

The History of Pearly Kings and Queens

Pearly Kings & Queens originated in the 19th century from the 'Coster Kings & Queens', who originated in the 18th century, who originated from the 'Costermongers', who originated from London's 'Street Traders', who have been around for over a 1000 years... with that out of the way let's get down to the nitty gritty!

Street traders, or 'Costermongers' as they became known, have been an important feature of London life since the 11th century - and for the best part of 900 of those years they were unlicensed and itinerant - at times hounded by the authorities & bureaucracy. They cried their wares to attract customers with vigour and panache - much to the annoyance of London's 'well-to-do' society - yet they provided an essential service to London's poor; mainly selling their wares in small quantities around the streets & alleyways - at first from baskets, then progressing to barrows - then permanent static pitches from stalls - until they finally evolved into today's familiar and popular Markets. Oh yes, we owe a great deal to our ancestral costermongers - but like so many things we take for granted today, their fight was long and hard.

Because of London's unique geographical position it grew and thrived as a trading centre - the City grew up not just around its financial market, but around its famous markets that provided the necessities of life - markets such as Billingsgate (where the fish were landed), Smithfield (for cattle & livestock) and Covent Garden and Spitalfields (for fruit, veg & flowers).

Although each Coster family traded independently, they remained loyal to other costers - collecting for those that fell on particularly hard times. Their philosophy of life was one of fate - some you win, some you lose - when things went bad you just had to pick yourself up and start all over again. They liked a gamble - be it on boxing matches, pigeon racing, dog fighting and even rat-killing matches! Most of all, of course, they liked to indulge in a tippie or two. Not because they enjoyed a good old booze-up and sing-song, you understand - 'no guv', more to do with being suspicious of water, what with cholera & typhoid and all that! Besides, the Ale Houses, Gin Palaces & the Penny Gaff Music Halls were warm & welcoming compared to their squalid lodgings. By now most of London's poorer working classes were hoarded together outside the thriving City - dockers, sailors, immigrants & factory girls - all living in slum conditions with little or no sanitation.

As London grew beyond the boundaries of the walled City - costermongers in each Borough elected a 'Coster King' - they were chosen to fight for their rights - the first form of trade union, if you like. Coster Kings needed to be a hardy breed with leadership qualities, strong personalities, physical strength, and also be loyal and quick-witted. And it wasn't just the men - the female Billingsgate fishmongers were regarded as fearsome characters! Coster Kings and Queens brought up their 'Royal' children to follow in the tradition and inherit their titles.

Costers admired style & panache. They had evolved a showmanship and cheeky banter that boosted their custom. They also developed their own secret language - Coster back-slang - which pre-dated Cockney rhyming slang. They used this language to good effect, confusing their punters and the police when they wanted! With typical coster cheek they imitated the wealthy West End society who by early 19th Century had developed a fashion for wearing pearls - only the costers took it one step further by sewing lines of pearl 'flashies' on their battered hand-me-down waistcoats, caps and working trousers!

The transformation to the complete Pearly Costume as we know it today finally came in the 1880s when a road sweeper and rat-catcher by the name of Henry Croft completely smothered a worn out dress suit & top hat with smoked pearl buttons - incorporating patterns, symbols and slogans - one of which was 'All For Charity'. Henry was a lifelong friend of the costers and he was particularly influenced by their outlook on life - which was all about helping one another and those less well off, even if you had little yourself. He joined the costers on their hospital fund raising Parades and Carnivals. It wasn't long before all of the Coster Kings and Queens from London's 28 boroughs produced their own Pearly Costumes - realising that their shimmering outfits delighted onlookers and worked wonders in raising funds for the charities. While Pearly Kings and their princes decorated their caps, Pearly Queens and their princesses wore ostrich feathers and bobby-dazzler earrings!

