

## WORKSHOP ON BASICS FOR BEGINNERS

**To the "Experienced" Leader** - If you do not work on "dance" technique yourself and do not know what it is about, then you are not really fitted to teach others, as you may be passing on bad practices and creating confusion. The lack of analysis of objectives, emphases, stresses and timings is a handicap.

**Beginners** - other dance specialities explain the whys and wherefores of their technique, but this is not so currently in folk dance world - the "traditional process" is claimed, but it supposes that there exist good dancers to model on. Although it can work as a policy, it is unnecessary and often a cloak for inexperience or at worst ignorance. Beginners have a problem, forgotten by the more experienced, with the jargon and both the observation and perception of movements, and do not remember what they have been shown after a while without some reinforcement, say by words or by explanation - in particular they are confused by the unspoken differences between nominally similar movements within dances, let alone between traditions.

The first problem is seeing what is being taught from the beginners point of view. Their training needs to be by means of exercises that give the beginner a vocabulary of words and actions to which they can relate.

We can only learn what we almost know, therefore we must build from existing experience - learning one thing at a time, trying to build up movement habits - not just by saying it once, but through using sequences that act as a continual reminder.

The normal club approach takes two or three years to develop a proficient Cotswold dancer - but better training could speed this up - also like many sports there has to be some degree of fitness and experience. Cotswold morris is not disciplined in the manner of Clog Morris - but it is expressive. The beginner needs to develop a mix of body control (motor skills), expression and the remembering and recognising of movement sequences.

It is intended as a workshop that dancers try the movements as they are discussed, in order to appreciate the points being examined. A workshop should start by recognising that there will be potential problems, leading to aches and pains, that arise from the dancers faults of physique. For example, small differences between the dimensions of each leg.

**Feet** - walk around to get the feel of normal pronation, or inward rocking motion, as the foot rotates from heel to toe - one can tell if the movement is abnormal by examining the worn edges of heels or soles for any over-compensating action - orthics, shoe inserts, are available for correction, to straighten joints etc.

**Turn Out** of the feet is a part of the old style, fashionable for 300 years. The morris can be a museum! It can be significant - McCorquadales in the Wembley Olympics London 1948 100yds, missed a medal by less than a yard - experts say because of his small foot turn out whilst running. Also in the old style was the swaggering swing of the leg in 17th century when moving forward or back - the action allowed the wearing of fancy boots with lace tops etc, not the other way round - the movement is still inherent in the morris backstep of several village traditions.

## UPS & DOWNS

**Vertical Jump** - just try making one without using the major thigh muscles. This shows the need for a bend of the knees, the plié - an action so basic that it was called "the movement" - most of the effort and hence velocity into a jump comes from the big muscles in the thighs. The height reached is helped by rolling up on the toes with a full extension of the foot - height comes from the roll-up and the velocity achieved at leaving contact with the ground - height in the air is limited by gravity, which pulls one down rather rapidly so that the actual time out of contact with the ground is rather short. If on the rise the use of foot extension is limited, then it may not be being used at the landing. The risk on landing is then of jarring the leg joints - leading in the long term to the damage of cartilage and ligaments - the number of "g"s experienced can be as high as three. Practice avoiding slapping the ground by trying to land quietly.

The apparent achieved height is partly an illusion. An audience sees the total body/head rise and fall, including the drop while in contact with the ground which will be below the starting position when upright.

**Stretching and Warm-Up** - for both the freedom of movement and the avoidance of injury it is very desirable to start with a stretching and warm up activity - not a vigorous warm up - one should still be able to talk naturally to a neighbour while doing it. One should also include a warm down at the end of a dance period to avoid subsequent stiffness.

Beginners tend to tense all their muscles - they exhaust easily - their new movements are achieved by counterbalancing forces - this is not the same as a normal control of movement. We should work to avoid this by "loosening up" the actions and relaxing the inessential muscles, but this needs a confident dancer. Such an approach produces a visible difference to the movements, which is one way by which we normally recognise an "experienced" dancer.

People's personal image of their own movement is not as they see others - thus actors exaggerate every day gestures to make them appear normal when under the undivided scrutiny of an audience. Actors are trained to observe accurately and to replicate what they are shown - ordinary people copy but with a significantly smaller movement. A personal experience with teaching Longborough hand waves - it is a wrist movement - but often dancers move their hands to follow the motion appropriate to the handkerchiefs - a mental image problem. It is a good idea to work sometimes in front of a big mirror - ideally in a dance studio but deep office or school windows can be adequate. I think that part of the general learning problem of translating words into movement is due to the two halves of the brain with their different skills having to communicate across the boundary. It is important to present visual images reinforced with words. Also Douglas Kennedy always spoke of the need to look at movements both in "close-up" and in "long-shot".

