable sky, and that nothing really mattered anyway if death was real and life was transitory. 66 years later nobody cared. Nobody knew of their existence. But were they more special than anyone else? Other than accidentally owning, and losing, the Dorset Ooser, perhaps not. Despite writing a book on them, I have no idea what they were like as people. The only information I have on them is horrifically formal, and gives little away about their characters. Had I existed at the same time and space as the Cave brothers, would I have been friends with either of them? Would I have watched Edward's coffin as it was lowered in? I have never seen photographs of the Caves. I will never know them. The rules of time and space do not allow it. I can never know them.

Since it is cruelly impossible for me to break the rules of time and space, I thought perhaps I would try for second best. I would try to locate descendents of the Cave brothers. I hoped they might have heard the tale of the Ooser mask and their ancestors, and I thought in vain that they might have had old photographs of Thomas William Cave or Doctor Edward John Cave handed down to them. I consulted all the sources I had to hand, including several Wills. I knew that Doctor Edward Cave had a daughter, a Mrs N.H.Marshall, who lived on Coram Avenue, Lyme Regis, in 1962, but she has long since died and I have been unable to trace any of her relatives, or even anyone who knew her.

At the time of her death in 1938, Matilda Cave, wife of Thomas William Cave, left everything to a Doctor Thomas Storrar Cave. I presume this man to have been the son of Thomas and Matilda. I then located Thomas Storrar Cave's Will. Prior to his death in 1966, Doctor Thomas Storrar Cave had been living near Port Eynon, South Wales. In his Will he left everything to his wife, Doris Mary Cave. I contacted the occupants of the house in which Thomas and Doris had lived in to see if they could give me any further information that might enable me to contact Thomas and Mary's living relatives. Kindly, they checked various records for me, asked elderly inhabitants of the town to see what they could remember, and discovered that a Doctor Mark Vernon-Roberts, then in Canada, had known Doris Mary Cave well during her last years. Nobody in Port Eynon could recall Thomas and Mary having had any children, but they did recall either a niece or a nephew who may well still be living. Doctor Vernon-Roberts returned from Canada, and we got in touch. He wrote to me that Doris Mary Cave, a proud graduate of the London School of Economics, had been one of his patients during the early 1970s. Apparently, she was very eccentric indeed, with very firm views. Doctor Vernon-Roberts did not recall any mention of the Dorset Ooser. From what Doctor Vernon-Roberts was told by other patients, her husband, whom she referred to as "Storrar", was equally eccentric. Doctor Thomas Storrar Cave was adamant about donning a white gown and mask before entering a patient's house. Could this have been a throwback to an atavistic urge to dress up like his ancestors did with the Ooser costume? He also insisted that his medicines be made up with spring water straight from a local stream. Despite an utter obsession with his job, he had refused to join the NHS in 1948, and had therefore had very few patients indeed. From what Doctor Vernon-Roberts told me, it sounds as if this plunged the couple into poverty. He certainly got the impression that they had been living in reduced circumstances for some time. Thomas and Mary never had any children, and it seems highly unlikely that I will ever get in touch with the niece or nephew.

This was a sad end to the story in many ways. Both the Cave family themselves and the Dorset Ooser had faded away. People had lived and died, events had occurred. And then, in little time at all, people and events had been forgotten. I hope some of this text will, to an extent, preserve the memory of these people and these events.

Before The Caves

The Dorset Ooser has much in common with the Cerne Abbas Giant and Silbury Hill, in the rather odd respect that little is known about its origins and purpose. Despite being far less ancient than both of them, the Ooser too is surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty and puzzlement. Ultimately, it is extraordinarily difficult to find out precisely what the mask was used for before the Cave family acquired it. There are no sources of information from earlier times, and even a century ago people were just as unsure as to what purpose the Ooser served as we are today. What follows is therefore a discussion of the suggestions themselves, rather than being an authoritative account of exactly what the Ooser was used for, since the latter is sadly impossible now. However, this is not to say that all of the following suggestions are equally valueless. Some of the ideas are highly plausible, if slightly lacking in terms of evidence, whereas other suggestions are particularly unlikely.

There is little information to ascertain when, where, why and from whom the Cave family acquired the mask. Nor is there any information to help us find out who constructed the Ooser and where the additional materials, such as the horns and hair, came from. Without being able to get our hands on the real thing, it is difficult to answer many of these questions. Indeed, it is not even known what type of wood the Ooser was built from. Did one of the Cave family themselves assemble the Ooser simply as a means of preventing children from trespassing on their property? Or did the mask have a more important role than that? Was the mask brought back from abroad? It is fairly likely that William Cave's parents had owned the mask before him, since William's children remarked that the Ooser had been in the family for time out of mind, which surely means at least two generations. With regard to dating the original creation of the mask, common sense suggests that the Ooser could not have been constructed that long before the nineteenth century. Given that the Ooser was made from wood, and that it had been kept in the malt house in the village and then in a doctor's loft in Crewkerne where it began to fall to pieces, probably because of woodworm, it does seem unlikely that the mask could have been constructed earlier than the mid-eighteenth century.

I discussed the potential origins of the mask with Caroline Oates of the Folklore Society at University College London. She commented that it could be possible that the Ooser had been imported from another country. Horned masks were not uncommon in places such as Hungary and Austria at the time, and the prospect of the Ooser having been brought back as a souvenir should not be ruled out. Travelling abroad was a common pastime of the wealthy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Perhaps the affluent inhabitants of Melbury House returned from a holiday with the strange mask.

Soldiers also travelled extensively, and I have located a reference ³⁵ to an inhabitant of Melbury Osmond, Benjamin Miller, who joined the Royal Artillery in 1796, and served in Minorca, Egypt, Gibraltar, Portugal and Spain. He returned to Melbury Osmond in 1814, where he later died in 1865, and wrote a book about his travels. Of course, this in no way proves conclusively that the Ooser found its way to Dorset from overseas. It does, however, show that there is a distinct possibility that the Ooser's origins are foreign, given that people from the locality did indeed travel

³⁵ See *Dorset Up Along and Down Along*, edited by M.R. Dacombe, 1935.

abroad, and that there is little evidence to refute the suggestion that the Ooser was unique to the county of Dorset, if not the whole of the British Isles.

In terms of construction, there are certain parallels between the Ooser and Eastern animal masks. Like the Ooser, Chinese and Japanese festival masks have large, moveable jaws. In addition, the Ooser's 'third eye' is something normally associated with Eastern religions. Located over the pineal gland, this area of the forehead is thought by some to be of great spiritual power and significance. It certainly is a mystery how and why the mask was given its curious bump between the eyebrows. If the beast's origins were not foreign, then perhaps whoever constructed the Ooser gained a certain amount of inspiration from Eastern masks of the time. This suggestion might help to explain the 'third eye', at least.

In his attempts to propose some kind of possible origins and purpose of the mask, H.S.L. Dewar drew several comparisons with various historical folk items. He discussed the ancient origins of the use of horns in fertility ceremonies, mentioning 9000 year-old ritual skull caps found at Starr Carr in Yorkshire and antlers of the early Bronze Age found in Dorset Bowl-barrows. Dewar also cited the cave of Les Trois Freres in France, inside of which there is an ancient painting of a man disguised in horns and animal skins on one of the walls. Modern survivors of this 'horn tradition' include the ancient Abbots Bromley horn dance in Staffordshire and the Kingscote Wassailers of Gloucestershire. From this link between fertility rites and the use of horns, Dewar suggested that there was a connection between the Dorset Ooser and fertility worship. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support such a claim. That the Ooser had horns is not enough to suppose that it was a relic of ancient fertility worship. The mask could not have been that 'ancient' given the materials it was made from. And for all we know, the horns may well have been added to the mask at a later stage. Of course, more ancient folk figures may well have influenced the maker of the mask, but this would certainly not denote a direct relationship between the Ooser and fertility worship. Authors have attempted to link countless folk customs, such as Morris Dancing, with ancient fertility rites. However, there is no supporting evidence for the vast majority of these assertions.

Dewar also proposed that the Ooser had been 'relegated' through the ages. He thought that the significance of the mask had slowly diminished. He claims that from originally being an important item of fertility worship, the mask was first relegated to use in an interesting rural custom known as 'skimmity riding', which I will discuss later in the chapter, and then finally to use in the malt house in Melbury Osmond simply to frighten local children. Despite the fact that there is no evidence to support the claim that the Ooser was connected with fertility worship, this idea of downgrading importance is worth discussing. A more recent author, Frank Thorne, who was of the same opinion as Dewar, wrote that his 'great uncle Frank' spoke to him about this 'relegation'.

One of uncle Frank's comments was revealing. When he told how the Ooser had been used to frighten children he paused and said, "Ah, but then t'was fallen," meaning it had once been used for greater things.³⁶

³⁶ See Thorne, F., Dorset Life magazine – "Of Masks and Mockery. The Dorset Ooser", December 1987, page 60.

The above quotation suggests that there were either previous oosers, or alternatively that the mask had been in existence for centuries, having once been used as a 'fertility god'. Due to the materials used in the construction of the Ooser, it is impossible that the mask had been in existence for such a great length of time. Therefore I take the statement to mean that there were previous oosers, supposedly of greater significance, which is a common enough assumption made by many modern authors on the subject. However, there is very little evidence that might defend the supposition that other oosers existed. Thomas Hardy's mention of 'an ooser', as opposed to '*the* Ooser', in 'Return of the Native' could be interpreted as suggesting that there had been several at one time³⁷. If this is correct, then it means that the photographed Melbury Osmond Ooser was simply the last to have existed in a long line of ancestor oosers. However, the mere use of the Hardy reference to support the theory is clearly inadequate. It is certainly not impossible that other oosers existed, but given that no evidence whatsoever exists to support this, we have no alternative but to suppose that the Ooser was a unique mask, and that no other oosers existed. However, the possibility that other oosers existed at one time should not be completely ruled out. In terms of evidence, and evidence is what we must go on, no others are known to have existed, and it would be wrong to suggest otherwise. It is unlikely that we will ever know either way for definite.

