

## FUTURE OF THE MORRIS

The following was written many years ago.

Today's Morris is of the 1970's and looking forward. It is still important to be aware of the roots in the villages, it is essential to have available what is actually recorded about the morris of the 19th century and a detailed baseline description of the dances and their style of performance. But it is time to stop the illusion of the separation into the traditional and the revival. Many revival sides have existed longer than the 19th century village teams. Most traditional sides have now the characteristics of revival clubs.

It is impossible to produce an authentic notation of how it was, only an account of current practice. The character of a "tradition" that shows through in a performance is an interpretation by the group doing it and is dependent on the skills, experience and techniques available within it. That this varies with the personnel is obvious when seeing the adjustments made at Bampton from year to year. A good development of a tradition, whether an attempt to recreate from mss or an extension on artistic grounds, can be very stimulating, as with Jockey MM's Ilmington or Russell Wortley's Sherborne. The relevant analogy is with Shakespeare's plays where the inherent quality of the material allows of both orthodox and exciting new-light presentation.

Invention usually works within self imposed constraints of what is "right", although the recorded material indicates that the old dancers were far more free in what they introduced, like using coconut shell halves for hand clapping. Good, simple ideas are hard to come by. But it is easy to adapt dances from one style to another. If a team is permanently specialising this is one way of generating a satisfying repertoire. Following tradition, a viable repertoire is never more than 24 set dances and jigs, and this would include dances to more than one tune. A practical aim, based on experience in other performing arts, is to have three times the number of dances needed to support a single show.

The common situation of a lack of knowledge, of experience and of talent is justification enough for a club maintaining two contrasting "traditions". How much can be added to a "tradition" before its character is affected? The doubling of the number of dances available for public performance at Abingdon has changed the feel of the dances overall. Achieving a uniqueness is one possible simple aim for a club.

Invention must not be complex. Cotswold morris is not elaborate pattern making nor is it exotic stepping. It is interesting that no side seems to have imported or invented steps from outside the known corpus. Invention is parochial. After all it is to make the team different, and not intended for the whole Morris world. Local references in the titles are good, if they are significant to the dancers or the audience, but it must be recognised that the significance can be ephemeral. Abingdon once called a dance "The Aeroplane Dance" during wartime Wings for Victory activities, possibly because of a fancied resemblance of the distinctive figure to two propellers. It was renamed when the title became an embarrassment.

Sides, when considering what they should do, could consider their "good" points and exploit them, for example the Cardiff women with their cross-back-steps and the Bristol men with their capering. The converse is also true, to a point, but standards will only rise by setting technical challenges. In general women's sides have been poor at capering. There is no physiological reason why they can not be athletic, so the problem may be sociological. Men have a natural brio and it has fitted them easily.

In the future there should be more general awareness of technique, not only of good dance but also of good teaching. The real technical difficulties in each tradition can be recognised and solved by bringing together the experience of the teachers from many sides, and between them they probably have the approaches to effective learning. The idea that learning from good teaching and sharing experiences will lead to stereotyped morris is wrong. What one does with a club is a conscious choice, especially if one has mastery over one's own movements. Morris as a hobby needs to allow self-expression or it holds little attraction. But it does not mean the toleration of deviant individual performance.

The number of sides will continue to rise rapidly and the national organisations should need to

reorganise themselves to cope. In recent years the Morris has been opened up to a wider part of society, faster than the available system of training leaders can work. It takes time to develop dance skills, and gain experience and knowledge. Why have we not estimated the average number of hours on the hoof needed? In my opinion there is a strong obligation on existing sides to help new ones. It should be in their own self interest to avoid bad performance of the morris in their own area.

It is reasonable that many sides will have short lives under modern conditions. Dancers will change clubs frequently. When sides are thicker on the ground, this is probably the better way of broadening personal experience in the dance, and it might slow down the constant urge to do it by introducing too many new dances into a club repertoire.

I hope that the prejudice remains against mixed Cotswold morris. I wonder why we never have to worry about the odd man dancing in a women's side? Already there are a few women who dress like the men and dance like the men, but to be generally satisfying this ought to remain exceptional. A more difficult question is that of having a musician of the opposite sex, where does that musician, unless they are exceptional, get their experience of the dance to play with an understanding of movement? The subtleties of rhythm and phrasing are the difference between good and average dancing.

With the increase in the numbers of clubs, there will be a growth of interest in the byways of the tradition, both to be different and to be local. There is not the same wealth of material to be welded together for most parts of Britain, as done by the Shropshire Bedlams and Marth Rhodens for the Border Morris, but local material does exist if looked at without prejudice and preconceptions. The number of Molly dances, Ribbon dances, Garland and Stave dances are limited. One will have to turn as did the original 19th century performers to then contemporary social dance material. With care some forms can even be augmented by using similar continental dances. The legitimacy of grafting is a problem for each individual club. It depends on whether it is a necessity because of constraints that the club has set itself, or whether the drive is to preserve local ritual or to be in effect a folklore troupe. Often a local ritual is more a question of the custom and the costume than the content of the dance, as at Salisbury and Shaftesbury. It should be remembered that most traditional forms had a start some-when and arose out of something related but different. If it is legitimate to transplant some forms outside of their region why not others?

It is still possible to collect dance material, particularly the NW morris which is the richest and most recent of the UK traditions. Because of social mobility dancers will be found anywhere. I have collected several NW dances south of Oxford!

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