

4. THE DANCE

STEPS & STEPPING

4.1. The Single Step

Sharp's 1922 notes on Brackley state, "No 4/3 or 6/3 - all 4/2 and 6/2". This is the basic single step and is used as the basic Brackley stepping. In *The Morris Book Vol. I* Sharp described this ubiquitous step as follows:⁸

"Let the learner stand at attention and begin to mark time at an elastic trot: right - left - right - left, treading on the ball of the foot only, and springing from one foot to the other as in the military "double." Instead, however, of bending each knee by turns and picking up the feet alternately, he must keep the knees straight, and bring each foot forward alternately in a sharp swing (almost a jerk) of some fifteen to eighteen inches.

This constitutes the Morris step in its elementary form, and will be marked in the music diagrams thus:

- r. (step on the right foot)
- l. (step on the left foot).

As soon as the learner has acquired it as a stationary step, he may practice it as a forward trot instead of a mark-time. In moving forward, the distance traversed in any given number of steps should be small: for the learner a yard in four steps may perhaps be suggested as a maximum . . .

The Free (or Swinging) Foot and Leg

1. The movement of the free foot is, as has been said, a sharp swing, not a lift; the thigh of the free leg is swung forward and backward, never lifted up.
2. The free leg should swing naturally and easily from the hip-joint; the knee must be straight, but not rigid - indeed, it is better that the knee should be slightly bent than that it should be consciously stiffened.
3. The dancer will find that the extent of the swing is to a great degree naturally defined for him by his own balance (the throwing forward of the leg must not be enough to force him to lean backwards in order to counteract it) and by the time of the dance. As a rule, however, it may be said to be not more than fifteen to eighteen inches, the heel of the free foot at the furthest point of the swing being some three inches, roughly, from the ground, and four to six inches in front of the toe of the supporting foot.
4. The toe of the swinging foot must not be pointed, nor the heel thrust forward; so long as the ankle is loose and flexible the foot will fall of itself into the right position - roughly, the angle between the shin and the instep should be rather more than a right angle.

The Supporting Foot and Leg.

5. The step is executed wholly on the ball of the foot, not the toe; the heel, though always close to the ground should never touch it.
6. The knee of the supporting leg naturally bends slightly for the spring."

Maud Karpeles later remarked that Howard achieved "extraordinary height" in the stepping, but this is difficult to gauge - i.e. extraordinary for his age? or compared with other dancers? - and how high did he get?

Hands

In Brackley stepping the arms are held close to the body (elbows tucked in to sides) and the hands describe circles at about hip-bone height: the hand movements come mainly from the wrists.

Sharp called this The Low Twist:

"This is a slow, continuous twist of the hands held in front of the body at breast-level or a little lower, the elbows three or four inches away from the sides.

The hands describe circles in a vertical plan parallel to the front of the body, the right hand clockwise, the left counter-clockwise."

This is clearly higher than hands are held today.

There is approximately one twist for every change of foot in the stepping. The 1922 notes read:

"The normal movement is a low clockwise twist, elbow close to side. The movement made almost entirely with the wrist, very little forearm and no upper arm movement. Circles in a vertical plan parallel to front of body."

4.2. The Side Step

"Side Step as usual" wrote Sharp in 1922.

In *The Morris Book Vol. I* Sharp described the British Standard side-step:

"When it is executed in a stationary position, one foot is swung in front of and across the other, and placed on the ground parallel to, and from four to five inches away from it. The weight of the body is then successively transferred from one foot to the other and a rhythmical, rocking movement set up, the feet being raised alternately an inch or two from the ground. The centre of gravity of the body must always be directly upon the supporting foot . . .

In advancing or retiring at the side-step one foot is placed from six to nine inches in front of the other, and in line with it. The step then becomes akin to the chase, one foot chasing the other, except that the dancer rocks to and fro as he moves. This rocking movement, however, is less marked than when the step is performed in a stationary position.

Usually, the course of the dancer is diagonally to his right or left, according as the front foot is right or left. Consequently, when the relative position of the feet is periodically changes, the dancer will pursue a zigzag course.

Whenever the Side-step is used, the body should be twisted at the hops into line with the feet, right shoulder over right foot, left over left, and the head turned so that the eyes look over the front shoulder. Ordinarily, the head and body are held erect . . .

The Side-step is, perhaps, the most graceful, as it is indubitably the most troublesome of all the steps of the Morris dance . . ."

Hands

The 1922 notes on hands add, "One arm twists in side step."

Sharp in *The Morris Book Part III* again utilises the 'Low Twist', but with only one arm employed at a time.

4.3. The "Slip".

"The Slip. As in the Country Dance." - Sharp, 1922.

