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This issue of Morris Matters owes a lot to a few people, especially Roy Dommett who supplied me with copy for several articles some years ago and up till now I have not had room as plenty of topical copy was arriving. The recent publicity over ‘Backroom Boys’ featuring one respected, well known morris dancer and British boffin prompted the inclusion of “Off Planet Morris” – the more so as probes have been landing on Mars. If you disagree with what Roy or anyone else is saying – let us know!

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From Folk Dance to Festivals - What are We Talking About?

One has to start with, what is Folk Dance? Curt Sachs suggested a spectrum of definitions of dances from *Primitive*, seen as communal and sex segregated, through *Folk*, restricted to couples of opposite sex, to *Civilised*, meaning both court and modern. This does not fit our common experience. Popular folk dance is non-ritual, non-professional, unselfconscious, anonymously choreographed and normally sexual. Even then, professional dance companies in other countries adaptor paraphrase folk dances and provide a continuation of folk style on the stage and ordinary people accept such performance as folk. But here is also the form of dance which does *not* fit these categories and, because of this difficulty, is often in the UK called 'ritual', even though the ritual content is, to all intents and purposes, non-existent and the general public does not distinguish between them, seeing the common element of dressing up and performing something in public.

Each form of dance could have two existences, the first as an integral part of the community and the second when it is no longer such but is the property of a few interested people. Within any first existence, folk dance depends on a one-to-one relationship of transmitter and receiver, and basically upon oral transmission, even when the detail is obtained by emulation and trial and error. In this second existence it is more fixed and less dynamic; it is extracted from the dramatic context that gave it its original justification and is not part of the larger complex that remains in oral transmission. Often it is a recreative process with specialist teachers, manuals, aids and a notation system. Even if there has been continuity, it will be equivalent to a revival at this stage. We assume that there was a proper first existence for ritual dance - but this could be challenged.

A definition of folk dance has to recognise such comment. It can be expressed as a vernacular dance form performed as part of a little tradition within the great tradition of a given society. Such dance is an affective mode of expression which requires both space and time. It employs motor behaviour in redundant patterns which are closely linked to the structural features of the music. Note – this definition does not include the concept of authenticity or the passing through generations and it can be the product of change and innovation. Maud Karpeles said in her preface to Sharp's Sword Dance Books that it is well known that traditional art forms never remain static.

Today we are wedded to print and people are trained to work from the written word. This can dominate the aspects of a subject that we think about. It causes one to miss that folk dance has still some dependence on oral transmission. Seldom does formalised motor behaviour occur without it being part of some context, the understanding of which is passed orally. That is, folk talk about dance and its setting, which they do not do about everyday gestures that are learned by unconscious mimicry. To appreciate these other aspects fully, we need rigorous studies of the dance event and its social background instead of just observing and recording 'steps' and 'stylistics'. Examining the total requires looking at what happens between dances and in the audience.

¹ This article was inspired by some notes made from an academic paper seen in the offices of Tony Barrand at Boston University. Festivals in this context are the secular celebrations in general not just Folk Festivals.

A festival will include ceremonial acts, but not all behaviour is ceremonial. It might include prescribed behaviour. Traditional festivals can persist maintaining essentially the same format long after their original meaning has been forgotten. The enduring significance of the festival is not in its apparent purpose but in the fact of the celebration itself. Midsummer bonfires were once a signal for the community in a hundred to assemble. The social side persisted after the Normans had reorganised the legal structure of the country into manors. As the original purpose of the bonfire was forgotten, the people involved thought up other justifications which have served to confuse anthropologists. There may be other utilitarian justifications, for example, bonfires are also an opportunity to burn accumulated rubbish, or even the unusable bits from the annual animal slaughter.

Secular celebrations in recent centuries have been organised institutionally so that the occasion is a respite from work or holiday and an opportunity for witnessing a spectacle such as a procession, games, dancing, speeches, band concert or fireworks. There has been strong tendency for community festivals to be transformed. The UK has national public, formerly called Bank, holidays. The USA does not have national holidays as each state sets its own but, as in England, not all are of equal popularity. It is noticeable that the fiddling with the traditional dates has changed the character of the days even in my own lifetime. A festival is a large group celebration where one has a right to participate by virtue of being a member of the community and often it is this participation that confirms that one is a member of that community. Such festivals are to be contrasted to limited participation celebrations involving small sub-groups such as are found at rites of passage as a person moves from one stage of life to another.

A festival provides an occasion for people to rejoice together, to interact in an ambience of acceptance and conviviality. Sometimes the general participation feast is the only time in a year when members of a community come together. It creates a bond between participants, they identify with each other so it is a feature which is a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integration of an individual into society or a group and maintaining them as members through shared, recurrent, positively reinforcing performances. Hence the emphasis by communities today on carnivals, fetes and other participatory entertainments. As festivals diminish, the individual lessens identification with society and replaces it with identification with a sub-group.

A traditional festival is not a place to learn something new. It is rewarding to the performer, generating positive emotional responses or expressing a positive emotional condition. The festival is a shared sequence of experiences based on symbolic interaction. Participation, for example, by wearing of a traditional costume, implies an allegiance and some subservience and devotion to the community.

The modern Folk Festival is a complex interpretation of its participants perceived needs, including involving the community in which it is run by publicity beforehand building anticipation, public displays in an arena, on the street and in the pubs. But it is a reaching out by those involved, not a natural growth from the local community. Folk Festivals usually provide workshops to pass on technique and dances which are otherwise difficult to transmit. The existence and format of the Folk Festival tells much about what has been lost from community life.

Roy Dommert

©1985

Flame!

