

Fools, Lords and Boggins: Folklore and Photography on Lincolnshire's Isle of Axholme

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Figure 1 -

Singing with the former Lord of the Hood Stan Boor during the 2023 Haxey Hood procession. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

Introduction

The Haxey Hood, a folk game performed each year on the 6th January in a small village in rural Lincolnshire, is celebrated as one of the oldest calendar customs in the country, with a continuous observance of more than two hundred years and a history possibly dating back to the thirteenth century or earlier. Like all extant folklore and custom, the Haxey Hood is a living tradition, adapting and changing year on year, reflecting communal concerns and

changing culture; however, the earliest written account of the Hood, from 1817, describes an event largely the same as the one practiced today albeit without the omnipresent smart phone (Figure 1). This essay focuses on the landscape, folklore and visual representation of the performative aspects of the Haxey Hood, especially through photography and film, and considers what this might reveal about this ancient calendar custom.

This narration from a 1962 Newsreel by British Pathé provides a brief introduction to the Haxey Hood:

The fool is the most important chap in Haxey on St John's eve. He summons the young lads of the village to the annual contest with nearby Westwoodside, and in hats like the ones worn six hundred years ago, off they go thirsting for the game. It's played in a field near the church. That's where Lady de Mowbray's riding hood blew off one St John's Eve in the 14th century. Since then, a hood of sacking is thrown by the Lord of the game into the bunch, where they scramble for it as the villagers of old did for Lady Mowbray's Hood. As soon as one is dropped the Lord pitches another in. When twelve Hoods have been thrown, a special leather wrapped one goes into the scrum to be kept by the lucky man who gets it. Why Lucky? Because he gets as much free beer as he can drink. A very popular game!

Old Game Has Airing, British Pathé Newsreel, January 1962 (British Pathé 1962).

Whilst this provides a useful overview (albeit failing to describe the 'sway' – a sort of walking scrum that follows the throwing of the leather hood), it struggles to convey the richness and complexity of this ancient custom. What makes the Haxey Hood so interesting to the folklorist, and the photographer or filmmaker, not to mention those attending to watch or participate, is the complex performative structure of this form of mob football.

‘Football’ and Fools

Often violent games of mass or mob ‘football’ (games played between different communities, towns or even counties, involving individual or team competition for a ball or similar object), have a history of more than a millennium in the UK (Leggart 1929: 2). The earliest written evidence of mob football events is usually in the form of petitions or legal documents attempting to ban them due to the often drunken and unruly behaviour of the participants. Many of the surviving games take place at Shrovetide and are played with a normal or oversized leather ball which is hugged, thrown or kicked by players who compete between two points in the local landscape which act as goals. These include the Atherton Ball Game in Warwickshire, the often-brutal practices of which are the subject of many videos on YouTube (for instance see the documentation of the 2020 game by Urban Pictures¹). Some believe that these games have pre-Christian Pagan or Viking roots and might originally have been played with the head of a sacrificed bull, or the heads of executed criminals or soldiers from opposing forces (Leggart 1929: 2). One of the best known and longest running of these games is Royal Shrovetide football, which has been played in Ashbourne, Derbyshire on Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday since at least 1667. Similar ball games are popular in Scotland and the Borders, where smaller balls are typically used.

Most of these games of mob football lack the complexity of the custom practiced at Haxey. However, there are exceptions, such as the Hallaton Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking: a custom involving the processing through the village of a Hare pie accompanied by three small barrels – which take the place of a ball – and a bronze effigy of a running hare, after which the pie is blessed by the vicar and the majority of it is distributed to the waiting crowd (Figure 2). This is followed by the decorating of the three barrels at the village cross before a

¹ Urban Pictures, ‘Brutal Atherstone Ball Game 2020 takes place in the UK’, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmoUaIT44Mc>.

procession to the edge of the village where the contest between the residents of Hallaton and Medbourne (and anyone else who wishes to join in) commences. Two of the three barrels contain ale, while the third, for use in the event of a tie, is solid and painted red, white and blue.



Figure 2 - Hallaton Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking, Easter Monday 2019. (Hare Pie / Parade of Bottles / Scorer of first goal) photographs © Andrew Robinson 2025.

The Haxey Hood (or ‘the Hood’) is distinct from Hallaton and other such games in a number of ways, most noticeably in terms of the organising and performative role of the Hood officials and their attire. The Hood is officiated by the Lord and the Chief Boggin and at times additional officials, all dressed in red jackets and wearing hats decorated with flowers, feathers, jewellery and badges, accompanied by a Fool and the ‘Boggins’, making a total of thirteen ‘performers’. The Lord carries a wand of office made from thirteen lengths of willow, with one inverted to represent the fool, which is bound horizontally thirteen times along its length with pieces of thinner willow.