Whilst discussing the purpose of the original Ooser, Alan Cheeseman, of the Wessex Morris Men, told me of the effect that the modern Wessex ooser has on children. They are completely and utterly terrified of it. This unquestionably supports the claim that the original beast was constructed simply to frighten naughty children, a 'bogeyman' as Hardy said, and nothing more. On the back of a local hobby horse tradition, the Ooser-bogeyman would inevitably have attracted its own set of myths and stories. This might account for the wild ideas about the mask and fertility worship. Of course, this is a far less grand suggestion than the others, but perhaps one that is closer to the truth. For me, however, this is not an adequate enough explanation of the Ooser's purpose. I am sure that the Ooser would have had some other function than simply to frighten children. It is a lot of trouble to go to, to construct such a mask simply in order to keep children away from empty buildings.

Peter Robson suggests that the mask may have been the head of a marching giant. Indeed, the Ooser was used in a carnival in Crewkerne sometime around, or just previous to, the turn of the century. But was it used for similar purposes decades earlier? Sadly, we will never know for sure. Robson likens the Dorset Ooser to the giant 'Christopher' that can be seen in Salisbury Museum. In terms of size, construction and appearance, the two are very similar, but Christopher has no horns, and is certainly not as terrifying.

Another of Dewar's suggestions was that the Ooser was a recent representation of the Devil. Although the mask was certainly frightening looking, there is no reason to suppose that the Ooser was a symbol of Satan. There have been many other authors who link the Ooser with the Devil because of its terrifying exterior. Frederick Thomas Elworthy notes the following about the Ooser's appearance in 'Horns of Honour'.

The eyes and nose are simply frightful without special meaning; but the grinning, opening and shutting jaws reproduce that voracious, malignant mockery which we have seen to be the conspicuous

³⁷ See Hardy, T., *The Return of the Native*, Penguin Classics, page 348.

attribute of the devil from the Middle Ages onwards to our own day, whether in England or Japan.³⁸

The mask was certainly scary, and was probably supposed to represent evil, given that it was used to frighten children. But it is a large jump to make from saying that the Ooser was a bogeyman to saying that the mask was some sort of manifestation of Satan. Therefore, I believe that it would be incorrect to state that the mask had anything to do with the Devil. Of course, the mask was hideous, and horrifying, but certainly not an embodiment of the King of Evil.

I will now move on to the more plausible suggestions as to what the purpose the Ooser served. The first of these is that the Ooser was used in Christmas mumming plays in Dorset. An old man of Dorchester, Henry Joseph Moule,³⁹ wrote in to 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' in 1892, with a recollection of talk of the Ooser, and a suggested link with Yuletide 'mummers', literally meaning 'wearers of masks'.

The note about the Ooser calls back old times. In my childhood he was doing service - at Christmas mummings surely it was. Our Cerne Abbas nurse was quite up in all relating to the 'Wurser', as I should spell it phonetically. I did not know of the horns, indeed in our embryo Latinity we thought the word an attempt at Ursa, if I remember rightly. What crowds of odd bits I could note if, alas, I did but 'remember rightly' all the nurse's folk-lore and folk-speeches.⁴⁰

It is unlikely that Henry Moule himself saw the actual Dorset Ooser, since he recalled no horns attached to the mask he remembered. He was very probably confusing it with similar other masks used in the mumming plays. Indeed, there were certainly other comparable jawed 'creatures' in existence at the time. In Dorset were the Shillingstone Bull from near Blandford Forum, and the Symondsbury hobby horse near Bridport. Further afield there were hobby horse figures in places such as Padstow and Minehead. Moule's error is understandable since the appearance of the Ooser is certainly reminiscent of ancient mumming masks. Strutt makes the following point in regard to the appearances of the masks used in mumming plays.

The actors took upon themselves the resemblance of wild beasts or domestic cattle, and wandered about from one place to another...those concerned in it were wont to clothe themselves with skins of cattle and put upon them the heads of beasts.⁴¹

The Ooser could certainly be described as a 'beast' and it has been proposed that whoever wore the mask was also dressed in animal skins. In addition, Mayo, after

³⁸ See Elworthy, F.T., *Horns of Honour, and other studies in the by-ways of archaeology*, Murray, 1900, page 143.

³⁹ The Moule brothers were close friends of Thomas Hardy. See chapter entitled "Hardy and the Ooser" for more.

⁴⁰ See Moule, H.J., *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset* – "The Ooser" vol. III, 1892, page 27.

⁴¹ See Strutt, J., *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, 1831, page 250.

having described the Ooser, in 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries', went on to say that it 'reminds us of the animal heads worn by 14th century mummers' ⁴². On these reasonably stable grounds, there seems, initially, to be a definite link between the Dorset Ooser and the masks worn in mumming plays. However, Peter Robson, a Dorsetshire folklore expert, notes that 'since the ooser has humanoid rather than bovine features it seems unlikely that it was used as a midwinter visiting animal mask'. Unfortunately, no reliable references to its being actually used for such occasions exist, either.

Besides, according to descriptions of the Melbury Ooser, and to the detailed explanations of the construction and dimensions of the Wessex Morris Men's modern ooser, the mask would have been too large and too heavy to be used in mummers' plays. When worn, the top of the Wessex ooser mask is over seven feet off the ground. On the basis of the available sources, and the dimensions of the Ooser itself, it does seem implausible that Christmas mummers ever used the mask. The distinction must be made between the Dorset Ooser, and mumming masks in general. The Ooser seems to have been an utterly unique mask, and was certainly not a hobby horse.

However, this is not to say that Moule's 'nurse' never saw the Melbury Osmond Ooser. In fact, given the age of the source, and the great probability that the Dorset Ooser was reasonably well known in the Dorset area at the time, it is pretty likely, although by no means definite, that she did see the beast at some stage.

With regard to other suggestions as to what purpose the Ooser served, it seems very likely indeed that the mask was used in a form of popular moral protest, not uncommon in nineteenth century Dorset, known variously as 'skimmerton', 'skimmington', 'skimmity riding' and 'rough music'. Skimmington was a procession, the aim of which was to humiliate publicly an unfaithful or badly behaved spouse. Adultery, sexual irregularities, wife or husband beatings, and other activities deemed immoral or unorthodox were viewed with suspicion and looked down upon in village communities. Roberts gives three causes for which the skimmity takes place, as follows.

- (i) When a man and his wife quarrel and he gives up to her.
- (ii) When a woman is unfaithful to her husband, and he patiently submits without resenting her conduct.
- (iii) Any grossly licentious conduct on the part of married persons. ⁴³

In Dewar's article, he states that 'at Melbury it is related that the Ooser was brought out and paraded to complete such a show' ⁴⁴. His source of information was a Mr Kenneth G. Knight of the Melbury Estate Staff, and bearing in mind that Dewar's article was first published in 1962, it is not likely that Mr Knight ever actually witnessed an event first hand. This means that we cannot, purely on the basis of this evidence alone, conclude absolutely that the Ooser was used in these village revels. However, Mr Knight probably got his information from a member of the previous generation of Melbury Osmond village, and I think that therefore it is not

⁴² See Mayo, C.H., Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset – "The Ooser" vol. II Part XVI, December 1891, page 289.

⁴³ See Roberts, History of Lyme Regis, 1834.

⁴⁴ See Dewar, H.S.L., Proceedings of the Dorset Natural history and archaeological society: The Dorset Ooser, vol. 84, 1962, page 179.

unreasonable to say that it is quite possible that the Dorset Ooser was used for such a purpose.

Dewar also stated that skimmity riding is illustrated in Montacute House, on the border between Somerset and Dorset. Mr Edward Phelps, the son of the then owner of Montacute House, Mr W.R.Phelps, discussed the objects of interest in the house in 1908, during a visit of the Dorset Field Club.

The interest of the room centres in the plaster work at the northern end of the room representing the old custom of 'Riding the Stang', or 'Skimmity Riding'. The story represents the master of the house helping himself to beer with one hand, while with the other he nurses the baby. His wife is just about to chastise him with her shoe, while an interested neighbour is watching the proceedings from the background. The sequel is also shown, when the poor man is paraded round the village, exposed to public ridicule for his inability to keep his wife in order.⁴⁵

In most skimmity rides, two stuffed figures, or indeed actual human impersonators, were dressed in a way to represent, and indeed ridicule, the couple, and seated back to back on a horse or donkey, or as Roberts mentions, sometimes a cart. In his 'English Dialect Dictionary', Joseph Wright adds the following.

The party assembles before the houses of the offenders....and performs a serenade for three successive nights. Then after an interval of three nights the serenade is repeated for three more. Then another interval of the same duration and a third repetition of the rough music for three nights – nine nights in all. On the last night the effigies of the offenders are burnt.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Udal, J.S., Dorsetshire Folklore, Toucan Press, 1922, page 196.

⁴⁶ See Wright, J., English Dialect Dictionary, page 475.



Fig. 10. 'Skimmity Riding at Melbury Osmond' by Adam 'Jav' Latham.

The 'rough music' that accompanied the procession consisted in the beating of assorted tin pots and pans and other implements, basically anything that made a noise. Effigies or human impersonators of the objectionable individuals were carried through the village. If effigies were used, they were later 'shot at, buried or most commonly burned'⁴⁷. Occasionally, the effigies were thrown in a pond⁴⁸. In one of his letters, Sir Walter Scott mentioned that during a skimmity ride, those who are likely to receive a similar treatment in the near future were warned in an interesting manner. He wrote 'when they ride the Skimmington, it would seem they swept the doors of those whom they threatened with similar discipline'⁴⁹.

The term 'skimmington' probably derives from 'skimming-ladle' since such implements were used during the procession. Rev. Brewer tells in his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, how in a 1639 illustration of the ancient custom, 'the woman is shown belabouring her husband with a skimming-ladle'⁵⁰. Skimming-ladles were a sign of female dominance and since a husband who could not control his wife was often the subject of a skimmity-ride, this fits in perfectly.

⁴⁷ See Thompson, E.P., *Rough Music Reconsidered*, *Folklore journal*, vol. 103: I, 1992, page 4.

⁴⁸ See Carrington, B., *A Skimmington in 1618*, *Folklore journal*, vol. 41, 1930.

⁴⁹ See Udall, J.S., *Dorsetshire Folklore*, Toucan Press, 1922, page 194.

