

Cross-dressing



A Cambridgeshire Molly dancer



Rollin Howard - a minstrel 'wench'

Cross-dressing has long been part of the carnivalesque in popular culture: Morris sides regularly perform with a 'Molly', whilst black-faced minstrel shows would often include a 'wench' act.

Many regarded female performance as demeaning and the open air locations for pierrot troupes removed any air of respectability offered by an indoor theatrical venue – as a result, prior to the 1st World War, most troupes were all-male.

This resulted in the roles of women in the sketches or 'scenas' being played by men, who cross-dressed for the part. For obvious reasons, this was particularly common during the 1st World War in the all-male military environments in France, Gallipoli and beyond.



'Pierrot in Plus Fours' - an army troupe with 4 female impersonators, 1929



A Canadian troupe making-up during 1st World War

Styles of female impersonation varied widely: some were broad caricatures, like a pantomime dame, whilst others dressed glamorously to perform convincingly as women: these 'female impersonators' presented an idealised representation of femininity.

Billy Manders (a Catlin female impersonator)



At home, during the 1st World War, some all-female troupes were created because the men were fighting overseas.



Ellison's All-Lady Concert Party, Brighton, 1916