

CARNIVAL MORRIS

At Carnivals in the North West, three things go together, the "Morris Troupes"; the "Entertainment Troupes"; and the "Jazz Bands". They pad out the processions and form a large part of the continuing interest at the Carnival field as they compete against each other. The following notes are based on a typical Carnival, that at Colne, Lancs., 17.8.68.

JAZZ BANDS

The jazz has nothing to do with New Orleans. Each group numbers between 3 and 4 dozen girls aged 11 to 16 with an occasional boy in the drummers. In the procession the band is led by one of 3 drum majorettes, followed by two girls carrying the team's banner. The banner is similar to that of Unions and Friendly Societies; square, supported by a pole on each side. Up to four small girls walk before and behind holding guy-ropes. Following the banner are the other drum majorettes, one quite young, who are not extras or mascots but have a part in the general display. The band consists mostly of Kazoo players, carried as bugles are in other types of band. The rhythm is provided by one base drum, two or four side drums, and a larger number of snare drums. A band usually walks in a column of four.

COSTUME

At one time the costumes were commonly based on the short dress but the fashion now is for long trousers and a "toy soldier" look. At Colne were "Hussars"; "Scottish Highlanders" (complete with several sets of imitation wooden bagpipes); "Torreadors"; amongst others. Three teams had been invited from further north, two of them from Sunderland, where such bands are also very popular. Always an appropriate hat.

MUSIC

The drumming is controlled by the base drum. The drumming is good, very loud, but simple and rhythmically as one might expect from their age. During the procession the Kazoos are not played very often. In the arena display the drumming can change to mark certain movements, e.g. slow march. The Kazoos are usually played at some point in the display while on the move, but several tunes are normally played with the band stationary. The age of the performers shows in the lack of wind to sustain notes. The choice of tune seems arbitrary, e.g. the "Scottish Highlanders" marched around to "Puppet on a String" and never used a Scottish tune at all.

STEP

Presumably a march, but normally a walking step, but breaking when desired into a creditable slow march.

DISPLAY

Quite long, of the order of 20 minutes. Procession enters and parades round, then the banner marches off to one corner. The band makes itself up into various formations, marches and counter-marches and for periods divides into two halves, one for each of the senior drum majorettes.

After regrouping the band marches off where it came in. At Colne the Jazz Bands attracted the major interest of the crowd and were given the main arena in front of the platform and the dignitaries.

At one time the bands used to have properties with them which were assembled and exhibited to illustrate the tunes being played, e.g. a windmill to go with "Tulips from Amsterdam". At Colne this was the exception rather than the rule.

ENTERTAINMENT TROUPES

Each group consists of a leader or "queen" and 16 dancers. One troupe had a boy leader. In the procession the troupe were often led by two girls carrying a board giving the troupe's name and championship wins. General age level quite low.

COSTUME

The leader was often dressed differently to the rest. Short dresses universal with a close fitting cap like a bathing cap.

MUSIC

In the procession nothing. In the display used a record which had to be supplied by the troupe. Almost any non-vocal music used, from Jimmy Shand to exotic modern rhythms. Performance only slightly related to phrasing of music as it continues quite happily through the several periods when the needle is being put back to the beginning of the record.

STEP

Anything seems to go.

PROCESSION

Would process in column of 2 or 4 depending on whether the group had one or two teams. Normally the eldest were at the front and the youngest and smallest at the back. Nothing is carried in the hands and thigh slapping is very characteristic. One might guess that the Entertainment Troupes are dancing class derived, the movements used in the competition remind of 1930's chorus girl routines and keep fit classes. However, if they are trained by relative youngsters as are many Morris Troupes, then the dominant influence may be old TV movies. They appear to derive from the Morris Troupes. In procession they are often indistinguishable except for the absence of shakers. Every so often they break into an arm movement sequence which is a combination of physical jerks, point duty and Karate blows.

