

Volume 28 Number 1

Marie Matters



Contents of Volume 28, Number 1

Long Lankin's New Year Resolutions	2
A Few Random Thoughts On The Wearing Of Trousers; Early Women's Morris Kit	3
<i>by Pauline Beighton</i>	
'They Look Like An Explosion In A Tie-Dye Factory'; A Brief And Fairly Inaccurate History Of Gog Magog Molly	4
<i>by Emma Darby</i>	
Myddleton Street No More: Research Tools for the Morris Historian	6
<i>by George Frampton</i>	
Memories of Bampton	8
<i>by Andy Hilditch</i>	
New tunes for the Morris – part 2	9
<i>by Barry Goodman</i>	
Biggles Flies Undone: The Kentish Christmas Mummers Play, December 2008	13
<i>by George Frampton</i>	
Been and Gone – events and news	16
➤ <i>MBE for Norris Winstone</i>	<i>16</i>
➤ <i>Deaths of Francis Shergold and Son(ny) Townsend</i>	<i>16</i>
➤ <i>Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival : 30th Anniversary 9 – 11 January 2009</i>	<i>17</i>
➤ <i>Mary Neal Event: Cecil Sharp House; 7 February 2009</i>	<i>17</i>
➤ <i>Fire, Feasts & Frolics: Cecil Sharp House; 30 January to 25 April 2009</i>	<i>18</i>
➤ <i>John Gasson Website</i>	<i>18</i>
Derek's Ninth Letter To The Truncheons	19
<i>by Chris Sugden</i>	
Morris Dance: A Eulogy	20
<i>by Long Lankin</i>	
Pub Morris	22

Welcome to 2009. Each time I sat down to start this something else cropped up in the news! The good news was that Norris Winstone was made an MBE in the New Year Honours – and he featured in quite a few news items – congratulations!

Then we had the sad deaths of two Bampton stalwarts - Francis Shergold in November and Son(ny) Townsend at Christmas. The latter seems to have sparked off a media frenzy ("light" news being a bit short) after comments made by Morris Ring officials at his funeral about morris dying out. I am pleased that Andy, our cover artist, has jotted some of his own memories about growing up in Bampton and Long Lankin felt stirred to jot down a few topical thoughts about the death of morris.

In the remainder of this issue, Barry Goodman has continued his articles about writing morris tunes. On a seasonal aspect, we have a comment about mummers plays from George Frampton and a long awaited (by me) history of Gog Magog Molly! And lots of other interesting snippets. Read on.

Long Lankin's New Year Resolutions¹

A popular pastime on New Year's night is to make resolutions about what you are going to do differently. These are usually of a life affirming or improving nature like resolving to go to the gym twice a week or not to drink so much. Part of the idea of publicly announcing your resolution is that everyone then knows what it is and, if you fail, will know you for the sad loser that you are.

But then you wake up the following morning and even if you can actually remember what it was you resolved to do or not to do, the fact that you were at least half-drunk when you made the promise should call into question its validity. So let me go on record by stating that I am stone cold sober as I write this article. I know I am sober because my hands are shaking making it difficult to type if I do not concentrate.

I am determined not only to make a New Year resolution but to keep it and, as in the past I have often avoided doing this, I probably owe a few as well. However, I want to take this one step further and encourage everyone to share these resolutions with me. Peer group pressure and support will be all the greater if we are all trying to keep the same resolutions and, if we can all keep these for a year, the local folk scene will be a lot better off.

So repeat out loud - This year I resolve that . . .

- I will try to get to at least one song or music session a month
- I will not make jokes about melodeons or melodeon players - they are funny enough as it is.
- I will read every Unicorn magazine cover to cover
- I will endeavour to Morris dance
- In a song session I will not talk out loud while the person next to me is singing - even if it is all 55 verses of the Child Ballad "The Kitchie-Boy" (variant B)
- I will not play the bodhran - even in private.
- I will not make disparaging comments about Border Morris - they are not worth the attention.
- I will try to get to at least one Unicorn ceilidh.
- I will be kind about ageing stars of the folk scene who are past their best, living on their reputations and really ought to have more respect for their audiences if not for themselves.
- I will get a life.

