

EAST ANGLIAN MOLLY

The Molly Dance is the mid winter seasonal dance of Cambridgeshire and its neighbouring areas. It can be seen as two performing traditions, the old simple Cambridgeshire style and the new associated with the Seven Champions. Neither were thought of as using sticks, wearing bells, or normally carrying handkerchiefs. The older collected dances are few, come from a limited area and from a very limited time, when the seasonal custom was in terminal decline.

WHEN

The older traditional dancing used to centre on two opportunities which no longer exist,

1 **Plough Monday** ; the first Monday after January 6th, that itself was Epiphany or the Twelfth Day of Christmas and the climax of the mid-winter celebrations until the end of the Stuart Age, and which became Old Christmas Day as remembered in more modern times with the change of the calendar,

The team could consist of several ploughmen kitted out as Molly dancers, led by a better dressed Lord and a "Lady" who was a cross-dressing man, perhaps also with a plough, although this was often taken round by a separate gang. A good deal of time would be taken up in preparation during the evening before going out. It was said that it took two good women to dress a Molly Dancer, one to hold and one to sew, (but perhaps only one had one to undress him!). The gang would perform during the day and then dance again in the evenings in the pubs when out of costume, but treating the same dances as social dances by including women in the sets. Only men went on the Molly Outings within living memory to the 1920's, as would be expected to be acceptable to society in those periods,

2 **The Village Feast** ; The pubs would open up the bars for dancing. Perhaps it would be for the Benefit Club and the club night consist of a supper and dance for all. But it was quite different from the Molly centred occasion. The "Feast Dances" would be the same in form but not done in the same spirit as for the Molly, again particularly because they were then danced mixed. Dancers would pay per dance, perhaps as much as 2d.

WHERE

The Molly Festival was once widespread throughout inland East Anglia, over both Cambridgeshire and into the neighbouring counties, although few traces of the dances have been recovered. Cecil Sharp himself saw the dancing near Littleport by Ely. Six men wearing white shirts, ribbons, sashes and box hats, danced what is recorded only as a "set" jig. Some account of the Cambridgeshire Molly dances were first published by Drs Needham and Peck in 1933. They wrote of the dancing around Cambridge and Ely as separate groups. Near Cambridge at Girton, Histon and Comberton, the desired team was six dancers, although sometimes eight, one of whom was a Bessy or Molly, plus a musician and several cadgers. They would carry handkerchiefs and wore a form of wide baldrick or sash decorated with many rosettes.

The late Russell Wortley has been by far the most industrious enquirer, and has recorded evidence of dancing in many villages, although this has not yet been analysed and published in terms of the eras of occurrence.

WHAT

At Girton the dances were *Birds a Building*, *College Hornpipe*, *Double Change Sides*, *Gypsies in the Wood*, *Richard's Riddle* and *Soldier's Joy*. Around Ely the best known group was at Little Downham, because it was the longest lived, where the dancers dressed in ribbons and flower decorated hats. There were usually only four dancers in the final years so they danced as couples, reputedly mostly to the one tune, although there was a mention of tangos. They claimed to have had normal country dance figures as elsewhere and a four hand reel. But at Haddenham it was said that broom-stem dancing was done by the plough party, and that elsewhere near Ely four and six hand reels were performed. There never was any indication of an association with local mummers.

Russell Wortley and Cyril Papworth had published on some of the Comberton dances in *English Dance and Song*. Then Cyril printed his booklet *Polka Round*. In this he also explained a broom dance learnt over a number of years from members of his own family. Mostly it was about the Feast Dances, *Birds a Building*, *College Hornpipe*, *Cross Hands Polka*, *Double Change Sides*, *Gypsies in the Wood*, *Six Hand Reel* and *Up the Middle and Down the Sides*, a version of *We Went Go Home Till Morning*, as danced as social dances. They had much in common with the Girton dances. He gave a consistent style for the dancing using a so called "Cambridge Polka", a 1 2 3 hop, which is three small steps and a lift, bringing the free knee fairly high in front, but being light on the ground. A later booklet "...for a bit of sport'..." by Richard Humphries summarised much of the known information on places, happenings, dances and music, but it also suggested that Sam Bennett's *Lively Jig* was obtained from an East Anglian gamekeeper who might have come from near Little Snoring by Fakenham in Norfolk.

TODAY

The first attempt by outsiders to present the old dances in their villages in the old style was not particularly well received according to some villagers interviewed. They were about the least spectacular English dances that could be offered. Perhaps the approach was wrong as their successors have now been successful. There has been a marked regional interest in the wider East Anglia in the local tradition and many teams are active either as purely Molly sides or with the Molly as their mid winter expression. Also many are mixed following the modern trend. Whittlesey Straw Bear, now on a Saturday in early January, brings the groups together, and several have their own Plough Monday tours.