With a title like, "Flame!" you wonder what it is about? Is it about something that starts small and then grows into something huge to set the world alight or, in the e-mail vernacular, is it some thing that puts down a challenge?

Well for me - I think both apply!

The "Morris Show" at Sidmouth has been like a smouldering flame- starting off from the Morris Displays in the Market Square, to the afternoon Morris Shows, called, "Whistlestop", in the Arena. and now to the narrated Morris Shows on the Arena Stage. In 2003 the production was produced and directed by Sue Swift (author of the 1998 Morris Show "The Forgotten Mary Neal" and the 1999 Morris Show "Flashback"). Sonia Ritter and Tim Laycock narrated it, with music in the first half by the Mellstock Band, and the English Acoustic Collective in the second half.

It is a joy of the Morris Shows that although they are planned well in advance, the reality is that, with participants coming from all parts of the country, they are often put together at the festival, and rehearsal is minimal. And that includes the narrators reading from a script (and I have been there and done that too!). The lack of cohesive rehearsal sometimes showed - especially in the first half where the teams were not all dancing to their usual musicians, and the music was sometimes not always in sympathy with the dancers and the requirements of the dance. But that said, overall it was well presented and it would be churlish to dwell on the gaffs when there was reason to celebrate the opportunity to see some superb dancing.

And what dancing!!

The frame story was of a modern day academic (Ritter), losing her way to a Morris Conference, and finding herself in the time and realm of the First Queen Elizabeth. She seeks directions from Sir Timothy (Laycock), who is overseeing the Revels at the Queen's palace, and they tumble in to a discussion of the origin of the Morris, with Sir Timothy using teams at his Revels to illustrate his point.

"So what is the origin of the Morris?"

We were taken through a display of the galliard, some courtly dances by the Renaissance Historical Dance Society, (with Queen Bess herself in attendance, taking the floor in a most elegant and graceful dance – see Figure 1). The dance members of Outside Capering Crew came rollicking in with their Hobby Horses, reeling and clashing with short swords and then using pennants on poles to wend their way around the stage in a foursome dance. Perhaps here the music could have been slightly slower to allow for the manoeuvring of the Hobby Horses - the tangling of one of the pennants and Simon Pipe's hamming of outrage highlighted the problem.

But did the Matachin have any influence on the Morris? Berkshire Bedlam strode on in their wonderful Darcyesque fashion - swords grasped in hand (see Figure 3). It was the first time I have seen an interpretation of Matachin although I have read descriptions of it in John Forrest's work. Let me say that it was eight men with swords clashing, moving around the

set in a variety of set directions (sort of like but different from a Lichfield Hey). I liked it, and would hope to see it again! And yes- you could see links with Morris.

We couldn't escape a mention of Will Kemp- but instead of wheeling out the old rascal, we had Laurel Swift taking the part of the maid that Kemp had met on his Nine Daies Wonder- she who had "danced a jig for more than an hour". A nice touch to remind us that there are early references of women dancing the Morris.

Simon Pipe was back on stage as the jester- dancing to pipe and tabor played by Andy Richards and seemed to me to start his piece taking the stance of the fool in the Betley Window! Nice referencing!

Grenoside Sword came on to finish the first half to represent the Sword Dance. It's a stately dance that looks easy and casual - honed from years of patient dancing together and always a pleasure to watch. Stately, that is, unless one of your dancers' trousers starts to fall down. And, to much cheering, they were hitched up again, and again and again!

And so to the second half - "let me take you to the future of the Morris and the creative freedom of the dance" said Sonia. And what a future. And this is where your ideas about Morris were well and truly challenged!

We were in something of our own time - and the first display was from Morris Offspring- mostly under 30's dancers and several (including Laurel Swift, the organiser) are the offspring of Morris dancers. However, I suspect the name is a pun (or even a rebus!) intended to reflect how their style of dance "springs off" from traditional Morris. With white shirts and trousers and hankies, no bells (reminiscent of StepBack) they took traditional Cotswold figures and steps, changed them into a new dance format. They covered the stage with a mass of dancing to take your breath away but still conveying the stateliness of the dances of the Elizabethan court! They were accompanied by the English Acoustic Collective in a specially commissioned piece. Together they allowed the tension in the dance to gradually develop as you tried to work out the shape of the patterns, and then as they filled the stage the spring snapped and the energy of the dancing jumped out at you so that you could believe that the future of Morris was secured.

But that was not all - because we still had to see the future of have other styles of Morris. GogMagog Molly entered to the mist of the fens (no thanks to the smoke machine that engulfed those of us sitting near the stage!), initially dancing only to a drum and the sound of their own stepping- a rhythm that matched your heart beat and continued to take your breath away. Filling the stage with the gaudy colour of their kit, "Is it legal?" asked Sir Timothy.

Sonia - "They are all setting the world alight with post-modern excitement and innovation!" (So there you are!)

And setting the world alight were Black Swan Rapper - entering in semi darkness with their raised swords bent in front of them, the middle of the swords wrapped in cloth that were aflame - truly a glorious ritual entrance (see Figure 2). With the sword dance figures carefully chosen to maximize the effect of the flames, the Tommy and Betty ran in and out, catching a topper alight as they went through. Finally the swords were raised high in a fiery five-pointed star - and a murmur, then a roar went through the audience in appreciation.

Then Morris Offspring and English Acoustic Collective again - but this time in a more animalistic ritual dance - with dancer's flesh painted in red, wearing boar's head, unicorn head, and clanking metal poles (see Figure 4). I'm not sure if that's where the Morris is going, or where I want it to go and the muttering in the dark around me was evidence of the impact of the dancing and the challenge to people's beliefs in what they want Morris to be. Some of it was beyond me but all of it exciting and I'm happy to see more- although is it Morris?

