

# May Day

**May Day celebrations have their origins in old pagan beliefs. They were a way of inviting the ‘benevolent spirit of increase’ into the lives of the people, in the hope that crops, cattle and families would flourish and grow.**

May Day celebrations have always held a special place in the hearts of Hertfordshire people. However, changing communities and the industrial revolution meant that many May Day customs started dying out in the 19th century, whilst some customs had been under attack for even longer. For instance, Maypoles were not popular with the Puritan minded. In 1602, John Brand was arrested for assembling a group of people and pulling down the Maypole at Ardeley. A Maypole existed at Hoddesdon from the 17th century, but was blown down around 1820, never to be put up again.

However, this did not mean the end of May Day celebrations in Hoddesdon. Early 20th century references mention girls carrying garlands and appealing for money, and a children’s May Day rhyme:

*“It is the first of May  
Through the playground lead the way  
All our lessons now are past  
Left foot first and not too fast*

*Oh it’s nice each sunny day  
Thus to enjoy ourselves in play  
We’ll be fairies on the green  
Dancing round the Fairy Queen”*

In Hitchin, May Day was celebrated in style with the singing of the “Mayer’s Song”.

‘May-Dolling’ was the name of the celebrations that took place in Royston. Townsfolk would parade through the town singing the Mayer’s Song dressed in special costumes and masks and fixing large branches of greenery to doors as they went. However, if the residents were not in favour with the Mayers, they would find stinging nettles instead!

Two men would dress up as the strange characters of ‘Mad Moll and her husband’. ‘Mad Moll’ wore a tattered dress and carried a ladle, while ‘her husband’ had a painted face, an artificial hump and a birch broom.

Another two men would dress up as ‘The Lord and Lady’, one in gaudy ribbons, coloured bandages and a sword and the other as a lady in a white dress.

There is an 1832 record of the people of Baldock making an effigy of ‘The Lord and Lady’ on May the first. The Lord and Lady are thought to date back to much earlier pagan beliefs and have taken the place of a god and goddess. May Day is still celebrated in Hertfordshire, albeit on a much smaller scale than in days gone by. Morris Men, Maypole dancing and the crowning of May Queens can still be seen in local villages and towns.



May Queen, Pages and Assistants, Norton Road School. May Day Celebrations, 1943. By kind permission of Gillian Bonfield