This is described in *The Morris Book Part III* as:

"This is the same as the Country Dance slipping step. It consists of a series of springs, made sideways, off alternate feet, the major spring being on to the outside-foot, i.e. the left when moving to the left and the right when moving to the right. Although the legs are thus alternately opening and closing, scissor-fashion, the motion is effected almost wholly by the spring, not the straddle; the legs should be separated as little as possible. The free foot should not be allowed to scrape the ground.

The accent falls upon the foot on to which the major spring is made, that is, left or right according to the direction of the motion.

This is marked on the diagrams:

l . r . l . r
sl. ———."

4.4. The Caper.

In Sharp's 1922 notes he only mentions capers (as opposed to quick capers) when the dancers finish a dance by capering into the middle, e.g. "all-in in ring with 2 capers."

Capers are plain capers, a straight jump from one foot to the other, described by Sharp in *The Morris Book Vol. I*:

"This is an ordinary Morris step with an exaggerated spring; indeed, the spring should be as high as possible, or as high as the time given by the music will allow. The springing leg must be in line with the body, which must be erect. The free leg is swung forward in the same way and as far as in the Morris step, but no further."

Quick Capers

"A quick caper sometimes used instead of 4/2 or 6/2, in which case music played rather faster" - Sharp, 1922.

But in the 1922 notes for Jockie To The Fair, Sharp records: "For all corner movements dancers may substitute the quick capers step for sidesteps and 4/2 at will. Howard said they usually did so when they had a large audience and felt like it."

In *The Morris Book Part III*, Sharp notes, "This is the ordinary caper, but danced at a quicker pace and therefore with less spring."

In his notation of Jockie to the Fair in *The Morris Book Part III (2nd ed.)* Sharp gave a chorus direction as "Corners With Capers":

"Dancers follow the same track . . . but instead of the side-step in the first four bars and the 6/2 step in the fifth and sixth bars they take twelve Quick-capers (two to each bar) beginning with the right foot . . . The music is played rather faster."

4.5. The Rear-Up

"Back-step - similar to shuffle but in position with legs well apart. Always 2 shuffles one at beginning and one at end of bar.

Two different ways of ending phrase.

- (a) Feet apart jump
- (b) Backstep, backstep, feet apart jump."

- Sharp, 1922

In *The Morris Book Part III* (1924) Sharp retained the description of the shorter of these movements, (a) above, as a feet apart jump: but the backstep movements in the second, (b), he christened the "Wide-Back-Step":

"The dancer stands with feet straddled fifteen inches or so apart. On the first beat of the bar, one foot, say the right, pivoting on the ball, is screwed round clockwise and the heel thrust inward and forward. On the middle beat of the bar, the left foot is screwed round counter-clockwise in like manner while, at the same moment, the right foot is straightened.

On the first beat of the second bar the left foot is straightened and on the middle beat a jump is made alighting with feet-together.

These movements are made in a stationary position, the weight of the body being thoroughly supported equally by both feet."

In the Figure diagrams, this is represented as, e.g., "right, left, feet-apart, jump". In Shooting, the wide-back-step has only three beats, not four: in Sharp's notation the "feet-apart" is omitted and the step becomes, e.g.: "right, left, jump".

There is an amusing incident in the account given by Peck of the dancing session with William Giles in 1937, in the section on Beansetters:

"Giles twice did something at the end of crossing that looked like a shadow of the wide back step, though when Joan Schofield asked him if they did it (demonstrating) he said no."

It was Hamer in 1955 who first gave us the name:

"Some note must be taken of the characteristic Brackley phrase-endings: the Apart-together, and the Wide-back-step. These are terms coined by Sharp to describe two movements new to him. They were used almost interchangeably by the Brackley man, but the Apart-together tended to be used at points when the dancers had less time to think. It is the last half of the wide-back-step, of which it is, in effect, a shorter version. Sharp's terms were unknown to the Brackley men who called them both Rear-up. I think this is a better description for the Wide-back-step at least, since the essence of the movement is not that the feet are wide apart but that the body rises and falls rhythmically. The use of the traditional term might help to prevent the ugly wriggling movement of the body that is so often seen. Surviving dancers insist that the body does not twist in any way."

The shorter movement is now known as the Short (or Half) Rear-up; the longer as the Long (or Whole) Rear-up.

Hands In Rear-Ups

In *The Morris Book Part III* Sharp has the hands held out during the backsteps, with a 'Bent-swing-down' on the Feet-apart and a 'High-Bent-Swing' on the jump.

The 'bent-swing-down' is described as:

"The fore-arms are raised and folded back upon the upper arms, the backs of the hands close to the shoulders; the upper arms are held loosely by the sides of the body, pointing downwards and slightly forward. On the first beat of the bar the forearms are swung forward and down and the arms straightened."