⁵⁰ See Brewer, Rev.E.Cobham., *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Cassell and Company Ltd., page 1006.

A great deal of information on the intriguing custom can be found in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*⁵¹. The custom goes back centuries, and Brand notes one similar and fascinating event that took place as far away as Spain, and as long ago as 1593.

In one of George Housnagle's "Views in Seville," dated 1593, is a curious representation of riding the stang, or "skimmington," as then practised in that country. The patient cuckold rides on a mule, hand-shackled, and having on an amazing large pair of antlers, which are twisted about with herbs, with four little flags at the top, and three bells. The vixen rides on another mule, and seems to be belabouring her husband with a crabbed stick; her face is entirely covered with her long hair. Behind her, on foot, follows a trumpeter, holding in his left hand a trumpet, and in his right a bastinado, or large strap, seemingly of leather, with which he beats her as they go along. The passengers, or spectators, are each holding up at them two fingers like snail's horns.⁵²

Other sources suggest dates almost as far back as this, one well-documented event occurring in 1618⁵³.

Besides old tin pots and pans, the rude or 'rough music' involved the use of bull's horns, and it is also said that the horse or donkey was preceded by a man carrying or wearing horns. Hardy refers to the 'lanterns, horns, and multitude' of the skimmington procession in his description⁵⁴. This all seems to suggest that there is a link between the skimmity ride and the use of horns, and this connection almost certainly has something to do with the saying 'cuckold horns'. Brand discusses the word 'cuckold' and its origins in the following passage.

I know not how this word, which is generally derived from *cuculus*, a cuckoo, has happened to be given to the injured husband, for it seems more properly to belong to the adulterer, the cuckoo being well known to be a bird that deposits its eggs in other birds' nests. The Romans seemed to have used *cuculus* in its proper sense as the adulterer, calling with equal propriety the cuckold himself "Carruca," or hedge-sparrow, which bird is well known to adopt the other's spurious offspring.⁵⁵

The notion of the cuckold, or figuratively horned man, whose wife was having an affair with another man, seems to fit in flawlessly with the suggestion that the horned mask, the Ooser, was used in skimmity riding. In Thorne's article, he supposes that the Ooser was used for this purpose, and claims that his great uncle Frank could 'just

⁵¹ See Brand, J., *Popular Antiquities*, pages 127-131.

⁵² See Brand, J., *Popular Antiquities*, page 128.

⁵³ See Carrington, B., *A Skimmington in 1618*, *Folklore journal*, vol. 41, 1930.

⁵⁴ See Hardy, T., *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Penguin Classics, page 280.

⁵⁵ See Brand, J., *Popular Antiquities*, page 131.

about remember' skimmity riding⁵⁶. The use of such a hideous item in skimmity riding would have been a particularly damning attack on the accused.

Such events of 'matrimonial lynch law'⁵⁷ took place in the nineteenth century in many parts of the country, especially rural areas. The practice had other names across the country. In many northern counties, the custom was called 'riding the stang', the word 'stang' referring to the pole which was sometimes 'ridden' by a boy, in mockery of those deemed guilty. In the county of Warwickshire, the event was apparently named 'loo-belling'. In Wiltshire, the practice was known as 'wooset-hunting', and the procession apparently included the use of a horse's skull. In fact, there are also references to similar processions in other parts of the world; 'charivari' in France, 'scampanate' in Italy, and the German 'haberfeld-treiben', 'thierjagen' and 'katzenmusik'⁵⁸. Similar processions are known on the continent as 'hussitting', and this term is thought to have originated from the name given to the movement against the early fifteenth century Bohemian martyr John Huss (Jan Hus), and his followers, the Hussites⁵⁹, a group of heretics who saw themselves as devoutly orthodox Christians. Skimmity riding is also supposed to be similar to the ceremony of the Mumbo Jumbo in Africa⁶⁰.

The practice seems only to have rather vague rules and therefore inevitable variation exists between any one procession and another. However, in all the skimmity processions, the aim was largely one and the same, although the seriousness of the performance was known to vary. But the skimmity ride was rarely a humorous event quickly forgotten by villagers. The intention of the skimmity was, most commonly, to drive the persons out of the area. As Roberts states, 'the parties for whom they ride never lose the ridicule and disgrace which it attaches'⁶¹.

The most famous account of such an occasion in Dorset is Thomas Hardy's, in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', where the skimmity ride causes the death of Lucetta Farfrae⁶². In 1882, skimmity riding was made an offence against the Highway Act, punishable by fine and imprisonment. Apparently though, such an event occurred as recently as 1917 in Dorset. Skimmington was certainly common in rural Dorset during the nineteenth century. The following quotation is a newspaper report from November 1884, referring to an event that occurred in the village of Whitchurch Canonicorum on Bonfire Night.

On Wednesday, the fifth inst., this usually quiet parish was in a state of some excitement owing to a demonstration of a peculiar character, not immediately connected with the day, which, however, was selected for the purpose by the superior judgement of the promoters.

⁵⁶ See Thorne, F., Dorset Life magazine – "Of Masks and Mockery. The Dorset Ooser", December 1987, page 61.

⁵⁷ See Udal, J.S., Dorsetshire Folklore, Toucan Press, 1922, page 192.

⁵⁸ See Thompson, E.P., Rough Music Reconsidered, Folklore journal, vol. 103: i, 1992, page 3.

⁵⁹ See Thompson, E.P., Rough Music Reconsidered, Folklore journal, vol. 103: i, 1992, page 3.

⁶⁰ See Mungo Parks, Travels in the Interior of Africa, 1799.

⁶¹ See Roberts, History of Lyme Regis, 1834.

⁶² See Hardy, T., The Mayor of Casterbridge, chapters XXXIX and XL.

About six o'clock in the evening, just as darkness began to reign a strange noise was heard, as of the sound of trays and kettles, and it was soon found that some "skimmerton riding" was in progress, such a thing not having been known for years in this parish. Three grotesquely attired figures were to be seen escorted by a procession of persons dressed in various queer and eccentric costumes, and who paraded the parish, also visiting Morcombelake and Ryal [sic]. The figures alluded to appeared personages who were very well known to them, there being a male and two females, whose past conduct had caused them to be made the subject of this queer exhibition. The two female characters were conveyed about on the backs of what are described as "celebrated Jerusalems"⁶³, which certainly seemed to enter pretty well into the joke, for one of them particularly displayed his innate agility in a surprising manner. One of the females was represented as having an extraordinarily long tongue, which was tied back to the neck, whilst in one hand she held some note paper, and in the other pen and holder. Those performing the procession were liberally "wetted" at the various inns, and after their perambulations were concluded they repaired to a certain field where a gallows was erected, and on which the effigies were hung and afterwards burnt, having been previously well saturated with some highly inflammable liquid. Nearly two hundred people assembled in the field, and a flaming light was maintained by torches. The extraordinary proceedings terminated with a fight, in which black eyes and bloody noses were not absent. However, the Riot Act was not read, the military were not called out, and the crowd dispersed about midnight, when the village resumed its wonted quiet.⁶⁴

Skimmity riding does not appear to have been an unusual occurrence in rural nineteenth century Dorset, and it seems pretty likely that the Ooser was used during these processions. The mask may have been worn by one of the actors tied back to back on a donkey, or alternatively by a member of the jeering audience.

Over the years there have been various suggestion for the origin of the term 'ooser'. Where the name came from is a very complicated question, and in all honesty, I do not believe that anybody knows the answer. Many of the suggestions are credible and interesting propositions, and all have their advocates, yet none stands out high above the rest as the definitive etymology. William Barnes, the Dorset poet and philologist, suggested in his 'Glossary of the Dorset Dialect' of 1863 that the word is derived from the Middle English 'Wurse'.

ooser, oose, or wu'se - a mask with grim jaws, put on with a cow's skin to frighten folk. 'Wurse' in Layamon's 'Brut' is a name of the archfiend.⁶⁵

⁶³ The donkeys.

⁶⁴ See Bridport News, November 14th 1884, page 4.

⁶⁵ See Barnes, W., A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect, 1863, page 73, or 1886 edition, page 85.

Sadly, there is no information to suggest whether or not Barnes ever witnessed the Dorset Ooser first-hand ⁶⁶. It is therefore interesting, although ultimately doomed, to wonder as to the source of Barnes' information on the Ooser. I suspect that his suggestion of a link with 'Wurse' was his own guess, and did not come from any reliable evidence. He had a great interest in philology and this could certainly account for an assumption such as 'Wurse'. He includes no account of how the word 'ooser' could have derived from 'Wurse', and the only real link seems to be that the Ooser mask was seen as diabolical, and presumably so was the archfiend. However, there is no evidence that the Ooser was ever known as a 'wu'se'.

Mrs E.A.Ramsden, who helped to generate interest in the Ooser during 1935, wrote in to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper suggesting that the term 'ooser' is derived from the old English dialect word 'ouse' meaning ox. 'Our word, Ooser, for a mask with animals' horns, might very well come from this old word, and mean "the Ox-man"'.⁶⁷ I think this is a reasonably plausible suggestion, given that the Ooser's horns are so prominent an element of the mask's overall appearance. However, the fact that the Ooser consisted of a human face, rather than an animal face could be a criticism of this suggestion that the word originates from an old word for 'ox'.

In 'Horns of Honour', F.T. Elworthy mentioned mediaeval Latin word 'osor', a name for Diabolus Christiani ⁶⁸. The identically spelled word 'Osor' is also the 17th century Italian term for the Devil. These two proposals both seem to echo Barnes's proposal, the link again resting on the idea that the Ooser was horrific and terrifying, and perhaps Satanic in some respects.

It has also been suggested that the term could be derived from 'guiser', 'guisard' or 'vizard', all of which are old words for mummers. It must be said, even though it is unlikely that the Ooser was ever used in mumming plays due to its size and weight, this does not absolutely rule out the possibility that the Ooser did gain its name as a result of appearing similar to a mummer's mask, since it was certainly a form of disguise.

The terms 'wooset' and 'hooset' (and variants 'houset' and 'husset') have also been proposed as the origins of the word 'ooser'. Skimmity riding was known in some counties as Hooset- or Wooset-Hunting. Given that 'hooset' is indeed similar to the pronunciation of 'ooser', and that the mask itself is highly likely to have been used in skimmity processions, this suggestion is certainly convincing. Even so, as Professor John Widdowson, of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition comments, the linguistic evidence is still too slender to provide a definitive etymology. There is simply not enough information to determine which of the above proposals is the most likely.

