

3. THE BRACKLEY MORRIS - KIT AND PERFORMANCE

The best description of the Brackley Morris in the 19th century come from Hilderic Friend, after seeing them on Whit Tuesday, 1884; written in 1909:

"This well-known troupe prides itself in having kept up the old custom of morrice-dancing through an unbroken succession of years, and one of the present company can boast a connection with it extending over something like half a century, while his sons are also being trained for keeping up the art when he shall fail. Probably no-where in the country could a better opportunity of studying the subject . . . have been . . . afforded than which was enjoyed by the people of Brackley on Whit Tuesday, June 3rd 1884. I mention the date expressly thus because in many places it is supposed that the old custom had entirely died out years ago. I will attempt to give first of all some notice of the present company and then supply a few notes from other sources . . .

The Brackley troupe consisted of eight men, one of the company being a kind of master of the ceremonies, under the dignified and ancient title of "Fool", and another beat time, while the remaining six kept up the dance, which was performed in a variety of ways. A ninth individual deserves mention, since he occupied the place of Judas and collected the money which was placed by the donors in a large wooden money box through a small slot or opening in the lid, so that it could not be withdrawn. The "Fool" was dressed in different fashion from the rest, having on a broad [brimmed hat] covered with gaudy trimmings and decorations, a short muslin skirt with numerous flowers over his pantaloons or knickerbockers which were of pink cambric and flowered pompadour, and were so short as to exhibit to perfection the odd pair of stockings, one of which were (sic) black and the other pink. A muslin bodice or loose jacket, for one can scarcely give the article a name which will correctly describe it, covered the upper part of the body, while streamers and rosettes added to the general display. To make his appearance more befitting his name, he carried a whip on the lash of which were tied a number of old bladders, most of which had already burst. This corresponded to the bauble which the fool is said to have anciently carried. I am disposed to think that this personage has gradually merged in one the two characters of "Fool" and Maid Marian, who at one time figured in the dances.

The person who beat time was dressed in peculiar costume but during the dance kept up a constant accompaniment on his "tabor & pipe" - instruments which have always been associated with this kind of entertainment. The six performers were dressed in white shirts and trousers, with high hats (in most instances) ornamented with bright coloured streamers. Across the shoulders bands of coloured material covered with Rosettes took the place of braces, while below the knees other adornments were fastened by means of tapes. On these latter decorations were placed small bells which kept up a constant jingling as the dance was being performed. During certain dances each of the six performers carried a stick or wooden spear, and this was manipulated in various ways. Sometimes it was twirled round and round while the dancers approached their partners when each other struck the other's spear; at other times they were struck on the ground before being brought in contact with those of their comrades. In other dances the sticks were given up and the performers were supplied with a pair of white or coloured handkerchiefs, formerly called napkins, which were flaunted by the

dancers who held one in each hand and performed various gymnastic exercises therewith. Legs, hands and in fact every part of the body was exercised in the performance of some of the more complex dances, and the evolutions, which were executed with great precision, proved quite attractive. When a new dance was about to commence the "Fool" would call out, "Go on! Go on!" whereupon the troupe would begin again reminding us that formerly one of the dances was called "Trick and Go."

I am informed that many years ago the Brackley Morrice-Dancers were largely patronised and encouraged by a religious house that used to exist in the town. Unfortunately, now-a-day the performers are frequently the worse for the patronage they receive during the day, and become incapacitated for dancing properly through partaking too much of Brackley ale . . ."

In another piece, Friend wrote,

"I think the leg ornaments were formerly called garters, but those worn in Brackley are several inches deep; the bells were then as now fastened to these articles.

"After the degeneration of the dance, Maid Marion was personalised as a clown, which fact accounts for the custom still observed by the Brackley Fool of dressing particularly in the costume of a woman with a different head-dress . . . from that worn by the other dancers. The description of the 'Fool' or 'Tom the Piper with Pipe & Tabor' as found in Brand corresponds in many respects with those characteristics as still maintained in the Brackley troupe."

After Sharp's first visit to Brackley in 1909 his MSS record the following:

"Brackley

T Howard of Manor Road, Brackley, a dancer as well as his brother. White trousers, ordinary shirts. Diagonal ribbon across breast.

A rosette on each shoulder	2
2 on breast, 2 on back	4
1 on navel, 1 on back to correspond	2
2 on each side just above hip to tie	4
2 on hat, one on each side with 2 ribbons hanging down	<u>2</u>

14

"It took 14 rosettes to do a dress."

Bells, 5 strips of leather, 5 bells on each strip. Fastened on outside of leg, the first bar of leather was on the shin bone. Tied tight at the top, but loose at the bottom.

Handk. was tied by its two diagonal corners and passed through the middle fingers.

2 sollar (sallow or willow) sticks, 2 feet 6 in. or 2 ft. 4 in. long, peeled white.

They twirled the sticks by side, holding loose between thumb and

first finger and moving wrist up down and round.

His daughter, a scullery-maid at Lady Knightly of Fawsley Park, Daventry, told him that Morris men came to dance there when her mistress entertained the King.

Shirt with pleated sleeves and Irish front "let in".

His field notebook adds, "High Hats".

Sharp published this in *The Morris Book Vol. III* (1924):

"The traditional dress of the dancers was an unusually elaborate one - white trousers, linen shirt crossed with a double baldric consisting of two broad bands of different colours upon which were sewn ten large and beautifully worked rosettes, one on each breast, on each shoulder-blade, at each intersection of the ribbons back and front, and two on each side above the hip; a bunch of half a dozen or more broad silk ribbons eighteen inches in length of various colours attached to the side of each hip; fastened on the outside of each leg, a pad of bells consisting of five vertical strips of red braid or leather with five bells on each and many small rosettes; and high hats with two bands of ribbon, round the bottom and mid-way between brim and crown, and two large rosettes, one on each side, with streamers hanging down over the shoulders. I was told by the widow of one of the performers that "it took twelve rosettes to dress a Morris dancer." When handkerchiefs were used the two diagonal corners were tied to the middle finger. The sticks for the stick-dances were of white peeled sally (i.e. willow), about twenty-four inches in length and three quarters of an inch in diameter, and these, when not actually used in "clapping", were twirled very skilfully in the way to be described later on."

There is a discrepancy here concerning the number of rosettes on the baldrics, which differs from his notes and MSS. In the account in *The Morris Book Vol. III* Sharp has omitted the two rosettes which went on the back, to correspond with the two on the breast. Whatever the reason for this (perhaps he amended his earlier version to conform with the baldric he obtained in 1922 "that was made for a special performance in Jubilee year"), it is a pity he then had to alter the quote about 'the number of rosettes to dress a Morris dancer' from 14 to 12.

Sharp's account of the Fool in *The Morris Book Vol. III* (1924) draws heavily on Hilderic Friend's 1884 account, and reproduces his speculations:

"The Fool wore a broad-brimmed hat with a mass of gaudy trimmings; a woman's bodice and short skirt of muslin covered with ribbons and flowers; pink cambric breeches, odd stockings, and a whip to the last of which was fastened a number of bladders, some of them broken. He was always known as the Fool, although from the dress above described he might have been the Moll, the Morris name for the man-woman who under various designations - Dirty Bet, Bessie, etc. - invariably accompanied the sword dancers. In the Brackley Fool these two characters appear to be merged."

"The Fool was a man-woman" - Bacon, 1974.