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## MOLLY DANCING IN EAST ANGLIA

BY JOSEPH NEEDHAM AND ARTHUR L. PECK.

## I—INTRODUCTION.

THE 'Molly dancing' or Morris dancing of the Eastern Counties of England seems to us to have received less attention than it deserves from folk-lorists and folk-dancers during the last fifty years.\* In the investigation of English morris dances carried out through a long period by Cecil Sharp and his collaborators, there can be no doubt that the western parts of the country, especially Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, yielded the richest harvest, but it remains very desirable that information should be obtained from other parts of the country before it is too late. As far as we are aware no attempt has so far been made to collect the molly dances of the Eastern Counties from the dancer's point of view, as well as from that of the pure antiquarian. But in presenting the few facts which we have been able to gather together we hope that our work may be a beginning rather than a conclusion, and that others as well as ourselves may be lucky enough to make further discoveries in this interesting field.

The central feature of the Morris dance of the Eastern Counties is its connection with Plough Monday, *i.e.* the first Monday after the old Christmas Day, now the first Monday after Epiphany. The Plough Monday festival, which accordingly always occurs early in January, appears to be of very ancient origin. Its pre-Reformation character may be assessed from the following interesting passage in Blomefield's "History of Norfolk":—"Anciently, a light called the 'Plough Light' was maintained by old and young persons who were husbandmen, before images in some Churches, and on Plough Monday they had a feast, and went about with a Plough and dancers to get money to support the plough light. The Reformation put out these lights, but the practice of going about with a plough and begging for money remains." This was written in the early years of the nineteenth century, and for the next hundred years we find continual references to the ceremonies of Plough Monday

\* The term "Molly-dancing" has also been recorded as used for the garland dance at Castleton in Derbyshire (O. S. Addy, *Folk-lore*, 1901, 12, 412).

in the eastern parts of the country.\* There can be little doubt that Plough Monday was a universal festival in the Eastern Counties.

"The dancers referred to by Blomefield," says Ordish (*Folk-Lore*, 1893, 4, 164), "were the Sword dancers. In the Plough Monday play, the sword-dance entered into and gave shape and coherence to existing dramatic conditions." Ordish divided the existing folk-drama into three main classes, (1) the Christmas mummers' plays, (2) the Plough Monday plays, (3) the Easter or Pace-Egging plays; but we are doubtful as to the necessity or desirability of this classification since all seem to involve as a central ritual-act the killing and subsequent restoration to life of an actor representing the world of living things (see D. Kennedy, *Journal English Folk Dance Society*, 1930, 3, 13). We have not observed any traces of plays in the Plough Monday customs with which we have become acquainted, and the dancing has certainly not been for many years past anything resembling a Sword dance.

Perhaps the most striking custom associated with Plough Monday was the carrying round of the plough, and the ploughing up of the threshold of any house where the celebrants were not welcomed. Ordish (*loc.cit.*) quotes an account of an eye-witness of Plough Monday in Lincolnshire in the 'eighties of the last century. It appears that the dancing and the ploughing lingered on separately until recent years, for at Fen Drayton and at Bottisham in Cambridgeshire there was no recollection of dancing, only of ploughing, while at Girton, Histon, Fowlmere and Comberton, it was the other way about. The custom of ploughing up the inhospitable threshold has recently found a place in literature (see *Go She Must* by Richard Garnett).

We shall now pass to a description of our material.

## II—THE VILLAGES NEAR CAMBRIDGE.

In 1930 we had the good fortune to become acquainted with Mr. Samuel Asplin (aged 81) who used to be one of the Molly dancers of Girton village, and with Mr. Richard Prior (aged 76), who used to be the musician (concertina) of the Histon dancers. From them we elicited the following information:—The dancing was called "Molly" or "Morris" dancing indiscriminately, and each village round Cambridge had its own team or "set" (Girton, Histon, Comberton, Coton, Madingley, Grantchester). The dancers used to start out from their villages in the early morning of Plough Monday and converge about midday on the Cambridge market-place,

\* E.g. in Cambridgeshire, at Ickleton and Duxford (M. C. Jones, *Folk-Lore*, 1913, 24, 234), at Witchford (J. G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore*, 1897, 8, 184), at Madingley (*Notes & Queries*, 1882 (ser. 6), 5, 176), where apparently in 1848 they were very renowned, at Little Downham and Littleport (unpublished notes of Cecil Sharp, see below); in Bedfordshire, at Shelton (J. G. Whitehead, *Folk-Lore*, 1926, 37, 76); in Nottinghamshire, at Bingham (T. F. Ordish, *Folk-Lore*, 1893, 4, 149), at Thoresby (*Notes & Queries*, 1904 (ser. 10), 2, 287), at Clayworth (R. J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play*); in Lincolnshire, at Kermington (*ibid.*), at Long Sutton (A. Mitchell, private communication to the present authors), at Addlethorpe, Holbeach, Leverton, Louth, Sutterton, Waddington, Wainfleet, Wigtoft, Axholme, Hibaldstow, Winterton, Kirton-in-Lindsey (M. Gutch and M. Peacock, *County Folk-Lore*, 1908, 5).

