

As a lifelong follower of morris dance and other folk traditions I was intrigued to know the true origin of the blackened faces used by some types of dancers, so after I retired I took the opportunity to research the matter in more depth. The whole practice was already coming into question before I began my studies in 2008. This is a very brief overview of some of my findings together with my more recent thoughts.¹

I found a long history of blacking faces in England, in theatre, court and street entertainment, criminal activity, social disorder, and custom and tradition. Often the borderline between custom and disorder was blurred, especially in instances such as the riotous begging customs of Pace Eggers or Plough Stots. These, together with sweeps' May Day holidays and the North Welsh Cadi Ha, reference black faces pre-dating minstrelsy. The use of blacking for disguise, a Lord and Lady, cross-dressing, ribbons, hump, besom, ladle, are all associated items which emerge in one form or another in similar circumstances. Some of these features have disappeared apart from isolated instances - even Mr Punch's hump is vestigial – whilst others have been retained. Interestingly, I found no references at all to morris dancers with blackened faces at such early dates.

The styles of dance most associated with blacking up – border and molly – regained popularity from the early 1970s. E. C. Cawte's research uncovered dancers with blackened faces recorded in the 1870s-1890s. Seminal teams for the border revival were Shropshire Bedlams and Silurian; both blacked their faces, but while John Kirkpatrick admitted he did no research for Bedlams, Silurian adhered closely to collected tradition. These are male-only sides, but the 'new' border style, with its shape-concealing tattered jackets and black faces masking features, emerged at the same time as the demand for mixed teams, the disguise fulfilling a different social function of assisting anonymity. Half a century later teams of any mixture of genders are accepted. The 1970s also saw the revival of Molly Dance. The equivalent sides could be said to be Mepal Molly (as the "traditional" side) and the innovative Seven Champions. Again, both sides blacked their faces, and same- and mixed-gender sides ensued. Both border and molly revivals set great store by delving into their own histories, searching out contacts with memories of the dance before the Great War. This is where the references to dancers with disguised black faces come from. The problem here is that "living memory" in the context of interest in morris dance, mumming and associated matters reaches back to around 1850, by which time the popularity of minstrelsy was already established.

Minstrelsy. The bugbear of morris history, and especially of blacking up. From its introduction in the 1830s to the demise of the BBC's Black and White Minstrel Show in the

¹ This led to the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in 2011. The thesis is available online at http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/4181/1/MPhil_upload.pdf It becomes more readable after the technical first chapter.

late 1970s, the inconvenient truth is that this form of entertainment was so all-enveloping that it had an enormous effect on traditional practice. There are well-documented instances of how this 'fashionable, readily accessible' practice, 'easily imitated in concept as well as repertoire' was incorporated into existing traditions. From Pace Eggers in the North to sweeps in the south, border dancers in the west to plough lads in the east, it left a mark which has now become an indelible stain.

What is it about black history and experience in England, portrayal of black people across the years, and minstrelsy in particular that makes blacking up such a hurtful practice? I found a lengthy and troubled history of black people in Britain from Roman times to the present, showing how they have persistently been regarded as 'Other', as inferior. There are numerous examples of how the inferences of the very word 'black' in idiomatic language and folklore are negative. Slavery compounded this and gave a set of caricatures reinforced by popular culture. The early minstrel shows were based on these stereotypes, which were carried over into Hollywood films and children's cartoons. Thus blacking up became associated with demeaning and dehumanising attitudes towards a group of people already experiencing second-class citizenship in education, housing, health, justice – in fact, in all areas of modern life.

At the time of writing my thesis, I wrote, "It is unlikely that those people who see in blackened faces only a reflection of racial stereotypes will make sufficient contact to discover any alternative explanation, and will continue to find them offensive ... On the other hand, there are undoubtedly some within the folk world who are so fiercely defensive of their Englishness and their traditions that they refuse to be concerned that others could be affronted by their actions." Thankfully, those in the latter category have become fewer and fewer. Whilst I found that no group which blacked up regarded it as anything other than disguise, some dance sides were aware of this difficulty from the start and painted their faces in different colours. I found these were mostly people who, by reason of location or employment, had greater contact with minority groups. Others over the years have since changed their practice in line with their thinking. Shropshire Bedlams now wear masks, and Seven Champions have a 52/48% covering of black on their faces.

In the years since my research, society has become much more polarised in many ways. I am gratified that the majority of those involved with my lifelong interest have shown increased sensitivity towards the feelings of others in the complex issue of blacking up and no longer wish to continue a practice seen by many others as outdated and hurtful.

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