And back to Simon Pipe- this time dancing with burning torches. For some reason he was not dancing on the stage, but in front on the ground. I don't know whose decision it was to do this, but I felt that this restricted viewing and I certainly was not able to see him properly. This was a shame as I was in the fourth row at the front!

Then quiet. Stillness. A soft playing of the violin, and a "ding!" of the triangle. From the side of the Arena, came Thaxted Morris Men carrying the horns, doing their version of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. At first they weaved and dived in front of the stage, and then they moved up onto the stage, all the time holding a timeless calm in their hands and a hypnotic trance falling over the audience, punctuated only by the "ding!"

They were escorted by members of Morris Offspring carrying flaming torches to light their way. Having the two teams together, at opposite ends of the Morris spectrum seemed to sum up the evening. Just as Thaxted reminded us that some things don't change and will continue on in the same way, Morris Offspring reminded us while they are developing the Morris and interpreting it in new ways, they will still respect and protect the old ways.

Flame. It set me alight. And it challenged my views about Morris. If you weren't there you missed something special.

Janet Dowling

December 2003

P.S. For those who did miss it, the video is available for £11.50 including p&p from:
JKL Video Film Services
60 Temple Street, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 9BQ
01395 512805
jklfilm@aol.com

Note from the editor -

rumour has it that Sue Swift, "engineer" of Flame, has another idea for a show in mind - drawing together traditional and not so traditional performers in a show to be called, "LEAP" Watch this space!

The Traditional Repertoire

Much is rightly made of the differences between the characteristics of the known Cotswold village sides. However the assembly of a collection of material on the morris has enabled a re-examination of the older idea of "one morris" of which these teams' dancing was a reflection. Lists of dances performed exist in varying degrees of completeness for 34 villages. These give over 600 separate usages of tunes and more than 300 separate usages of a dance idea. Statistically the average list contains about 17 dances of which about 7 were jigs.

The information for some teams is severely limited and it would be expected that in reality the old teams had much larger repertoires. Where it has been possible to obtain information which reflects the change in repertoire over a period of years, it seems that each side had a little over 20 dances, old and new, in regular practice. When the side was a living tradition nearly as many again seem to have been remembered to some extent and unused for a variety of reasons - both old ones superseded and new ones that did not catch on. The tune lists show that 7 tunes were almost universal, given below in bold, and that 10 others were probably used by more than half the teams. However about 10% of the tunes seem to be titles that were unique to the particular side and not normally associated with the morris

The dance notations have been considered for the content of their distinctive figure. A total of 22 dances, which includes 14 set dances, is best to obtain a proper balance between the ideas. The 14 set dances should include Trunkles, 2 clapping dances, 3 stick dances, 3 slow caper dances, 3 corner dances, 1 tune that has two distinct dances to it, most likely a stick and a clapping one, 1 tune that is used for both a set dance and a jig, a processional and 2 elementary dances. Obviously some dances can satisfy more than one of these requirements e.g. Trunkles is a corner and a slow caper dance and Shepherd's Hey is often a stick dance, a clapping dance or a jig.

It is possible to offer a list of dances and tunes which produce the traditional repertoire.

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| Processional | Hey Diddle Dis |
| Dance in position | Brighton Camp |
| Simple handkerchief dance with "different" idea | Maid of the Hill |
| Sidestep and half hey | Black Joke |
| | Highland Mary |
| | Old Woman Tossed Up |
| Corners with slow capers | Cuckoo's Nest |
| Corners without slow capers | Local unique tunes |
| Corners twice and slow capers | Trunkles |
| Sticks - hitting ground | Young Collins |
| Sticks - hitting in air | Balance the Straw |
| Sticks ditto and as handclapping dance | Constant Billy |

Handclapping and as a jig

Miscellaneous –

slow caper dance, heel and toe or leapfrog

Jigs

Baccapipes and Broomstick

Shepherd's Hey

Local unique tune

Jockey to the Fair

Lumps of Plum Pudding

Nutting Girl

Old Mother Oxford

Princess Royal

Sherborne Jig

Greensleeves

The marriage of dance and tune should immediately recall traditional dances.

Much of interest can be deduced from the degree of fit of various teams to the above list, as well as from the geographical distribution of particular dances and tunes. An interesting result is that the fit to the tunes is much closer than that to the dances. It could reflect that some pipers played for many morrises. It also suggests that the average piper had a severely limited selection. With the dances, there is usually some compensation that maintains the balance of ideas. For example, at Bampton there are no stick dances but there is an increase in the sidestep and half hey dances.

The repertoires of sides that survived to or into the twentieth century have diverged, so an explanation is needed of the older similarity. Either close contact, eg competition, kept them in line or perhaps, heretically, the Cotswold morris is not as old as we have been thinking. Another area of interest is the older revivals in the traditional environment. Where there is no antiquarian drive to revive everything good or bad, from 7 to 10 different dance ideas are sufficient but fewer have been tolerated - like 5 at Chipping Campden and at Abingdon for many years, and even as few as two and a mummings play, as at Eynsham. This could be the difference between an emphasis on the recipient and an emphasis on the performer.

Lessons that can be drawn for those interested in the traditional way are:

- ❖ the set of dances for massed dancing at Ring Meetings is not an unreasonable selection, apart from the insistence on particular traditions.
- ❖ there was a greater emphasis on jigs so that the experienced and skilled dancers expressed themselves in these, rather than in rare or additional set dances imposed on the others.
- ❖ by contrast there were few corner dances featuring capers so that the deficiencies of the poorer dancers are not exposed.
- ❖ the number of set dances to keep in practice is not high, perhaps 14, without lowering standards in public performance.