The costume of the fool varies from performer to performer and year to year. Tatter suits adorned with pieces of cloth or paper are common, as are patchwork trousers and tops, along with a decorated hat of some kind. Whilst there have been many variations in the costume, it is always distinct from, and less formal than, those of the officials, while the Boggins typically simply wear red jerseys to identify themselves. On the morning of the event, at the

Carpenters Arms in Westwoodside, the fool's face is ceremonially painted, or 'daubed' (Pearson 2007: 154) either as a form of traditional disguise or in reference to soot from his smoking or burning. Although the fool is often described as having a blackened face, in reality a host of designs using a range of different colours can be seen across the photographic history. Nevertheless, in recent years this aspect of the custom has proved problematic with some seeing the fool's disguise as an example of 'blackface', a negative and racist caricature of black people. Whilst there is no evidence to suggest such a link, given current sensitivities to the use of blackface within English folk custom the continued use of black, ochre and red coloured paint to create the fools disguise has attracted criticism. This has resulted photographs of the Fool being designated as 'likely to cause offence' and withdrawn from an exhibition of the author's photographs in Sheffield in 2023, and Hood-related images and artefacts being removed from display at North Lincolnshire Museum in 2024 (Simpson 2024).

A Performative Custom



Figure 3 - Singing on the village green during the procession, Haxey Hood, 2020 and 2023. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

The Haxey Hood exists as a type of ‘festival’ or ‘calendar custom’, what Turner and McArthur describe as a complex ‘public display event’ (1990: 83) involving ritual, ceremony, drama and contest alongside food, drink, costume and music. If we were to break the event down into its key performative elements they might be listed as follows. However, we should remember that, as a living custom, the event may change in its observance year on year:

- Three traditional songs (‘A Farmer’s Boy’, ‘John Barleycorn’ and ‘Drink Old England Dry’) are sung in pubs and at other venues in neighbouring villages in the days before Hood Day.
- The painting of the Fool’s face and singing in local pubs takes place on the morning of the 6th of January.
- The Fool, the Lord, Chief Boggin and Boggins toast at the old Butter Cross outside the Kings Head pub on the morning of the event.
- A parade then proceeds through the village, stopping to sing and drink at several locations (Figure 3).
- As the procession approaches the crowds outside the Church the Fool attempts to escape (Figure 4).
- He is then captured and taken to the Mowbray Stone, the remains of a medieval cross in front of the church (Figure 6).
- Standing on the Mowbray stone the Fool delivers a speech whilst Boggins distract him by lighting damp straw behind the stone and smoke (or occasionally burn) him (Figure 7).

- At the end of the Fools speech a doggerel is recited: ‘Hoose agen hoose, toone agen toone, If tho’ meets a man, knock ’im doone (but don’t ‘ut ’im!).’
- The procession heads to the top of the Hood field on open ground between Haxey and Westwoodside.
- 12 individual sack hoods are thrown and competed for by youngsters in a running game (Figure 9).
- At dusk, there are speeches, a further recitation of the doggerel, and the throwing of the leather hood.
- The tightly packed ‘sway’ centred around those holding the hood then begins, overseen by the Lord, the Chief Boggin and the Fool, with the assistance of the other Boggins (Figure 10).
- The game is won after an indeterminate period (usually several hours) when the hood is finally passed across the threshold of a local pub, usually to the landlord, followed by celebratory drinks and singing (Figure 12).
- The following day, affectionately known as Port Day, the Boggins meet up to clean the streets, and visit each pub to collect the sack hoods and have a drink with the landlord.

This complex series of formative events takes place across key locations from the Carpenters Arms at Westwoodside in the west, across the open ground between the villages to Haxey, along the main street and to the Butter Cross at the far end of the village, and in doing so it maps out the landscape and key locations of the village including current and former public houses, the church, village hall, village cross, Mowbray stone and hood field.



Figure 4 - ‘Tom Foolery’ as the Fool approaches the Church, Haxey Hood, 2020. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

Over the years these rich and complex performative elements have attracted artists and academics who have studied and responded to the event in different ways. In the 1970s, the artist Stuart Brisley, known for his performance-based arts practice, visited and filmed the hood for inclusion in a film work (Brisley 1984). This was an attempt ‘to search out the origins of performance art, connecting it not to modernism but to ancient folk rituals in England and Europe [...] where the division between performer and audience has not been institutionalised’ (Brisley 2018). The portion of the film covering the Haxey Hood focuses on the communal singing, the throwing of the hoods and especially the physicality of the ensuing sway, which Brisley sees as evidence of a pre-Christian ritual, as a form of social action that ‘doesn’t know itself in the heat of the moment.’ The film uses slow motion and a mesmerising soundtrack with a voiceover by Brisley to create an eerie and mysterious effect.

Theatre artist and performer Mike Pearson suggests that the Hood exists ‘as a prescribed sequence of distinct activities, of varying lengths and at different locations, each section with its own aesthetic features, rules and [...] conventions’ (2007: 159). He identifies three main forms of performative activity: formal, informal and fluid. This includes the formality of the

Fool's speech to the gathered crowds in front of the church, the informal singing in the pubs, private houses and along the procession route on and around Hood Day, and the fluidity and unpredictability of the Sway and the Running Hoods (2007: 158). Catriona M. Parratt, reflecting on gender roles and landscape in the performance of the Hood in the *Journal of Sport History* (2000: 229–245), describes these activities as 'a sequence of dramatic events played out by a cast of hundreds, with elements of rising action, climax, and resolution [...] a confirmation and celebration of a patriarchal [...] and pugnacious masculinity' (233). Parratt also suggests that the Hood conjures 'a distinct physical and spatial image of Haxey [...] as a place that is remote and inaccessible – adrift, almost – in time and space' (2000: 236).

