

## TEACHING MORRIS TO BEGINNERS.

Much can depend upon the actual "Tradition" of dancing to be taught, but below are some general principles that should always apply.

### 1. Basic Movements of The Feet, in Change of Foot.

The stepping from one foot to the other (the change of foot) and how the whole body is involved with this movement., not just the legs. That is, when the hips go up, so must the shoulders and head by the same distance. It is essential to note that the leg being jumped from should be bent at the knee, and that the ankle and instep should be flexed; this allows for the slight spring that is necessary to push the body into the air, before landing the other foot.(ie. the body actually goes slightly down before going up). The foot/leg you land on should also be flexed at ankle and instep with the knee bent. This action absorbs the body weight and reduces the problem of knee damage, etc.. This is best explained by saying that you should try to land as quietly as possible, and where possible you should land on the ball of the foot, and not flat-footed. The free foot/leg should go forward so that the foot is not under the body, but in front and approximately 6 to 9 inches off the ground. The hip joint is actually used to maintain this position, not the knee (although this joint should not be locked straight, but bent slightly and relaxed). The thigh of the free leg should be at approximately 30 degrees at maximum from the vertical for this position. The toe should not be pointed to the ground when the free foot is in front, but the ankle joint should be held at the normal angle, and if anything, the toe should be pushed up rather than down and "pointed".

### 2. Basic Movements of Foot, in the Hop Step.

In the Hop Step, the body is lifted off the ground, using the same knee bend and flexing of ankle and instep as the change of foot. The only difference being that the foot/leg that pushes the body up, is also the one landed on (with the knee bent and ankle/instep flexed). The free foot should be left in the same position it was after the change of foot and should not be moved other than up with the hip, etc. A dancer should be taught that the change of foot and the hop are the most important aspects of the Morris step, and that once mastered, will aid all other aspects of the dance.

### 3. Balance of Body during Change of Foot & Hop.

In both of the above, the centre of balance should always be over the landed foot, except when the body is being propelled forward at the beginning of a phase of stepping, (see "Shift Step" below).

4. Basic Movements of The Foot, in the Shift Step.  
By a "Shift Step", I mean the movement necessary to prepare the dancer before the first change of foot. When you start a dance (and halfway through a figure) there is almost always a jump; when you push off the ground by flexing the instep and ankles of both feet, and bend the knees to leave the ground. When you land you should also land softly and quietly as above. However, at this point both feet will be on the ground and it is therefore impossible to dance the first change of foot without lifting the free foot off the ground. This should be achieved by jumping slightly off both feet, but landing on one, with the free foot in the position required before the change. In other words, approximately 6 to 9 inches from the ground and in front of the body. It should also be stressed that when you land from the first jump, the feet should be a little behind the point on the ground they left from. This will automatically propel the dancer forward for the shift step and the first change of foot. This step should be performed on the last note(s) of the proceeding music, so that the foot is in the air, and the dancer is off the ground to dance the first change of foot on the first note of the new phase.
  
5. Whole Body Movement.  
It has already been stated in 1. above how important it is that the whole body is used when stepping, ie. that the Hips, Shoulders and Head all go up together and the same distance while stepping. The upper body during this must however, be relaxed, not tense. There is a danger that tenseness in the upper body can cause it to decelerate, thereby making it more difficult to lift off the ground, particularly as the lower body is accelerating up at the same time. The upper body must be buoyant, and although the arms and shoulders should not be used in an attempt to lift the body, they do play a part, but it is stressed, this part should not be too great. Similarly, the head (which is very heavy) should be kept up and with eyes not looking at the ground. Kept the head up, the eyes looking straight ahead, and if possible look beyond the horizon.
  
6. The Double Step.  
This is normally 3 changes of foot and a hop step. As has been stated above, the landing from a jump with the feet slightly backward will propel the body forward for the shift step and the first change of foot. I believe that this movement is the essence of good morris, and that this forward surge on the first change of foot of a double step gives the movement great strength and emphasis. However, I believe this should only occur on the First double step of any sequence.