DISPLAY

The dance form is fairly free but there are some common elements. There is an entry and exit; there is a stepping and high kicking sequence in which they stand linked in a half circle; two or more perform acrobatics in front, such as somersaults, hand-stands, cartwheels; at a pause in the music they build a pyramid.

A basic arm movement, clearly derived from the morris, is a "chop" of the hand from having the forearm vertical, upper arm horizontal, down to slap the thigh. Each hand alternately, one to each step. The hand is kept flat, fingers straight and parallel, palm of right hand facing to left and vice versa.

The movement is done jerkily, reminding of the mechanical action used to imitate a puppet. In the entry and during change of formation it is often associated with a scuffing or shuffling step in which the feet are hardly raised - the effect reminds of small children playing at being steam trains. In the exit and entry some teams moved in single file with left hand on left shoulder of dancer in front using the chop for the other hand.

Entry:- in single file down one side of arena, making a right angle turn to dance across to middle of arena.

Leader:- can have a tambourine, often leads the tumbling, gives the timing for building the pyramid, stands at the centre of the semi-circle.

Formation changes:- some of them are done by the girls having to pass through each other in what can look like just a general milling around.

Could not see any generalities in the routines.

Pyramid:- usually done at a pause in the music. Leader signals by claps or whistles for members of team to go forward to form the various layers. The final position has to be held for a significant time.

Exit:- some teams exit as they entered but in three files, each with leading hand on the leader. In entry and exit one saw the arm waving sequence used in the procession at the leader's discretion.

ORGANISATION

There are Carnival Associations who provide services for local Carnivals, public address equipment, caterers, etc. and who control the Carnival troupes. The troupes are registered and told which Carnivals they are to enter. In the North West there are four organisations, the largest of which is the Manchester and North East Cheshire which holds sway from Rhuddlan in Flintshire to Colne in mid-Lancs. Presumably there are similar controlling bodies in the North East as teams from Sunderland appeared at Colne (as well as from Warrington). Troupes can belong to more than one body and there are probably about 100 independent groups active in the North West. The Associations provide their services voluntarily. Two adjudicators are provided for each class and these receive a fee. They seem to earn their fee as the classes at Colne were still running 6 hours after they started. Surprisingly the adjudicators seemed quite elderly and one wonders how and where they are recruited. The marking form seems to be common to all three types of display and one imagines that the details of steps and formations are not considered of great importance.

MORRIS TROUPES

There were 35 troupes at the Colne Carnival. Each group consists of 16 dancers; a conductor; and possibly one or two extras, each wearing a sash labelled "Mascot". The leader usually dressed differently to the rest. One or two carried shakers but most leaders had a tambourine. The leaders often teach the troupe - but they need not be out of their late teens, one or two seemed older. The leader often used an exaggerated version of the step used by the rest of the troupe.

A troupe has only the one display dance - they do not only dance in competitions, e.g. the Nelson Civic was a part of the entertainment at Nelson Hospital Fete. There are also non-competitive functions at which several teams appear, at one such Julian Pilling met the Lytham troupe whose dance is much closer to the older form. There are no active troupes today whose dance formations are more than loosely based on the older dance. However, all the characteristics of the Carnival Morris were inherent in the older traditional form.

The North West dance has never been exclusively the property of the men. In R. Chambers' "Book of Days", pub. 1869, Vol. 1, p. 819, it says,

"The Morris dancers form an interesting part of the day's amusements." (Buxton Well Dressing, June 24th).

"Formerly they were little girls dressed in muslin; but as this was considered objectionable, they have been replaced by youngmen gaily decorated with ribbons, who come dancing down the hill." (The festival started about 1840).

Many of the "traditional" dances have been collected from children's and girl's teams or older people who have learnt them when they were in such sides. The present form of the dance has possibly originated in the Cheshire Plain and spread north slowly extinguishing older forms. The Nelson side kept the old Spiritualist Church dance going till quite recently, then the girls voted to change.

