

The Chelmsford Sissies **by Sir Grayson Perry, 2003**

In the spring of 1648 Parliamentary forces were approaching Chelmsford, which at the time was under the control of a small band of Royalists led by Sir Thomas Sissye. On hearing of the imminent attack Sissye and eight of his most loyal men headed out to intercept the Roundhead troops. Their intention was not to fight, for they knew they were hopelessly outnumbered; they went to surrender.

Sissye and some of his party had witnessed the terrible destruction and bloodshed at the siege of Colchester the previous August. Now they hoped to avert a similar disaster for Chelmsford.

They soon encountered a scout and sent a message to Edward Dynnes, the commanding officer, to accept their surrender on the banks of the Chelmer. Sissye and his men knew they were bartering their lives for the safety of the town. Dynnes was a coarse and naturally violent man who took out his anger at being denied a good battle on Sir Thomas and his men.

On the 17th of May Sissye and his friends were paraded through the centre of Chelmsford bound and attired in women's dress, a humiliation Dynnes felt was fitting for what he saw as cowardly behaviour.

But Dynnes' cruel and unusual carnival did not get the reception for which he had hoped. The citizens of Chelmsford showered the condemned men with flowers and cheered them on their way to the scaffold.

A few years later after the end of the Civil War a festival grew up in the town to celebrate the heroic sacrifice of Sir Thomas Sissye and his followers. Men of the parish would don female apparel and parade through the streets carrying wooden swords decorated with flowers and ribbons. These would be thrown into the Chelmer symbolising their surrender and contempt for violence.

To this day every May the 17th the 'Sissies of Chelmsford' dance through the streets in their pretty dresses still carrying the decorated swords and casting them into the river. Over the years the parade has grown to include not just symbols of aggression such as tanks and missiles but also other talismans of masculine vanity such as cars and suits all rendered larger than life in papier mache to be burnt on a great bonfire in the evening.

This is of course how the word sissy, meaning a weak or effeminate man, passed into common usage.