

Folk Dancing and Fritillaries

It was a glorious spring day last Saturday - Oxford looking its best - all golden stone and pink blossoms in the college gardens. So it was a rush to get through the chores at home (whoever won a Nobel Prize for housework?) and set off on the bike to the city centre where a morris side was already ensconced in front of Balliol College, dancing their socks off. Oxford Folk Festival had arrived. The parade appeared, accompanied by a capering Green Man, the mysterious and amoral figure, who appears in ancient tales such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and is often depicted in churches hereabouts, peeping out from thick carved foliage.



Folk dancers came from all over the midlands and south of England - with one or two sides from Yorkshire (Otley) and Kent, all dancing with the tools of their craft (worsted bobbins), or simply what they had - hankies, sticks, hats, flags and hoops, decorated with ribbons. Some had blackened faces - to escape detection and disapproval. Morris dancing was often frowned on by those in authority. It's a living tradition - old dances from Oxford and neighbouring villages are meticulously repeated - and new ones introduced.



The best bit was being invited to join in a dance at the Castle - with the caller telling us what to do. Not that we always managed to do it. I must go along to my local Folk Dance group - there are several in the city. They say the average Oxford person belongs to at least 12 local organisations.....nice to know I'm average



But there's another annual ritual not to be neglected - going to see the fritillaries growing wild on Oxford's low-lying meadows. Once picked almost to extinction for sale in Oxford and London, these strange flowers, now fiercely and legally protected, flourish amid long damp grass alongside the River Isis (Thames).



They also grow in [Magdalen College Meadow](#) where the cattle are let out at exactly the right time to trample (plant) the seeds into the earth to ensure regeneration, and in the [Botanic Garden](#), conveniently photogenic, next to a path. But you'll have to hurry to see them.....in this warm, sunny weather, they soon go over. Until next year.