There are preconceived ideas of what is or is not morris, which reflect the prejudices of the beholder. The Carnival Morris has continuity and is a living, evolving Folk Art form. It is an accepted and understood part of the community life and is the heir to the richest of the English dance traditions. Unlike all other traditions it has not had to survive by being artificially encouraged by the "Revival" of Folk Dancing or the EFDSS.

COSTUME

Based on the short dress, otherwise bewilderingly diverse. In general prettier, less garish, more feminine than the other two types of troupe. The organisers (carnival or team?) usually give the girls a medal for appearing and experienced dancers end up with a large collection. These are frequently worn to decorate the dress or a sash across a shoulder. No hats are worn but most teams sported a bow in the hair, frequently a pre-made bow fixed by hairgrips or a comb. White plimsols. Each dancer carries a "shaker" in each hand. This is sort of double-ended waver. To each end of a short wooden stick are attached very large bunches of paper streamers - sometimes white, sometimes the dominant colour of the team's costume or occasionally two colours. The troupe's mother/chaperone collects the shakers and carries them around in a very large plastic bag.

The normal rest position in procession or display is with the knuckles, palm facing backwards, resting on hips. The shakers are then behind, a little like a bustle. On the face of it, shakers show little relation to older traditional implements. One assumes that the use of hand implements arose from the carrying of boughs, which evolved into decorated sticks, possibly wound with flowers, etc. There seems to be two quite distinct traditions, holding the stick at one end and holding it in the middle - this determines the way it can be used and the way it can be decorated. Sticks held at the end can be seen in the Manchester area to have evolved into tiddlers, bound rope with some flexibility, and on to slings. Photographs show that on the Cheshire Plain, the decoration on the ends of the sticks evolved from a bell and a few streamers to quite large bunches of streamers by WW I, that are obviously half way to the modern Carnival implement.

MUSIC

In the procession nothing. In the display, a record of their own choice - presumably the one they practised to - frequently in 4/4 and sometimes martial, but the most surprising things are pressed into service. One side danced very effectively in jig time. The speed was fairly uniform over all the teams - one team danced to significantly slower music and lost all their spring in so doing. The tambourine is used by the leader to bridge the gaps between repeats of the tune and if there is trouble with the PA equipment!

PROCESSION

After walking some distance they looked very bored. Step:- walking step, little sign of lift on the off-beat, dancers well up on toes, feet raised as high as in "entry" step. Hands normally in rest position but every so often breaking into the arm sequence used in the display dance. The whole gives the impression of the American bands of high stepping majorettes. The stance by necessity is upright, back even, arched back slightly. In pauses in the parade some troupes broke into the double step used in the display, together with the arm sequence, but still in column of two or four.

JUDGING

The marking form seems independent of the class of troupe being judged. The allocation of marks is:

Entry	10
Costume	20
Timing and Rhythm	20
Formation and Dancing	20
Department	20
Exit	10

At the championships it is said that the adjudicators look at the shine of the bells, etc. in order to separate teams. Each item is 15 to 20 minutes long and is a feat of endurance for the girls, some teams were noticeably flagging during their exit. The troupes seem to attract the better type of girl and are self-perpetuating. It catches the imagination of little girls who were to be seen mimicing all over the place.

Troupes could be seen to be limbering up to earlier team's music and in some instances running through their own dance. These rehearsals were done with a less energetic step.

The step being thus:- step on one foot taking the weight, point the other foot forward on the next beat, bring that foot back beside the other and transfer the weight to it, and point, etc. One understands that this is the step used while teaching the formations.

DISPLAY

Pre-entry: the troupes get themselves ready and line up in single file ready to enter the arena. The music is tried and the leader asked if it is satisfactory. The organiser then says "when you hear the music, come in dancing".