The 'high-bent-swing', on the other hand, has:

"The arms, bent at the elbows very nearly to a right-angle, are swung forward and up until the hands are two or three inches above the head."

In other words, the arms were to execute a 'down and up' movement.

4.6. Handkerchiefs

"In other dances . . . 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 bymnastic exercises therewith"

- Friend, 1884.

The only note on how the handkerchiefs were actually held comes from Sharp's 1909 Field book, and does not appear in any of the other sources:

"Tie the diagonal corners of handkerchief together and pass through middle fingers"

There is one last, enigmatic note in the notes of the 1937 dancing session with Giles, which appears beside the account of Beansetters:

"He does high handkerchief waving, though perhaps lets his hands fall slightly in alternate bars (cf. Abindgon, according to book). Very insistent that all 6 should "jump" up together at end of each corner crossing. Hands well up, rather like Longborough."

4.7. Stick Twirling

This unique and distinctive feature of the Brackley (and Hinton) Morris dances was first recorded by Friend:

"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 struck the other's spear."

Sharp's 1909 visit to Brackley resulted in the following note:

"Sollar sticks (trees which grew by the track) peeled till white. 2 ft 6 or 4. Twirled⁹ sticks by side holding loose between thumb & finger."

The typescript copy adds the detail, "and moving wrist up down and round."

Sharp's 1922 notes do not include any details about technique, but refer more to application:

"The sticks are twirled in stick dances whenever the sticks are not used in striking except when actually negotiating the figure movements in Back to Back and Side by Side. Twirl accentuated in each bar in the twirling."

His Field Book contains one brief note, "The twirl twice to each bar (not very fast therefore)"

His 1922 notes on *The Captain With His Whiskers* indicate that Howard approved twirling during the Foot Up and Foot Down only, and during a hey only when dancing in position after having finished moving. The only comment on twirling during the Side by Side or Back to Back follows that for the hey: "Dancers only twirl when they have danced figure and are dancing in position." In other words, according to Sharp, twirling was only done when dancing on the spot, and this was confirmed in *The Morris Book Part III* (1924).

In *The Morris Book Part III* Sharp provided the most thorough description of the Twirl:

"The stick, vertical with butt-end up, is held midway lightly but firmly between the fore-finger and thumb of the right hand (which is at chin level about eighteen inches in front of the body) and steadied by the middle and ring fingers; the back of the hand is turned towards the performer, little finger uppermost.

On the first beat of the bar the stick is swung so that the butt, falling and receding from the performer, describes a full circle in a vertical plane, the stick passing close to the inside of the extended arm.

On the second beat of the bar, the butt (which is approximately in its original position) is again allowed to fall away from the performer and to describe a full circle in a vertical plane, the stick now passing close to but outside the performer's arm.

These two circular movements alternate with each successive beat of the bar, whether the time be duple or triple.

The impulse is imparted to the stick by a rhythmical rotation of the wrist, which rocks alternately clockwise and counter-clockwise through an angle of about 90 degrees.

The following points should be noted:

(1) The spin of the stick never reverses (the butt, whether inside or outside the arm, always falling away from the performer and rising toward him), but goes on continuously in the same direction, simply alternating between two planes, which intersect at the narrowest angle obtainable by deft wrist-work.

(2) There must be no forcing; the spin once started, the weight and impetus of the stick do nearly all the work.

(3) The function of the fingers cannot be described in detail, beyond saying that they supply any fresh impulse needed during the upward swing of the butt and otherwise avoid obstruction and steady the movement as experience will dictate."

When, during a dance, should sticks be twirled?

Once to Yourself - In 1922 Sharp noted "twirl throughout, partners striking sticks on last beat of last bar." But in *The Morris Book Part III* partners stand through the figure with crossed sticks.

Rounds - although the figure was not collected by Sharp, Hamer has twirling throughout.

Foot Up & Down - twirl through Foot Up and Foot Down

Side By Side - although Sharp, as mentioned above, considered that twirling should only occur when dancing in position in his 1922 notes, in *The Morris Book Part III* he comments "the sticks are not twirled in this evolution."

Back to Back - In *The Morris Book Part III* Sharp states that there is no twirling in The Month of May's Back to Back, but in his notation for Shooting he allows twirling during the 3 single steps in position.

Hey - Twirl after moving sideways: "In bars 3 to 8 of each half-hey partners twirl their sticks."

Wide-back-step - in *The Morris Book Part III* sticks are twirled throughout, up to the final feet-together jump:

"In [stick dances] the stick, when not in active use, should be held in the right hand vertically, point downward, the arms hanging loosely by the side of the body."