

The Black Face of Morris.

When reaching far back to find the origins of morris dance in the mid-C15th England one soon finds there isn't a great deal of material, and evidence for early black-face morris is scarcer still. The closest antecedents of morris we can find are the moresk dancers in Europe. Indeed, at that time in England the terms morris, mores, moreys and moresk seem interchangeable. Examples of moresk in European sources of the period are found in area stretching from Belgium across southern Germany, north-eastern France and Austria. Descriptions and depictions bear many similarities in form and in context to the earliest records of English morris/moresk.

Amongst these are a few remarkable sculptures that indicate a group of dancers from exotic lands were touring in that part of Europe. The famous Munich and Innsbruck carvings show dancers that are considered to represent the same troupe of dancers that were touring the courts. A group of men gyrating and gesturing in costumes from Asia, Indian sub-continent, Middle East and Africa. Whilst the intricate Munich carvings clearly show one particular male was used to pose for most of the characters, the Innsbruck ones are more diverse, however, both sets include an identifiable Sub-Sahara African performer.

Whilst this travelling court entertainment of mainly black performers could be the seed that spawned many traditions in Europe, it may itself be a stylized performance of an already existing dance form. Nevertheless, in England the early descriptions and depictions of moresk and moreys from that period, whilst bearing many similarities in form and context, have a decidedly English flavour with performers in the guise of 'knights of old' competing in dance for a favour from a fine lady. At this time there was a fashion for entertainment based around the chivalric tournament of 200 years afore.

In the C16th morris dance escapes from the court to become a public entertainment. It was especially connected with the church at ales, patronal feasts and processions as well as civic occasions. Morris continues to be presented with an ancient English theme, but now the knights have changed to become Robin Hood's merry men and the fine lady is Maid Marian. These characters were already a particular feature of Whitsun Church Ale festivities at the end of May.

Masques were also a format within which a morris dance would appear, along with a cast of characters which on occasion would feature a 'Black'a'moor'.

In southern Europe from the early-mid C16th appears the moresca. This is a dance that derives from the term morisco meaning a Muslim that converted to Christianity in order to remain in Spain after the reconquest. Despite the similarity in the word 'moresk' and 'moresca', North European moresk and mores dance in England pre-date this terminology by several decades and the dances bear little in common with Moresca. Many moresca dances are sword dances that tell a tale – a mock battle between Christians and Muslims, there are also solo dances and couple dances in the French and Italian court social repertoire, eventually transformed into the ballet artform.

It is interesting to note that there are many dances in the Iberian peninsula that have a great deal of similarity with English morris – danced in sets, to the music of the pipe and tabor, by dancers wearing white costume, baldrics, bell pads, and wielding sticks and handkerchiefs. As in England, there are

curious people interested in the origins of their dances and many have produced well-researched accounts of the history of their dance. There is nothing as of yet that is pointing to an origin involving the moors, or morescos. The dances carry a similar context as our early C16th English morris: performance as part of church patronal feast day processions and to this day that is their prime *raison d'être*. By contrast we lost this church connection with the onset of the Reformation which banned such celebrations. A move which forced morris dance out of its institutional framework to become an activity owned and managed by its practitioners – who by this time were labouring class men.

In the early C17th, morris is firmly positioned in the national psyche as an expression of Englishness. Poets, writers, playwrights bring on the morris when they wish to summon up a rural idyll.

Through the C17th, C18th and into the C19th, morris finds its own way, providing entertainment for big houses, public crowds and Whitsun holiday makers. Large houses would book the morris to perform at parties and celebrations. They appeared at big processions and public events – often paid by the civic authorities. However, from the Reformation onwards, *cadging* was a major driving force in morris dance – the practice of collecting donations from the audience. These collections had such value to the dancers that teams from adjacent villages would physically fight each other over their perceived *cadging* rights on a particular patch during fairs or wakes. Their approach towards collecting from the audience could also at times be considered robust. In many places morris was a rough game and their *cadging* activities considered akin to begging.