where they "danced against each other." Each group consisted of six dancers, one of whom was the "Bessy" or "Molly," *i.e.* a man dressed as a woman, one fiddler or accordion-player, one "umbrella-man" to keep the rain or snow off the musician, and five collectors, or "cadgers," who also wore ribbons and sashes. Besides each dancing party there was also a party of six men dragging a wooden plough, and some men cracking whips. The dancers held handkerchiefs in their hands, and wore a form of baldrick but no bells. When shown the baldrick of the present Cambridge Morris Men, Mr. Asplin said it was very like his own ribbons except that they had been broader and had more rosettes. About five in the evening the dancers would return to their homes and rest, but afterwards meet and dance half the night. This evening dance had more of the quality of a ball, for women were present and danced the same dances which had served for the "Molly dancers" during the day.\* The names of the dances which Mr. Asplin and Mr. Prior could remember were The College Hornpipe, Birds-a-Building, Smash the Window, Double Change Sides, the Gypsies in the Wood, Soldier's Joy, and Richard's Riddle. We were able to collect the first four of these to some extent: tunes and notation follow. The step appeared to be an ordinary country-dance step throughout, with no  $4/3$  step or leaps and capers.

#### THE COLLEGE HORNPIPE.†

(TO THE TUNE OF THE SAILOR'S HORNPIPE).

Hands 6

7 slips clockwise, 7 slips back

face up, and engage with partner, putting arm behind partner's back,

cast off to the left and back to places, waving hdkf. in free hand

nos. 1 & 4 swing

nos. 2 & 3 swing

nos. 1 & 2 lead down, lead back,

first two couples swing and change places.

Repeat the whole until the original places are regained.

A dance which seems to be the same as that described, and done to the same tune, is apparently used traditionally as a country dance in Leicestershire, at Great Easton.

\* This practice was found still in vogue at Little Downham, Cambs., on Plough Monday, 1933.

† The "College Hornpipe" belongs to the *later* type of hornpipe tunes—*i.e.*  $\frac{4}{4}$ —the earlier hornpipes being in a running measure of six quavers ( $\frac{3}{8}$  not  $\frac{3}{4}$ )—and the dance belonging to it, if a special one at all, cannot therefore be of much antiquity. As far as I have been able to discover, the rhythm appearing about the end of the 18th century as a "Scots Measure" was the immediate precursor of the  $\frac{4}{4}$  hornpipe in its typical form, though "Del Caro's Hornpipe" (Early one morning) and Miss Gayton's (?) (1) "Guardian Angels," (2) "Lo, He comes, with clouds descending") were earlier  $\frac{4}{4}$  rhythms known as hornpipes, distinct from the later form. *Early* allusions to hornpipes probably indicate the triple-time form, and, earlier still, merely the instrument (still, I believe, to be seen in Welsh museums as the *piccorn*) to which the country folk danced. About the beginning of last century people frequently danced their country-dances to hornpipes, jigs, and even waltzes—as is evident in the directions given in old fiddlers' books.—A. G. G.

## BIRDS-A-BUILDING.

Noted by JOSEPH NEEDHAM and A. L. PECK.



nos. 1 & 2 cross over giving rt. hands  
nos. 1 & 3 and 2 & 4 do the same and so on back to places  
nos. 1 & 2 lead down and up, first two couples swing and change.  
Repeated by nos. 1 & 2 from the second place till all regain their places.

## SMASH THE WINDOW.

From an old fiddler's M.S. book,  
c. 1820.



A. G. G.

nos. 1, 2 & 4 hands-round and back  
nos. 1, 2 & 3 hands-round and back  
nos. 1 & 2 lead down and back, first 2 couples swing and change.  
Thus repeated by nos. 1 & 2 from the second place until all regain their places.

## DOUBLE CHANGE SIDES.

Tune not obtainable.

nos. 2 & 4 lead between nos. 1 & 3 and fall back } \*  
nos. 1 & 3 lead between nos. 2 & 4 and fall back }  
nos. 1 & 2 lead down, and back  
first 2 couples swing and change.

Thus repeated by nos. 1 & 2 from the second place until all regain their places.

It will be evident from this description that the dances of Plough Monday in Cambridgeshire were almost identical with Country dances, although done by a team of men, with all the accompaniments of the Morris dance of the western counties. And with the exception of the cast in the College Hornpipe, which can be effective, they offer nothing of interest to the folk-dancer from the technical point of view. Their interest lies rather in deciding what position they occupy in the scheme of affinities and historical development of folk-dancing in England as a whole. We shall return to this point when we have said a little about the villages of the Isle of Ely.