However, a more recent suggestion as to from where the Ooser derived its name is certainly the most interesting explanation. Peter Robson suggests that the

⁶⁶ Subsequent to the completion of this study, it has been brought to my attention by Margaret Courage that Barnes may have had first-hand knowledge of the Ooser. According to page 16 of "William Barnes the Schoolmaster" by Trevor W. Heach/Hearl (???), 1966, his brother-in-law Frederick Miles ran a boarding school in Melbury Osmond in 1823.

⁶⁷ See Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, 17th January 1935, page 7.

⁶⁸ See Elworthy, F.T., *Horns of Honour*, and other studies in the by-ways of archaeology, Murray, 1900, page 142.

term may have been a frightening sound made when the mask was used to surprise people. This idea is certainly unique, and when Peter Robson wrote to me with the suggestion, I could not believe that I had overlooked such an evident possibility. Unlike all the other suggestions made, Robson's does not rely on unlikely links with ancient terms for the Devil, and, as such, this new suggestion seems all the more plausible. The only criticism of this suggestion is that there seems to be no linguistic or other evidence that would allow it to be put unquestionably above the previous ideas expressed. However, Robson's suggestion is definitely the most commonsensical yet.

Quite incredibly, there has also been huge debate over the correct pronunciation of 'ooser'. In Dewar's article, he says that the word is pronounced 'ooss-er', with a soft 's', as opposed to 'ooze-er'⁶⁹. His source of information was Mrs. Marshall, daughter of Doctor Edward Cave, and therefore one would assume that that is the way the Cave family pronounced the term. However, there have been other suggestions such as 'osser' and 'ozer'. Thorne's 'great uncle Frank' suggested the latter term, and he claimed to have seen the Melbury Ooser. John Byfleet, who constructed the modern ooser for the Wessex Morris Men, believes that the word is pronounced 'usser'. At first, it appears to be quite absurd that there is so much debate over the pronunciation of the term, and it seems rather difficult to reconcile the various suggestions. However, there is a perfect solution to the problem. Peter Robson's suggestion that the word 'ooser' is derived from the sound made by the wearer when the mask was used to frighten people could account for these many various possible pronunciations. A term shouted in order to frighten victims of the Ooser is unlikely to have simply one correct pronunciation. If the various terms 'ozer', 'usser', 'oosser' and 'osser' are shouted aloud, as if to frighten a person, there is not a great deal of difference between the respective noises made. This gives Robson's claim further credibility. In addition to this, William Barnes's 'Glossary of the Dorset Dialect' of 1863 includes an entry for 'ooser', 'oose' or 'wu'se'. This strongly suggests that there was not one particular correct way of pronouncing the term, and that, indeed, the word may have originated from the various sounds made by the wearer of the mask when frightening people. Indeed, many of the above pronunciations sound reasonably similar to the exclamations 'who's there?' and 'who's that?', that just might have been shouted by the wearer of the Ooser mask.

The general conclusion seems to be that the Ooser was, without doubt, used for scaring people during the early and mid-nineteenth century and was also probably used in the skimmity processions that took place in Melbury Osmond and the surrounding area. Despite being fascinating, all the other suggestions as to what purpose the Dorset Ooser served plainly lack evidence to support them, and their truth or falsity is now sadly lost to the past.

Finally, a few words must be said about various erroneous pieces of information that have arisen over the years. The uncertainty and puzzlement that surrounds the origins and purpose of the Ooser has meant that there has been a great deal of misleading, and often downright ridiculous, comments written about the Dorset Ooser. Besides the comparatively sensible link to ancient fertility rites, the

⁶⁹ See Dewar, H.S.L., Proceedings of the Dorset Natural history and archaeological society: The Dorset Ooser, vol. 84, 1962, page 180. The word 'Ooser' has been mis-spelt with a 'z' by many twentieth century writers. The term was almost certainly never pronounced 'oozer', and therefore should not be spelled in this way.

mask has been associated with all kinds of nonsense such as devil worship, pagan religions, mediaeval witchcraft, and horned bull god cults in Dorset. One author even went as far as to pretend that a newspaper article from 1911 wrote that 'a man was charged with chasing girls and wearing an ooser', when by this time no Ooser even existed. It has even been stated that at one time every village had an ooser, and clearly this had never been the case.

There has also been much confusion between the Shillingstone Bull and the Dorset Ooser. Authors have supposed that they are one and the same, and this is incorrect. The Shillingstone Bull, known also as the Christmas Bull and the 'Wooser'⁷⁰, was a 'creature' from near Blandford Forum that seems to have gone about during Christmas to gather offerings from households in return for bringing good luck. The fact that the Shillingstone Bull was apparently known as the 'Wooser', and that it had horns, is undoubtedly why the two folk items have been confused. I must admit that it seems hard to believe that the 'Ooser' and the 'Wooser' were not closely connected. It does seem unlikely that the two terms did not originate from the same source. It cannot be purely coincidental. But the Shillingstone Bull was a quite different object to the Ooser, and was related to bull masks in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. The Ooser, on the other hand, consisted of a human face with horns, rather than a bull's face.

Authors have incorrectly written that the mask had been stolen from a barn at Higher Holt, that it disappeared to America, and that it was somehow returned to a witches' coven in the area. Although I totally dismiss suggestions that the Ooser now belongs to a group of witches, I do not dismiss suggestions that covens of witches exist in the county of Dorset. A person who wishes to remain anonymous has informed me that despite Dorset's apparent innocence and safety, sinister happenings take place occasionally. Witnesses to certain events, once having occurred in nearby Melbury Park, remain silent even now about exactly it was that they observed. This might be an explanation why the older inhabitants of the village did not wish to discuss the Ooser, for fear that the mask was somehow linked to these 'activities'.

⁷⁰ See Dorset Up-Along and Down-Along, edited by M.R.Dacombe, page 109, 1935.

Hardy and the Ooser

Thomas Hardy the man (1840-1928) and the Dorset Ooser mask (c1750-c1900) both happened to exist in the same time and in the same place. Because the two entities were linked in space and time, it was made possible for the mask to intrigue Hardy to such an extent that he would write about it, therefore preserving knowledge of its existence, whilst also causing thousands of his future readers to look in vain for the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. Thanks to Thomas Hardy, the word 'ooser' has had a huge audience over the past century. The number of homes that contain a book that contains *that word* is incalculable. And very few readers know what it means.

Thomas Hardy's novels are littered with information on Dorset folklore and rural English traditions of the nineteenth century, and are therefore a rich and valuable source of folk-custom information for historians. He was, of course, from Dorset, and spent the great majority of his life there. The county itself is the centre of the author's fictional Wessex, and today many people refer to Dorset as 'the Hardy country'. My favourite quote on Hardy's philosophies, which I think wonderfully encapsulates his important concept of individual versus destructive and narrow-minded nineteenth century village society, is the following, written by D.H. Lawrence.

Remain quiet within the convention, and you are good, safe and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side: or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, wilful, you will escape, and you will die, either of your own lack of strength to bear the isolation and the exposure, or by direct revenge from the community, or from both.⁷¹

The author was fascinated by rural customs, and anyone who has ever read a novel by Thomas Hardy will undoubtedly have noticed this. Two of Hardy's books actually contain brief references to the Dorset Ooser mask itself. Skimmity riding, a fascinating, yet often deeply offensive and ruinous, rural custom, with which the Ooser may well have been involved, is also mentioned, in considerable detail by the author. Hardy also had strong connections with the village of Melbury Osmond. His parents were actually married in the church there on 22nd December 1839. His mother, Jemima Hand (1813-1904), was born in 1, Barton Close, Melbury Osmond, and spent her childhood in the village. It is therefore very likely that Hardy's mother actually saw the Ooser for herself, and then told her son, with whom she had a particularly strong relationship, all about her experiences. The influence of Jemima on Thomas cannot be underestimated, since the author once commented that his whole life would have been different had his mother died whilst he was a child. Melbury Osmond is the setting for his work, "The Woodlanders" and its fictional name in Hardy's Wessex literature is Hintock. The young Jemima Hand grew up awful poverty. Her father, George Hand, was a violent alcoholic and when he died of consumption in 1822, he left his widow with Jemima and six other children to raise on her own.

⁷¹ See Introduction by George Woodcock in *The Return of the Native*, Penguin Classics, pages 35 and 36.

Mr. E.I. Stevens, an old Hardy Player of Dorchester wrote in to the Dorset County Chronicle in January 1935, describing a reference to the mask from Thomas Hardy's 'Return of the Native', first published in 1878.

.....Mr. Stevens also mentions that the origin of "oozer" was put to Thomas Hardy once when the Hardy Players were rehearsing one of their Wessex plays. "You will find that the word appears in 'The Return of the Native' in the Fourth Book, Chapter 6'. When Mrs. Yeobright went across the heath to call on her son Clym and the cottage door was kept closed against her by his wife Eustacia, she retraced her steps in a very agitated and trembling manner. She was met by the little boy Jonny Nunsuch, who observing her condition, said "What has made you so 'down?' Have you seen an ooser?" Mrs. Yeobright replied "I have seen what's worse – a woman's face looking at me through a window pane." This appeared in our play."⁷²

Mr. Stevens went on to explain that he knew Hardy personally and used to take part in his plays. He described how he actually once asked the author what an 'ooser' was, to which Hardy replied, 'whereas to-day a parent when correcting a naughty child will sometimes threaten to send for a bogeyman, so in earlier days they threatened to call in an ooser to frighten them into obedience'⁷³. Hardy certainly knew of the mask, but Peter Robson suggests that Hardy never saw the mask himself since 'he would have been unable to resist describing it' and there are no descriptions of the Melbury Ooser in any of Hardy's novels. Beyond a mere acknowledgement of its terrifying ugliness, there is no further description or explanation of the mask in any of Hardy's works, and this definitely supports Peter Robson's suggestion that Hardy never actually saw the Ooser himself. What author could avoid describing the huge grotesque beast, given the opportunity?