Landscape, Livelihood and Rebellion

Haxey lies at the southern end of the Isle of Axholme. Although for the casual observer there is little trace today of this ever having been an island, and Haxey is some distance from the sea, in the past this whole area was inundated by water and on early maps, such as the *Angliae Figura* from the 1530s (Barber 2009) and Sebastian Münster's map published in *Ptolemy's Geographia* in 1540 (Munster 1540), Axhome is clearly identifiable as an inland island (Figure 5). The higher ground on which Haxey stands was previously surrounded by marshes which remained waterlogged all year. Writing in 1817, Peck explains how prior to its drainage 'no less than sixty thousand acres were overflowed by fresh water' and that at Haxey Carrs the water was generally about three feet deep (Peck 1817: 90–91). Local folklore explains that the floods result from the 'Tiddy Mun', a legendary Lincolnshire bog spirit, who lived in the bog-holes of the Carrs, only emerging in the evening when the mists rose (Balfour 1891: 151). The Tiddy Mun was believed to be able to control the waters and mists of the Carrs and punished those who had angered him (such as those who tried to drain the lands) by causing floods.

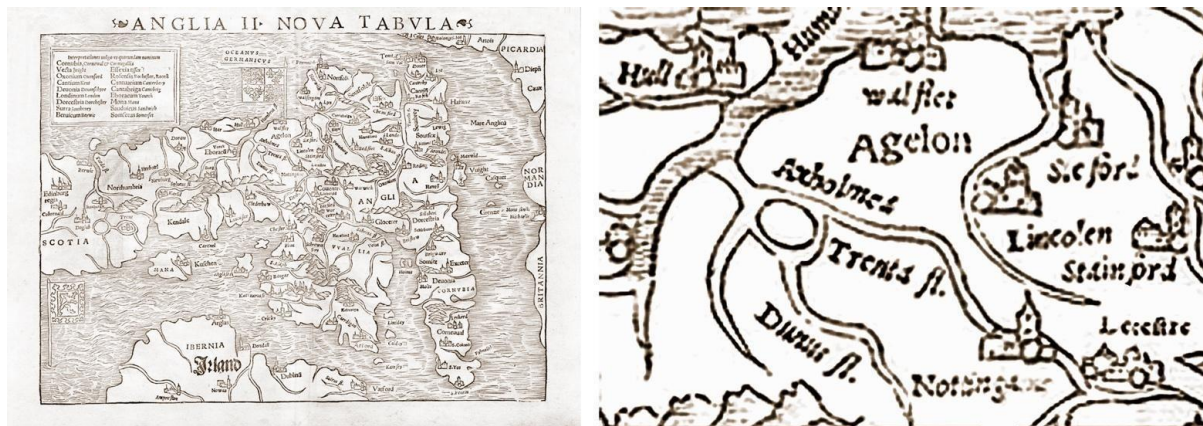


Figure 5 - Sebastian Münster's 'Anglia II Nova Tabula' a woodcut from *Ptolemy's Geographia* (Basle, 1540) with enlarged detail showing Axholme as an inland island. Used with permission of Lancaster University Library/Dr Ian Saunders.

If we look at current Government flood risk maps of the area, the outline of the former Isle is clearly revealed as high ground that is at no risk of flooding (Environment Agency 2025).

Despite their frequent flooding, before they were drained the marshes and fenlands surrounding this higher ground provided local people with a good living based on waterfowl, peat, hemp and other valuable resources, while two adjacent areas of peatland, Hatfield Mere (or Chase) and Thorne Mere, were reserved for hunting as part of The King's estates. A painting from 1609, believed to be of the last Royal Hunt on Thorne Mere, depicts up to one hundred boats laden with huntsmen pursuing a vast herd of deer across flooded land (Cory 1985: frontispiece).

The Dutch engineer Cornelious Vermuyden apparently first thought of the idea of draining the area in 1609, while on a hunting trip to Hatfield Chase on the edge of the Isle with the son of King James I. Charles I finally sold him the rights to do so on 24 May 1626. Vermuyden was required to undertake the drainage at his own expense in exchange for a third of the recovered land, with the Crown also taking a third and the remaining land being 'given' to the existing tenants. Vermuyden sold shares in his allocation of land to partners in Holland,

known as Participants, and more than two hundred Dutch and French workers soon arrived to undertake the drainage of up to 70,000 acres of bog and marsh and to claim their land (Wilkinson 1903). The people of the Isle were understandably angry at both the loss of their traditional way of life and what they saw to be the theft of two thirds of their common land, which although considered unproductive by the King, had long provided them and their ancestors a way of life. To make matters worse, the commoners were awarded the lowest lying and least productive lands. Moreover, the initial drainage works by the Dutch resulted in the flooding of commoner's lands which hadn't previously been susceptible to floods (Peacock 1885: 15). Even before this period of external interference, the islanders had a clear and distinct identity; however, this attack on their way of life and the sudden arrival of the 'Participants' from Holland clearly strengthened local identity and communal bonds.