**Jump** - to explore the use of the arms - swing them up together from having the hands just behind the hips, till they are well up in front and higher than the head. The opposite, of a swing down on a jump, feels quite different and less height is managed - more appropriate to a standing long jump! - incidentally this used to be a Much Wenlock Olympic (the heir to Dover's Cotswold Olympic Games at Dover's Hill, Chipping Campden) as well an early Modern Olympiad event.

What is role of the arms? - after all, all control is ultimately only by contact with the ground - how can the small mass (Tony Hancock's an "armful of blood") effect it? One major effect comes with the swing up of the arms - the force on ground is increased and the body leaves the ground with more total momentum.

For the maximum height, measured by the head rise in the jump - bring down the arms before reaching the top of the leap - the additional apparent height comes from the downward shift of the centre of gravity relative to the head.

For the appearance of a higher jump - make it appear to last longer by holding the pose till touching the ground and starting into the plié - a trick used in the ballet etc. Gravity does not allow one to actually float!

Remember also that half the time off the ground is spent in the upper quarter of the trajectory (near apogee if one is a space scientist!).

There is a problem arising from the different sizes of people and the getting of them to appear to bob up and down together. It is easy for shorter people just to rise less whereas all should rise the same. A consensus has to be found on the distance travelled while extending the foot. Shorter footed people have to work harder!

**Turns** - to examine the effect of roll inertia start with non-travelling jumps - try simple jumps (start with a 180° turn) - try to keep the arms down at one's sides, then to keep them fully extended out to the side, (both are hard work, showing that arms have a role) then finally draw them in while turning - usually find one overshoots! Normally arms are used naturally to control the landing. Arm control to compensate for ground friction in a turn whilst in continual contact with the ground is a part of the technique for galles and hooks.

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Keep the body straight - of course one must thrust up through one's centre of gravity - but do not stick the stomach out or arch the back - the body movement is ugly, and, having no ground contact, is difficult to control, as well as being a contributor to injuries. Contortions in the air go with gymnastics, high diving and tumbling, but not the Cotswold morris!

The head is also a mass that effects the dynamics of movements. One thing to avoid is drooping it during a jump. Stretching the neck up would be better.

**"Spotting"** - a technique for stability in a rotation - fix the eyes on a point and let the head initially lag the turn - then snap the neck round - say to the final direction if doing a 180° turn - surprisingly one is less likely to sway in the turn. Conventional pirouettes, turns with foot to ground contact, are not part of the morris - the equivalent are the galleys and hooks.

**Posture** - is important - it is visible all the time to the audience, not just while dancing - they see the implied body language and it should say "eager" - at rest one should be on the balls of the feet. Bringing the weight back onto the heels produces the problem of acceleration into the next move - the overall impression looks slack and gives a sloppy morris.

There is the issue of the best height for heels on shoes, as yet unresolved - they reduce the available flexure at the ankle joint. Most European folk dancers favour a very light weight dance shoe, equivalent to that used by the Scots, with little or no heel - but one must remember that the Bluebell Girls and people like Ginger Rogers did quite well in high heels!

A rigid torso seems characteristic of Cotswold morris - there are few flexible movements of the body other than a twist with some of the side steps.

**Breath** - should be abdominal with stomach movement - not pulled in as one breathes in, as this leads to stitch - because the diaphragm is working the wrong way - the pain is actually muscle spasms. To avoid it, it helps to take some deep breaths before starting - it assists both poise and readiness - actors use the technique to control their nerves before entries.

Back to the jump to bring more of the elements together - to try Longborough type arm movements. Start with the arms bent at right angles and with the hands out by the sides at ear level - raise the hands up, straightening the arms and opening them out during the jump, to end on the landing with the arms horizontal.

Where comes the beat of the music in a jump? Certainly to just touch down on landing on beat - but on take off? - as one leaves touch with the ground? The note is of finite length - the "beat" is the maximum stress at its leading edge. The maximum effort is on the beat - the movement is across the beat - hence its appeal as a means of self expression. Anticipatory preparatory effort is needed. Jumps need preparation - they need time to accelerate - a jump is usually longer in the air than a step - so the musician has to stretch the music etc .

Jumps (and turns) on the move require consideration of additional points about the appropriate body tilt. A forward drive comes from being off balance - thus one should land leaning into the direction in which one wants to move off.

The initial emphasis has been on jumping because it leads to a desired style for the stepping.