The Ooser is referred to, though sadly not described nor explained, in another of Hardy's works, "The First Countess of Wessex", which was set in the village of Melbury Osmond and the surrounding areas. In Ruth Firor's book on Hardy, she tells how 'Betty Dornell, grieved at her lover's repugnance when he saw that she was sickening with smallpox, exclaimed indignantly that she would not so have treated him, had he been as ugly as the Ooser in the church vestry itself'⁷⁴. This short story, "The First Countess of Wessex", first published in 1891, can be found in the Hardy collection "A Group of Noble Dames", and the following is the relevant excerpt.

"Is this your love?" said Betty reproachfully.

"O, if you was sickening for the plague itself, and going to be as

⁷² Letter from Mr E.I.Stevens to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed 10th January 1935, page 7.

⁷³ Letter from Mr E.I.Stevens to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed 10th January 1935, page 7.

⁷⁴ See Firor, R.A., *Folkways in Thomas Hardy*, London: Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1931, page 57.

ugly as the Ooser in the church-vestry, I wouldn't ----".⁷⁵

This statement unquestionably refers to the Melbury Osmond Ooser, and illustrates that it was an object of horror amongst the people of the village. The quote itself gives further support to the suggestion that the mask had been kept in the chapel down by the water-splash. Thomas Hardy's mother, Jemima, who was born in Melbury Osmond in 1813, probably gave him this piece of information.

In addition to the above references to the Ooser, Hardy mentions skimmity riding in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', which was first published in 1886. Lucetta Farfrae, married to Donald Farfrae, the mayor, has had an affair with the disgraced ex-mayor Michael Henchard, and the inhabitants of Casterbridge, Hardy's fictional name for the town of Dorchester, decide to put on a procession to illustrate their contempt towards the adulterous individuals. Thomas Hardy's literature provides great insight into rural customs as a whole, and it is fortunate that he, and others like him, took the time and effort to describe curious events such as these.

"I say, what a good foundation for a skimmity-ride," said Nance.
"True," said Mrs Cuxsom, reflecting. "'Tis as good a ground for a skimmity-ride as ever I knowed; and it ought not to be wasted. The last one seen in Casterbridge must have been ten years ago, if a day."⁷⁶

And later on a skimmity ride does indeed occur, and two maidservants observe the procession. One of them describes what she can see as she watches the effigies go by.

"What – two of `em – are there two figures?"
"Yes. Two images on a donkey, back to back, their elbows tied to one another's. She's facing the head, and he's facing the tail."
"Is it meant for anybody particular?"
"Well – it may be. The man has got on a blue coat and kerseymere leggings; he has black whiskers, and a reddish face. `Tis a stuffed figure, with a mask."⁷⁷

The figures are, of course, supposed to represent Lucetta and Henchard, and it is this very procession that leads to Lucetta's collapse and early death. It is reasonably likely that the Dorset Ooser was used in similar real processions in Dorset during the nineteenth century.

Besides the relevant references found in Hardy's works, there are other ways in which he is linked with the Ooser. As a young man, Thomas Hardy was a good friend of the remarkable Moule family. Horatio Mosley Moule, more commonly known as Horace, had a profound influence on Thomas Hardy. Horace, a Cambridge University graduate, was Hardy's teacher and many Hardy scholars suggest that Horace's subsequent suicide signalled an intense change in Hardy's writings. According to Robert Gittings, 'from the time of the death of Moule, Hardy never

⁷⁵ See Hardy, T., *The First Countess of Wessex*, in *A Group of Noble Dames*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1912, pages 40-41.

⁷⁶ See Hardy, T., *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Penguin Classics, page 256.

⁷⁷ See Hardy, T., *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Penguin Classics, page 274.

portrayed a man who was not, in some way, maimed by fate' ⁷⁸. Horace's brother, Henry Joseph Moule, the eldest of seven sons of Rev Henry Moule, met Hardy through their mutual interest in watercolour painting. Henry Joseph Moule would later write in to 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' in 1892, with an apparent recollection of the Ooser. As I have stated earlier, it is unlikely that Moule's memory of a mask was indeed one of the Dorset Ooser, but the 'nurse' that he refers to may well have witnessed the Ooser first-hand. It is also interesting to note that H.J.Moule became the Curator of Dorset County Museum at Dorchester owing to his lifelong fascination with archaeology.

Both Hardy and the Moule family also knew Reverend William Barnes, the Dorset poet and philologist, who actually defined the term 'ooser' in his 'Glossary of the Dorset Dialect' of 1863. After Barnes's death, Hardy described him as 'probably the most interesting link between present and past forms of rural life that England possessed'. Of course, the statement could equally well refer to Thomas Hardy himself. Both authors' many writings have, to a great extent, preserved detailed knowledge of, and insight into, rural life for future generations to become fascinated about.

The three men, Thomas Hardy, Henry Joseph Moule and Rev William Barnes, were all important and highly regarded figures of nineteenth century Dorset. It is remarkable that, besides the three men being linked together through friendship with one another, they are also all linked, in some way, to the Dorset Ooser mask itself. However, I must comment that it is a great shame none of them was sufficiently interested in the Ooser to locate the mask and see to it that it would be kept in Dorset Museum. Whilst Thomas Hardy held his pen and wrote the short word 'ooser', just a few miles down the lane the object to which the term referred was getting closer and closer to its disappearance and untimely disintegration and demise. Hardy's mention of the mask certainly preserved knowledge of the Ooser, but could not the mask itself have been preserved also?

⁷⁸ See Gittings, R., *Young Thomas Hardy*, Penguin Literary Biographies, 1978, page 264.

Modern Oosers

Although the original Dorset Ooser has not been seen for over a century, and is most probably lost forever, the ooser tradition is being continued. Whereas the nineteenth century had just one Dorset Ooser, the twentieth century has been lucky enough to witness the construction and, in some magnificent cases, actual use of a number of modern oosers. Since the disappearance of the Melbury Osmond Ooser, to my knowledge, there have been at least three modern masks constructed. Wonderfully enough, a new ooser exists just a few hundred metres from where the original beast once was. Mrs Ebsworth, who lives in Melbury Osmond village, has a modern mask in her possession.



Fig. 11. A modern ooser mask in Melbury Osmond.

Tony Hawkins constructed this modern ooser specifically for use at Holwell Medieval Fair, which took place on 2nd May 1978. Although the mask is a great deal smaller than the original would have been, and the fact that it appears to have stolen someone's lipstick and applied it liberally, the facial features still capture the essential mischievous expression of the original. The book 'In Search of Lost Gods'⁷⁹ by Ralph Whitlock, contains another photograph of this particular modern ooser, taken not so long after it was originally built.

⁷⁹ See Whitlock, R., *In Search of Lost Gods*, Phaidon publishers, 1979, page 52.

Another Ooser mask is in Ray Buckland's museum collection of Witchcraft and Folklore⁸⁰. Ray, who now lives in America, is considered an authority on the occult and supernatural. He acquired the African mask in the late 1960s from a friend who visited Africa and brought it back for him. Because it reminded him of the Ooser, Ray added the horns and hair himself. However, since this mask does not have a moveable lower jaw, and the fact that it has pierced eyes yet no vestige of a third one, it certainly differs greatly from the original in these respects.



Fig. 12. Ray Buckland's modern ooser.

But by far the best modern ooser is that belonging to the Wessex Morris Men. In 1973, John Byfleet made a new mask, for the Morris Ring Meeting at Yeovil. The ooser was built using the photograph of the original mask included in Dewar's piece, and was constructed traditionally using the sort of materials that the Melbury Osmond Ooser had been made from. John Byfleet's father, Don, wrote to me with the following details.

He started off with a section of an ash tree trunk about 2 feet long and about 1 foot in diameter. (These measurements are only approximate as the mask is not with me at present). He first made a model out of paper mache to get the features and spacings correct, using as a guide the photograph. He then split the trunk section down the middle and carved the face out of the solid wood, hollowing it out behind. The jaw he made detachable. It is on leather hinges and is operated by a lever and string. He went to the slaughterhouse and obtained a calfskin (which he cured himself) and hair for the woolly top and the long side whiskers. The carved eyeballs were painted but the rest of the colouring for the face was applied using all natural materials - including blood! The mask, complete with hair is mounted on a flat board which constitutes

⁸⁰ For other photographs of Ray Buckland's Ooser mask, see *Scholastic Voice*, January 31, 1972, *Vanidades Continental*, March 20, 1972, and 3rd *Stone* magazine, April-June edition, 1999, page 20.

a pair of rudimentary shoulders. To these are attached the calf skin, complete with tail. The skin wraps round like a cloak leaving a small space at the front which is filled with sacking for the person inside to see through. A piece of furry material is tacked to the top of the back of the mask and falls down to cover the back of the mask down to the calf skin. The whole is supported by a pole which goes up through the 'shoulders' and into a recess on the inside of the top of the mask. The carrier gets under the calf skin, lifts the pole (and ooser) and drops it into a support rather like a flag bucket. The weight of the mask is such that this is the only way to carry the ooser for any length of time. John could not obtain decent horns of a suitable size and was forced to manufacture a pair from glass fibre wrap. They were a bit small in diameter and he subsequently obtained a suitable pair of real horns from a second hand shop. In the supporting construction, John used wooden pegs where possible instead of nails or screws, although I have had to recourse to screws over the years for running repairs.

Although even the Wessex ooser is slightly less menacing than the original, the mask still closely resembles the Melbury Osmond Ooser, and is often on display at Dorset County Museum in Dorchester. However, the new Wessex ooser is not merely an object of curiosity as the original mask had become. The modern ooser accompanies the Wessex Morris Men to the top of Giant Hill above the Cerne Abbas Giant when they dance there at dawn on May Day morning. The Morris Men then follow in a procession through the village behind their ooser. Don Byfleet added that the Morris Men's ooser serves 'rather more as a totem than a mascot. In fact I think such a fierce, dominating and dignified character would be highly offended at the word 'mascot' with its patronizing inference.'

I decided, after an invitation from John's father, that I simply had to catch the modern Wessex ooser in action, and so I visited the ancient village of Cerne Abbas on May 1st 2000 in order to watch the procession. Events began at sunrise, high on the hill by the wonderful Cerne Abbas Giant. The 55 metre tall chalk-cut figure is thought to represent the god Hercules or Helith, and to be linked to fertility rites. It has been suggested that the giant dates back at least to Roman times.

