

WHO SHOULD DANCE THE MORRIS?

In the quiet moments the philosophers of the morris talk about things old and new, right and wrong, and what they are doing and the happenings elsewhere. Sometimes there is unease about the current differences from the perceived 19th century morris, and that itself was the end product of a substantial and now unknowable evolution. There is a feeling that somehow it matters, that there is a message to be uncovered. Hidden by the vast social changes since, they miss that there is no real continuity with the past. The leadership of the revival of interest in the dancing of the morris passed for a period through a section of our society not normally associated with preserving the performing traditions of working people. So alternative justifications of what is done today has been sought by them in aesthetics, in street theatre, democracy or an imagined version of history. Few have studied the surviving records and most available secondary source books make challengable assumptions. But nothing is as clear cut in history as we would like, and there is always the difference between what actually happened and the perception of it that influences our actions to consider. Dance for the participants is normally for one or more of three reasons, it is economically exploitable, it allows boy to meet girl or it is customary. It is worth discussing some of the uncertainties in the debates.

Who Did Dance the Morris?

The work of Keith Chandler has now identified many traditional Cotswold morris performers, their occupations and kin groups. We have a clear idea of the status of the dancers in their community and that there was probably a decline during the 19th century. The previously received wisdom suggested that there was a drop from the time when a farmer's son might join, till it was done by farm labourers, but with an impression given of it never sinking to the lower strata as the morris was always more respectable than the mummers, just as beer drinkers were often considered in the Cotswolds to be above cider ones. One would have expected the troupe leader to aim for respectability to increase the box. What is noticeable is that the same class of people today are active in charitable work in their communities and the leaders often become local councillors. Village society is no longer as it was in the 19th century, for example it changed when so many died in the trenches and it is still difficult to grasp the consequences of that impact. Researchers are not clear where to start. Similar evidence for the other dance traditions may remain forever far less detailed than it is now for the Cotswold morris. At the moment it suggests that work or trade was a common element, miners in the North East, mill and workshop workers in the North West, and craftsmen frozen out of work in the West Midlands. It is natural that a gang was formed to dance from people who were likely to know each other socially through being family, workmates or neighbours. Thus a team would be drawn from a small catchment area because of limitations on cost, time and distance to travel at the time. Horizons are different today. Members of traditional groups this century have been drawn from increasingly wider territories as mobility has increased. The surviving tradition is only going to tell us that society has changed in one hundred years.

Who Did Not Dance the Morris ?

a People from Closed Villages?

One would expect that the morris only happened in a community that tolerated it and when a village was dominated by one or two landlords their attitudes prevailed. There are cases where the big house accepted or encouraged the morris. Obviously the opposite is difficult to demonstrate. Without support the records of earlier morris would be scant indeed. This implies that some teams may have been too ephemeral even to be recorded. Only by luck has mention appeared in surviving newspapers and minute books of the clubs. There cannot be a proper systematic study of the character of the communities with or without the morris. Cotswold dancers could be drawn from a wider area than a single community, so that even active local discouragement would not stop keen performers, although their employment opportunities might then be restricted. Not only were dancers prepared to go out with different leaders but they often moved around, annually shifting home and job to better themselves. Thus we are at the level of speculation at which answers are unknowable because we have far too few biographies at the required level of detail for any such generalisations. Keith Chandler has shown that what deductions have been made by others are unsupported. Thus we are left with arguments based on common sense which unfortunately miss out the local attitudes of the time because they are no longer familiar or accessible to us.

b Children?

The strength to sustain a day's dancing was not supposed to develop until after childhood, which it must be admitted lasted longer before the modern concept of a pre-adult teenhood existed, and starting ages of at least eighteen have been mentioned. This is fundamental to Keith Chandler's model of a typical dancer. Body physical changes occurred later, it is to be remembered that the evidence is that puberty could come late for girls compared to today. However there are cases of dancers starting at as young as eight years old, and even now youngsters have been expected to do the long all day hike at Abbots Bromley. Each group might well have had its own, probably flexible rules. A young dancer is an attraction, if dancing well, and it is easier to train and control someone who is still living at home. Young men can be a risky investment for an older team because of the consequences of moving jobs and the distractions of courting, one reason why Bacup looked for married men. Health and stamina must be important but generalisations cannot be easily drawn based on them as it is very individual. How rare essentially teenage teams might have been has still to be established although one or two may have been identified. The first revival at Bidford was one such gang. It would not be surprising if other teams were based on unmarried men, although they may not have lasted long. It was probably common for most of a team to be drawn from one age group, unless it was family based, as this is still typical today. There have been children's sides in the Cotswolds, from Keith Chandler's discovery at Sherborne, to the few sides from the turn of the century trained by traditional dancers from Abingdon, Bampton and Sherborne.

