

My copy - + notes.

WMF/BAB/1979

Historical Notes 1.

Extract from a letter written by Barbara Butler, WMF Technical Officer in July 1979 in answer to a query on the history of Women's Morris.

The information compiled below is derived from the following sources:

1. Notes on the Revival of Women's Morris by Val Parker (précis of a chapter of the book she is writing on the history of Women's Morris).
2. Men only. Exploring the Myth of Exclusively Male Morris by Bill Banbury. Published in the Newsletter of the Hoy at Anchor Folk Club.
3. Spelsbury, Oxfordshire - From Percy Manning's Notes (Top Oxon.d.200 Bodlian Library - Oxford).
4. Women and the Morris by Roy Dommett.
5. Letter by Roy Dommett to the Editor of Bristol Folk News on Women's Morris and the Suffragette Movement.
6. The Morris Book by C.J. Sharp & H. MacIlwaine. Part 1, page 12 which quotes T. Blount's 'Ancient Tenures 1679'.
7. The Morris Dance in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire, by E.C. Cawte: EFDSS Journal Reprint No. 13 1963.

Roy's article⁴ looks at why there is such poor documentation of women dancing, or why women did not attempt much Morris dancing in the past. He points to the problem of the social structure. Women of 'good character' did not involve themselves in public displays and working class girls, whether of 'good' or 'bad' character were usually in service, working long hours with very little free time. (Roy does not mention this, but I feel it ought to be included here, that once a woman was married there was little or no birth control to free her from the yearly baby. Therefore, she was not physically in a position to dance for the best part of the year.

He also looks at the problem of dress; the crinoline and the bustle did not exactly encourage the wearer to dance capers etc! There was also the problem of unsuitable undergarments. Girls in the North-West of England used to hang up their clogs when the breasts developed because dancing became painful and embarrassing. With these social problems I suppose we are lucky to have the few references we have.

The first mention² seems to be in 1599 during Will Kemp's 9-day marathon 'Morris Dance' as well as several young ladies joining him dancing along the way:

"At Chelmsford, a Mayde not passing fourteen years of age.... made request to her Master and Dame that she might dance the Morrice with me.... to fit her with bells; besides she would have the old fashion with napking on her armes: and to our lumps we fell. A whole hour she held out...."

In 1625 Vihkenboom² painted a rustic scene of men and women dancing the Morris. The painting is currently in Lord Fitzwilliam's mansion on Richmond Green.

The next reference I have is one made by Thomas Blount⁶ in 1679 in his 'Ancient Tenures of Land and Jocular Customs of Some Manors made Publick for the Diversion of Some and Instruction of Others'. He refers to the Kidlington (Oxfordshire)

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Lamb Ale, in which the lady of the Lamb (one of the village girls who had caught a freed young lamb, with her hands tied behind her back, at the start of the celebrations) went into procession accompanied by a "Morisco Dance of Men and another of Women".

The next reference I found⁷ was to a gravestone in the village of Willey in Shropshire. It is dated 1756 and relates to one ~~was~~ Margery Brider 'who danced with the Morris-dancers the year before'. She is supposed to have reached an incredible 113 years, but since one of the local men's sides was supposed to have an average age of 103, I don't think the improbable age can be taken to disprove the whole engraving.

Jumping to 1824² & ³, to the recollection of one John Corbett who in 1894 told of the women dancing on the church tower at Spelsbury some 70 years earlier, they used to dance on Whit Monday and were mostly farmers' daughters between eighteen and twenty years old. They wore head-dresses of ribbons and flowers, short skirts to show the bells on their legs (these bells were the same kind as worn by the male dancers) and carried white handkerchiefs. A clown or 'squire' went with them and a man playing a pipe and tabour. Mr. Corbett records the names of six of them.

In 1912², George Butterworth recorded in his diary after a visit to Kirtlington in Oxfordshire that he saw the girls use the 'Forest Feather' a framework of sticks decked with ribbons, which were detachable in a 'set dance'.

In 1895⁵, Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick founded the Esperance Club in London. During working hours the girls were seamstresses at 'Maison Esperance', but Mary Neal decided they needed healthy leisure activities and so she organised Morris Dancing. (I have several photographs of the Esperance Women and the girls dancing in white dresses and bonnets, doing stick and handkerchief dances.

Roy thinks that from the atmosphere of the time Sharp broke with Neal and the Esperance women, not because they were women dancing the Morris, but more because of her involvement with the suffragettes and his involvement in internal politics as to who controlled the folkworld in England. The 1914-18 war took many men away leaving only girls' teams in the North-West of England and these developed and flourished into the "Carnival" or "Fluffy" Morris of today².

A year or so ago I met in Bath a lady named Mrs. Barbara Cooper, who had danced as a girl at the end of the 1920's, early 1930's with the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers. Apparently the public performances were put on by only the men's side but, at practice, the sets were of mixed sex and were taught by "Young" Mr. Kimber.

In the 1930's Sam Bennett of Ilmington tried to revive his village side but, because the men were not interested he taught the women and children to dance. The Women's Morris Federation holds photographs of these ladies in mob caps, white handkerchiefs, aprons and print or white dresses. One of the children is now Mrs. Brenda Sparrow who now dances with Somerset Maids Morris (my side) and her family were friendly with the Bennetts. Arnold Woodley, one of the Bampton Squires, remembers watching the women in white dresses, dancing when he was a lad.

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My next reference is the much mis-quoted address of William Kimber to the Ring in 1961. The first part of this quote is often used by some men to say women did not dance but, the rest goes on to tell of women dancing:

"...Did I think women ought to dance the Morris or did I know if women ever did the Morris?"

"Let me tell you there was some dancers there as would whack half the men at dancing jigs." "Old Jemima Smith - she'd challenge any of 'em."

"You say should women dance the Morris?..."

"Now who started the Morris in London in the first place and would there have been any Morris at all in London if it hadn't been for the ladies?....."

(referring presumably to Neal).

Finally I turn to referende (1); in 1971 - Bath City Women started dancing Morris at first in private, then in public. The first dances were White Ladies Aston (Border Morris); Keswick (North-West Morris); Ilmington and Wheatley. They were followed in 1972 by the formation of Cardiff Ladies, then England's Glory (Cheltenham); Oxford and Blackmoor (Chelmsford and since then disbanded through lack of numbers). Now at the beginning of 1979 there are 52 women's sides, members of the Women's Morris Federation which was formed in 1973. There are now more sides and to my knowledge there are about thirteen non-member women's sides.

SS/1982

"The Lancashire Rush-Cart & Morris-Dance" Anne G. Gilchrist EFDSS 1927 pp 17-27
 p21 - 2nd paragraph - a letter describing Rush Cart procession witnessed at Neaton nr. Manchester. "After this came 12 country lads & lasses dancing the real old morris-dance with their handkerchiefs flying...?"