Once in Cerne Abbas, I found my way to the nearest pub where I remained until closing time. I then paced the narrow streets, counting the hours as they crawled by. I eventually found somewhere to rest, and at this point the writer must apologize to the unfortunate resident of the village who received a rather large shock on finding me fast asleep in the bus shelter.

After this unforgettably strange night, I climbed Giant Hill and stood there waiting, hoping that they would indeed turn up. A few sudden lights darted about in the car park at the base of the hill just before 5am, as the sun began to rise. Within minutes, a procession of Morris Men and spectators had arrived at the top of the Giant, and opened the gate at the edge of the double banked earth enclosure known as the "Frying Pan" or "Trendle", which is a little further up the hill above the giant's left arm. The old earthwork has been the site of May Day celebrations for centuries, and some say that the rectangular "Frying Pan" may be an Iron Age tomb.

One of the Wessex Morris Men was carrying the large ooser with him. The men began to dance in the "Frying Pan" to the sounds of the accordion that one was playing,

and old Don Byfleet was running about with a rubber chicken in his hand. The Ooser soon joined in the celebrations, and the event, which lasted altogether about thirty minutes or so, was quite surreal and highly memorable.



Fig. 13. The Wessex Morris Men with their ooser on the hill above the Cerne Abbas Giant, May 1st, 1978.



Fig. 14. The Wessex Morris Men and the ooser parading through Cerne Abbas village, May 1st, 1978.

As the sun rose in the morning sky, and the Morris Men walked back down the hillside towards the village, I went over and introduced myself to Don Byfleet. He mentioned to me that in his opinion, the Wessex Morris Men's ooser is probably slightly larger than the original had been ⁸¹. Indeed, poor Alan Cheeseman, whose stature dictates that it is he who wears the Wessex ooser, looked incredibly tired, and had to rest occasionally between songs because of the weight of the heavy mask.

When the procession had reached the base of the hill, the men prepared themselves for more dancing. The Wessex Morris men assembled in the main street in the village, and began again to dance. The ooser was joined by a hobby horse. After the event, the Morris men had a pub breakfast and quaffed some good ale.....and all this by 7am.

They then proceeded to other towns afterwards; Dorchester and Blandford Forum. The Wessex Morris men ⁸² have taken their ooser up Giant Hill on early May Day morning for over twenty years now. It is, of course, wonderful to see that these rural traditions are being continued, rather than lost, irretrievably, to the past.

⁸¹ This is supported by the information from the Sussex newspaper article of 1918, in which the Ooser is described as having been just over two feet across.

⁸² This commendable body of men are well worthy of the support and appreciation both of visitors to, and residents of, the grand county of Dorset.

After a wonderful weekend spent in the same land that the original Ooser once terrorized, I made the long walk back from Cerne Abbas to Maiden Newton where I caught the train back to London.

Final Remarks

I hope that future researchers will find my book helpful, although I do believe that as every day passes, any information not yet unearthed, becomes gradually more and more difficult to dig up. As time goes on, memories are forgotten and material objects disposed of, forever. Indeed, if someone had taken such an interest in the Ooser at the start of the twentieth century, a great deal of further information from the Cave family themselves, the inhabitants of Melbury Osmond, and many others who witnessed the Dorset Ooser first-hand, would have been available. The Ooser itself could have been restored and put on public display in the Dorset County Museum. However, I suppose that much of the charm in researching the Ooser lies in the inevitable and ultimate inaccessibility to its world and time. For those individuals that wish to consult original sources of information on the mask, I recommend visiting the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester, where a reasonable number of newspaper cuttings are stored in the Folklore box. Dorset County Library, also in Dorchester, have many documents worth consulting, including the original 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' from 1891, and the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper from 1935 on microfilm. The Folklore Society Library at University College London is another great source of information on the subject in general.

I hope that the wonder that the world of the Dorset Ooser has created in my mind has, to some extent, spilt over into the world and time of the reader. I also hope that the many confusions and omissions made by previous authors interested in the Ooser have been avoided as much as is possible in this account.



Fig. 15. The author and the Wessex Morris ooser.
In Dorset County Museum at Dorchester, August 1998.

Appendix A: Ooser Chronology

The Ooser is constructed.

c1825 The Ooser is likely to have been used in 'skimmity riding'.

c1850 The Ooser is stored in the malt house in Melbury Osmond.

1858 Thomas William Cave born in Melbury Osmond.

1860 Edward John Cave born in Melbury Osmond.

1863 The word 'Ooser' is included in William Barnes' 'Dictionary of the Dorset Dialect'.

1875 William Cave, father of Thomas and Edward, dies. The former malt house in the village becomes a Chapel, and the Ooser almost certainly remains in the building for the time being.

c1875 Thomas Cave plays with the Ooser in the garden at Holt Farm, and gives his cousin a fright.

1878 'Return of the Native' by Thomas Hardy is first published. The text includes a reference to the mask.

1880 Thomas Cave buys Bridge Cottage, Melbury Osmond, and proceeds to rebuild the house.

1889 Edward Cave is now a doctor in Church Street, Crewkerne, and marries early in the year. He is a partner in a practice, Webber and Cave, with William Woolmington Webber, of Sheepmarket Street.

1883 - 1891 At some point during this period, the Ooser is photographed in Chaffin's studio in Yeovil.

1891 Thomas Cave attempts to sell the Ooser. In 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries', Canon Mayo describes the appearance of the mask. Still in Crewkerne, Edward Cave has become a widower. 'A Group of Nobles Dames' by Thomas Hardy is published. The first short story in the set includes a reference to the mask.

1892 Thomas Cave is now in London, and again tries to sell the Ooser. He remains unsuccessful in his efforts to sell the mask, despite having been in contact with at least two or three gentlemen who were interested in purchasing it.

1897 Edward Cave moves to Bath, leaving the Ooser behind in Crewkerne, apparently with his coachman.

c1898 Doctor Webber's coachman, Lawrence, wears the Ooser in a Crewkerne carnival procession. The mask, now in a poor condition, is stored in Doctor Webber's loft.

c1900 A man comes and asks Lawrence about the Ooser, which has by now fallen to pieces. The mask may have been sold to this man, or alternatively simply disposed of.

1917 Margaret Murray enquires unsuccessfully into the whereabouts of the Ooser.

1918 A West Sussex newspaper includes an article on the mask.

1929 Thomas William Cave, of Field Bank, Wye, near Ashford, Kent, dies, 26th April, aged 70. He is buried in Wye churchyard.

1934 Edward John Cave, of 16 The Circus, Bath, dies, 16th February, aged 74. He is buried in Lansdown Cemetery.

1935 The Dorset County Chronicle records inquiries at Crewkerne carried out by Mrs. E.A.Ramsden of Beaminster. She interviews Doctor Webber's coachman, Lawrence. No trace of the mask is found.

1962 H.S.L. Dewar's article on the mask is first published.

1973 After conducting research into the Dorset Ooser, John Byfleet constructs a new mask for the Wessex Morris Men. The new Wessex ooser is used to accompany the Morris Men during May Day festivities.

1978 Tony Hawkins makes an ooser replica for use in Holwell Medieval Fair.

1998 The Wessex Morris ooser goes on display at Dorset County Museum, Dorchester.

Appendix B: Twentieth Century Inquiries

Subsequent to the disappearance of the Dorset Ooser, several people enquired into the whereabouts of the mask. The majority of the useful information found during the twentieth century was uncovered during 1935, and was recorded in the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper at the time. I include these various references to the Ooser in this chapter, along with several other informative enquiries that have taken place.

It is highly important that readers do not believe everything that is quoted in the following text, since some of it is certainly pure speculation. It has been conjectured that the Ooser may well have been linked to Pagan religions, horn worship and various other far-fetched ideas. These claims must not be taken very seriously, since they have no evidential support at all. Such comments have misled many researchers and authors alike over the years, and caused a great deal of confusion. As Peter Robson said, the Ooser has certainly been ‘the subject of more unfounded assertion and wild speculation than any other item of Dorset folklore’.

This chapter is meant merely as a record of the more interesting and revealing articles that have been written about the Ooser over the last century. The main body of the book deals with the reliability of such articles, and includes some accompanying criticisms.

An enquiry was made by Miss M.A.Murray (1863-1963), Assistant Professor of Egyptology at University College London, during 1917. Miss Murray wrote to ‘Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries’ asking if any readers could ‘inform me as to the present whereabouts of the wooden mask known as “The Dorset Ooser”?’⁸³ The request elicited the following response from an anonymous reader on 7th May 1917.

In February 1892 I had correspondence with Mr Thomas Cave (whose address then was 86 Cannon St., E.C) to whom it then belonged. He offered it to me for fifty Guineas, and said that he had two other gentlemen to whom he was writing to the same effect. In a London Directory of 1906 I happen to have, his address is given as 19 Basinghall St., E.C.

Perhaps the above information may be a help in tracing it. He says on 6th Feb., 1892, “Several Societies have written me for price, which I have given no one, as you wrote me first.”⁸⁴

Whether Margaret Murray, of University College, contacted Thomas Cave at his London address is not known to me, but her book, ‘God of the Witches’, which includes a few sentences on the Ooser⁸⁵, suggests that she did not acquire any subsequent information of any great value. Sadly, I have been unable to use the above response to find out anything more about Thomas Cave’s unsuccessful attempts to sell

⁸² See Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, vol. XV Part CXVII, March 1917, page 182.

⁸⁴ See Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, June 1917, vol. XV Part CXVIII, page 214. The writer wished to remain anonymous. Out of mere curiosity, I actually visited 86 Cannon Street during January 2000, and found it to be a branch of Benjy’s Takeaways.

⁸⁵ See Murray, M.A., The God of the Witches, page 31.

the Ooser, since the reader of “Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries” gave his name only as C.H.Sp.P.