A strong and effective influence in the current revival of interest has been the impressive Seven Champions from Kent. They are as authentic and as lovable as treacle mines. These are widespread in folklore, although every place believes itself unique, and the stories are most likely to have been inspired by the finding of underground tar pits rather than molasses! This team has been about style and discipline, at its best more akin to a music hall act than an amateur road show. They have opted for heavy boots and a slow deliberate stamping step and non social dance interpretations of the common country dance basics that had been collected. Starting from collected dances, their repertoire has expanded and developed in so many ways as has been partially documented by George Frampton. They are the stars of two videos, one from the Sidmouth video company that recorded *An Hour with the Seven Champions* and their own *Fan-Galactic Guide to Molly Dancing*. They are very successful on the Festival and Day-of-Dance circuits.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Journal of the EFDSS for 1933
Important as the first public recognition of a regional form.
- Cambridge
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Cambridge Morris Men, Cambridge 1980 and 1983
A memorial collection of articles by Russell Wortley including,
- R Wortley
C Papworth **Molly Dancing in South West Cambridgeshire**
English Dance and Song, Summer 1978
Not a complete set of Comberton's dances,
- R Wortley **A Penny for the Plough Boys**
English Dance and Song, Spring 1959,
- C Papworth **Polka Round - Folk Dances of Cambridgeshire**
Published by himself at Cambridge in 1984.
Used as a basis for his many workshops and orientated to the social dance format,
- R Humphries **...for a bit of sport'...**
Published by himself at Linton, Cambridgeshire, in 1984.
He mistakenly tries analogies to other regional traditions ignoring the origins of the dances in the social dance,
- M Neal **The Esperance Morris Book Part II**
Curwen, London, c 1910.

Folklore of East Anglia
A typical reference with anecdotal information,

OLDER MOLLY DANCE NOTATIONS

GIRTON & HISTON

Source : *Needham and Peck, Molly Dancing in East Anglia, J EFDSS 1933*

Music : Fiddle or concertina.

Step : Ordinary country dance step (no knee lift), no double step or capers.

Set : Six dancers, one of which is a Bessy or Molly.

Kit : Handkerchiefs, a wide baldrick, whose colour depended on the team, decorated with many rosettes and worn over white shirts, but no bells.

Extras : Several collectors or cadgers, umbrella man for musician, maybe up to eight men dragging a plough and others to crack whips.

1 **BIRDS A BUILDING** - duple minor

Tune : *Flowers of Edinburgh*

A1/(2) Nos 1 and 2 cross over giving right hands, Nos 1 and 3, 2 and 4 change down the sides, and so on to place. [options : could be progressive square, or Nos 3 and 4 never cross the set, take two or four bars or polkas per change, or even involve the whole of the set]

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

Nos 1 and 2 repeat all from the second place etc.

2 **COLLEGE HORNPIPE** - triple minor

Tune : *Sailor's Hornpipe*

A1 Hands Six Round - seven slips clockwise, seven slips back, [as is familiar in Scottish Country Dancing]

A2 Cast - all face up, engage with partner putting arms behind partners' backs, double cast to left and back to place, waving the handkerchief in the free hand,

B1 Swing - Nos 1 and 4 swing ; Nos 2 and 3 swing,

B2 Lead Down - first pair lead down the middle and back, first two pairs swing and change places. [This is faster than in the other dances]

Repeat whole until all reach original places.

3 **DOUBLE CHANGE SIDES** - duple minor

Tune : just possibly *Speed the Plough*

A1/(2) Nos 2 and 4 lead between Nos 1 and 3 and fall back ; Nos 1 and 3 lead between Nos 2 and 4 and fall back, (all move or just pair mentioned)

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

4 GYPSIES IN THE WOOD - duple minor

Tune : *Smash the Window*

A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 hands three (circle or star) round and back,

A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 hands three round and back,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

[Suggest consider circling one way (hands round) and starring the other (hands across)]

Other dances mentioned were *Richard's Riddle* and *Soldiers Joy*. The latter tune was used by Papworth for his version of the dance **Double Change Sides**

COMBERTON

Source ; *Wortley and Papworth, English Dance & Song Summer 1978*

Music ; Fiddle or concertina,

Steps ; Walk and change-hop-step, Strength of the hop and the general vigour depends on the dance, Upper arm hold is suggested for the swings,