For dancers wishing not to be recognised by the neighbours while they were *cadging*/begging a disguise could be useful, and there are precedents in a closely related tradition. Mummers have been *guising* since the C14th, although this was primarily for fun. In early records disguising oneself in a different character is actually the main activity of mumming rather than any form of drama. Nobility masquerading as common people and vice versa. By the late C18th morris dancers and mummers were often the same people, just *cadging* in different seasons. The form of disguise was normally costume and masks, but *blackening* was known as method of providing anonymity for anyone wishing to break the law – poaching, vandalism and rioting.

The C19th brought minstrelsy to the music halls. This was a musical comedy and dance form, imported from North America to become a widespread music hall entertainment from the 1840s onwards. The enthusiasm for minstrelsy took-off and quickly spread across Britain and into Europe.

Such was the popularity of these shows that groups of children would *black-up* and form minstrel troupes known as *black boys*, featuring minstrel percussion instruments - tambourine, triangle and bones. They would roam the streets, acting out comedy routines and singing. This was followed by adults *blackening* up to perform minstrel music and songs on stage. Dance historians Theresa Buckland and Peter Bearon both identify the clear minstrel music-hall precursors of the coconut dances of Lancashire.

The impact of minstrelsy upon local customs is widely noted. In Cornwall, the existing tradition of midwinter *guising* adopted *black-face* and minstrel songs to the extent that it became known as *Darkie Day*. *Pace-egggers* adopted *black-face*. Some Gloucestershire mummers used *black-face* and would finish their performance with minstrel songs. Tradition and minstrelsy intermingled. In Much Wenlock on the English/Welsh border, street dancing groups dancing reels or heys, adopted *black-face*,

used minstrel music featuring the typical tambourine, triangle and bones, and danced to minstrel songs like Not for Joe. This group also included a character named Sambo the Black.

From a current perspective, in the shadow of Black Lives Matter, it seems hard to believe that black-faced minstrelsy as a basis for entertainment was an accepted norm which ran from the mid C19th well into the C20th.

When Cecil Sharp and his friends started seeking out folk dance and drama traditions at the turn of the century, black-faced minstrelsy was part of the everyday. That some of the teams wore black-face was recorded, usually as part of their costume. For the most part, the field notes of these collectors represent the first mention of black-face in relation to such traditions.

This begs the question, was black-face morris prevalent before minstrelsy, but unrecorded?

The evidence indicates otherwise. Since Tudor times morris has been described in terms of an expression of Englishness. In particular it has been a signifier of the English rural idyll. Through the centuries one does not find a long history of morris dancers blacking up. Even during the late Victorian era, morris itself appears to be particularly resistant to the minstrelsy fashion. That said, absence of evidence cannot be taken as evidence of absence. In the historical record, if performers dancers or characters appeared in black-face they were described as such, eg, the Moor or Black-a-more or boys painted black as devils. Such characters are sometimes found in records of events that also included morris dance, so we could expect that if the morris dancers themselves had been black-faced, it would have been noted.

The form and context of morris has changed significantly over five centuries. The spangled, chivalric knights that entertained the Tudor court evolved into white costumed, baldricked, farm labourers celebrating Whitsun by cadging money from their neighbours. Yet still even today they evoke a sense of ye olde England. Given this context, adopting the minstrel fashion would not have added any real value to their performance as archetypal English men performing an English tradition.

At the time of Sharp, many of the dance forms now represented by the Joint Morris Organisations were not formally considered to be 'morris'. We have traditions like the Britannia Coconut Dancers and the molly dancing and street (reel) dancing which Roy Dommet eventually came to call 'Other Morris'. These dances are comparatively modern, arising in the C19th, mostly constructed of figures borrowed from country dancing. When they were collected at the turn of the century, some of the groups were noted as having black faces. So why did these groups have black-face? How far back does it go?

Evidence for black-faced 'other morris' is lacking pre-1840, ie. pre-minstrelsy. Not even taking us back 50 years further to tie in with the late C18th practice of using black-face for disguise when committing nefarious acts.

Despite this, the idea that blacking up did provide valuable anonymity is demonstrated in Buckland's exploration of the history of coconut dancing: **Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage**, she cites a former member of a Lancashire n****r boys troupe saying,

"The whole point, was that you dare go and sing because they didn't know you, you'd got black faces".

