

## Women and the North West Morris Dance: A Brief Sketch

This article attempts to provide only the briefest outline of some of the involvement of women in the North West Morris Dance. Although some articles have recently begun to emerge, the available material for study is scarce, because much information is still confined to researchers' notebooks and their research is a continuing process.

Before some of the current research results became available, it was generally held that the Morris of the North West was in decline during the latter part of the 19th century and was dealt a serious blow by the effects of the First World War (1914-1918). One has only to look at the War Memorials all over the county to realise that even the smallest communities had men killed. Add to this the number gassed, shell-shocked or crippled and the shortage of healthy young men after 1919 can be readily appreciated. The absence of sufficient male dancers to form a team caused some survivors, often former leaders, to raise teams of boys or girls or even a mixed team of boys and girls. However, the North West Morris Dance traditions were undergoing transformation before the Great War and there is evidence of female participation a number of years earlier, particularly, but not exclusively, in Cheshire. Even ignoring the reference in Omerod<sup>1</sup> which suggests that female morris dancers took part in rushbearing ceremonies in the county (perhaps at Lymm) during the early 19th century, several contemporary newspaper reports indicate a strong female presence in later years. Around the turn of the century examples can be found of a girls' team in Goostrey (1898)<sup>2</sup>, a female team in Crewe (1901)<sup>3</sup>, and further female teams in Nantwich, Sandbach and Wheelock (1902)<sup>2</sup>. Mixed teams are also reported before 1914 - Preston (1893)<sup>4</sup>, Birtles and Over Alderley (1911)<sup>2</sup> and Holmes Chapel Mixed (1912)<sup>2</sup>. In South East Lancashire, Middleton Junction had a flourishing girls' troupe (1911)<sup>6</sup>.

The Gisburn Morris was performed in 1910 by a team of twelve women and twelve men in the county of the West Riding of Yorkshire as it was then known<sup>8</sup>. In the Lake District the girls of St. John's School, Keswick were dancing around the period 1910 to 1912<sup>9</sup>.

The main events promoting and maintaining the morris teams in Cheshire and on the Lancashire Plain were the May Festivals, Rose Festivals and similar fetes and carnivals. Evidently it was a matter of local pride for each community to have a morris team of its own performing at its own festival and hence the number of teams proliferated. Many of these new teams learned by the traditional processes of oral transmission, being taught or recruited by dancers from existing or defunct teams, sometimes from different parts of the North West. Thus the dances spread and when introduced into particular localities they were not necessarily based on any tradition already existing in those places.

For example, David Billington who is believed to have been an ex-member of the Preston Morris Dancers<sup>3</sup>, taught a team at Alderley Edge. Then Aaron Shuttleworth, a member of the all male Alderley Edge team, went on to teach a mixed team at Goostrey in 1907<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently, a Goostrey dancer, Mr. Hurstfield, trained teams at Birtles Hall (there was one team of girls and one team of boys) and at Over Peover<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, some teams were trained by professional dancing teachers with a wider experience of other types of dancing<sup>2</sup>. It is likely that their influence would have been more innovative than the continuity implied by the connections between Messrs. Billington, Shuttleworth and Hurstfield.

An intermixing of old and new is apparent throughout the North West after the Great War. At Hayfield in Derbyshire a team of boys was trained by a former dancer in 1928<sup>6</sup>. In 1920, the leader of the pre-war men's team, Mr. Chris. Winkley, trained a team of girls at Clitheroe, Lancashire<sup>6</sup>. In 1929 Maud Karpeles noted the performance of the Hyde Onward Morris Dancers; girls taught by Mr. James Crawshaw of the Godley Hill team<sup>7</sup>.

In Cheshire a girls' team (the so-called "Cranford" troupe) was formed at Knutsford around 1913. It's dance was based on what could be remembered of the Peover men's dance as performed at the Knutsford May Festival before the War. Subsequently, between 1924 and 1930, individual dancers from Knutsford went on to train teams at Alderley Edge\* (girls), Altrincham (men), Aughton (girls), Morley (mixed) and perhaps most significantly at Mobberley (initially a boys team and a girls team)<sup>6</sup>. Further teams sprang up in the Altrincham area and by 1929 there were half a dozen teams dancing the Mobberley dance<sup>5</sup>. In an effort to win competition prizes, these teams devised new figures and movements and the influence of these changes spread. For example, the previously mentioned Hyde Onward Morris Dancers used to dance the 'old style' morris with 'old style' sticks until they came into contact with a Mobberley style team at a carnival in 1937. Thereafter they danced with paper shakers<sup>5</sup>. Although it seems likely that the girls' carnival morris dances of today evolved from the older traditions, the nature and extent of its influence since the 1930's is unclear due to lack of evidence. Most research addresses the earlier period and a published history of the carnival teams currently dancing is not available. However, it can only be assumed that the requirements of competitions have gradually forced the style to alter to such an extent that the modern carnival dance bears little resemblance to its predecessors.

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\* Morris appears to have died out in some places only to be introduced again, but with no apparent link to the original team. It will be recalled that Aaron Shuttleworth danced with an Alderley Edge team before 1907.

In the past ten years the dances of the 1920's have undergone a revival thanks to the efforts of a number of modern teams who perform the dances as taught to them by surviving members of the older teams. Most notable in this field are the Poynton Jemmers.

Many of the earlier Lancashire Plain and Cheshire teams performed other items in addition to North West Morris; some performed a maypole dance, a Scottish Reel or even acrobatics. This variety still has echoes today. The 1982 competitions staged by the English Town and Country Carnival Organisation included classes for both morris dancers and entertainment troupes. The latter perform a combination of acrobatics, human pyramid building and formation changing. The morris dancers perform using a high stepping derivative of the polka or rant step, flourishing shakers made from shredded, high-density polythene or crepe paper. Although the figures in modern carnival morris can be quite complex, the change from one figure to the next is rather slow. Despite this, the displays can still be quite spectacular.

## References

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