## TRAVELLING

The style is determined by the floor surface and the style of stepping that was first developed at the Renaissance - James Burke's TV series and his book "Connections" discussed the change in building style following a worsening of the weather in the Middle Ages and the consequential appearance of flatter floors as social life moved indoors. Before the change, the most available flat surfaces were the barn threshing floors - realistic for social but not for ritual dancing.

Unfortunately "Step" is used both for the single movement and for a sequence.

**Step** - the basic movement is a quick change from the weight on one foot to the other - the style was described in the earliest dancing books - not a knee lifting like medieval clod-hopping. Start standing on the ball of one foot with the other in the air, about the length of the foot in front of the supporting foot. The free foot is kept about horizontal and relaxed during the movement and not curled up or pointed down. Really it is wrong to practice stepping in place as one is seldom dancing on the spot, and then only with some special emphasis. Real movement sequences involving stepping usually start from jumps or otherwise having the feet together, but this introduces complication at a first teaching of the steps which can be avoided. Although it is natural to start practicing with very little lift, the development of a reasonable amount of spring is essential.

**6/8 Jig Time** - two "steps" per bar (almost capers, which are the same action with a greater lift and more exaggerated arm movement) - start off from standing on one foot. To keep it symmetrical - use circular arm waves, at one per step, with the emphasis on the upward rise or "lift". "Up" takes longer than "Down" due to gravity. The tune's rhythm is important - compare it with a hornpipe in 4/4 - there is less life in the dancing as the more even rhythm constrains the rise that is possible. True polkas, as distinct from polka tunes played as hornpipes, have an irregular rhythm (they fit the clog morris polka well) and are best avoided with beginners, because they induce bad dance habits.

What is a good morris tune? It needs to be able to be played to fit the effort profile of the movement sequence - in particular to stress the lift on the first beats. Modern tunes do not lend themselves to this characteristic.

The jig rhythm encourages hops. Starting from the simple capers, put in the hops - still keeping the action symmetrical with the free feet travelling forward the same distance and the body rise being the same off of either foot - the drive is on the ball of the foot - just like for the jumps.

Look out of a window and watch the relative motion of the frame or bars as an indication of ones own body motion - there are 4 rises per bar - the first and third are larger than the second and fourth. Hence the main beats being called the "Strong" and those in between the "Weak" beats.

To get a feel of the meaning of "tradition" and the problems facing beginners, try stepping with appropriately different arm movements.

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. Down & Up, both arms working in parallel       | (Hinton)           |
| 2. Alternate arms as in exaggerated walking       | (Chipping Campden) |
| 3. Forward Flick of both hands together           | (Bampton)          |
| 4. Low Circular forward facing Waves at hip level | (Brackley)         |
| 5. High Circular Waves at mid chest level         | (Badby)            |

- note the feeling of a "help" on the **UP** part of the arm movement. Thus the character of the movement as perceived by the new dancer will depend on the tradition being done.

**Arm sequence** - do it without stepping but simulating the body bounce. Beginners can have a problem of coordinating arm, leg and body movements new to them so there is some value in a little practice of these separately. Because of the problem of coordination, practice arm sequences alone for a while to obtain the flow, but not for too long, as they are slightly modified by the body actions when actually stepping.

Traditions surviving into the 20th century have acquired an off-beat emphasis, with a strong movement on the weak beats (in practice a Schottische). Although no ragtime or subsequent musical style has stuck with the morris. It has led to the villages teaching a basic single step with a foot lift up and a kick forward style, which is not the classical stepping style recognised by Sharp that has been introduced here.

**Left Foot Lead** is medieval - they danced in a linked curved line and moved first to the left and then to the right. To go with the sun was lucky - to start to windershins, as supposedly did witches, was not. The left foot lead is natural with a strong thrust off of the right foot.

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Form a set of 6 dancers, in two files of 3, numbered 1, 3, 5 (the "odds") in the left hand column, and 2, 4, 6 (the "evens") in the right, as facing up towards the music.

Try dancing something very simple but illustrative, eg Chipping Campden's Constant Billy - face one's opposite across the set for the playing of a "Once To Yourself" - jump and turn 90° to face left, odds facing up, evens down in the last bar - dance a complete whole rounds for 8 bars, ending as at the start facing across the set - approach one's opposite for 4 bars, ending with a jump and stand feet together side by side - clap with the opposite - dance past the opposite, passing by the left shoulder, turn to the right in the opposite's starting place to face back and approach again etc. - repeating the crossing and clapping a few times - end the dance with the rounds again.

(Clapping = both, r+r, both, l+l, both, behind, both, r+l & l+r in brief notation)

**6/8 Double Step** - is 3 quick changes and a hop, "1 2 3 hop", - the lift on the hop, the broken rhythm ensures an unequal rise on the 4 movements.