6. The Double Step (continued).  
The second and subsequent double step should be danced on the spot and not moving forward. This however, is where the Tradition to be danced and the restrictions involved there, may require a different approach.
7. Double Step Phasing.  
By this, I mean where the emphasis should lie in a double stepping sequence. This will not only depend upon the Tradition, but also the teacher. In my method I like to see a strong beat on the first change of foot and then another strong beat on the Hop. When learning it is important to stress that although there is the strong beat on the 1st and 4th steps, the 2nd and 3rd should not be subjugated as a result. The 1st and 4th should be made larger, not the 2nd and 3rd made smaller. It is also important to tell dancers to exaggerate the steps in practice, and that dancing in practice should be better than when dancing out.
8. The Single Step.  
This is normally a step onto a foot followed by a hop on that foot. This can be used as a Back Step in some Traditions, where in others it can be a forward step used in place of a double step. Therefore it is difficult to make any hard and fast rules on how it should be danced, as it depends upon the Tradition taught.
9. Use of Arms and Handkerchiefs.  
As has been said above, the use of the arms depends very much on the Tradition being taught, but in essence, whatever that may be, the arms should always be used to help the dancer to lighten the upper body when stepping or jumping. Similarly, Handkerchiefs should also, when used, be "in front" of the hands during every movement. They should be extensions of the hand and never be allowed to droop, etc..

#### TEACHING TEAM SKILLS TO BEGINNERS.

The details listed above are only some of the "individual skills", and these must be learnt and understood before moving on to other aspects of dancing. The teaching of "Team Skills" should include the teaching of the Figures that exist within the Tradition involved.

1. Figures.  
These are the movements that exist within all (or nearly all) of the Dances that make up the Tradition's repertoire. I believe that these should be learnt as a block, and then only with a complete set of dancers. This is because beginners need to recognise as soon as possible that when dancing they are part of a team, a unit, not a group of individuals.

2. Amount of Travel in Figures.

Again, this will depend upon the Tradition and the preference of the teacher, but, the basic rules must be taught for every movement and stuck too rigidly. The distance of travel will be most effected by where the emphasis in the step occurs, etc.. If a strong first beat is used, it is likely that the height of the step will be greater, therefore the travel across the ground will be less than that where a weak first beat is used. However travel, when dancing, is almost always a two way thing - there and back. I prefer to see a strong surge forward on the first double step, and then the second double step on the spot, which again effects the distance travelled, but, if you do move forward on this second step you must also remember you only have the Back Steps to return to place. In my experience, there is less time available for the movement back or return, so the move forward will be effected by this fact. I also believe that the Back Step should never be "Phrased" (ie. different emphasis on different steps) as with the Double Step, but be of a more even time, thereby also reducing the forward travel options. In Traditions that have Capers at the end of the figure, it is even more important that the dancer is back in place to perform these; as trying to dance Capers going backwards is difficult both to perform and maintain one's balance and provide the ability to move forward again at the end of the movement.

3. Spatial Awareness.

When teaching figures and team skills, dancers should be made aware of the other dancers within the set and also where in the set they should be at defined times. In the Cotswold Morris it is very unusual for dancers to actually touch each other; also, they should never get closer to each other than is necessary, nor should the set get larger or smaller while dancing figures. Beginners should be taught how far they must travel in all movements, and these must become second nature, eg. in rounds only move to diagonal place, or two places around the circle, etc.. This is particularly important when teaching the more complex figures, eg. Heys, and even more so with the complex stepping that can occur in some dances, eg. Adderbury - "Sweet Jenny Jones", etc..

4. Internalising.

This is a skill that is both individual and team based. By "Internalising" I mean the ability to count or feel in your head the rhythm of the dance and music. It is no secret to an experienced dancer that knowledge of the music helps the dancing, and this is where this technique is most useful.

4. Internalising (continued).

As some languages are taught by teaching the rhythm of the words before the words are actually spoken; so Morris rhythms can also be used to help in the learning of dances and dancing. Once a tune to be used is known by the dancer, it can be sung in the head while dancing, even as far as providing no actual music. If a whole team try's to dance using this method, they are taught immediately the importance of the rhythm and how it is necessary to form into a team, all doing the same thing together - in time. This should include the musician.

5. Other Important Skills.

It should go without saying that certain skills should also be taught that improve the general look of the dance. Lines should always be straight, and I believe that this is something that can be controlled by the "Amount of Travel" in the figures; it can sometimes be useful to use Middles to set the lines rather than the top pair. Certainly the dancers should never dance with the head turned, looking up and down the line as though in a march-past, this looks very bad. It is also important to stress to a beginner that they should always be prepared to do something, ie. be ready and waiting, even when they think they know what is coming next. Team leaders have been known in the past to call figures out of sequence, and this should not be a problem if all dancers are attentive.

