

HOW IT BEGAN

In 7500 bc at Stone Carr near Scarborough, early postglacial Mesolithic hunter/gatherers were becoming adapted to a forest environment. The site gives the earliest example of artificially felled trees and of a domesticated dog in England. It also has red deer horns that appear to have been worked so that they could be worn. The site was occupied only by 5 or 6 families but the need could have been disguise in the hunt or ritual.

The earliest known reference to a linked chain dance is depicted on rocks in the open air in a valley NW of Luxor in Upper Egypt, dated c 3400 bc, showing 7 girls holding hands. This was before metal was introduced into Egypt and therefore before the first sword was made. Nine skirted women are shown dancing round a naked male in a rock shelter in Catalonia. About 2000 bc a small carving was made in Sardinia of 3 naked women dancing a wild dance round a stone. Stone circles were built in Britain from 3300 to 1500 bc. Many have an associated legend of dancing maidens turned to stone. It is generally believed that these circles were dancing areas, rather as the sites in the mountain states of the USA were used by Red Indians at a similar level of civilisation.

However to talk of pre-Christian roots to what we do is pure speculation. It implies a continuity of form, of culture and social environment that did not exist. It confuses with the survival of superstitions and folk lore which are individual and not community activity. There are certain characters and activities which have forgotten ritual roles but these have nothing to do with the morris as a dance form or as an entertainment. Significance can not be hung on the ^{single} fact that people have always danced and done things in due season. Where are the comparable dances of the Celts, Saxons or Danes in other countries? In any case the "old religion" is witchcraft.

The pan-European dance is the hilt and point sword form and a very suggestive correlation has been made with the distribution of early mining sites. However the earliest references are in Nuremberg, 1350 ad, and Dordrecht, Holland, 1392 ad and subsequently in Medieval towns in that part of Europe that were developing an independence and a new culture. The earliest British references are Edinburgh, 1590 and Lathom, Lancs, 1638.

The earliest records are where records were kept, so were the guilds adopting something already existing in the villages or did the villages come to adopt what was done in the towns? There is ample evidence that most of folk culture is survival from older more sophisticated levels. Also that things pass either up or down and when one part of society adopts something from another, the originator drops it. Like evolution in animals, society does not reinvent something already eliminated, the potential is not there, that is excluding our present times with its ^{novel} awareness of the past.

The first Morris or Morisca was staged in Lérida in 1149 at the betrothal of Petronilla, the young Queen of Aragon to Ramon Berenguer of Barcelona in the form of a Moors versus Christians battle as one of the court celebrations. The Moors had been driven from the town the year before. The form spread through Spain as it was recovered and along the south coast of France into the northern Italy plain where the Moors never invaded. Perhaps John O'Gaunt really did bring back a performance of the Morisca to England in the mid 14th century. The Morisca evolved in various ways, different places emphasised the martial movements, the 2 lines or subsidiary characters like the young bride.

The Medieval Church had a feast of fools which when expelled from the church was welcomed into towns, law-courts and universities. In France the Sociétés Joyeuse were associations of young men which existed from the mid 15th to the mid 16th cent with some surviving to the mid 17th. The Parisian societies Enfants-Sans-Souci and the Kingdom of the Basoche, first mentioned in 1442, were lawclerks associated with Parliament in Paris who celebrated traditional festivals and acquired considerable reputation as comic actors and organisers of pageants. They were frequently summoned to act farces at Court, to devise Royal entries, Masquerades and Morris dances.

The English imitation was led by a Lord of Misrule and one appeared at Court from the reign of Henry VII (c.1500) to the death of Edward VI (1553) and still existed at Oxford in the early 17th cent. The first English mention of morris was at Court in 1494 and for a few decades appeared where the Royalty frequented such as Kingston on Thames, Richmond and Reading. About the middle of the century it began to be picked up by the town guilds, for example Abingdon 1554-92, and towards the end of the century it had descended to the lower classes. The first known morris competition was at Middleburg, Holland in 1525.