The Cotswold morris was in decline and there were alternative attractions by the time that universal education was having an impact, and the gathering of children into Church Sunday Schools, Orphanages, and Church and National Schools became organised so that they could be an obvious source of dancers, particularly as they were no longer committed to sustaining part of the family economy. Maypole dancing was promulgated through such channels since just before the turn of the century, as were the later processional dances as at Lichfield and on

the Cheshire Plain. Because dances often went with leaders rather than communities, it was possible for particular individuals to be responsible for teams of all ages or sexes as has emerged from the researches into the dance in the North West. But drawing examples from all the dance traditions implies the assumption that social forces dominated and were universal. This is debatable.

c Women?

During the 19th Century and even into the 1920's, most working class girls belonging to the culture that preserved the morris, left home about the age of 12-14 and went into domestic service, with perhaps no more than half a day off a week. They worked long hours, for very low wages which hardly allowed of savings let alone afforded a dance costume. In 1980 the United Nations reported what while women and girls constitute one half the population and one third of the labour force, they actually perform two thirds of the work hours. They had no tradition of independent activity, thus there was neither the time allowed or the opportunity or encouragement given. As a woman's property was either their father's or husband's by law, there was little financial incentive, which is also one major reason why there were so few women's Friendly Societies. Their escape was for marriage by 21 as the only path to relative economic independence. Certain women were known to have been able to dance the Cotswold morris but it was not a common occurrence, and the surviving anecdotes are mostly about relatives of dancers. Women did dance when there was either a trade or occupation that gave the opportunity, eg. milkmaids on May Day in towns and perhaps the mill workers at wakes time, but there is no indication that this was widespread and it was naturally confined largely to girls and unmarried women. 19th century culture still required women to have a chaperone to be thought respectable so that it could never be a purely women's affair. Normal 19th century adult women's clothing was not very suitable for prolonged energetic dancing either.

The dance opportunities for both sexes were restricted and we still need to know more of how the ones that did dance were able to find the time. Kimber's trips to London lost him a job each time, but as a mason he could quickly find another.

One result of their position is that there are few specifically women's dances surviving. If there were they would be like those of other European Countries reflecting a 19th century view of what was suitable. Many men suggested this as a suitable source of material when women's sides first formed. That makes it difficult when as now women do have the opportunity and the desire to dance using traditional material. Whether their position was always so needs further consideration for the 18th and 17th centuries, but the lack might extend back to the times in the Middle Ages when society considered women to be almost chattels. We witnessed a similar debate about women as priests within the church of England, appealing to emotional and historical truths which range from a "new" understanding of equality and the need for "justice" and to do "what is right", to saying that the arguments are only part of the whole picture, and that the past should not be set aside because the male role contains a truth about human nature that is permanently true and cannot be put aside. The worry is that people cling to beliefs that have no more foundation than most of those of late medieval christianity or the nature cults of wicca, which may cause no harm to others and be beneficial to the users, but are not a basis for justifying causing harm.

Public Schools and the Separation of the Sexes?

Once society escaped from cooperative farm work involving the whole family as equals where everybody could do everything, as in more modern frontier societies, there grew up different roles and expectations for the sexes, and a division into "men's things and women's things" was recognised. As an example contributing to cultural separation, public schools began separate education, the boys first and then the girls, even Sunday Schools started this way. Later the Public House, Trade Unions and leisure activities reinforced this division by being male centred, and reported and recorded by male dominated media to the exclusion of non-frivolous female activities, so there then existed a separate male culture, of the rugby club or sports team, and public bar drinking with darts, skittles and other games, which built up its own language and behaviour comraderie, so that small groups with common interests, ie. gangs, were the natural model for traditional dance teams, not a community basing. It is not that this is wrong, it is a fact that it is so, and it could be as old as the forming of single sex groups for major activities such as the militia.

Equal opportunity and sexual discrimination legislation has to exist to mitigate the worst excesses of the unthinking attitudes that grew out of uncritical acceptance of historical accidents and the marginalisation of women. However we are the heirs to "old" ideas as well as to "new" and the relationship and separation of the sexes is ingrained. Of course the insistence on "mixed" morris in some parts of the world loses an aspect of our culture to gain something else felt to be important. The fact that a special word has to be found for it shows that there is a difficulty. But are we not in the business of preservation as well as of innovation? What is wrong with keeping some of the time the traditional roles and arrangements, as long as they are recognised for what they are and not used for domination or other social abuse? The jossing of young women by old men was very traditional, but hardly acceptable to the recipients and now unacceptable in any circumstances. Morris or any street entertainment should not be the battleground for sexual or any other politics when the morris has to be socially acceptable to be tolerated at all by the people at large.