A year on, in June 1918, a column on the Ooser, headed “Selbourne Notes”, and edited by a Mr. H.L.F.Guermontprez of Dalkeith, Bognor, was printed in a West Sussex newspaper. The writer was introduced to information about the Ooser by ‘a lady, now residing in Sussex’ who showed the author ‘a photograph of an ancient Mummers Mask, which was for many years in the possession of her family, during their residence in Dorsetshire’⁸⁶. I presume this Sussex lady to be Emma Cave, sister of Thomas and Edward. The article does not add anything substantially to what was already known at the time, but goes on to describe the appearance of the Ooser in reasonable depth. The mention of mummers in a 1918 Sussex newspaper article on the Ooser, means that the Emma Cave, who gave information to the writer of the article, must have thought that the Ooser had originally been used in mumming plays. Later in the article, the writer includes a great deal of information taken from the ‘Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries’ pieces, which Emma Cave no doubt passed on. This suggests to me that the writer may well have seen Moule’s reference to the Ooser, in which he presumes a link between the Ooser and mumming plays. This could account for the reference to mumming. I am inclined to think that the writer was influenced by Moule’s suggestion, especially since there are doubts expressed in the article as to whether or not the wearer of the mask also wrapped himself in bullock’s hide. Either way, Emma did not see the Ooser being used in any plays or for any other purpose, and therefore any reference to mumming is only conjecture.

As I have previously mentioned, the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper records several inquiries during 1935 into the Ooser. These inquiries are of great importance, since they unearthed numerous pieces of information that might have otherwise never have been available. The enquiries were begun by Mrs. Elizabeth Alice Ramsden (1863-1943) then of Beaminster, who made a request in ‘The Countryman’ for information on the Ooser. Her inquiries prompted several letters to the Dorset County Chronicle over the first three months of 1935, without which we may never have known many important facts about the mask. The very first mention of the Ooser in the Dorset County Chronicle was on 3rd January, 1935, by the light column writer, “Hazelbury”.

The Great “Ooser” Mystery – Of course, there may not be any mystery about it at all, and for all I know there may be someone among the Chronicle’s thousands of readers who is able to tell me what an “ooser” is. The “b” in it, you observe, is silent, which, of course, it would be in the New Year. But what prompted my enquiry was this. In “The Countryman,” that most delectable of all quarterlies, E.A.Ramsden asks for information about “The Dorset Ooser,” and writes :- “A few years ago there was in Dorset an old wooden mask called ‘The Dorset Ooser.’ I should be very grateful if any reader who has seen the mask can tell me anything about it and if any more were known of in the county. The one I speak of was seen 30 or 40 years ago at Sturminster Marshall and has since disappeared.” Now then, Mr. Cox, what

⁸⁶ See West Sussex Gazette, 13th June, 1918, page 3.

about it? ⁸⁷

I have absolutely no idea where the suggestion that the Ooser had been in Sturminster Marshall came from since no other sources mention anything similar. Bearing in mind that the mask had been kept in Melbury Osmond, and that Melbury Osmond is not particularly close to Sturminster Marshall, I suspect that the suggestion may well have been a mistake. Another reason to conclude this is that the suggested date of the sighting of the Ooser in Sturminster Marshall is almost undoubtedly false. The article suggests the Ooser had been seen in Sturminster Marshall between 1895 and 1905. By this time, the mask was no longer even in the county of Dorset, but in Crewkerne in Somerset. Of course, this is not to say that the Ooser was definitely never taken to Sturminster Marshall during these years, but the lack of detail, and the particularly vague dates, does not make further enquiry into the suggestion possible.

The first reply to Mrs. Ramsden's query came from Mr. E.J.Stevens, an old Hardy Player of Racton, Dorchester, who cited Barnes' Glossary of the Dorset Dialect and 'Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries' vol. II references, and discussed one of Thomas Hardy's references to the Ooser ⁸⁸. On the same page, a Mr. A.C. Cox wrote a piece on the mask, with the heading "Last Heard of at Melbury Osmond", and again referring to, and almost wholly relying on for information, previous articles written on the mask. In response to the previous week's challenge from the column writer "Hazelbury" Mr Cox described his search for information.

I explored the Dorset County Library and there came across that stupendous work of reference in eight volumes, "The English Dialect Dictionary," edited by the late Joseph Wright, M.A., a Professor at Oxford University. I find that "ooser" is a word peculiar to Dorset and Somerset, meaning "a grotesque mask, made of wood, surmounted by a cow's horns and hair, which was made to be worn by a mischievous person to frighten people.....In "Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries," Vol. II., 1891, of which Canon C.H.Mayo, of Longburton Rectory, was the Dorset editor, there is the following :- "With the present number our readers are presented with an illustration of the Dorset 'ooser' taken from what is possibly the only example now in existence, or at any rate from one of the very few which may still survive in the country.".....Is this "oozer" still in the possession of the Cave family or will this article be the means of bringing it to light? It is certainly not in the Dorset County Museum. ⁸⁹

Of course, by this time the mask was definitely not still in the possession of the Cave family. Mr. Cox went on in his article referring readers to several other bits and pieces written about the mask.

⁸⁷ See Dorset County Chronicle, 3rd January, 1935, page 7, and The Countryman, January 1935, page 661.

⁸⁸ See chapter entitled 'Hardy and the Ooser' for a detailed account of Mr. Steven's letter.

⁸⁹ Article by Mr. A.C.Cox, Dorset County Chronicle, January 10th, 1935, page 7.

In the edition of 17th January 1935, a letter to the editor appeared from Mrs E.A.Ramsden, of Beaminster, thanking those who had written in to the Dorset County Chronicle over the previous couple of weeks for their information. Mrs Ramsden also proposed a possible derivation of the word “ooser”.

As my letter to “The Countryman” started the subject of the Dorset “Ooser” in the Dorset County Chronicle I write to thank the writers of these letters for the extremely interesting information they have given about the mask and for the derivation of the name. I would suggest another possible derivation. In Halliwell’s dictionary of “Archaic and Provincial Words” the word Ousen is given as meaning Oxen. Oxford was once called Oxenford, and in very old deeds it is called “Ousen-ford.” Our word, Ooser, for a mask with animals’ horns, might very well come from this old word, and mean “the Ox-man.”⁹⁰

In the next edition, dated 24th January, a very interesting letter regarding the Ooser was printed, under the heading “Enquiries as to its Whereabouts – Wanted for Dorset Museum”. Mr.B.W.Milward, of Sawbridgeworth, Herts, cousin of Thomas Cave, wrote to the Dorset County Chronicle, with the tale of his own first encounter with the Ooser.

I have had sent on to me a copy of the Dorset County Chronicle.....I am a distant relation of the Cave family and have visited Holt where they lived for many years, and it was on a visit about sixty years ago that I first saw the 'Ooser' which gave me a sudden fright by meeting my cousin, Tom Cave, in the garden with it over his head in the dark. I am not sure whether it was taken to Melbury Osmond when the Caves left Holt or whether it had been kept in the malt house and later taken to Holt. When Dr. Edward Cave went to live at Crewkerne he had the 'Ooser' in his possession until he left there for Bath, where he died about three years ago. About twenty-five years ago when in Bath I asked him what he had done with it when he left Crewkerne, and his reply was that he had given it or left it in the charge of his chauffeur or gardener. Since then I have never heard anything further about it.⁹¹

Thomas Cave would have been about 17 years old at the time of this incident. With regard to his doubts over the location, the Ooser was definitely kept in the malt house and then later taken to Holt Farm. However, the Ooser may well have been kept at Holt before it was taken to the malt house. That is, the Ooser might have only temporarily been kept in the malt house. I suspect that the reason why the Ooser was kept at these particular sites was because of its size. I doubt that any of the other inhabitants of Melbury Osmond would have had room to store the huge mask.

⁹⁰ Letter to the editor of the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, from Mrs. E.A.Ramsden, printed January 17th, 1935, page 7.

⁹¹ Letter from Mr. B.W.Milward to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed January 24th 1935, page 7.

In the same edition, it was told that Mr. Cox, unable himself to devote time to a search for the Ooser, was in communication with Miss Squibb ⁹², of Weymouth, a cousin of Mr. Milward, who was thought to be able to throw some light on the fate of the old mask.

In the next edition, of the paper, dated 31st January, under the heading “No Trace of it Yet”, Mrs. E.A.Ramsden wrote in again to say that she had old friends in Crewkerne who might be able to help. 'I am immensely interested in the old, old worship of the 'horned god' in Britain,' she wrote, 'and this mask may well be a link' ⁹³. Another cousin, Miss F.L.Squibb, once an inhabitant of Melbury, also wrote in to say that she too was making enquiries at Crewkerne. 'When Dr. Cave (my cousin) left Crewkerne about 35 years ago I believe he gave the ooser to his chauffeur' ⁹⁴, she wrote. In the edition of the Dorset County Chronicle dated 7th February 1935, another short column appeared, under the heading, “No Trace of Ancient Mask”.

Although many enquiries about the old Dorset “ooser” (a grotesque mask worn by practical jokers and others a hundred odd years ago) have been instituted since the subject was first mentioned in Mr. A.C.Cox’s article in the Chronicle, there is no trace of it. Has it been shipped to America as a curio?

Miss F.L.Squibb, of Melbury, Queen’s road, Weymouth, writes To Mr. Cox: - “Dear Sir, - The late Dr. Cave's sister has kindly written me the following information about the Dorset 'ooser':- I think it will be useless to make enquiries in the Crewkerne neighbourhood about it and that most likely it has left this country. I do not see that anything more can be done in the matter, anyway that is my cousin's verdict, but it would be a joy to see the old family mask was found and placed in a corner of the Dorset Museum.” “An American would jump at the chance to secure such an old-world object as the ‘ooser,’” is Mr. A.C.Cox’s comment. ⁹⁵

This was the last that was heard from Miss Squibb on the matter. A suggestion in H.S.L.Dewar’s monograph is that the Ooser may indeed have found its way to America, to be sold as a curio, and I expect his only authority for such a claim is the above speculative suggestion. On 21st March 1935, a major breakthrough was noted. Mrs. Ramsden, who originally began this renewed interest in the Ooser, wrote in again and told the Chronicle that she had pursued her investigations among members of Dr. Cave's family at Crewkerne and had discovered some fascinating new details. The

⁹² Miss Squibb used to live in Melbury Osmond herself. Some of her relatives are listed in county directories under Melbury Osmond; George Squibb, farmer, on page 2683 of the 1849 Post Office Directory of Dorset and Wiltshire; Thomas Squibb, farmer, on page 905 of Kelly’s 1880 Directory of Dorset.