The unrest resulting from the Civil War of 1642-46 was exploited by the commoners, whose claim for the return of their land was based on a deed locked in a chest in Haxey Church. This 'Mowbray Deed' was a gift of 13,000 acres of relatively poor-quality land in perpetuity to the commoners of the Isle of Axhome, made by John De Mowbray, 4th Baron Mowbray, on the 1st of May 1358, apparently to quell a dispute between his Socmanni (stewards working for the manor court) and local tenants (Wainwright 2025). During this time, sluices were damaged, flooding the Participants' farmland, while their crops, barns, houses and even their churches were destroyed. Nathaniel Reading, a barrister, was sent to the Isle in 1655 and initially acted as counsel for the commoners before betraying them and working for the Participants as a kind of 'law enforcer', collecting rent and arrears (Newall 1980: 17). Despite having some of their land returned, more than fifty years of unrest and violence followed, with no less than thirty-one pitched battles between Reading's men and the Commoners, resulting in several deaths and repeated attacks on Reading's land, property and family, which included the burning of his house on two separate occasions and repeated attacks on

sluice gates, drains, property and buildings (Newall 1980: 17). The Participants in turn struggled to make profit due to the damage caused along with the need for additional improvements, and because they repeatedly had to give lands and income to islanders as compensation. In 1698, after several arrests, the Islanders finally reached an agreement, paying £600 in compensation to avoid prosecution. Following the introduction of the Riot Act in 1715, and the dismissal of the commoners' case four years later, the unrest finally ended in 1719.

Throughout this period, the Mowbray deed gave the commoners a legal footing for their rebellion and ultimately allowed them to preserve most of their land. Some have suggested that the Haxey Hood is in some way a recognition of the Mowbray deed and a celebration of the strength of the Islanders' resistance, in which the Fool might represent Reading with the Lord and Boggins representing Mowbray and the ringleaders of the resistance. However, the evidence to support this notion is wholly circumstantial.



Figure 6 - The Fool is captured and returned to the Mowbray Stone after his escape, Haxey Hood, 2020 and 2023. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

For Mike Pearson (2007: 161), the Hood contains echoes of this fight for land rights, representing an 'act of transgression [...] of communal trespass, rewriting laws of tenure and

ownership, reappropriating the land [...] all under the illusionary sanction of no law'. Here the 'performative and the ludic overlie, displace, confound, supplant and suspend the everyday, within a given landscape'. Parratt (2000: 238) likewise suggests that the Hood provides the people of Haxey with an opportunity to 'expresses regret at the removal of the fen that once cut off the place and people' and that it even 're-establishes that watery barrier', reconstructing Haxey's 'ancient topography, its boundaries and distance'.

The Hood on Film: Formal vs Fluid

Books cataloguing the traditions and customs of Great Britain are common, and the Haxey Hood is almost always represented. When photographs are included, the Hood is most often represented by the Fool's Speech. For example, in 1938, F. J. Drake-Carnell describes the traditional Lady Mowbray legend alongside a photograph of the Fool's Speech (Drake-Carnell 1938). Writing in *English Custom and Usage* (1941), Christina Hole refers to the custom as a pagan survival, this time accompanied by a pair of photographs showing the officials at the Butter Cross and the and the Smoking of the Fool (Hole 1941). Endless Cavalcade from 1964 again includes a picture of the Fool posing on the Mowbray Stone (Howard 1964), while in *Rites and Riots* (1981) Bob Pegg associates the game with other examples of mass football and again includes photographs of the Fool's Speech, this time by Doc Rowe. The Mowbray legend is again referenced in 'A Chronical of Folk Customs', a 1998 collection of customs, where once more we see the Smoking of the Fool (Day 1998).



Figure 7 - During and following the smoking of the Fool, Haxey Hood, 2020. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

Homer Sykes' influential chronological survey of British calendar customs, *Once A Year* (1977), opens with the Haxey Hood, which he photographed in 1972. The Hood is given more detailed coverage than any other subject in the book, with six photographs spread over four pages, accompanied by a description that links the game to rugby and includes a detailed summary of the Mowbray legend as the most likely explanation, along with a description of contemporary gameplay (Sykes 1977: 14–17). Shot with a relatively wide-angle lens, the images, unlike most press photographs, are open and spacious, in part perhaps due to the relatively small number of onlookers and participants present. The six images provide reportage of the event: a memorable shot of the diminutive cigarette smoking Lord Stan Boor leading the procession; the Fool's speech; the throwing of the sacking Hoods; the Sway; an injured player lying amongst a crop of cabbages; and the winning landlord holding the hood aloft.