Dancers should also enjoy themselves; so they should not be discouraged from smiling, as this can only improve the general aura presented by the team.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING BEGINNERS.

I think it is important that the teaching of Morris should be a "staged preparation". One should seldom teach "dances" until all the steps and figures for the simplest within the Tradition have been taught.

At Adderbury, I start by teaching Stick Dancing, as this is different to Handkerchief Dancing, due to Capers and Side Steps, etc., only moving to Handkerchief Dances when the beginner has mastered most of the "normal" stick dances. Some teams begin by teaching Jigs (I believe this is the practice at Bampton). This can be a good way of teaching a single new beginner, as it can be taught (and practised) in isolation, not effecting the other team members who should be more advanced, but will still contain the major elements of the Tradition, eg. the steps.

When teaching a beginner it is very easy to "over teach", ie. provide so much information, the brain cannot take it and rebels. This is one major reason why there can be a large fall-out of beginners. They should be nurtured and looked after by all the team, not just the teacher.

#### GENERAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING BEGINNERS (continued)

It is also important to tell beginners, as soon as possible, if they are not going to make a dancer.

There is nothing more frustrating to a team, a teacher or the beginner, if they are getting nowhere slowly.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION OF ATTITUDES TO MORRIS.

Having said above what I have about beginners, where you and the team are going depends upon the outlook of the team. Some teams live for total excellence and athleticism, others are more social in their outlook and others are more interested in authenticity, identity, continuation, commitment, etc.. How well a beginner fits into a side often has much more to do with the whole side rather than the beginner !!

I believe that every Foreman must have a "preferred" style or method of dance for every Tradition he or she is involved with., as they, "The Traditions", are not all the same. This style should be taught and only changed if the whole team agrees or there is a significant change in the leadership of the team, which I do not advocate.

It is easy for teams to learn "dances", but not as easy to learn "Technique and Movement". The dancers should be taught the difference when they start to learn. In my experience not enough emphasis is placed on Technique and Movement, many teachers simply teach the "Choreography" of the Morris, and hope that dancers will add their own technique and have "natural" body movement. I think this is a mistake. Dancers of all levels should be helped to see what are the important elements of the dance, and should learn how these elements can be best used to show Morris to the optimum. One should not leave it to chance, or assume that the public, in their ignorance, will not notice or know the detail.

Roy Dommett once said, in one of his many articles, how pleasant it would be for dancers only to have enough knowledge of the dance in order for them to perform that dance, ie. not be encumbered by the problems, and history, the conflicts, etc. that exist today.

This, for me, is a very valid point, as the weight of argument that exists at present can, and does, colour dancers and beginners opinions to greatly.

In my experience, at Adderbury and Kirtlington, Roy's wish is very much the case. Very few members have any idea of how to dance anything other than what they dance with the teams, and few have any idea of all the theories of the origins. I think this is a very healthy situation and is a reason why the members have that little amount of added pride that is essential when dancing good Morris. This is not to say that occasions occur when the team's don't dance bad Morris, this is always likely, as the time, place and the mood/abilities of the dancers involved also effect performance.

I really don't believe that the early dancers, ie. those collected from, were driven to the same levels of excellence demanded by some teams or foremen/squires today. I also believe they had a much more simplistic view of the tradition, and that they would never have danced anything very "complex".

It is interesting to read, again Roy Dommett, on this aspect, ie. it is thought that the old teams were lucky if they had as many as three "good" dancers in the team at any one time.

This fact is often forgotten by some of the "zealots" that are performing today (ie. they want too much from the dancers), BUT this fact is often also used by some of our less able dancers and teams as an excuse for bad dancing. I think that both are wrong; not to dance the way they do, but for using the past as an excuse, etc..

It seems to me that the two distinct camps that dance the Morris today both have "Knowledge". However this "Knowledge" is different within each camp.

One "camp" feels that the History of The Morris and The Dances are the most important "Knowledge". Whereas the others feel that Technique and Movement and the Future are more important. Both, to me, give a little too much emphasis to their own view of "knowledge", and disregard the other. This may be a harsh criticism, and a generalisation, but be careful not to put beginners through these arguments, it should not be important.

A team's style and attitude should be a matter for the team, and the team alone, as should the arguments for and against the conflicts that dog the Morris, and will always dog the Morris, irrespective of what anyone tries to do to change things.

Dancers should be taught that the Dance is more important than the arguments, and that the Morris must change with society to survive, as it has been proved to have done in the past.

Tim Radford - July 1990.