⁹³ Letter from Mrs. E.A.Ramsden to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed January 31st 1935, page 7.

⁹⁴ Letter from Miss F.L. Squibb to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed January 31st 1935, page 7.

⁹⁵ See Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, 7th February 1935, page 7.

following is the article in full, which had the heading “Traced to Crewkerne – Relic of Pagan Religion”.

The Dorset “Oozer,” the terrifying old mask, one of the last relics of Pagan (horn) worship, which was last heard of at Melbury Osmond and has been the subject of a recent article by Mr. A.C.Cox, of Dorchester, and of interesting correspondence in the Chronicle, is buried in obscurity right enough, but its place of “interment” is known. It has been finally traced to Crewkerne, and is now somewhere in the foundations of the new Post-office there. Mrs. Ramsden, of Meerhay, Beaminster, who has delved deeply into the subject of Dorset folk lore and superstition and who first started a train of enquiries about the “oozer,” told the Chronicle this week that she had pursued her investigations among members of Doctor Cave’s family at Crewkerne, where the old mask was last heard of hanging in the loft of a doctor’s house. “Dr. Webber followed Doctor Cave at Crewkerne,” said Mrs. Ramsden, “and I got in touch with Dr. Webber’s old coachman. He remembered it hanging up in the loft there in a dilapidated condition. He says he put it on over thirty years ago and walked in a carnival procession at Crewkerne, and it seems to have frightened some of the people to death. He said it was falling to pieces, the horns were gone and it was crumbling to dust. He remembers no more about it. The new post office is now built over Dr. Webber’s house, and there it is probably buried. It has been a very interesting experience tracing it,” added Mrs. Ramsden, “and there have certainly been some very amusing letters about it. Mrs. Ramsden says that the old horn worship (from which the “oozer” appears to be handed down) still survives in the Hebrides and also in one other part of the British Isles.⁹⁶

Mrs Ramsden wrote another, similar, letter to Margaret Murray at the Folklore Society at University College London, revealing Doctor Webber’s coachman to be a man named Lawrence.

You will be interested to hear I have at last traced the “Dorset Oozer” to its last lair. After many a false clue and disappointment I found an old man in Crewkerne who had been coachman to a Dr Webber who succeeded Dr Cave in his practice in Crewkerne and lived in the same house. He says when Dr Cave left Crewkerne he left the mask behind him, and it hung there in the loft till it fell to pieces. This man, Lawrence, told me he had taken the mask down, some 35 years ago, and worn it in a procession to frighten people – and the hair was coming out in tufts then. About 2 years after, someone – he did not remember who – came to him asking about it, but it had fallen quite to pieces then, and finally when Dr Webber’s house was pulled down and the new Post Office built on the site, every vestage (sic) of it

⁹⁶ Letter from Mrs E.A Ramsden to the Dorset County Chronicle newspaper, printed 21st March 1935, page 7. Note the ridiculous speculation.

disappeared. So here endeth the Ooser quest. R.I.P....⁹⁷

Several more enquiries took place subsequent to this, and although no new information on the Ooser was discovered, it is worth recording them. In March 1962, the daughter of Doctor Edward Cave, Mrs. N.H.Marshall (1902-1979) wrote the following letter addressed to Roger Peers, the Curator at Dorset County Museum.

As I promised yesterday I am sending you this photograph of the ooser which was in the possession of the Cave family (my father's family) at Melbury Osmond. I am also sending cuttings collected by my father's sister, the last member of the family, I think, to have seen it. My father had it at Crewkerne. In, I believe, 1897, he left Crewkerne for Bath leaving it, for the time being, in the charge of the coachman. I was told as a child that the coachman sold it to a man who asked him for it, thinking it of no value (the coachman I mean!) If all this is of interest to you then please keep it. Dorset County Museum is where it ought to be if it affords any clue to the discovery of the mask. I shall be pleased to answer any questions I can but I have never even seen it myself.⁹⁸

Mrs Marshall enclosed several cuttings with her letter, including several of the Dorset County Chronicle references mentioned above plus the West Sussex newspaper article from 1918.

In the 1960s, prior to the publication of his article, H.S.L. Dewar made his own enquiries in the village of Melbury Osmond, but failed to gain any useful new information. In 1972, John Byfleet also enquired after the Ooser. He interviewed H.S.L.Dewar, and Mr Kenneth G.Knight, of Melbury Estate Office who gave Dewar some local information, but he too gained no further details.

⁹⁷ See Oates, C., and Wood, J., *A Coven of Scholars*, FLS Books Archive Series 1, 1998, page 41.

⁹⁸ Letter from Mrs N.H.Marshall to Roger Peers, the then Curator of Dorset County Museum, dated 14th March 1962. Located in Folklore box at Dorset County Museum in Dorchester.

Appendix C: Records

Census data

(i) Holt Farm, Melbury Osmond

1861

William Cave, Head, Married, Age 49, Maltster and Farmer of 91 acres employing 3 men and 1 boy, born in Melbury Osmond.

Sarah Swaffield Cave, Wife, Married, Age 33, Farmer's wife, born in Melbury Osmond.

Emma Cave, Daughter, Age 5, born in Melbury Osmond.

Thomas William Cave, Son, Age 3, born Melbury Osmond.

Edward John Cave, Son, Age 1.

1871

Lower Holt Farm:

William Cave, Head, Married, Age 59, Farmer of 408 acres employing 9 men and 4 boys, born in Melbury Osmond.

Sarah Cave, Wife, Married, Age 43, Farmer's wife, born in Melbury Osmond.

Mary H. Whittle, Servant, Unmarried, Age 24, Domestic Servant, born in Minterne Magna.

Ellen Hand, Servant, Unmarried, Age 23, Domestic Servant, born in Melbury Osmond.

1881

Holt Farm-House:

Sarah S. Cave, Head, Widow, Age 53, Farmer of 404 acres employing 7 men, 4 boys and 2 women, born in Melbury Osmond.

Emma Cave, Daughter, Unmarried, Age 24, born in Melbury Osmond.

Thomas W. Cave, Son, Unmarried, Age 23, Farm Manager, born in Melbury Osmond.

Elizabeth Daniels, Servant, Unmarried, General domestic servant, born in Tolpuddle.

1891

Lower Holt Farm:

Thomas W. Cave, Head, Single, Age 33, Farmer, Employer, born Melbury Osmond.

Richard F Dampney, Visitor, Married, Age 44, Retired Farmer, born in Ryme.

Mary Bullock, Servant, Single, Age 26, General Domestic Servant, born in Beaminster.

(ii) Crewkerne

1891

Church Street:

Edward J. Cave, Head, Widower, Age 31, Doctor of Medicine, General Practitioner, born in Melbury Osmond.

Elizabeth Duck, Servant, Single, Age 25, Cook and Domestic Servant, born in Somerset.

Alice Jane Norris, Servant, Single, Age 17, Housemaid and Domestic Servant, born in Hook, Dorset.

Harry Steer, Servant, Single, Single, Age 18, Groom and Coachman, born in South Perrott, Dorset.

Sheepmarket Street:

William W. Webber, Head, Single, Age 34, Registered General Practitioner, Employer, born in Merriott, Somerset.

John Webber, Brother, Single, Age 36, Tutor Classics School, born in Merriott, Somerset.

Anna Webber, Sister, Single, Age 37, born in Merriott, Somerset.

Mabel A. Sarcombe, Servant, Single, Age 20, General Domestic Servant, born in Chard.

Wills

CAVE William 24 July The Will of William Cave late of Melbury Osmond in the county of Dorset Farmer who died 25 April 1875 at Melbury Osmond was proved at the Principal Registry by Sarah Swaffield Cave Widow the Relict and Thomas Swaffield Squibb Farmer both of Melbury Osmond and George Dibble Templeman of Chiselborough in the County of Somerset Yeoman the Executors. Effects under £4,000.

CAVE Thomas William of Field Bank Wye Kent died 26 April 1929 Probate London 25 June to Hilda Cave widow Julius Kingsford Solicitor and Robert Melville Wilson college principal. Effects £5773 18s. 9d.

CAVE Edward John of 16 The Circus Bath died 16 February 1934 Probate London 20 April to Westminster Bank Limited and Kenneth Macdonald retired solicitor. Effects £49679 6s. 11d. Resworn £49726 12s. 2d. Resworn £49476 12s. 2d.

CAVE Matilda otherwise Hilda of the Grey Cottage East Dean near Eastbourne widow died 2 June 1938 Administration London 5 August to Thomas Storrar Cave medical practitioner. Effects £776 11s. 1d.

CAVE Thomas Storrar of Kelston Overton Port Eynon Gower Glamorgan died 6 July 1966 Probate Carmarthen 2 August to Doris Mary Cave widow. £3079.

Graves of the Cave families in Melbury Osmond churchyard

A four-sided grave:

In memory of William Cave who died April 25th 1875 aged 65 years....

In memory of Susannah wife of Thomas Cave who departed this life November 28th 1805 aged 63 years. Also of Thomas Cave who died March 5th 1832 aged 87 years.

In memory of Susannah Cave daughter of Thomas and Susannah Cave who departed this life October 9th 1796 aged 20 years. Also of Edith their daughter who died March 2nd 1857 aged 76 years.

In memory of John Cave who died September 19th 1850 aged 76 years. Also Deborah Cave wife of the above John Cave who died September 19th? 1857 Aged 78 years.

A flat grave with a cross:

Thomas Cave born January 2nd 1787 died Yeovil September 10th 1863. Mary his wife born November 29th 1799 died September 17th 1868.

Graves of Thomas Cave and his wife Matilda at the Church of S.S.Gregory and Martin, Wye, Kent

Thomas William Cave FRCVS Vice-Principal of the College Wye Died April 27 1929, Aged 70.

Matilda Cave Wife of T.W.Cave Died June 2nd 1938, Aged 71.

Grave of Doctor Edward Cave at Lansdown Cemetery, Bath.

In Loving Memory of Edward John Cave, Feb. 16th 1934.

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