OK so who said it was going to be easy - Happy New Year!

¹ This was originally published in Unicorn Magazine (January 2009).

A Few Random Thoughts On The Wearing Of Trousers; Early Women's Morris Kit

Holdens Goldens Morris side was started in 1975 by Margaret Guest. We practised - in the back room - at the Painters Arms pub, Coseley (midway-ish between Dudley and Wolverhampton, in the Black Country). They wore white blouses, white aprons, long black corduroy skirts, black tights, black character shoes, armbands, hats, bell pads and yellow hankies. These did not symbolise dusters, as a member of a local Ring side once opined to me, but were gold representing Holdens Golden Pale Ale, which was served in the pub. Holden's brewery was in nearby Woodsetton. There are still Holdens pubs in evidence in the local area today. It soon became apparent that if we wanted to do capers, leapfrogs and star jumps, the long skirt would have to go. So they were shortened, as were the aprons. They were very hot to dance in, especially in the summer, when we danced Bucknell dances, the brisk downward arming soon had hats falling off so we just wore the hats when not dancing. It was felt by some that you did need a morris hat, even if you didn't wear it when dancing!

Fiz Markham is correct, the debates to change into trousers were "long, drawn-out and agonising". Most of the meetings were because we wanted to do everything 'properly' and were conscious that local Ring Sides were waiting for us to make mistakes. Or generally 'get things wrong'. We went with Scholl lace-ups; they only came in light tan, so we had to dye them black, which shrunk my shoes so lots of shoe stretchers were bought into play! We managed to get some cheap black trousers/jeans from a market but care had to be taken when washing them because the thread on the seams had to be pulled back into shape to prevent a "ruched" effect! Later we had more debates about wearing white shoes, to draw attention to footwork during the dances. We adopted a more shirt style blouse rather than the square necked originals, baldricks and armbands with trailers in purple, dark red and gold. Armbands and baldricks were obtained from a firm specialising in medal ribbons. Later we bought cord trousers which were terribly hot for dancing in, but kinder to those of use with larger bottoms than white trousers would have been,

I was also a founder member of Glorishears of Brummagem. We practised in a pub near FiveWays in Birmingham. We wore brown culottes and waistcoats with peach blouses, our colours were beige, orange and chocolate brown. We wore brown tights and brown flat lace-up shoes, small bell pads and ribbons on our feet. Again the kit was hot to dance in, in summer, but I thought very practical. Later the side had white skirts and chocolate brown pinafore dresses with white detachable aprons individually decorated orange tights or stockings, Now they wear a blue pinafore dress, I believe, deeming the brown orange and beige look 'too '70s.

I feel trousers or culottes are best for women to dance energetic, emphatic morris; but these are my own personal opinions and not those of any morris side I may have danced with in the past.

Pauline Beighton

July 2008

‘They Look Like An Explosion In A Tie-Dye Factory’; A Brief And Fairly Inaccurate History Of Gog Magog Molly

As Gog Magog Molly head towards that difficult teenage phase, it seems like a good time to put down on record a little bit about the team and how they have developed from a birthday party spot to one of the country’s premier molly sides.

East Anglia is the home of molly dancing. It developed out of the feast dances and country dances of the area. Danced by plough boys in the depths of winter when ploughing jobs were hard to come by, it was a form of begging. It got an understandably bad press as the molly gangs, once they danced at people until they’d coughed up some cash, would then go and spend their ill-gotten gains on drink leading to booze-fuelled fights between rival gangs. Such brawls in the Market Square in Cambridge led to a bye-law banning molly dancing in the city in the early eighteenth century.