Set ; Six or eight dancers,

Kit ; First pair are Lord and Lady and more elaborately dressed, the Lady as a woman in a skirt, Rest wore four inch wide sash over left shoulder, a waistband, broad arm ribbons and narrow hat ribbons of mixed colours, Rosettes were stitched to the broad ribbons, All decorations were worn over an ordinary jacket, [probably because of the season],

Extras ; Two caddgers or collectors with ladles,

In duple-minor sets the first two pairs alone start and the rest are brought in progressively, In triple-minor sets the top pair swing to the bottom of the set at the end of the time through that leaves only one pair below,

1 **COLLEGE HORNPIPE** - triple minor

Tune ; Version of *Sailor's Hornpipe* or *Jacks the Lad*,

A1/2 Circle six to left and back, eight change-hop-steps each way,

B1 Double cast to the left in pairs and back to places, waving a handkerchief in their free hand,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

[Does not say if danced half way round or one and half in the swing for a progression, Assume that the direction for travel in the swing is the conventional line of direction in a ballroom of anticlockwise,]

2 **CROSS HAND POLKA** - duple minor

Tune ; Collected tune *Cross Hand Polka*,

A1 Nos 1 and 4 half turn by right hand and half turn back with the left,

A2 Nos 2 and 3 repeat,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back with a walk step,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

3 **SIX HAND REEL** - triple minor

Tune ; *Girl I Left Behind Me*

A1/2 Nos 1 and 2 cross over and cast down outside of set, cross again below third pair and return to places, Four bars or polkas for each side,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back with walk step,

B2 First two pairs swing and change,

4 SPECIAL MOLLY DANCE - whole set.

Large handkerchief is held between each pair (in right hands).

A1 Opposites forward and back and crossing - ("edging") first going to the right into line right shoulder to right shoulder and then passing left shoulder to left shoulder to actually cross over. (Handkerchief held up so as not to throttle partner!)

A2 Repeat with the same shoulders with crossing back to place.

B Nos 1 and 2 down middle under the arches, followed in turn by the second, third and fourth pairs and all coming up the outside ("edging") in turn to their original places, like a "roll". (Roll could be done twice through with practice!)

C Nos 1 and 2 swing down the middle to the bottom of the set, (Under the ribbons).

COMBERTON

Source : *"Polka Round" by Cyril Papworth*, published by himself, Cambridge 1984

Step : A walking step is used for the lead down and back. The Lead Down is done holding right hands only, turning inward at halfway to face up, and leading back with crossed hands, ending in a swing hold position, holding opposite's arms just above the elbows, and all facing up and down along the centreline of the set. Perhaps a call of "set" or "sit" by the leader to indicate a pause (or a bob down) before the next figure. This was thought by Cyril important for displays.

"Cambridge Polka" - three short steps and a lift, raising the knee of the free leg in front. Start with the right foot, as he always did!

Set : Eight dancers in four pairs

In the original form the dances were slow, with the movements repeated and some dancers standing inactive. In duple minors the top pair work down the set as a "first" pair and then work back dancing as a "second".

1 **BIRDS A BUILDING** - duple minor, wider than usual set.

Tune : *Flowers of Edinburgh*

A1/2 First and second pairs move round four sides of a square, passing partner right shoulder and giving right hands shoulder high, then pass next **in the same way** to place, 4 bars per change, one to meet, two to pass giving right hands, one for quarter turn at the corner. All turns are the shortest ie "easiest" way.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places and "set" as described, ie bob down.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

2 **COLLEGE HORNSPIPE** - triple-minor, perhaps only six dancers.

Tune : *Jacks the Lad or Sailors Hornpipe*

A1 Six hand circle left for eight bars with polka step nearly twice round.

A2 Circle back to the right for eight bars.

B1 All face up, odds place arm round even's waist, evens put hand on odds shoulder. Double cast to left, dance to bottom and up middle to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress.

3 **CROSS HAND POLKA** - duple minor

Tune : Own collected tune *The Cross Hand Polka*

A1 Nos 1 and 4 whole turn once round with the right hand and then all the way back with the left.