Roy Dommett

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Wantage Weekend of Dance

17 – 19 October 2003

Perhaps the weekend before my wedding wasn't the best time to attend my first Wantage weekend. Perhaps having danced Cotswold for only one year wasn't enough for a Wantage weekend. Perhaps getting stuck in traffic on the Oxford ring road for an hour on the way there wasn't the best preparation for a Wantage weekend. So, was it worth it?

Well, Jenny and I finally got to the Ridgeway Youth Hostel and in time for the evening meal. After the meal, the tables were cleared away and Brian Mander led an energetic session on the Ascott under Wychwood tradition. Too lively for me, so I joined a few others in the kitchen, where we put the world to rights over a few pints of real ale and glasses of wine. The hostel provides accommodation in mixed dormitories and breakfast on the Saturday and Sunday as well as the Friday evening meal. The rest of the weekend takes place in Lain's Barn which is a mile or two from the hostel.

The Saturday morning was given over to Yorkshire Morris with the Flag and Bone Gang. This was the main reason I'd wanted to come to Wantage, as I'm a founder member of Rattlejag Morris who have also been developing the dances from Paul Davenport's Forgotten Morris research. First, though, we had to learn how to use the bones - which was not easy - and then we had to dance while clicking the bones on the off-beat! Great fun.

In the afternoon, Pauline Woods-Wilson of Windsor Morris introduced us to Brackley and then that roguish Lynne Pointer from Rogue Morris led a very enjoyable Border workshop. After dinner, Adrian Williams gave an illustrated talk on the Dixton Harvesters painting which features, amongst lots of other activities, Morris dancers. Many people had brought implements like brooms and hula hoops (not the sweets) to dance with, some more successfully than others (see Figure 5). A pleasant way to wind down and let off a bit of steam at the end of a long day.

Between the activities, we were well supplied with tea, coffee and biscuits, as well as a bar, and videos to watch from Sally Wearing and Adrian Williams. The meals at the barn are provided by Dick and Kirsty Squires and are something to write home about. Worth the price of the weekend on their own!

Sunday morning began with Julia North-Lewis of Stroud Ladies leading a session on contemporary Cotswold dance, followed by Tim Radford taking us up to (another wonderful) lunch with Morris from across the pond in the Minnesota 'tradition'. Unfortunately Jenny and I had to leave after lunch, as Ipswich is so far from anywhere! So we missed the last dance session on Dances for Odd Numbers but, even without this, we'd had a great weekend.

So, to return to my earlier question, "Was it worth it?"

An unqualified YES. Lots of good teaching, dancing and company. A big THANK YOU to Adrian Williams for organising the weekend. Another one in 18 months time, please, Adrian.

Mike Everett

December 2003

Garland Dances

Garland dances are widespread in Europe, but not very common outside Austria where the garland replaced swords in some ritual dances. In most places the garlands are large and used as a frame for the head and top of the body. In Austria many are rigid and small, of 'A' frame or triangular shape as well as complete circles. The earliest English reference is in a ballet. Earlier references to garlands are to a different type of thing that is not a dance implement, but something that is carried to accompany a party of dancers or singers.

In the 1840's garland dances were part of the stock-in-trade of the dance display choreographer along with maypole dances and theatrical morris. The Bacup and the original Whitworth dances probably date from the middle of Victoria's reign but most English dances seem to be late Victorian or Edwardian period compositions. A particularly well known one is the 'Victory' dance from Knutsford which was danced with a slack garland, like a flower decorated skipping rope, now danced by Poynton Jemmers. Garland dances are still part of the repertoire of children's dancing schools and a waltz garland dance was performed at Knutsford May Day in 1982. This dance was done with small rigid framed garlands which allowed quick and easy change from linked to stand-alone formations.

The only English dance to include linked movements is the "Rose" collected from a college team from Sunderland at an inter-college folk event and apparently taught by an ex-longsword dancer from Cleveland. Originally seen danced by 12 it now appears with 8 with some loss of scale, and even by 6 by English Miscellany, but they use a character with the dance who passes through at appropriate moments. English dances seem to include bows, from the waist but keeping the head up, as at Bacup, Blennerhasset and the Mayers, "Maze" dance at Lancaster.

Garland dances do not attract fancy stepping. Within a club's repertoire there is a need for a variety of rhythms and speeds from waltzes to polkas and it is not unusual for teams to change the collected material for the sake of the balance in their shows. A good garland dance uses the garland as part of the dance, rather than having the garland just to look pretty. However, garlands have been added to existing dances such as the reconstructed Mrs Hepple's dance. There are now in circulation a number of composed dances, from the 4-handed Sweet Garland Dance, the 5-handed dance, the 6-handed Tina's Dance - up to the Wain for 14, which is a much longer dance now than when first seen at Sidmouth danced by a visiting overseas team.

Garlands can be made of a variety of materials - plastic water pipe is just about the right diameter and flexibility and first suggested, I believe, by Professor Tony Barrand of Boston University, USA. Some have used Hula hoops but cane is desirable if the garlands are to be clashed, or even wood, steamed to a permanent shape. Weight seems an important criterion, especially if someone has to carry 8 or 12 of them and a set of garlands in basket wickerwork has been seen. Decoration is very much a matter of the team's personal taste as there seem to be no common ideas.