The Revival?

By this I mean the Cecil Sharp initiated spread of the knowledge of the Cotswold dance outside of its native Cotswolds. The more dramatic sword dance did not have the same impact, and even today its performance is numerically at least two orders of magnitude less. Until well after WW II morris clubs were few and small. There was very little street performance of the morris and the world at large did not recognise a morris dancer from their appearance, what was their role, where they came from or why. The EFDSS spread a knowledge through school and dance class teachers but that did not lead to street performance by either children or women. Other dance "traditions", Nort West morris, Welsh Border, Molly, and Garland have only appeared in strength in the last 10 to 20 years and are really new idioms.

The earlier happenings in this century were not revivals but a new flourishing. For example the North West Morris at the start of the 20th century, the girls on the Cheshire Plain between the wars and the Carnival Morris. Changes in child employment patterns, as that age group was not required for labour intensive

activities, and the following growth of time occupying youth organisations have made young people's teams practical. The Whiteladies Teachers Training College May Day celebration helped promulgate the Maypole and the May Queen, and Mary Neal's Esperance organisation the idea of morris and country dancing for schools, and this grew up with Empire Day, May 24th, an similar opportunities for public display by troupes, with the interest generated by the 20th century emphasis on the cult of the child. Perhaps the oddest turn about is that the older tradition of children's dance in Cheshire is now being collected and danced by adults. Will the turn of the post war Carnival Morris come eventually?

Who is Doing it Now?

The EFDSS objectives recognised that the dance should go back to the ordinary people without being sure what it had been like. It could not depend on educated organisations, vicars or school teachers, yet there was no way offered of breaking through the barrier. In the Cotswolds the EFDSS led classes taught morris, country dancing and sword and enthused a generation, but did not get many of them to dance in their communities or on their streets. I have only heard of the odd class based male side who were less than proper. The key step forward has been the 1944 Education Act which brought people from the right background to meet the preservers. The first break out in numbers dancing came at the same time in the mid 1950's. Then there was the opportunity of the discovery of "new" Cotswold traditions and the other English dances which spawned its own waves of teams, the process is still going on and being enthusiastically creative. Teams come while others go, it has always been the way of the world. The dancers now are still often professional people, financially middle class but able to subsidise their morris and the associated travel, but socially still with their roots below. There is now such a large number of people who can teach the morris and of such diverse backgrounds, that someone suitable for any group's needs can be found.

The collectors did not look for the younger persons' contributions to the morris and to creativity, even though the honing and improvement is an essential element of any model of how tradition works. The early revival was not exposed to nor would have recognised or accepted innovation and adaption in the dance. What survived was not enough for modern shows or club repertoires so invention or "borrowing" has regained its role.

Are We There?

If the aim was to restore to a situation of local dances performed in local communities then it has not been widely achieved. Clubs exist that fit into today's society but are drawn from wide areas and cannot have the roots. There are no family, work or community ties to hold them together, nor community expectations to cause them to get a team out each year. Only with the Combe Martin Horse and the Hunting of the Earl of Rone has the community appeared to have picked up and taken over a revival. Elsewhere, like with the Whittlesea Straw Bear, the community is taking its own custom to its heart, but it could stop as easily as it started. The norm is of dance troupes doing their own thing as an occasional entertainment. If the morris arose from seasonal good luck visiting (ritual) why is it do obviously absent? Dancing at Fetes, shopping centres and outside public houses is not being a part of the community but going for ready made audiences and keeping them at a distance. What there is may be a

response to our current social conditions, but it has much more in common with medieval travelling players than the likes of Helston or Padstow. Ah! you should say, was the morris ever a part of the community? I cannot produce hard evidence one way or the other, but I would not be suprised if morris troupe conditions today are close to the way things always were, with much of the morris self centred. Community involvement is my ideal for the future because it is needed by today's world. It remains to be seen if the existance of women's morris has slowed or speeded the transition from dance troupes to community involvement. The truth is that if people want to dance they will, and if you do not like what they do, you have to help an imporvement, not hinder!

V 1.1 1983 Roy Dommett

V 1.2 1994 Roy Dommett, with amendments.