An analysis has been done of all the English references ^{up} to the early 17th cent. There is no evidence of a fertility-ritual origin. The performances were arranged for holidays and important events. There is no reference to the blacking of faces although this was common in the Masques. Bells were universal. The costumes were expensive, uniform within a team, and valuable enough to be left as major items of property in wills. Parishes would hire costumes if they could not afford them, eg Marlow. Fees for dancers were initially high, £5 to £25, c 1500, suggesting professional performers. Even in Gloucester in 1553 Master Arnold's Servants, a company of players, were paid 5/- for providing the May Day morris dancers, but incidentally 20/- for Bringing in the May, another newly arrived fashion from the continent. It is possible to distinguish 2 types of early dance, the first and most popular involved a female character ^{and} _{has} is best called a Ring dance and included pantomimic elements and a recognisable relationship to children's games. The other form is a processional, in a column two by two.

By the reign of James I the morris was waning in interest and it was called out in the Book of Sports as needing restoration to its previous position, along with archery. It had been very popular. In the 16th cent Phillip Stubbes told how morris dancers sometimes entered the church during a service and how the congregation would mount up on the forms and pews after devine service was finished to sing and dance in church on certain holy days and festivals. In 1571 the Archbishop of York had to prohibit Christmas and May Games and morris dances in churches and church yards during the time of divine service or of any sermon. Kemp's Nine Daies' Wonder, pub 1600, showed that interest could be generated.

The decline in the morris and the maypole is shown in the little protest at their loss during the Commonwealth although there was no prohibition against dancing in general : after all it was the period of the first of many editions of Playford's Dance manuals : although it suited later generations to blame it on the Puritans. The restoration of Charles II through the negotiations of General Monk, of the famous march, in 1660, led to an outburst of reviving Merrie England. Spring bonfires, maypoles and may games were

enthusiastically restored even before his arrival in London on the 29th May, his 30th birthday, especially in Oxford and the surrounding districts. The event left such an impression that many seasonal celebrations were transferred to Oak Apple Day in perpetuity, not to change again till the Bank Holiday Act of the late 19th cent.

There are several very local dance forms in England now called morris. They were often calendar customs and once kept alive by particular groups, but they were all associated with the concept of good luck visiting and therefore were part of the community and dependent on the existence of a suitable social environment. Such a countryside existed since the late 17th cent with independent farms and the houses of the minor gentry. The form of the dance varies markedly over the country, each fossilising a social dance style appropriate to its initial peak of popularity.

The Cotswold morris was as Kemp said in the old form with napkins and bells. It would be better called Wychwood as the teams showing the most complexity and uniformity are almost contained by the Royal Forest boundaries defined by Henry II. The forest focussed on the Royal Palace at Woodstock, a favourite residence for Kings up to Charles II and often forming part of the dowry of the reigning Queen. The technical detail is that of Society dancing of 1600, simplified as one might expect of a revival half a century later but showing little subsequent influence from the developments in social dancing, and therefore having quickly become a dance of the people, who were uninfluenced by the Country Dance till the 19th cent. The tradition diffused up the dissected plateau of the main Jurassic Cuesta into northern Oxfordshire and southern Warwickshire and Northants, losing characteristic elements, but did not catch on in the surrounding vale farming lands.

In Northamptonshire it overlapped with the Midland or Bedlam morris which appears to have spread from Northampton to the Welsh Border and the Vale of Evesham to Shropshire. This was a mid winter activity and tradesmen maintained with the chief characteristic of the regular clashing of sticks. The combat aspect of the Morisca had developed in Italy into the Metachin and spread in popularity to France, Spain and then England in the latter half of the 16th cent. The first English references at Court are in 1582-3 to 1590. A description was published by Arbeau in 1589, showing the use of simple fencing movements and clearly a forerunner of dances shown by continental sides today. In Northamptonshire in the 18th cent the two forms were clearly distinguished but use of sticks in the Cotswold dance diffused southwards.

In the 18th cent all popular antiquities, as they were then called, were viewed as survivals of classical mythology. In the 19th they were all given Scandinavian origins. The folk revival looked for history that was indigenous and lost in the mists of time. Today we are not surprised if fashions come and go. But fashion is innovative whereas the traditional process is selective. The origin is not important but the use to which it is put is.