Roy Dommett

©1983

Whittlesey Straw Bear

10 January 2004

Whittlesey is a town situated to the East of Peterborough, Cambridge in a part of England known as the 'fens'. A relatively flat, low-lying countryside drained by numerous dykes, renowned for arable farming and the making of bricks!

Up until around the First World War, traditionally, straw bears appeared in various fen villages as part of their Plough Monday (1st Monday after Twelfth Night) celebrations. The current Whittlesey Straw Bear was revived twenty-five years ago and the main performance around town occurs on the Saturday before Plough Monday, sharing the day with another fenland winter tradition of molly dancing!

The straw bear is played by a man whose limbs and body are covered from head to toe by tightly wrapped straw plaits, wearing a straw 'stook' hat covering both head and face. The bear, led by his minder, dances around the town and leads a procession from pub to pub, often in company with a junior bear similarly attired. A further straw bear frequently joins the festivities from Walldurn in Germany, accompanied by his own troupe of clowns, who catch and then rope young people, (nubile young women), to the bear - who then topples backwards to the ground with the victim! Probably under the guise of a fertility rite.

This year, unlike some previous years, the weather was fairly mild and dry during the dancing. (It often snows!) There were about thirty morris sides representing most of the different regional forms. With ten different molly sides ranging from highly organised sides with precise dances in elaborate costumes, to possibly the more traditional approach of everyday clothes, blackened faces and dances not over practiced with a more rustic appearance! Also the "darkside" with its pagan overtones were present with a very bored border terrier. It is good to see that the number of sides seems to be increasing yearly, including some new younger sides - all were interesting and entertaining.

It is delightful to see another excellent winter tradition of sword dancing, (both longsword and rapper), also well represented - including Orion from the USA - being danced both in the pubs and also outside in the street. The bears and all the forms of morris dancing were well appreciated by the large number of people present. If you weren't present this year, make a note of the date for next year -it's well worth it. Whittlesey possesses a varied selection of suitable hostelrys with excellent beer.

Included in our 'party' of spectators was a North West dancing friend and we met up with her sister and brother-in-law who live near Huntington. Neither had heard of the Whittlesey Straw Bear and knew nothing of Morris dancing except it is performed by men wearing white whilst waving hankies. Seeing the Straw Bear event through their eyes was most enlightening. The rapper seemed impossible to them - people weaving in, out and around each other without getting tied up into knots. The size and noise of a morris side's band seemed to be the best indication to them of how well a side performed - with the exception of 7 Champs dancing to Alison's singing. They thought Chiltern Hundreds the "best". Also, if the performers smiled and generally appeared to be having fun, it made a big difference to their perception of the performance! Now where could we have heard this before.. .

Clive and Denise Allen

January 2004

and at the Straw Bear for the First Time....

My friend Ann had been at school in Reading with Jan Forster many years ago and the opportunity to attend my first ever festival for a procession, morris & molly (whatever is that?), barn dances and everything else at Whittlesey, motivated me to pack my rucksack, brave the vagaries of the franchised rail service and head off for Peterborough. Jan & Tony Forster made me very welcome in their home and an added bonus was Pig Dyke Molly hosting the American visitors Orion and Handsome Molly on the Friday night at a Whittlesey church hall. Lots of laughs with the playing, singing and dancing. Great to have a knees-up with English and American callers, (providing my first experience of the balance step).

Saturday morning was dreary but promised to be dry. Ann and I were invited by Jan to open her Alladin's cave of a wardrobe crammed full of black and white kit acquired from countless excursions to sale and charity shops over the years. Decked out, eyes large and black with white faces, we jumped into their recently acquired white vehicle adorned in large black spots (and very useful in a convoy!)

The Ivy Leaf Club was awash with bodies of all shapes and sizes, turned out in their finery and not all "human". I had been warned about the German Straw Bear who grabs hold of maidens and pulls them to the ground on top of him, but feel reassured my comeliness is disguised by costume (and years). The Whittlesey Bear, larger and far too refined - being English - for such shenanigans, makes a fine sight.

For part of the procession I push the kit pram with its heaped, swaying load. The final challenge being, as we head off - "can you just take this tankard (empty!)" and 2 seconds later, "I'm sure you have space in your pocket for this hip flask" as the heaped load has already started rolling. Apart from these irritations, it was wonderful to see the faces of the crowd and be part of the action.

I enjoyed the range of Molly, Morris and Sword performances at assorted venues in the village, especially the nimble footing and synchronisation of sword team Orion. Old Glory looked particularly sinister with their black-faced musicians, heads bedecked in trailing ivy. One North-West side used the ropes with eye-catching efficiency. During the evening there was a Barn Dance in the Sir Harry Smith Community College Hall with demonstrations and dancing. This hall allowed vigorous participation. The Orkney (Strip the Willow?) was especially challenging with a huge line-up and me volunteering to be the man but ending up stripping down the woman's side, feeling collapse imminent.

Sunday promised bright, breezy sunshine and after an action-packed series of demonstrations by some of the best teams, indoors, we followed the procession of musicians to where poor bear was waiting for his return to Mother Nature, in smoke, to reincarnate next year. I have my salvaged ear of corn from his bulk. Perhaps the luck will include returning to Whittlesey myself - for more fun and frolics in the fens.

Sandra Gough

January 2004



Figure 1 Queen Elizabeth at "Flame!"
photo courtesy of Renaissance Historical Dance Society



Figure 2 Flaming Rapper in Flame!- photo courtesy of Black Swan



Figure 3 Berkshire Bedlam perform "Matachin" in Flame! - photo courtesy of Pete Thomas and Berkshire Bedlam



Figure 4 Morris Offspring in Flame! - photo courtesy of Morris Offspring

Following on from Mike's review of how it was for him the first time at Wantage, here are some seasoned veterans (and one newcomer, I think) trying out a hula hoops routine – can anyone create a good caption to accompany these?