Lack of thought can lead to an uneven forward kick - it needs to be equal.

Double and Single step - come from Tudor times - then called double and single (or simple).

For the Single step - the lead is always off the same foot - for the Double - there is a changing lead.

The 4/4 double step feels different to that in 6/8.

There are several rhythms given a 4/4 (or 2/4) signature - hornpipes, schottisches, polkas, rants and marches. Each produces a different feel to the dance movements once the dancer is sensitive to them.

Time off the ground reflects the power of gravity - therefore one should fully exploit using the foot extension and the bend at the knee. The question of speed of the dance coupled with height in the stepping is a matter of the effort level that can be maintained.

**Fitness** - more than a once a week session is necessary to achieve and maintain a modest level of fitness. The typical weekly morris practice is inadequate - other sessions of perhaps different physical activity should be added such as swimming, brisk walks etc.

There should be a concern for the state of the anti-gravity muscles. The back and leg muscles develop with dancing, therefore the opposite muscles need strengthening - the abdominal (eases back pain), the shin area (shin splints) and the thigh area (knee pain).

Shin Splints are a common complaint and arise from abnormal strain and stress on the muscles and tendons that lift the forefoot, control the toes, absorb shock and stabilise the foot during foot plant on the floor. Often the condition comes from being unused to being on the balls of the feet, over-striding, tension during the foot swing, leaning forward or not having well cushioned shoes - dancing on too hard a floor for the footwear. Experienced dancers have it when they dramatically increase their activity or develop muscle imbalance.

Actions that might be taken are - wearing thicker soled shoes, not slapping the floor, having a more upright posture, relaxing the free foot, using stretching exercises for the calf, hamstring and Achilles tendon, exercising by lifting objects with the toes and checking that clothing is not too tight around the legs from elastic bands or bell pads.

The pain could be an indication of a more major condition so it must be taken seriously.

Actions on injury - the best advice is, if it hurts it is telling you something!

Strains and sprains are best dealt with immediately by ice packs (even frozen pea packets), blisters by puncture and plasters but not by removal of the skin.

There is a problem in persuading people of the degree of effort involved in doing the morris!

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At a guess, of all the sports Cotswold Morris has an affinity with Basketball, because of the turns in the running and jumping and hence rotational stress on joints and muscles not so usual in other sports. More examination of relevant experience in other sports could be done to the advantage of understanding the physical problems associated with the morris eg footwear, types of injury, and fitness training.

**Sequence of Steps** should be seen as the basic unit of movement. It involves integrating the jump and usually significantly different forward and back steps.

Try a Princess Royal - a very basic jig from no village in particular.

The order is Foot-Up, Jig, Plain Capers, Jig, Slow Capers, Jig.

Foot-Up	= 6 double steps, backsteps and a jump
Jig or chorus	= long open sidestep to the left and to the right, 2 double steps, left foot cross over right, apart and cross again, right foot cross over left, apart and cross again, 2 double steps, backsteps and a jump.
Plain Capers	= 8 Plain Capers on the spot, 2 double steps, backsteps and jump.
Slow Capers	= 4 slows to tune played somewhat slower for the first 4 bars cross feet, left in front, right in front, feet together and jump forward landing feet together - done 4 times etc with arm movements corresponding to the feet - out to side, out, up and over to out.

The angle between the feet where the heels are close together and the toes apart - has to be sufficient to allow twisting of the individual feet on the balls so that the heel can clear the supporting foot. In the ballet the turn out is very large - Old Tyme is 90° (avoiding treading on long dresses?) - and this was normal till an English Modern Ballroom dance committee with Victor Silvester in early 1920's decided on a parallel stance. In the morris it matters in sidesteps but not necessarily during the basic stepping.

**Backstep** - is a similar body movement to the ordinary stepping but with different emphases - the rise is much less and there is a stronger sink down - even in the waves of arms - one should now meet the Fieldtown basic sequence and the figure eight wave of the hands in the backsteps.

The next energetic step to meet is based on a caper from one foot to the other. From one point of view it arises out of the basic double when one step is so strong that it becomes a caper and so is not followed by a step on the next weak beat. If on landing the caper is followed by a hop then it is called a Half Caper and during a sequence of them the lead is always off with the same foot, and if it is followed by a change step it is called a Furrie and during a sequence of them the lead off is off of alternate feet.

The choice of the arm movements to be used - up and down or down and up - affects the stress in the movement.

There is an opinion that good dancers would not move their hands in front of their face to cover an important part of the image being presented to the audience.