A2 Nos 2 and 3 repeat.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

4 **DOUBLE CHANGE SIDES** - duple minorTune : *Speed the Plough,*

A1 Nos 2 and 4 take inside hands shoulder high and lead forward and back with a walking step between Nos 1 and 3 who stand still ; Nos 1 and 3 then lead forward and back between Nos 2 and 4 who stand still,

A2 Repeat A1,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places,

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress,

[A more active alternative is to dance A1 and A2 throughout with the polka step when moving]

5 **GYPSIES IN THE WOOD** - duple minorTune : *Smash the Window,*

A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 circle four bars clockwise and four bars anticlockwise, once round each way,

A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 circle four bars anticlockwise, picking up the new dancer moving in the direction already travelling, and four bars clockwise,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places,

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress,

6 **SIX HAND REEL** - triple-minor, or three pair setTune : *Brighton Camp or Girl I Left Behind Me,*

A1/B1 Nos 1 and 2 cross over, passing right shoulders, and dance all the way around next two pairs, passing right shoulders again below third pair and then coming back to places,

A2 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places,

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress,

The dance is less tedious if A1/B1 is compressed into eight bars. In triple minors pairs work up set as seconds and third pairs alternately. In three pair sets, top pair goes through second place to bottom

7 **SIX HAND REEL** - a more active alternative,

A1 Nos 1 and 2 cross over and dance around the set and finish up in the second pair's place, Nos 3 and 4 polka sideways to the top during the last two bars,

A2 Nos 3 and 4 repeat and end in their starting place,

B1 Nos 3 and 4, followed by Nos 1 and 2, lead down and back,

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress, while the third pair cross over and dance all around the other two rotating pairs but themselves ending in the middle pair place, between the other two pairs,

8 UP THE MIDDLE AND DOWN THE SIDES - whole set
from Whaddon as well as Comberton,

Tune : *We Won't Go Home Till Morning*

Girls did this in the cloakroom when it was raining

A1 Top pair Nos 1 and 2 galloped sideways down the middle and back,

A2 Top pair went around the set anticlockwise, either No 1 staying inside and No 2 outside the set all the way holding inside hands to end as they started, or No 1 goes down the outside of the odd side and up the inside of the even side, changing hands at half way, in either case "cutting across the corner" at the bottom,

B1 Top pair weave to the bottom, through the other pairs,

[B2 All swing]

9 UP THE MIDDLE AND DOWN THE SIDES - whole set, developed version

Tune : *Shave the Donkey* and *Bob Ridley O*

A1 Nos 1 and 2 take both hands and dance four side steps down the middle and four sidesteps back, Repeat, ending facing up holding inside hands,

B1 Nos 1 and 2 make an arch, turn down, and dance round the set with No 1 inside the set, making arch over each dancer in turn until back to the top,

A2 All take both hands with opposite, Nos 1 and 2 weave to the bottom of the set No 1 pushing and then pulling, while other three pairs move back and forward, keeping lines, the odds pulling then pushing, This is a combing and not a reel. [There is a timing problem of fitting it into eight bars]

B2 Both end two pairs dance round each other two times,

To end the dance every pair could dance round into one big circle,

BROOM DANCE

SOLO STEP DANCE

Enquiries suggested that this involved impromptu variations on the polka step, particularly towards the last days,

LIVELY JIG

- Source** : Mary Neal's Esperance Book II from Sam Bennett. It is out of character with the other known Ilmington dances. Investigations by Richard Humphries have suggested that it might have been brought to Ilmington by a fiddler and gamekeeper from East Anglia and therefore may well be in the Molly tradition.
- Music** : A hornpipe collected with the dance, (A²B²A).
- Step** : To a simple step, with a basic phrase of, r l r l / r l r - /, without hops or stamps, and with the knee raised as high as the pace allows. The arms are swung alternately up and down, going up to high forward but not past the body in the down swing.
- Set** : Four dancers in a square, facing into the centre.
- A1 Whole rounds round twice clockwise and end as at the start.
- A2 First corner dance a back-to-back in bars 1-4, passing by the right shoulders first, and going across right to the opposite diagonal's place before retiring, while the other corners dance on the spot. The back-to-back is not repeated immediately the other way. The second corner then does the same in bars 5-8.
- B1 The first corners, Nos 1 and 4, meet and clap by dancing, in two bars, into a line of four with the other corners, Nos 2 and 3, across the other diagonal, so that they are right shoulder to right shoulder. They then slap right hands together on the last beat of bar 2 or the first beat of bar 3 and dance backwards to place (where they all clap again). Meanwhile the other dancers dance on the spot and clap their both hands together over their head simultaneously with the first corner's clap. The first corner, Nos 1 and 4, then repeats the movement to the other side, left shoulder to left shoulder and clap left hands.
- B2 Second corner, Nos 2 and 3, repeats all this.
- Repeat ad lib, using the other half of back-to-back, reversing the order of the siding and clapping, and anticlockwise rounds. End on an extra whole-rounds.
- The dance can be expanded with other figures at A 1 or A2.