Figure 5 Trying out Hula Hoops at Wantage



Standards of Morris: Maximum or Minimum?

The need to improve the level of Morris performance is generally accepted: eavesdrop on any discussion at a Morris weekend and sooner or later it will turn to a critical analysis of the styles and quality of the sides present (but usually when they are out of earshot). There were also some items in the Morris Federation newsletter referring to comments made by festival organisers about the standard of Morris, though this was as much about attitude as about the quality of the performances.

Now the Federation has started a 'Visiting Tutor' scheme through which some generally respected dancers/foremen will act as 'critical friends' and offer constructive comments on your side's performance. Unfortunately I suspect the only sides that will take advantage of the offer are those that already have good or rising reputations and are actually concerned about the quality of their presentation.

When talking about improving standards most people envisage that there is some single concept of 'excellence' which we should be seeking to achieve. The reality is that given the variety of styles, traditions and interpretations the idea of 'excellence' can only be comparative and subjective: judged against the performance of other sides or what the side in question has as its objectives – what it is trying to achieve. Thus a side that actually operates on the premise, "if you can walk you can dance" and encourages everyone to participate, is unlikely to expect or to achieve the same standard of performance as a side that selectively invites individuals on the basis of their proven ability.

Where I think we fail is that we do not have an agreed minimum standard. If we cannot agree on what is 'acceptable' how can we start to identify what is 'excellent'? Part of the argument about improving Morris, and some of the criticisms by those festival organisers, is the poor standard shown by some sides either in performance or attitude – or even both. Setting a minimum expectation should at least help to clarify what and is not acceptable to the various Morris associations.

So as a starting point, here is my own minimum standard:

The side is ready to start at the billed time.

Time keeping may not be as important on a "pub night" but is more than good manners when receiving a fee or dancing as part of a larger programme (such as a festival). Not being ready is an insult to the audience, the organisers and any other sides sharing the slot.

The musicians play in tune (and play the same tune at the same time).

Yes, we are getting that basic. The more musicians the bigger the issue is likely to be and bass accompaniments such as trombones can be a particular problem. Drums

¹ This article is based on one that originally appeared in "Unicorn" No. 83 (August-October 2003).

and other percussion can also be difficult as there is an assumption that anyone can shake a tambourine or bang a drum even if they have no sense of rhythm.

The side wears appropriate kit.

The dancers should be recognisable as a side. This means wearing the same kit or variations with sufficient common elements or a unifying theme. The outfit should also be appropriate to the tradition and style of dancing.

The side takes the floor knowing what they are going to dance.

At a dance spot it is very annoying - having danced and collected an audience - for the next side to *either* hang around deciding what their next dance is going to be and who is going to dance it *or* to go on and then have the discussion. By the time they have decided and are in a position to start, half the audience has disappeared.

The selected tradition and style is appropriate to the ability of the dancers.

Some Morris traditions are more difficult than others. A simple dance performed well is better than a complex or difficult one performed badly (e.g. if nobody in the side can leapfrog properly, do not do a leapfrog dance).

Have some sense of purpose.

The side, or at least most of its members, should have some sense of what it is they are hoping to achieve (since this is a minimum standard though there is no expectation that they should actually be achieving it!).

In all these the driving concern is the standard of the performance – not interpretation. The fact that there are as many versions of the *Upton Stick Dance* as there are Morris sides is immaterial: what is important is that they can actually perform it when required.

Of course the real problem with setting a minimum standard is enforcement – there is no law preventing people setting themselves up as a Morris side. However we could at least distance ourselves from sides that consistently fail to meet such minimum standards. If they were refused membership of the three associations (the Federation, the Ring and Open Morris) they would at least find it harder to get insurance and, since they would not appear on the membership and mailing lists, less likely to get invited to festivals and thus less likely to be a major embarrassment to the rest of us.

Long Lankin

24 September 2003



Off Planet Morris

When the first Morris Dancer goes into orbit – these are Roy’s thoughts on the matter:

In the distant future someone will face doing the morris somewhere else than on Earth in a different gravity environment. Let us assume that it will be in an earth density atmosphere of breathable air and not while wearing a space suit! To think about it will show whether we actually understand movement and the morris. There are three scenarios to consider:

Low gravity on a moon or planet smaller than the Earth....

It’s unlikely that anyone will want to dance under a gravity which is much greater than the Earth’s, as it would be like dancing with someone on your back - and only University sides try that!

Under artificial gravity as produced by rotation....

as has been proposed for large wheel shaped stations as in the film “2001”

In free fall, as in orbit around a planet....

where the relative gravity effects are negligible and there is no preferred ‘up’ direction. They can produce near-zero gravity in an aircraft for about 20 seconds, hardly enough time for a short jig.

Low gravity:

It changes the balance in a step between the time in contact with the ground and the time in the air. With an earth gravity level of effort, the dancer will float around and the music will have to be very slow. Body and arm movements in the air will have time to move the body around, rather like high diving, so they must be minimised as well. If the effort is cut back to regain the speed, the lift effort will be negligible, the effort will be very slight and then there will be a problem in moving around - because although the gravity is reduced, inertia is not and the effort needed to move laterally will not have changed.