The practice continued in rural areas and eventually came to the interest of folklorists. Cecil Sharp famously considered the molly dances too primitive to bother with, but fortunately others took on the mantle he had shirked. Russell Wortley was a Cambridge academic who not only studied the dances but also took part in them. His tabor remains tucked away in the Cambridge Folk Museum. Later Cyril Papworth recorded as many of the Cambridgeshire feast dances as he could find, especially those taught to him by his aunt and uncle, whom he mentioned in his book on the subject. Like Wortley, Papworth was a dancer himself and taught the dances in the locality, particularly he danced the Comberton Broom Dance.

It was in honour of Cyril that Gog Magog Molly came into existence. It was Cyril’s 80th birthday in 1996 which prompted members of The Round (the Cambridge University Country Dance Society) and Granta Morris to branch out into something different. Initially the idea was to do one performance, but with an impending Cambridge IVFDF in 1997, the run was extended indefinitely. The repertoire at the beginning was based largely on the feast dances from Cyril’s book and the morris and country dances that team members were familiar with; for example Arbury Court began as a dance for 6 with distinct foot up, foot down and half gyp choruses.

When setting up a team, even if only for one performance, there are a number of important things to consider. A name for a start. People read an awful lot into the name Gog Magog Molly and to the best of our knowledge the name has nothing to do with the end of the world as foretold in the Book of Revelations, nor the ‘evil and destructive’ giants of the Qu’ran, nor an apocalyptic coalition of nations arrayed against Israel. Rather prosaically the Gog Magogs are a range of hills to the south of Cambridge. They’re notable because they’re the only hills in the vicinity. And they have a golf club on them. It seemed a reasonably distinctive thing to name a team after, given that Cambridge Morris Men and Granta Morris already existed.

The next consideration is kit. It is fair to say that Gogs’ kit is pretty memorable. As a dance kit it has lots of advantages – it is comfortable, it can be layered for warmth, it doesn’t matter if you spill things on it and it’s really easy to find. None of these were really thought about at the time, but they are very welcome consequences. The kit was based on the molly from Ouse Washes Molly Dances, who at the time wore brown cords tied up with string lallygags in the style of the agricultural workers who originally did the dances. Rather than having one molly, as Ouse Washes and the Seven Champions did, Gog Magog Molly decided in the democratic

spirit in which they were trying to run the team that everyone was going to be the molly and as such would all wear a variation on the same kit. Being young and enthusiastic, bright colours seemed the best way to make an impact and thus the kit was born.

The most important part of the kit is probably the face paint. Traditionally this would have been made of a natural dye, such as burnt cork or reddle, and would have disguised the ploughboys from those who might employ them later in the year. The decision made by Gog Magog to wear multi-colours is connected with the exuberant kit, not any desire to be politically correct. We aim to have only one of any given colour, but it doesn't always work out like that!! When the team first formed, there was a communal face paint stash even down to sharing sponges for putting it on and removing it. The move away from that was sparked by a tendency for the sponges not to be cleaned out between performances, eventually resulting in people keeping their paint and sponge for themselves, which is why many of the Gogs now have their own colour to which they stick.

Neither the name nor the kit of the team has changed a great deal in nearly 13 years. What has changed is the dancing. The Gog Magog style has no basis in tradition, even if some of the dances do. It is robotic and counter-intuitive, reliant on sharp turns to highlight the geometry of the dance. It was heavily influenced by Ouse Washes and the Seven Champions, both teams that we still admire greatly and have borrowed dances from, but the greatest influence was the desire to be a display dance side. Eye-catching kit covers a great many sins, but underneath that you need to have something worth watching. Traditional dances like the College Hornpipe were looked at again from an audience point of view, and new dances were developed; again thinking about what an audience might want to watch. As a result the dances tend to be energetic, but short. The best example of this is the Ultimate molly dance, which takes four dances, all traditionally done like the Nottingham Swing in very long sets and linked by a common chorus, and then uses the distinctive figure of each to form the figures of the modern dance.