**Double Step Sequences** - in a finer analysis each individual step has a different emphasis. For example to put in the travel - one must accelerate, move, decelerate, stop, reverse, etc. finally stopping again. The body rotates forward and backwards as a function of the acceleration and deceleration - particularly during the backstep and jump. The body slopes to move - gravity again - to move one's centre of gravity forward, then one moves the feet to stop falling over - like satellites in the earth's gravity field. Some people say that one should lean forward during a backstep, which would overcome the technical point.

Need to note the rotation of the body in the air to prepare for moving off from a jump - often a difficult point. Be aware of landing a foot's length behind the stationary position. This allows a snappy move off.

## THE REST

End by trying a Longborough style sidestep dance. The dance is constructed of 4 figures each followed by a chorus. For this workshop the figures are danced with a 4 bar stepping sequence which is essentially the same for both halves of the figures. The sequence is a double step and a jump moving forwards, backsteps (or single steps), and another jump moving backwards.

The figures are,

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Foot up      | - all face up, after the Once to Yourself, dance the sequence, turning outwards, away from one's opposite, to face down on the second jump. Repeat facing down, but turning inwards on the second jump. |
| Half Gip     | - all face across set, dance past each other passing right shoulders and retire backwards to place, then repeat passing left shoulders.   |
| Back-to-Back | - as half-gip, but having passed one's opposite move behind them to be able to retire backwards passing the other shoulder.   |
| Whole Gip    | - as back-to-back, but on the first jump, turn to face back across the set, then single step forwards, passing by the same shoulder, to the jump to face across again.                                  |

Each chorus is a sidestep sequence followed by a half hey, which is then repeated till the dancers are back where they started.

**Sidestep** - it is probable that each village had its own interpretation of this step. The feet could be crossed or apart, the body turned a little or a lot, one arm or two in use, and the handkerchief action at different levels and of various types. The sidestep can be long (2 bars) or a mixture of sidesteps, doubles and jumps. For Longborough the turn out of feet is maintained - the feet are crossed over with the heel of the leading foot close to the toe of the rear one - and the body is turned about 30-45°. The leading arm only is raised, fairly straight up past the ear. Like all Cotswold traditions the sidestep is performed very energetically. Cross the feet for one bar, dance a double step straight, cross the feet the other way, and dance another straight double.

The half hey - the dancers work in pairs. The top pair turn out and dance down the side of the set to the bottom place. They must come quickly so that the jump in the second bar can be sideways. The stepping in the third bar is a galley, not backsteps, with the dancers rotating and moving out to the final place. The middle pair follow the tops, in the first half hey moving to the top, but turning out quickly so that the jump can be back to where they started. The middles leave just enough space between themselves and the tops to let the bottoms pass through. The bottoms face down and turn out to come up to the top going behind the tops but in front of the middles.

Diagonals lines in body actions are more interesting to watch than verticals. The recent drift to vertical arm/hand movements in new traditions can only be justified in terms of appearing different rather than being artistically better.

Be conscious of leading sidestep hand movements with the wrist - also control the direction of the eyes which often affects posture, particularly of the head - (and smile?)

Work on the various side step arm gestures from different traditions.

**Mechanics of Movement** - often not simple, for example high diving, tumbling and the landing of a falling cat - we have met the effect of arms in jumps and roll inertia in a jump turn. Drive in the galley/hook comes from reducing the roll inertia during the rotation. By starting with the arms extended, the body tilted into the turn, and the upper part of the free leg raised, the roll inertia can be 4 times that when vertical with the arms at the sides. As the dancer turns the arms are brought in, the body made more vertical and the free leg lowered.

The lower part of the free leg is twisted once or twice in the turn and this motion can be used to help the dancer to turn. Of course different villages had different detail in their ways of performing this movement.

**Team Issues** - there are issues that arise from being in a team.

For example there is the rhythm, speed and togetherness of stick tapping - sticking choruses seem to have the problem of achieving acceleration into the next movement - dancers often forget to be up on their toes and to make a preparatory lift into the move off.

Many sides let themselves down with their exits and entries, and even as they prepare for once to yourself before the dance starts and in the manner in which they behave immediately after all in or up at the end of a dance.

**Dance is Style** - remember the importance of body language and be aware of being on stage all the time. The details of style are "personal" as well as "club" and will need a direct one-to-one working out between the beginner and their teacher.

Spread the physical effort over all the muscles - the shoulders and back as well as the arms and legs - like a carpenter working with a plane.

There is no substitute for observing other morris dancers and sides critically both for the good and the bad points. Much can be learnt from recognising what is wrong about other performances.

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