Lateral movement is generated by rotating the body in that direction and moving the feet to stop falling over, but falling is slower, so again it is a slow down. It is not done by the friction on the foot soles! In any case friction is proportional to weight and both are reduced. Could there be an advantage in carrying additional weights, like a deep sea diver? Height might be controlled but the additional inertia will drastically slow travelling. So, low gravity simulant morris will be slower and more restrained than the earth standard. Are some sides practising it already? The opportunity would be for more gymnastic routines, with incredibly complex capers.

Stick tapping should work out, as it is mostly a matter of inertias, but the lower ground friction may make it difficult to keep on one’s feet. Handkerchief behaviour will look odd; there will be less asymmetry because any ‘drop’ will be much slower.

That the flow and shape of the hankie is determined by gravity is seen when films or videos are played backwards.

Rotating gravity

A rotating frame of reference introduces the pseudo Coriolis forces because the dancer's body is actually rotating in one plane but there are no visual clues for the muscles to allow for it. Running and jumping in the place of the rotation will seem normal because the body will rotate about its centre of gravity at the same rate as the 'outside'. The problem is with rotations, i.e. turns in the air, hooks or galleys when balanced on one foot, in the 'horizontal' where the preserved angular momentum of the initial body tumble will throw dancers over. Like high jumpers, vaulters and divers, it is possible to learn the control of body component angular rates, once analysed.

Zero Gravity

Being able to move around at all could be difficult. So one solution is a flat surface with magnetic soles! Another is to dance within a box, launching oneself from one wall to another. The way to get something that looks like a conventional patterned dance is to use small personal jets, but this eliminates footwork! Perhaps there is a solution which has the effect of swimming around? However, the one novel feature is the chance to have a set of 27 - three layers of nine with each nine in a square. There could be heys in every conceivable three-dimensional direction! Without an obvious 'up', this direction could vary throughout the dance – just think what the 'sphere' equivalent of rounds could be like!

Someone could propose a research topic to NASA on the morris in zero gravity!

Roy Dommett

© sometime in the last millennium

Return of the Blue Stots - An Aspect of Traditional Drama in Yorkshire

Chas Marshall and Stuart Rankin

No, I haven't got the volumes mixed up – we did have an article about the Blue Stots from this duo in the last issue and I must grovel publicly here in that I omitted to include the last few corrections from Chas which were to have included the fact that the booklet of this name had not yet been published – sorry to have raised false hopes in a couple of people. Anyway, I can now reveal – the booklet *has* been published in a limited edition of 100 copies and it was worth a wait. Buy one for yourself¹ and one for a friend for next Christmas! The story has been over 20 years in the telling...and as the authors point out, you never know quite when to stop, as each year something new crops up that alters your knowledge or your viewpoint.

There are plenty of photos and some delightful snippets of information throughout the booklet. Some of the photos are a bit faint, but this is not unexpected given the sources. The booklet falls into three main sections: a history of mumming, the Knaresborough Mummers in particular; and then of how Chas & Stuart researched the post-Christmas Plough (Blue) Stots plays. There are tables showing the various aspects which they felt were helpful in identifying the plays: time of performance (pre- or post- Christmas), age and number of performers, costumes worn and methods of disguising the face, and names of characters. They also discuss the location and style of performances; how a collection was made and for what it was used, - in one case, “..We bloody keep it!” -, and how the text was passed on from one year to the next. Then there is a section on the Revival of the Blue Stots from 1978 by Knaresborough Mummers, based on other local texts. The interesting aspect is just how much new information comes to light once the performances are being taken around the area, hence the appendices. However, they note in some towns or villages, the main interest in maintaining it is from the ‘folk’ people, not the people for whom the plays were originally written.

The final section is the appendices, which include references, a map of Yorkshire places, new texts from other villages, some Peace Egg chapbook text (and why, you wonder, is St George shown in a kilt?!) and newly found newspaper clippings from 1839. And then there's an ‘Afterword’, which is a potted history of “What is it all about?” – on the emergence of folk customs.

Published by Dockside Studio, 4 Helier Court, Hithe Point, London SE16 6PZ.

Obtain your copies, price £4.95 (plus £1.50 P&P), from:

Chas Marshall, 6 Silverfields Road, Harrogate, North Yorkshire HG1 4SY: please make cheques payable to **J. Marshall**.

¹ Another good reason to buy it - sales of the booklet are allowing donations to national archives; copies have already been donated to: EFDSS - Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Folklore Society, Morris Federation Archive, NATCECT and the Morris Ring Mumming Play Archive

Books from the Serpent Press

by Dave Townsend

Dave Townsend's English Dance Music, Volumes 1 and 2

My first introduction to English dance music came in the early 1970s, when I heard people like Oscar Woods, Billy Bennington and Percy Brown playing in East Anglian pubs. I was drawn to this bouncy vigorous music and came to learn more of it whilst living in Lancashire and playing in sessions with Garstang Morris. Like most musicians playing this sort of music, I learnt by ear. Thus when Volume 1 arrived I seized on it with delight, to have the music at last. I looked for Volume 2 but never saw it; so I was equally delighted to be sent both for review. The second volume, revised and enlarged, completes the reissuing of tunes in Dave Townsend's earlier books, published between 1982 and 1985. Volume 2 contains 130 traditional English dance tunes, part of the common repertoire of English dance tunes. Many of the most common tunes are here and this is an excellent basis for anyone starting to play this kind of music. Volume 2 contains 132 tunes, many well-known and commonly played, other less so. I played right through this collection and enjoyed it greatly. Again, most of the tunes were familiar to me, but there were some less well known which promptly went on my 'to learn' list. It was good to see in print tunes like Woodland Revels, which I have only ever played by ear, and the Redowa Polka in a version which sounds like what I have in my head. I would recommend these two books to anyone interested in this music.