When studying such photographs of the Haxey Hood and other similar events, we should bear in mind the technical limitations of the photographic technology of the time, along with the demands and practices of photography in general and press photography in particular. In

the early days of photography, bulky cameras and slow emulsions – which necessitated long exposures – made candid pictures difficult, if not impossible. Photographers had to set up their cameras in order to capture the more formal ‘tableau’ moments of events or even intervene by asking participants to pause and pose. As with images of other similar events, many early photographs of the Haxey Hood are staged in this way. Even as recently as the 1950s, as can be seen in a photograph of the Fool’s speech from the 1950 Hood in the author’s possession, many press photographers continued to use bulky plate cameras, limiting their ability to capture the more fluid and fast-moving aspects of the custom.

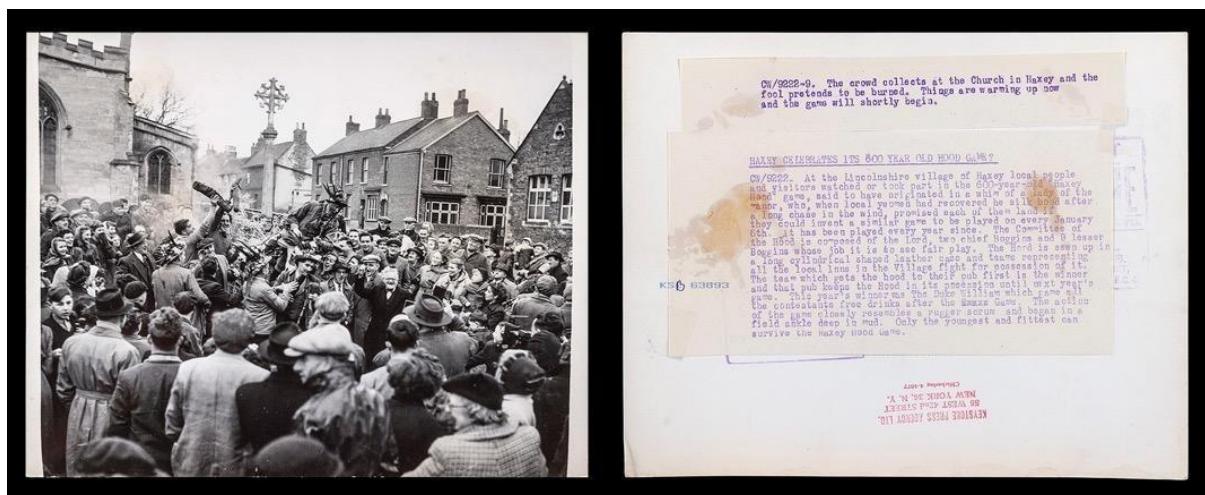


Figure 8 - A vintage press print from the author’s collection showing the Fool’s speech from the Mowbray Stone in 1953 (front and rear). © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

The needs of newspapers for a single successful image to convey the complexity of the event can also result in the posing of key participants at one or other of what Pearson, quoted above, termed ‘formal’ pauses in proceedings (2007: 159). Thus, it is not surprising that across much of its history on film, we see a focus on the Fool’s speech (Figure 8) and the gathering at the Butter Cross, as these points in the custom effectively present staged tableaux. Indeed, even today press photographers arrive early to place their aluminium step

ladders in prime positions in front of the church in order capture the classic shot of the Fool's speech from the Mowbray stone. As such, this single scene has become a visual trope used to represent the entirety of this complex and multi-faceted event. For example, in the summer of 2025, a local community group and the Kings Arms Public House raised over £4000 via a crowdfunding campaign to 'celebrate our heritage and the wonderfully tradition of Haxey Hood' by painting a mural based on a photograph of the fool's speech on the gable end of the pub (Young 2025).



Figure 9 - The throwing of the sacking hoods and the running game in the Hood Field, Haxey Hood, 2020. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

The fact that the leather hood is thrown up at dusk and the sway takes place in low light or darkness also may explain the focus on the running hoods rather than the sway (Figure 10). Photographers could use flash; however, the blinding light might upset the sway, and one could find oneself thrown into the midst of this unpredictable, shifting mass of bodies. Writing in his short history of the custom published in 1934, local headmaster Phillip D. Taylor warns: 'Let the unwary visitor or mere spectator beware of the Boggins during the sway for it is their delight to throw him in where he will enjoy the squeeze of his life' (Taylor 1934). A reporter for the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* attending in 1947 reflects that had

he heeded this warning he ‘might have saved myself considerable bodily pain and not have had to walk over frozen ploughland minus one shoe’ He had been thrown into the centre of the sway by three Boggins before witnessing a passing lorry driver suffer the same fate (B.T.T. 1947). As Taylor takes care to warn, ‘Boggins are no respecters of persons, be they bishops or makers, peers or peasants’ (1934).

The advent of smaller, more portable cameras and faster films in the 1960s allowed photographers greater opportunity to capture different aspects of the custom, including scenes inside poorly lit pubs and private homes, and the drama, excitement and at times brutality of the sway. This can be seen in the many photographs captured over the years by the folklorist and longtime supporter of the Hood, Doc Rowe, which have been posted on the event’s website (Patchdog Productions 2025). Brian Harris, a photojournalist known for his work for *The Times* and *Independent*, visited in 1998 to capture images of the sway in the low light of dusk on high-speed black and white film. He produced a series of at least four finished photographs of the event for reproduction, taking us deep within the sway to reveal the physical intensity and drama of the game. However, it was (again) his image of the Fool’s speech which was chosen for reproduction (Harris 1998).