Entry: the girls line up with the shortest in the front and the tallest at the back. The entry is from one corner of the arena, the exit is on the opposite corner. The conductor leads, directing by means of arm movements or tambourine, not word of mouth or whistle, often she faces the team while indicating instructions. The troupe enters parallel to the edge of the arena and get to the centre for the display by a zig-zag path making one to three right angle turns. The line covers ground very slowly and each girl turns when she reaches the place the previous dancer turned at. Once the centre has been reached the troupe moves to it's starting formation for it's display, the change being done equally slowly, and the initial formation was usually a column of two sometimes of three or four, once something quite exotic. Clearly there are no accepted rules about this. The arm sequence was used for most of the entry, certainly as they came onto the arena. The impression was given that most teams used the same arming in all parts of the dance but that one or two varied theirs considerably, obviously it does not matter to the judges. One team just raised the opposite arm to the knee raised. All troupes used the same "single step" in the entry as in the procession, but livelier, there being some sign of a bounce on the off-beat. The free foot was usually raised to about mid-shin, the leaders usually exaggerating it. The foot was raised straight and never crossed in front of the other leg. Thigh almost horizontal.

Display: the set piece starts with a change from the single to a "double step" without pause in the dance. There are again no general rules as to the form of the dance. Some fairly obvious formations appeared several times, eg.

6 groups of 3, including leader and mascot in one 3, step on spot, then move round in a three-handed star.

A cross with the leader at the centre, sometimes rotating with arms on neighbour's shoulders.

A circle with the leader in the centre.

3 lines making an arrow head with the leader at the point, this normally brought a cheer from the supporters.

Movement from one formation to another usually slow but at least one team was slick passing from one pattern to another in a few bars, e.g. from a star, they moved outwards as a circle, then the corners moved out further to a square, all turned to face in and moved sideways into a large cross. However most teams made this aspect of the dance appear very laboured.

Surprisingly each team had its own variant of the double step or 1-2-3-hop. Fitting the step to the music was not often easy and we thought that they might have got out of phase over the gaps in the music but this was not so. The emphasis varied a great deal.

Variations noticed were,

Bringing the free foot down emphatically on the first beat without making much of the preceding hop (feet crossed on first beat). One side danced 1 hop 2 3.

On the hop, the free foot touched the knee of the supporting leg with the ball of the foot (free foot always to this level).

The majority of troupes crossed the feet, but some did not.

Although the hop could be exaggerated the other steps need not be, one side having crossed the feet on the first beat so that the legs crossed at the ankles, hardly raised their feet on the next two beats but rocked the weight from one foot to the other and back.

The hop could be suppressed and replaced by a caper from one foot to the other, this was commoner with troupes that crossed the feet on the second beat. Also in this case the foot that had crossed would be kicked diagonally forward to its own side on the hop or caper.

When the feet were crossed on the first beat, the free foot could be brought down either across the supporting knee or across the shin - the effect looked quite different.

In all cases the step does not allow of rapid ground coverage. The high stepping in both the single and double step is of course very characteristic of the Carnival morris, but was inherent in the older traditions of the area, the knee being well raised in the men's dance from Cheshire and in the country dance from the Lakes.

Exit: the final formation before exit was often column of two. The exit begins when the troupe change back to the single step and is the reverse of the Entry, the troupe first having to get into a single file.

All the elements of the Carnival morris can be found in more rudimentary form in the older dances, e.g. arm sequences at Failsworth and Leyland; formations at Mawdesley, but the necessities of the competition with its emphasis on precision and appearance and the length of time to be filled has led the evolution to a more static dance and not to the adoption of more country-dance-like movements as at Colne, with grand chains, corners crossing, etc.

Much more should be established about the Carnival morris and its recent history and it is important to remember that the above is based on one event in the north of the Fluffy area, not a major championship and that visits to Knutsford May Festival, at the southern end of the area and to Bellvue, Manchester, are necessary to establish generalities. Other convenient occasions are Tideswell and Buxton.