For coconut dancers and 'other morris' alike, adopting the style of minstrelsy was a culturally acceptable and entertaining way to achieve anonymity. Maybe not because they were ashamed of begging, but perhaps because putting yourself out there, on show, dancing and singing was a bit easier if you felt none of your neighbours or friends would recognise you. For the street dancers of Much Wenlock black-face could well have been a convenient disguise in a time when minstrelsy was also a popular form of street entertainment and activity. However, they clearly went much further and incorporated minstrel instrumentation, songs and characters. They appear to be a kind of Shropshire version of the n****r boys troupe.

Which brings us to the C20th morris revivals. Or perhaps one should say revivals and reinventions. The Cotswold morris revival of the 1920s was in many ways a reinvention, transforming a farm labourers cadging tradition into an acceptable, middle-class, aesthetic pastime, whilst keeping historically accurate choreography.

It took longer for some of the traditions to revive. 1950s saw the re-appearance of North West morris and the 1960s and 70s brought workshops on molly and street dancing.

The re-invention and transformation of street dancing into 'border morris' is well documented, not least of all by two key figures in its history – Roy Dommet and John Kirkpatrick. Roy, who collated and promulgated the documented dances and John who put huge energy and creativity into re-interpreting those dances. The sources were a mixed bag of many 'reel' or 'hey' figures collected in a variety of locations from Buckinghamshire to Shropshire and down to Gloucestershire, danced in the street on festive occasions.

That border morris is a re-invention and not merely a revival is very clear from John Kirkpatrick's articles 'Bordering on the Insane' and 'Shropshire Bedlams'. He set out to use the collected material to make something different. In particular, he wanted something very different from the staid, middle-class, Cotswold morris performing dances as collected. He wanted a 1970s morris:

"...I think it's vital that what we do speaks to today and isn't only historically accurate."

Whilst the simple dances were shaped into exciting display showpieces, the stepping, style, appearance and costume were drawn from a variety of sources as well as John's own imagination and experience. The result was the Shropshire Bedlams – the team that came to define a new 'morris' – border morris.

At some point in this process he decided on black-face, black-neck and black-hands – so that 'no sign of pink showed from under the rags of their costume. A far cry from the gentile Cotswold cricket whites.

"I just think it looks more complete than seeing bits of pink peeping through. [I like to look frightening.]"

Blacking up for Kirkpatrick was a style decision designed to create impact. It was a historically informed decision. 1) Much Wenlock, one of their Shropshire dance sources, was performed in black-face. 2) Silurian Morris, the neighbouring side led by Dave Jones, also used black face in their earlier 1969 interpretation of the border morris street dances.

Should he have had reservations about adopting black-face? Obviously if one were setting up a side today in the light of several decades of 'valuing differences' no-one would even consider it, but this was 1970s. At that time Robertson's Marmalade was on everyone's breakfast table with it's Golliwog

branding. In 1976 Clare Francis made the news headlines, when she crossed the Atlantic in her yacht 'Robertson's Golly, and a golliwog was a favourite children's toy. The Black and White Minstrel Show was one of the BBC's most popular Saturday night TV variety shows through the 60s and early 70s. It Ain't Half Hot Mum, the army sitcom that featured white actors playing Indian characters, had an extremely popular run from 1974 to 1981. Blacking-up was at the forefront of popular culture.

Right at the beginning of the Bedlam's history, Kirkpatrick's blacking decision was put to the test...