The event has also been filmed on several occasions by British Pathé, who visited in 1938, 1939, 1954, 1960, 1964, and 1967, treating the event slightly differently on each visit. The Fool’s speech, the procession and the running hoods feature in all films; however, other aspects, such as the painting of the Fool’s face, the Fool chasing children, his attempted escape, and even the sway itself do not always feature. Of particular interest is the 1960 Pathé film, which was shot in colour and structured around the theme of decorating hats. At this time, not only the Lord and the Chief Boggin wore hats, but so did several others, including children.

The reverse of an archive press print in the author's collection capturing the Fool's speech in 1954 reveals that it was wired for publication on 6 January, the same day as the Hood. In 2019 I returned to my car, parked in the community hall car park close to the church, to pick up a camera battery shortly after the sway had begun, and found a press photographer downloading photographs from a digital camera in his car and processing them on his laptop to send back to the office before leaving whilst the event was in full flow. We should take care when using photographs of the event as evidence for how it was performed year to year, as such images are as likely to reveal changes in photographic technology, and the practices of photographers, as they are changes in the event itself.



Figure 10 - Reciting the doggerel and the throwing of the leather hood before the Sway begins, Haxey Hood, 2020. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

The arrival of digital cameras in the late 1990s, especially compact versions with auto focus and auto exposure, allowed many more members of the public and interested amateur photographers to capture good quality photographs of the Haxey Hood; the internet and social media now allow for instant worldwide dissemination of the resulting images. In 2020, I witnessed the Chief Boggin providing an update from the field of play to an absent Haxtonian via FaceTime on his mobile, and others now livestream the game from their

phones. A Google search for ‘The Haxey Hood’ currently provides nearly 400 images and over 100 videos of the event, mainly covering the last decade of the custom. In 2023 and 2024, the event was filmed by drones, providing a bird’s eye view of proceedings, and the resulting footage was shared on YouTube (Drone Media 2023 / Isle Films 2024). At the time of writing, commercial picture agencies Getty Images and Alamy between them provide a choice of over 450 images of the event for sale.

This availability of images and video, along with their worldwide dissemination, has brought knowledge of the Haxey Hood to a far greater audience than ever before, and visitor numbers reflect this growing awareness. Photographer Homer Sykes, who has visited the event since the early 1970s, recently reflected upon this:

There are now many people photographing and sometimes many hundreds of people who have no or little connection to the village visiting. When I documented these customs in the mid-1970s, I was probably one of maybe two or three people photographing, and I knew them all (although we didn’t speak or at least I didn’t!) (Merryclough 2024).

Whilst contemporary photographs are readily available, historical images have until recently been harder to obtain for study. The majority of these photographs quickly disappeared into inaccessible archives or private albums. In recent times, however, by collecting, borrowing and copying images from both professional and amateur photographers, some of whom such as Doc Rowe having documented the custom for many years, the Hood committee and interested locals have amassed an extensive collection of photographs documenting the event across the twentieth century. Many of these have been made available to all via the Hood’s website (Patchdog Productions 2025).

The Hood is a perennial favourite for local, regional and national newspapers, and its modern history can be traced through the reports in newspaper archives: the British Newspaper Archive returns over 4800 hits for ‘Haxey Hood’. Local historian Edward Fish recently published a book entitled *Mud, Boggins and Beer*, which summarises this coverage (Fish 2024). Most of these reports are text-based, though some include photographs, once again typically focusing on the Fool’s Speech, the Butter Cross and in more recent times the Sway itself.

Reviewing archive reports on the British Newspaper Archive reveals several interesting discoveries, which suggest that the historian or folklorist should approach such reports with caution. Many were clearly made by journalists who evidently had not attended the event and were simply copying or repurposing previous reports, from the same or even other newspapers, sometimes in their entirety. One report first published on 6 January 1924 in the *Lincolnshire Echo* is reprinted, almost verbatim, more than ten times between 1924 and 1926 in newspapers as far afield as Glasgow and Middlesbrough. Even those reporters who visited Haxey may not always have stayed to witness the entire event, and as a result not always reported on it accurately. Given the relative isolation of Haxey and the timing of the sway, which begins at dusk (in early January usually around 3 pm), it is perhaps understandable that reporters might arrive in time to capture the Fool’s speech and stay for the throwing of the sacking hoods, but then leave as dark draws in, returning to their offices in time to write a report and make the deadline for the following day’s paper.

Given the complexity of the structure and history of the Haxey Hood, it is also unsurprising that journalists, especially those not present for the whole event, might include inaccuracies in their reports – mistakes that are then amplified by others who copy or repurpose text from earlier reports. The same mistakes can also on occasion find their way into the writings of

folklorists who might then provide inaccurate interpretations. As a result, researchers should take care not to read too much into slight variations in the description of the event across time, as they are as likely to be the result of poor or incomplete reporting as they are changes in the game.