Available at £9.50 a volume

The Mellstock Carols (2nd edition)

West Gallery Carols from the Hardy family manuscripts and other Dorset sources.

This is a splendid book and a wonderful complement to the recorded versions of some of the carols. There are 22 carols with arrangements. Many people will have encountered 'West Gallery Music' or 'Country Psalmody' through workshops at festivals and enjoyed its 'extraordinary vitality and variety'. In its strength and vigour, being composed by ordinary people mainly from the lower classes of society, it is a wonderful counterpoint (pardon the pun) to the church harmony singing, very much classically influenced, with which many people outside folk traditions are more familiar. These carols are a joy, both in their words and in their arrangements. The book has been researched thoroughly and in a scholarly way, with clear notes and references to the sources used, as well as the kinds of parts of arrangements. If you have enjoyed West Gallery singing over the last few years, this book is an excellent memento and it is of interest to musicians not so familiar with the form and style. As a piece of musical history, it is excellent.

Available at £8.50

The Village Band Book
English Dance Tunes and Marches

This is another book from the Townsend stable, of the same high quality and interest. There are 26 tunes, all with arrangements in three, four or five parts. The tunes are mostly very familiar, being standard repertoire for most English dance bands, but they are all good tunes. The parts are based on those found in nineteenth century village musicians' manuscript books. The arrangements are interesting and of value to any set of musicians wanting to do more than just play the tune. There are useful notes on the style in the introduction and on the tunes at the back. Dave Townsend provides for musicians to order small or large copies of tunes and parts and requests that people do not make unauthorised copies. The book is well produced and edited, and should provide many hours of enjoyment.

Available at £8.50

For all these books - contact Dave Townsend:
Serpent Press
22 Swinbourne Road, Littlemore, Oxford, Oxon OX4 4PQ
01865 714778

Reviewed by **Rosie Turner-Bisset** **Windsor Morris**

News and Views....

From Norris Winstone:

“I remember when Kemps Men danced their way into full membership of the Morris Ring, at Christchurch Park in Ipswich in 1975, an American Side¹ was also there and what struck me particularly was their use of very short sticks in Headington Quarry dances, no more than 6 inches! A literal interpretation of short sticks?”

Rocking Chair merge with ADA

In October 2003 Rocking Chair and ADA Mail Order merged to form a well stocked supplier of folk, roots and acoustic CD's – they pride themselves on being able to find either an old recording or a new release, including smaller labels. They will still distribute to specialist shops throughout the UK.

They will be at various festivals and events in 2004 – otherwise mail order for a catalogue to Rocking Chair
:rc@mrscasey.co.uk or website www.mrscasey.co.uk/rockingchair

ADA on 01773 850000 or Mrs Casey on 01629 827013

“Dancing Days”

I got a flyer from Talking Elephant through a few months ago and noticed a CD which I promptly ordered and have thoroughly enjoyed playing and playing:

“Dancing Days” by Chris Leslie – subtitled,

“A celebration of Music from the Morris in the Glorious company of Gerry Conway, Ashley Hutchings, Simon Nichol, Dave Pegg, Ric Sanders, Matt Green and Mikey Radford.

Buy it – and play it to the end (!)... lots of good tunes from Adderbury as you'd expect, as Chris regularly plays for them – but also other Cotswold tunes from Ilmington, Fieldtown, Bampton and Bledington among others.

Mail order from :
Talking Elephant Records
8 Martin Dene
Bexleyheath
Kent DA6 8HA

talkelephant@aol.com or web site www.talkelephant.com

¹ Norris can't remember who they were – can any readers enlighten us – in 1975 there can't have been many American teams on the move? According to Jeff Bigler's list it could possibly have been the American Travelling morrice – noted in America in 1976.

Maybe the very short sticks took up less room in their baggage?!

Whapweasel: Relentless

Well I fell for Whapweasel about 5 years ago at a Sidmouth Ceilidh and thought their music was just great to dance to. I originally went as I heard that the drummer (Bob Wilson) was connected with High Spen Blue Diamonds and I thought they were (still are) pretty amazing – so I thought the band might be worth a listen. This is their third album – Burn (2000) was preceded by Skirl Naked (1998) and now Relentless (2003). The music is a bit...relentless; like you can dance all night because just as you go to sit down they start on another really good tune. That said, at first I thought some of the tracks on Relentless were a bit similar to those on Burn. For example, Burn has a brilliant track, “The Last Banana” which is usually (when I’ve been at their ceilidhs) the opening number – but then Relentless has, “The Final Last Banana” – which seems pretty similar. So I listened to Burn again (and again) and now think that in Relentless the balance of instruments sounds better – the eight members of the band play melodeon, keyboards (and occasional tambourine), tenor and soprano sax, guitar, bass guitar and cittern...and drums. It’s a really good listen; my favourite track is “Bus to Bombay” by melodeon player Robin Jowett. But they’re all good.

The CD can be obtained for £12 from Brian Bell at 3 Rocksprings Crescent, Haydon Bridge, Hexham NE47 6AT -or phone them on 01434 684705

They also put out a tunebook containing 50 of their own traditional sounding original tunes – price £10 including P&P from the above address)

More information – see www.whapweasel.com – it looks as though they will be at Sidmouth as well as other festivals in 2004.

Hands on Music

As usual – the weekends are running through the early part of 2004 – accordions, strings and bows, winds and voices, being the themes – contact 01865 714778 for further details.

From Tony Barrand

Update on his news of the Web site which should be showing clips from, among other things, Marlboro Morris Ales through the years (see Morris Matters 22-2) – he has high hopes of it being ready for the dance season - May onwards.



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