The Pearly attitude to life is one of pride - not just to raise money, but to dispense it in true Cockney spirit - good heartedly and without the recipient being made to feel humiliated. Money collected came from their own kind - well-organised self-help - collected in the traditional manner by providing a bit of good old Cockney entertainment in return. It is a tribute to The Pearlies that they have never been found wanting when their services have been called on. They have never looked for recognition but have been awarded countless medals, honorary memberships, hospital governorships, etc in appreciation of their achievements. The Societies & Organisations that The Pearlies have helped reads like a roll call of our most famous charitable institutions - with sums raised running into millions. But it is not just the direct fundraising that Pearlies are famous for - their unique and honourable traditions which have been built up over many centuries have enabled them to act as ambassadors at home and abroad - adding to both tourism and trade - visitors to our shores still expect to see something of our heritage, pageantry and costume.



Finally, we mustn't overlook the fact that in today's hustle-bustle world, Pearlies unselfishly give up their spare time whenever they can. Our ancestral Costers succeeded in fighting for our rights - which leaves today's Pearlies free to concentrate on charitable and educational work - not forgetting, of course, spreading Cockney goodwill, spirit & cheer!

A Further Thought

Now you have some background knowledge of how London's Pearly Kings and Queens evolved from ranks of the costermongers. Keeping this whirlwind history lesson in mind, try to imagine the everyday life of the society that gave birth to this generous and tireless tradition.

The London Henry Croft knew will be familiar to anyone who knows their Dickens. Urchins and infant pickpockets, flower sellers hawking their wares, a cheeky 'salt of the earth' underclass having a jovial, gin-fueled song and dance in the pub may all be stock images familiar to us from countless glossy movies and television adaptations but they do not tell the full story. Victorian London was riddled with social ills. There was no healthcare provision for the poor who were too sick to work. There was no notion of state welfare for the very young, old or unfortunate. Poverty was of a type that we cannot even begin to imagine today. Apart from a few conscientious philanthropists and campaigners, like Lord Shaftesbury (a good friend to the costermongers) and like Dickens himself, the ruling classes did little to alleviate the suffering of those who had fallen on hard times. The dreaded Workhouse was the only gesture of concern on the part of the government. It really was considered a last resort among the poor as treatment was harsh and conditions almost as squalid as life on the street.

Henry Croft and the costermongers he so admired were surrounded by this poverty. Indeed, they would have been well aware that they were only a stroke of bad luck and a couple of paces away from a similarly wretched fate themselves. Costermongers at this time really did survive day by day. They were dependent on moneylenders for the cash to buy their stock and rent their barrows. These debts weighed on them constantly and failure to keep them under control could easily result in total ruin. A few days of bad weather and poor sales would be equally devastating. Costermongers' customers were the poorest members of society and they would not venture out to market on a rainy day for fear of soaking their only set of clothes as unable to get dry and warm again in their unheated homes they would be risking a chill, lengthy illness and possible death. The police were another peril of costermonger life in this period. The unlicensed traders were not allowed to loiter and if spotted standing in one place by a policeman - even to make a sale - they would be moved on or arrested. They had to keep moving around the streets of the city, trying to make enough sales to survive another day. The costermongers' reputation as heavy drinkers had less to do with hedonism than with finding a place of warmth, refuge and solace to drown out the harsh realities they constantly faced.

This 'hand to mouth' lifestyle coupled with the daily evidence that there were others even less fortunate could easily have made Henry Croft and the costermongers cynical and hard hearted. In fact it had the opposite effect. These remarkable people recognised that no help would be offered from the privileged classes and so they dedicated their lives to looking out for their own kind. The very essence of the Pearly tradition - the bold and shiny costumes - developed from the instinct to attract attention and thus raise more money for genuine and worthwhile causes and charities. The costermongers relied on the poor as customer and the poor relied on the costermongers as providers of necessary goods as more established shops were either too expensive or decidedly unwelcoming to poorly dressed clientele. This mutual reliance paved the way for the charitable provision and support for which Pearly Kings and Queens are now justly famous. They do all they can to help those in need but without a hint of pity or condescension. The Pearlies never forget their own history. Anyone can fall on hard times. What counts is making the most of the good times while they last, doing all you can to help others and having the support of your own kind when the going gets tough.

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