Nevertheless, images produced by press photographers and others still provide a wealth of visual evidence which can be of great value to the historian and folklorist. At Haxey this is aided by the repetition, year on year, of a series of staged tableaux where the participants pause in the proceedings, the ‘formal’ activities recognised by Pearson (2007). The performers pause and pose at the Old Butter Cross outside the King’s Head, at a number of locations during the procession to sing, and most importantly outside the church for the Fool’s speech and smoking. This provides the same series of photo opportunities year after year, with successive generations of photographers effectively remaking these tableaux across time. The resulting photographic typologies reveal variations in performance, costume, and practice across the years.

Haxey resident and former Chief Boggin Ian Dawes has been collecting and studying images for many years and has made important discoveries which are helping to engage a new generation of children in the custom. For the last sixty-five years there have been only two officials wearing flower-bedecked hats, accompanied by the Fool and ten Boggins (each identified by red shirts or armbands), making a total of thirteen ‘performers’. However, careful study of archive photographs reveals that for much of the first half of the last century there were at least four officials wearing decorated hats, and also that the willow wands carried by these officials, known as ‘secondary’ wands, varied from the one carried today by the Lord with its thirteen vertical willows bound thirteen times. Dawes has shown that whilst the number of vertical willows usually remains the same, the number of bindings on the

secondary wands varies, and he has provided convincing evidence that this corresponds to the number of officials and Boggins (Dawes 2025).

Careful analysis of the newsreel footage and photographs has also provided evidence to support reports that in previous times a decorated ladies' sacking or running hood was also thrown and competed for by the women of the village. Evidence of this can be seen in photographs from 1928 (Fox Photos) and in footage from the 1939 British Pathé Newsreel, in which such a hood can be seen being thrown (British Pathé 1939).



Figure 11 - Willow wands (left) and Fool's sticks (centre) created by Ian Dawes, based on old photographs / Ian Dawes (R) with a young resident of Haxey wearing a decorated hat, January 2025. Images © Ian Dawes 2025, used with permission.

Dawes has also produced a series of replica wands and Fool's sticks based on those identified in old photographs and film (Figure 11) and, along with others in the village, has been providing wand making workshops for young people. In 2025, inspired by the 1960 British Pathé newsreel and clear evidence from archival photographs, Ian and others have led hat decorating workshops with local children, the resulting creations being worn by the young people of the village for the first time in more than six decades.

Folklore: The Cult of the Sun?

The folklore surrounding the Haxey Hood mainly functions to explain its origins and significance, and several origin narratives are in circulation. These exist somewhere between myth and legend, incorporating real people and historical events in folkloric explanations for the circumstances and practices of the custom.

Throughout its recorded history, the most common explanation has been what has become known as the ‘Lady Mowbray legend’. This is referred to in passing by Peck (1817).

However, a more detailed account is provided by W. B. Woolhouse in *Notes and Queries* (1858: 94). This tells how, in ancient times, the wife of the Lord of Axholme provided finances and a parcel of land to a group of farmworkers or ‘Boggins’ who had ensured the safe return of her hood after it had blown away while she was riding across a field close to Haxey church. The gift was reportedly given on condition that the Boggins, clothed in scarlet jerkins, re-enacted the event each year, by competing for a similar hood thrown up in the place she lost hers. Rohese de Clare, wife of Robert, the first Baron Mowbray, who lived on the Isle for at least twenty years during the thirteenth century and gave birth to her son Alexander De Mowbray there in 1288, is perhaps the most likely Lady Mowbray to have been caught in that gust of wind (Geni 2024). Alternatively, Joan Mowbray, second wife of John (II) de Mowbray, 3rd Baron Mowbray of Axholme, whose son John was born in the nearby town of Epworth on 25 June 1340, may be the protagonist.

An alternative explanation also linked to the Mowbray family is that the custom is in some way related to the Mowbray Deed, as discussed above. Interestingly, the deed mentioned eleven commoners by name, to which an additional two, the leaders of the Levellers John Wildman and John Lilburne who supported the commoners in their dispute, were added in 1651, making thirteen in total (Newall 1980: 9). The deed was kept for many years in a locked chest under a stained-glass window depicting Mowbray in Haxey church. However,

both the window and the chest were lost ‘during the rebellious times’ (Stonehouse 1839: 293).

In 1896, inspired in part by the comparative religion and mythology of Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, respected Lincolnshire folklorist Mabel Peacock presented a paper about the custom at the Folklore Society in London. Whilst not having witnessed the game herself, she provides a detailed summary of all existing reports of the custom and repeats some of the inaccuracies of previous writers. Peacock highlights similarities with other mass participation sporting events traditionally practiced across Britain, along with others practiced in eighteenth-century Florence, and violent games played with wooden balls by Vikings (Peacock 1896: 346). She concludes that ‘the original import of the game itself is not difficult to explain’, stating that it is a survival of pagan sun god worship and sacrifice, equating the passage of the Hood through the air with the passage of the sun through the sky and seeing the smoking of the Fool representing the purification of animal or man prior to sacrifice (1896: 343–344). Here, Peacock is suggesting a link with French religious celebrations and communal games associated with the winter solstice involving discs or balls, which were interpreted by nineteenth-century French folklorists as survivals of ‘the cult of the sun’. In particular, she suggests a link with the Breton game of Soule, as described by French novelist Émile Souvestre, a collector and publisher of Breton folklore, in his book *Les Derniers Bretons* (1836):

This exercise is a last vestige of the cult that the Celts gave back to the sun. This ball, by its spherical shape, represented the star of the day; it was thrown into the air, as if to make this celestial beneath touch it, and when it fell back, it was disputed as well as a sacred object (Souvestre 1836).