NORFOLK (?) THREE HAND REEL

Source : mentioned by Joseph Needham in Geographic Distribution(?) interpreted by someone from notes provided,

Steps : travelling and stationary polka, suggested cross over sidestep version for dancing on the spot, (note not a rant).

Set : Three dancers in a line facing to start 1> <2 <3,

A1 Nos 1 and 2 face and "step" for four bars, No 2 turns, right shoulder going back, to face No 3 and they "step" for four bars,

A2 Figure Eight : No 2 dances a figure eight around Nos 1 and 3, starting by facing No 3 and passing by the right shoulder, while Nos 1 and 3 dance to meet in the centre and retire to places twice, avoiding crushing No 2 as that dancer goes round,

B1 Nos 2 and 3 face, then Nos 2 and 1 and "step",

B2 No 2 faces No 1 and all three dance a reel of three, Nos 1 and 2 passing right shoulders to start, and adding one more change at the end to bring a different dancer into the middle,

Repeat ad lib,

The "stepping" could be any local step-dance step, although it looks better if all or at least the ends do the same and perhaps with only the middle dancer being clever.

NORFOLK LONG DANCE

Source :

4 FOUR PAIR TRIPLE MINOR - only three pairs at any one turn

Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ
2 4 6 -	- 2 6 8	4 6 8 -	- 4 8 2			
1 3 5 -	- 1 5 7	3 5 7 -	- 3 7 1			
Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ
6 8 2 -	- 6 2 4	8 2 4 -	- 8 4 6			
5 7 1 -	- 5 1 3	7 1 3 -	- 7 3 5			

5 FOUR PAIR WHOLE SET or TRIPLE MINOR with a slip to the bottom

Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ
2 4 6 8	4 6 8 2	6 8 2 4	8 2 4 6			
1 3 5 7	3 5 7 1	5 7 1 3	7 1 3 5			

6 THREE PAIR DUPE MINOR

Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ
2 4 -	- 2 6	4 6 -	- 4 2	6 2 -	- 6 4					
1 3 -	- 1 5	3 5 -	- 3 1	5 1 -	- 5 3					

7 THREE PAIR TRIPLE MINOR and WHOLE SET

Ⓢ		Ⓢ		Ⓢ
2 4 6	4 6 2	6 2 4		
1 3 5	3 5 1	5 1 3		

There are also non progressive dance constructions,

8 FIGURES plus CHORUSES - Cotswold like in structure,

9 JUST a sequence of FIGURES - North West in structure,

Finally There are the THREE, FOUR and SIX hand reels that have been mentioned which may or may not have a changing order element,

GENERAL DANCE COMMENT

ERA OF SOURCE OF DANCES

LENGTH OF LONGWAYS SETS

From a Performer's Point of View ; Only in New England and in modern Barn Dances has the longways for as many as will meant sets of eight or more couples. In Victorian times sets of a maximum of five or six couples were more common, and this has been reflected in the typical Scottish Country Dance sets seen in recent years. At typical speeds a 32 bar sequence takes roughly half a minute, so that a four couple set would take 4½ minutes, a five couple 6 minutes, and a six couple 7½ minutes to all return to their starting positions. It was unacceptable that some dancers would dance mostly as firsts or seconds. For a social dance 10 minutes was a tolerable maximum length, implying either seven couples for a progressive start and finish or ten couples with all starting and finishing together.

From a Spectator's Point of View ; Dances with more than eight persons are hard to follow in detail and the performers need to be mostly in unison. Large numbers are impressive but also after a while monotonous, therefore they should be used sparingly and as climaxes. But large numbers of dancers are harder to come by. With a tradition of progressive duple or triple minor dances the changing activity patterns are interesting, but for ten dancers always asymmetric and therefore far less aesthetically satisfying. It should be clear from the progression patterns given that there is much more scope for variety with eight than six dancers, and that this number is therefore a desirable aim.

SPEED

REPERTOIRE

Reels are defined as a type of dance that alternates reels, hays or figure eights with other simple movements, such as stepping on the spot.

QUADRILLES

WIDER LOOK

OTHER PROGRESSIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Notations have been rationalised as far as the originals allow and

expressed in non sexist language, that is, pairs not couples and opposites not partners. They are mostly derived from the publications referenced in the bibliography supplimented by the teachings by Cyril Papworth at his workshops. The Comberton dances at least remain in copyright and have been reproduced solely for the purpose of the workshop.

The ambiguities in the notations are indicated as options. It must not be assumed that there was only one "proper" way and that somehow the different sources are really consistent. It is a general characteristic of tradition to be "different", to make anything their own.

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