

PROGRAMME

1. Sumer is a cumen in: 13th century medieval English round. Believed to be the earliest example of written polyphonic music, with the words in the Wessex dialect of middle English. The earliest known copy of this beautiful illuminated manuscript was in the library of Reading monastery until dissolution and is now in the British Library. You can also see a copy of the manuscript in stone relief on the wall of the ruined chapter house of Reading Abbey.

2. In which we talk of Alveston, Stone, village bands, and village musicians

Band- Rogues March: trad. Cornish, arr. Alison Rowley

The British Army used to use this tune for making an example of delinquent soldiers, for example when drumming them out of the regiment. It was also played during the punishment of sailors.

Band- Butchers of Bristol: trad. arr. Alison Rowley. A Hornpipe

Band- Saltash: trad. Cornish, arr. Laurel Swift. This is one of many tunes that has travelled from pub tune to pulpit (the hymn Jesus, Thou Divine Companion). Village band musicians often wrote hymns in the front of their playing books and dance and ale house tunes in the back. Thomas Hardy makes this dual musical function the basis of his short story 'Absentmindedness in the Church Choir' and gives it as a reason for causing village bands to be banished from church.

Mixed consort (treble viol, bass recorder; autoharp

i) Awake Sweet Love, composed by John Dowland, published 1597

ii) Now is the month of Maying, composed by Thomas Morley, published 1595.

Thomas Hardy mentions the playing of bass viola da gambas in the village bands of his day. By then, treble and tenor viols were out of fashion, and had been replaced mainly by violins and violas. However, over the past 50 years or so, there has been renewed interest in playing "early music", including

consorts (groups of one type of instrument) of viols and recorders, and sometimes "mixed consorts", which are small groups playing a variety of instruments.

Band- Scotch Polka: arr. Matt Norman. From George Till's 1866 manuscript book.

Band- Brighton Camp: arr Mike Bailey. A quadrille from George Till's 1866 manuscript book

3. The coming of Spring, skylarks and May warnings

Reading: from Fantasticks by Nicholas Breton 1626

Band- Rising of the Larks: trad. Welsh March, arr. Laurel Swift. It was written down by William Winter (1774-1861) who was a shoemaker and fiddle player from the Quantock Hills, Somerset.

Singers (and audience): The Larks they Sang Melodious. A sailor's farewell song, focusing on themes of parting, nature, and love.

Interlude: Weather proverbs for May: Traditional – from assorted almanacs

4. May mischief and love divination.

Band- Fairy Prince: trad. slip jig in 9/8, arr Alison Rowley. Written down by William Winter (1774-1861) see above.

Reading: On May Day Eve: from Francis Kilvert's Diary. (1840 - 1879)

Dramatic reading: Hemp seed divination. This version is from a Mrs Calcott of Oxfordshire. She believed herself to be one of the last women in the area to scatter hemp seed in the hope that she would have a vision of her future husband. Parents in her village forbade its use because of the frightening consequences. Thomas Hardy also uses this event in his novel the Woodlanders.

5. Celebrations: singing, drinking and dancing

Band- Trumpet Hornpipe: Bristol is synonymous with seafarers and pirates. This hornpipe found in the John Moores manuscript of 1837 celebrates one of the most famous pirates.

Singers: Tailors Breeches: Robert and Henry Hammond toured Dorset on bicycles in 1905 collecting folksongs and collected this one from a Robert Barratt. The song is mentioned in one of Thomas Hardy's short stories, A few Crusted Characters, and his novel Tess of the d' Urbervilles. According to one folk song commentator it shows what can happen to a lad while under the 'alkafluence of inkahol'.

Band and dancers: Helston Furry Dance : Cornish processional, trad. arr Matt Norman, (Furry meaning fair feast) a celebration of the passing of winter and the arrival of spring.

A letter published in the Gentleman's Magazine for 1790 declared: "At Helstone, a genteel and populous borough town in Cornwall, it is customary to dedicate the 8th May to revelry (festive mirth, not loose jollity). It is called Furry Day". The processional dance is one of the oldest British customs still practised today and Helston Town Band plays the music for the dance.

Band and Singers- Let Union Be: trad drinking song, arr. Laurel Swift. Collected in Wiltshire by Alfred Williams in the early 1900's

EN May 26

Alveston Local History Society:
Wednesday 27th May 2026

Bringing in the May:
a celebration of Springtime
in 1850s west country music, words and mischief
with Brigstowe Village Band*

*Brigstowe is the old name for Bristol – the town on the bridge