*"We do a version of White Ladies Aston to John Locke's Blue Eyed Stranger, which is what we call it, and a version of the Leominster dance to the tune Not For Joe, which seems to have been the commonest tune, as given by E C Cawte in the Journal. We used to sing the words, "There was a little n****r but he grew no bigger ... " but we've changed them to avoid offending black people. I don't think there's any cause for offence in blacking up, but singing about n****rs is rather different. I must say we have rarely come across blacks where we live, obviously by travelling around we see more, but they usually either seem to understand the point of the disguise or they don't make any connection at all. The first time we ever danced out, we were all driving up to the pub in our blacking for the first time, nobody could recognise anybody else, and this carload of Africans turned up in full flowing robes. This had been set up by one of our members and he hadn't told the rest of us, so we were shitting ourselves even more than we were already. But they loved it."*

The invention of border morris has become a spectacular success, in the very spirit of Kirkpatrick's vision. Where Cotswold morris was seen as a tradition that was effectively preserved in aspic at the point of its revival with sides sticking to strict adherence to collected choreography, border has embraced revolution and change. Away with the gentile hanky waving to the music of an ancient pipe and tabor and on with the robust, suggestive stick thrashing and wild cries to sound of saxophones, tubas and electric guitars.

Back to 1979 and tagging onto the coat tails of Shropshire Bedlams came the Seven Champions with their own spectacular re-invention. The 'revival' on this occasion was the molly dances of East Anglia – a another form of the street dancers that first appeared in the mid-C19th and reached its peak around 1860. The Champions had a remarkably similar approach of creating a new style and appearance with performance and impact, as well as maintaining a 'distance' from Cotswold morris. They too adopted black-face, a feature of some of the original collected dances.

In the 1990s the revival Cotswold sides were in decline, failing to recruit sufficient new members to replenish their ageing numbers and mumbling into their beards about the wrongness of women dancers. Meanwhile border and molly caught the mood of the times, many sides were mixed and became a mainstay of the Morris Federation. They gained respect and popularity. Border is a broad church with wings that have encompassed many fashions including goth and steampunk.

Today, in 2020, there are many morris dancers who now claim their right to maintain the black-faced tradition on the principle that it was and has always been done to preserve the anonymity of the dancers. There is probably a grain of truth in this perspective, but there is also problem – there is little or no evidence to support this view.

On the other hand, there is plenty of documented evidence to show how black-face minstrelsy had a big impact on popular culture during the period that covers the practice, collection and revival/reinvention of what we now call molly and border morris. Indeed minstrelsy was a notable feature of Much Wenlock one of the most iconic dance and style sources for the Shropshire Bedlams and Silurian Morris, the progenitors of the border we know today.

Whilst it is unlikely that the border and molly dancers of the 'revival' have ever intended to cause offence by blacking up, the defence '*It is only about disguise*' is unsustainable. We have to acknowledge that black-face minstrelsy played a significant role in its origins and there is little or no evidence for the disguise position.

It also has to be said that when we talk about a maintaining a tradition of black-face morris, we are talking about a tradition that extends all the way back to John Kirkpatrick's 1975 radical reinvention, and possibly a little further to Dave Jones 1969 revival of the street dances. Black-face was a style choice to give the dance more impact and differentiate it from Cotswold. One cannot claim that it is a continuous disguising tradition dating back two hundred years, let alone ancient pagan fertility rites.

As for the Lancashire Britannia tradition, Theresa Buckland cites a contemporary observer of the coconut dancers from nearby Rossendale:

*"I think they were n****r boys - went from n****r boys to grown men still doing it"*

If the Black Lives Matter movement is about anything, it is about taking a good hard look at ourselves and our heritage, and acknowledging injustice and prejudice. This is the first step towards reconciliation, adjustment and justice. It is ironic that the black-face morris movement evolved from a desire to create a dance form that 'speaks to today', but is now digging its heels in over a principle based on an imagined tradition.

English culture and society has changed, the interconnected, cosmopolitan population of 2020 has very different norms to those of rural Shropshire in 1976, when we all sat down to watch the Black and White minstrels on a Saturday night. Black-face make-up is universally deemed unacceptable.

This issue affects all of the morris community. The public knows only of 'morris dance' and not the subtle classification of dance styles that we enjoy. If one part of the morris community is deemed offensive, then we are all tarred with the same brush.

Two weeks after the death of George Floyd the radio 4 news featured a vox pop of a young female member of the public speaking about the need for change, she said...

"...and why is morris dancing even allowed in this country?"

We have a choice: fight for a flawed principle, or become part of the solution. There isn't a halfway house. It is time to 'speak to today'.

*Stephen Rowley
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