Whilst the events to which Peacock refers, like numerous other similar mass sporting events, might share the involvement of large numbers of people from opposing communities competing for a ball or equivalent object, along with the often-violent rough-and-tumble of play, none of them share the defining characteristics of the Haxey Hood. The particular form of the leather and sacking ‘hoods’, the specific cast of ‘performers’, and the game play are all unique. The hood is neither spherical nor is it thrown through the air, aside from its momentary passage at the beginning of the sway, spending the entire game being tightly held against the bodies of the players or squashed into the earth of the Hood field. Likewise, no evidence of sun worship exists, a point made in a letter written to the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* in January 1903 in response to Peacock’s theories. ‘Your Contributor’ points out that there does not ‘seem any affinity between a secluded ultra-protestant Lincolnshire parish showing no trace of Celtic blood or speech which would connect it with ultra-Roman Catholic Brittany, essentially Celtic even today, in its customs and lingering superstitions’, and ‘to find in the “Hood” therefore, a survival of Celtic rite of sun-worship, seems an assumption somewhat far-fetched’ (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 1903: 13). Nevertheless, Peacock’s suggestions gained traction in the 1920s and recur in numerous press reports of the custom.

Sports historians writing histories of football and rugby also seem to have been influenced by Frazer’s ideas but have reached different conclusions. In a history of football published in the *Grimby News* in 1929, Frederick Leggett explains that modern football and rugby are sanitised versions of the mass games of football which used to be popular across the country, and suggests that these games are survivals of Pagan festivals during which different villages or communities would compete for the head of a sacrificed bull, either to claim it for their community as a symbol of good luck and fertility for the coming agricultural year, or to banish it to an opposing community as a form of ‘scapegoat’ in order to rid their own land of

bad luck (Leggett 1929). Influenced by such suggestions, many newspaper reports of the period cite Haxey as a possible origin of the modern game of rugby (see for instance *The Daily Mirror* 1928: 5; *The Sphere* 1928: 9).

These different folkloric interpretations might be seen to provide explanations for those with different beliefs. The original Mowbray legend appeals to those with more romantic sensibilities; rebellious opposition to unjust land settlements appeals to those with more political or social beliefs; while the idea of pagan sacrifice serves those wishing for an older, more magical or spiritual origin myth. Of course, these explanations need not be mutually exclusive: the Haxey Hood, along with other games of mass football, could indeed have been part of a pre-Christian festival which survived into mediaeval times but which, in the case of Haxey, then gained particular local significance after a gift of land by Lady Mowbray and the fact that the Mowbray bequest provided residents' legal rights to fight the loss of their common lands when they were stolen by the Crown.

Conclusion

The survival and success of Haxey Hood, when so many other similar unruly events have either been crushed by the authorities or simply faded away, results from a number of related elements. Regardless of the historical accuracy of the Lady Mowbray legend, the folklore celebrates the strong connection between the local landscape and communal history. At the same time, the islanders' sense of difference and their communal identity has been preserved down the centuries by both their relative isolation and their spirited defence of inherited rights. The uniqueness of the Haxey Hood, along with the opportunity for visitors to participate year on year, continues to attract a growing audience, whose interest, donations and the trade they bring to local businesses, help to ensure its survival.



Figure 12 - The sway enters the village before the hood is passed to the Landlord of the Kings Arms, Haxey Hood, 2020. © Andrew Robinson, 2025.

Each year, the different performative elements which comprise the event re-embed the custom within the community and provide a series of photo and video opportunities, increasingly shared via social media, that help promote the event and attract an ever-larger audience both in person and online. At the same time, the multi-layered nature of the event avoids limiting the custom to a single practice and thus provides a flexibility that allows it to adapt and respond to potential threats and challenges.

The focus of photographers and filmmakers on the staged tableau ‘performances’, in particular at the Butter Cross and the Fool’s speech, on one hand oversimplify the visual representation of this complex custom, often reducing it to a single posed scene. However, they also provide a fascinating documentary record when these images are studied as a typology across time. Study of the photographic record by local historians is providing new insights into the performance of the hood and helping to engage younger members of the community in a continuing living tradition. Jeremy J. Cooper, a member of the Hood and author of a history of the custom entitled *A Fool's Game: The Ancient Tradition of Haxey Hood*, Parratt (2000: 238), suggests that ‘through the Hood, the people of Haxey annually re-

assert their 'unique identity' as more than 'just another part of Lincolnshire', allowing them to construct a 'singular sense of the village and its people, setting them apart from other Islonians, and connecting them with each other.' Hopefully it will continue to do so for many years to come.

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