### III—IN THE VILLAGES NEAR ELY.

Early in our search we found that Cecil Sharp's manuscript notebooks, preserved in the library of Clare College, Cambridge, contained some information about Molly dancing. The following passages are of interest:—

ii, p. 39 "8th Sept. 1911. Jonathan Clingo (aged 85) at Littleport told me that 6 men called Morris dancers used to go round the village on Plough Monday, and the neighbouring villages. One man dressed in woman's clothes, led by a man with a long feather sticking straight up out of his cap. Also a fiddler and a sweeper with a broom. The 6 men had white shirts with ribbons and scarves all over them and high box hats. In the evening they had a ball to which others came, and all danced—very often too a fight to a finish between men representing two different villages. The Morris dancers didn't act a play, but simply jigged about. No bells, no sticks, no handkerchiefs. They danced a 'set jig'. No plough.

At Haddenham they had a plough decorated with ribbons and greenery. Young men drew it, driven by a man with a whip. It is 30 years since Jonathan saw them go out. He remembers broom-stem dancing.

Other men, Robert Grimditch (aged 80) at Ely workhouse, gave me a few details about Plough Monday, which was evidently a regular thing in these parts 20 or 30 years ago. The sweeper they called 'Humpty'. He had a hump on his back, a besom in his hand, his face blackened, and a long tail of braided straw hanging down his back. There was also a fiddler and a man with a tambourine. The dancers had ribbons down their sleeves and all down their trousers. They danced regularly 4- or 6-handed reels.

At Little Downham they had 3 dancers and a man-woman who danced and caused much mirth. The men used to 'kiss her and one thing and another'. The sweeper swept children off the dancing-ground, and the snow away when there was any. Old Mr. Grimditch was tambourine-man and purser i.e. 'treasure-man'."

\* This was similar to Fig. 34 of *The Country Dance Book* (Cecil Sharp), vol. i, but the opposite persons remained stationary.

In July, 1931, we had information of Molly dancing still being done at Little Downham, and accordingly went over to see if we could find any traces. We were luckily able to get the following information:—Mrs. Moore, of the Anchor Inn, and Mrs. Wright told us that the Molly dancing had been done on Plough Monday at Little Downham as far back as the memory of man would go, and had not been suspended even during the War. The dancers went to Ely and Littleport, and danced all round the droves and fens. "They done our fens, and many people look for them to come on Plough Monday." They black their faces and one of them carries a broom, in the old days they used to have a plough, but that had long been done away with. "The younger people don't understand it, don't know what it's for, but they do it for a bit of sport." Mr. Frederick Shelton, the leader of the "gang" told us that above all, it was "necessary to keep up the day." Plough Monday was the second Monday in January. No bells, no handkerchiefs, ribbons pinned on anyhow, six men, of whom four dance, one accordion player ("the same tune every year"), and one "box man."

The interest of the Little Downham custom was so considerable that we made a special point of visiting the village on Plough Monday, 1932. Arriving at 10.30 a.m. we were able to secure a photograph of the dancers as they were setting out to walk to Ely, and later in the day we saw a good deal of them in the streets there. There were six men, of whom one was the "Betty," and four of them, including the Betty, took part in the dancing; one played the accordion, and one held the collecting box and broom. The broom was a curved stick with a bush attached to it. All the men wore ribbons, and hats decorated with flowers, and some had what appeared to be vestiges of bell-pads or ruggles, but no bells. One of them, the leader, Mr. Shelton, wore a pink coat and trousers, and a pink top-hat with flowers round it. Another wore an old black tail-coat with a kind of long white pigtail hanging down the back of it. Some of them wore goggles and all of them had their faces blackened with soot. The "Betty" wore a kind of pinafore and skirt, and a woman's hat with a veil.

The four who danced engaged in couples, and jiggled to and fro, with occasional waltzing. They explained that there were two new men out with them this year, which prevented them from doing polkas, and other movements such as hands-across and lead-down, which had previously been done. The music was a tune in 4/4 time, unknown to us, and the name of it was not known to the musician either.

#### IV—CONCLUSION.

We feel that the data here reported raise in acute form the problem of what was the original form of dance done by the Molly dancers at the Plough Monday celebrations. Such dances as the College Hornpipe, according to the description of Mr. Asplin and other old men, seem to have some affinity with the Morris of the

Derbyshire type, with its country-dance figures and "ladies' side." And we are certainly no more justified in this case than in that, in supposing that Country dance figures are a corruption of some earlier form more approximating to the Oxfordshire Morris (see Phillips Barker, *Journal English Folk-Dance Society*, 1913 (1st ser.), 1, 38). In the living tradition here described, the dancing has unfortunately degenerated so much that all clues to its original form are lost. From the association of Plough Monday with plays of the Sword-dance type, one would expect that the Molly-dancing would be some derivative of Sword-dancing, but unless we are to regard the slips of the College Hornpipe as a vestigial organ in this sense, there is little trace of Sword-dancing visible in what we have found. Can it be that the Sword-dances were forgotten at some period of upheaval such as the Commonwealth (we may remember that Cromwell and his Ironsides came mainly from the Eastern Counties, especially Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire) and that when Molly-dancing revived again at the Restoration, Country dances were made use of? Only further work and lucky finds can elucidate this question.

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