

Border Morris Roots

SHROPSHIRE BEDLAMs

At the Morris Federation "Border Morris - Roots and Revival Conference" at the West Malvern Village Hall on the 29th February 1992, John Kirkpatrick spoke on the origins, development and current state of the associated Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhodens Tuppenny Dish teams which danced in the modern "Border Morris" style.

He started the Bedlams in 1975 and wrote an article about them in the EFDSS Magazine in 1979 which he still supports.

John met the morris at the age of 12 in 1959 with Hammersmith Morris under Hugh Rippon who was then in his mid-20's. When he moved to Shropshire he looked for something on which to base a morris. He had seen Chingford dance their development of Upton on Severn created by Geoff Hughes. There was the Dr Cawte article in the Journal of the EFDSS defining the Welsh Border Morris in 1963 and wonderful danceable sets of tunes from local fiddlers that he had found in the Sharp Mss.

The first step was to impose a style on the generally unrelated material, for example to find a standard step. The less that dancers have to think about the mechanics of what they are doing, the better the dance and the more they can think about what really matters. This was novel thought for its time. The inspiration was Hugh Rippon who had been happy to adjust the source for the sake of the dance. To be flamboyant it was necessary to slow down the music to gain the time, eg like Chipping Campden who are open and spacious but whose dances were not available for general consumption. Bampton just got on with it, nothing pretty or pretentious. The morris does not need words, there should be a magic and mystery about it. The more that you tell beforehand, the more seems to be taken away from it. He thought that there were very few successful morris fools and his solution was that all the side is the fool and any one can fool at any time, but they do not say anything.

The sequence found was 1 hop 2 hop, 1 2 3 hop ad lib. The emphasis is a drop down and kick up behind, not at all like the Cotswold Morris, but with no traditional authority either. The bells were on a string at the knee not in bellpads so that could not shake the legs to make them ring as in the Cotswold Morris. It was also the time of the first wave of interest in English Country Music which showed how to sustain rhythm with simple melodies at slow speeds.

The costume included top hats and long feathers, no flowers, to give height. There are no badges or stickers as these are cheap and demystify what is being done. They do not wear anything that gives away what it is. The "Tattered" jackets used a folk skill and made interesting movements possible. The blacking covers the face and the neck down to the collar and the backs of the hands. Being a little frightening is part of it all. They have a rule never to take their hats off because it detracts from what they are doing. The blue denim jeans and white pumps or trainers provide a modern bottom to a traditional top. They never appear in public in half dress as this then leaves them guessing. There are bells on the jacket arms.

The rest position is with the stick on the shoulder but plenty of uncoordinated waving is encouraged. They do it all at "full tilt" with nothing polite about the sticking.

The two sides developed in parallel. It was an early decision for the men to have the sticks dances and the women to have the handkerchiefs. It was surprising to him that few women's sides had followed Martha Rhodens style.

In the early days they had some dances in common and two versions of the same dance. The processional was worked up to be fancied in pairs and it allows of much improvisation. Steeple Claydon was one of the first dances done and to the local "Old Molly Oxford" tune and quickly became the final dance and is the only one now for as many as are available. Brimfield was the first dance in two versions. The men did it with sticks. The women used a 6/8 tune and introduced two balance steps, a "heel-&-toe" (with the heel out first) and a "balance-&-kick" turning clockwise. They called it the "Three Handed Reel" even though it was for four dancers by analogy with another traditional dance.

Border Morris Roots

Sheepskins was developed using the sheepskin hey and figures loosely adapted from the Leominster dance. The hey was done around three people rather than hats. So it became "Three Jolly Black Sheepskins" for the men who made it slower and took 24 bars for the hey and "Three Jolly Sheepskins" for the women who took it faster, 16 bars for the hey. They used the tune "All A Siden" from a local song book which introduced the phrase Martha Rhoden Tuppenny Dish and the tune title has become the dance's name.

The men did the Upton on Severn stick dance and invented some words to "Brighton Camp" which led to the dance being called "Half a Farthing Candle". It was written for six dancers but can now be done for ten. Most dances have a verse to sing and the men often write another. The Three-Tops figure lead to ideas for rotating the sets and a Three Reel was developed with this feature and called "Speed the Plough". Bromsberrow Heath was developed with its particular exaggerated Brimfield like sticking using the tune "Rickett's Hornpipe" and it was called "Maiden's Prayer" after a remark from one of the team. Leaning back for 16 bars is quite a strain, so is standing there while the other dancer beats the shit out of the stick.

The dances are not derived from pagan or primitive times but they try to get at the pagan and primitive side of human nature, the uncivilised part of all of us. The morris is almost socially acceptable, because one can get your local morris to express these feelings for you.

"Mad Moll of the Cheshire Hunt" was inspired by the Headington Morris Reels. "The Big Ship" from Brimfield and the "Blue Eyed Stranger" from White Ladies Aston. The Evesham Stick dance sticking developed from the composed Bledington Black Joke sticking bringing in the concept of tapping with a neighbour, which is now exploited in several dances. Pershore was danced to a version of the "Staffordshire Hornpipe" now called "Toddly Hill" (not sure). The women used "Bonnets So Blue" for its handkerchief dance. The women developed versions of what were at that time acceptable dances for women such as Abram, Bluff King Hal, Hindley, and the Ilmington dance "Lively Jig". The men did the Ilmington "Buffoon" but added to it. After trying simulated smacks and backside kneeling it was found that it did not have the desired effect, it looked pathetic, one should not pretend, now they actually do the slapping etc.

Following the visit to Sidmouth in 1977 John received a letter from Roy Dommett including other exploitable dance bits. The Oldbury U-hey figure was worked into a dance to "Morning Star" and the Peopleton "Pop Goes the Weasel" was developed into "Three Penny Halfpenny Treacle" using a made up tune "Tuppenny Rice". They dropped the Three Hand Reel and developed a version for five with a 4/4 tune. This became part of a growing interest in dances for odd numbers. There is a dance for nine in a square where all but the centre dancer does something different in each repeat. The Figure Eight movement reminded of the crossings in motor cycle displays so it was called the "Triumph" to the tune "Shreds and Patches". It was the only dance that was done to a single step throughout. A seven in line dance was done to "Hunt the Squirrel" and a five in a Cross dance to "Getting Up Stairs" with its hey up the middle and the outsides going round. Both were local tunes from Sharp's collection. A dance for nine women was done called "Churning Butter" and a dance for four to a version of "Greensleeves" from Herefordshire called "Green and Yellow Handkerchief". "Boyne Water" was used for "Last Night with Archie" and this introduced the idea of taps on the women's soles and heels for the effect. More recent have been "Old Towler Eightsome Reel" and "Over the Moon" a square for eight.

All the teams have contributed ideas, words etc. "Beating the Oak" had napping with either hand. "There's No Doubt About It" was a circle dance for 10 dancers. As Sue has not danced regularly for 2 or 3 years some of the women make up dances. Creation is part of the life of morris.

It all feels very organic to him still. He still has ideas for dances but there is no rush as there is still a lot of material to get on top of.

"Each team makes up its own atmosphere and energy."

Notes taken by R L Dommett

Border Morris Roots

Video was made by Sue Swift