As time has gone on, and more mathematicians (who seem to like the challenge of writing dances) have joined the side, there have been more and more dances written by the team. Influences range from Playford dance figures, to figures from other teams in other traditions. They would probably be unrecognisable as molly dancing to Cyril, were he still alive. It remains a constant question about how far we can push the dancing before it loses its Gog Magog feel, and also how many dances is too many when it comes to trying to maintain a high standard of dancing, but these are not new questions to many morris teams.

Questions about the standard are critical to the team's success. Gog Magog get a good reception from audiences because of a firm belief that it is performance that matters – dances should be interesting to do and to watch, music should be fun to play and to hear and the team should look like they're enjoying themselves because they are (even in the traditional Molly season of early-January). This is not to imagine that the dream performance is always achieved – but as soon as you lose sight of that goal, you lose any chance of attaining it.

So what next for Gog Magog Molly – more practice, of course!

Emma Darby
January 2009

Myddleton Street No More: Research Tools for the Morris Historian

You would have thought with the BBC family history programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' that no quarter be given to foster new interest in social history research by way of investigating family relationships. It is a tool that Keith Chandler and myself among others have used over the past three decades. So when the Office of National Statistics announced that the Family Records Centre (FRC) was to close at the end of 2007, was greeted with alarm by some historians. The argument was that, because so many people had online access, by downloading the Censuses for 1841 through till 1901, and putting the Births, Marriages and Deaths (BMD) Indexes online as well, the office would become redundant. Also, websites such as Ancestry.com were able to give people the information they needed.

I need hardly point out that subscriptions to any family history-based website tend to be rather competitive, but a facility I had enjoyed for around twenty years to be suddenly withdrawn was apt to leave future plans for research in jeopardy. Twelve months on, online public access to the BMD indexes is still only partial and it transpires that the problems encountered in putting the 1901 Census online by the contractor are presenting the same difficulty. Fear of libel action and limited knowledge of the full story prevent me from expanding further, except to say that no completion date has been set.

However, readers might like to be made aware of a recently discovered search tool that could be used which is almost as efficient as a visit to the former FRC. Unless you have your own subscription to Ancestry.com, a visit to your local public library may meet your needs so long as they've signed up to Ancestry Library Edition from ProQuest – even though you may only be eligible for half an hour's use depending on how busy the library you are using may be. Library Edition is basically an intranet site which gives you full access to the Censuses, and also to the BMD indexes.

The 'partial indexes' from 1837-1985 are there, of course, but these can already be accessed from your own desktop and really only cover the period 1837-1920 with any reliability (six months ago, and I would only have said from 1870-1920, so things are slightly improving). However, to explore the mysterious 'Complete Indexes', readers might choose to print out and follow the instructions given by the Birmingham Libraries website: http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=71018&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=10277.

As it says, if you scroll to the bottom of the initial page, and click on More Collections, then on All Databases, you can select the initial letter of the database you wish to see. For England & Wales, Birth Index 1837-1983, for example, click on 'E', then on the next screen click 'En'. The trick is then to fill in the blanks of surname and quarter you wish to see. You will probably end up with around ten quarters depending on how many hits your surname receives. If it's 'Smith', then jolly good luck! The page you see is actually a photocopy of the page you used to see at the FRC, so you could say it's as good as the real thing. The only downside I found when using the site last Autumn was, at times of high usage, it may not allow your search – or that's how it appeared to me. Very frustrating!

As far as I'm aware, there are no plans to relocate the Wills and Administrations Indexes from First Avenue House in High Holborn. In fact, more of their indexes are being placed online on an intranet site, progressively eliminating the need to lift out the heavy indexes (especially in the 1950s!) and viewing them. I don't believe any of this is remotely accessible as yet, but is a great tool for finding family interrelationships, addresses and dates of death when relevant, and more quickly than by scanning the former FRC Deaths Indexes.

Of more concern is the impending closure of British Library Newspapers at Colindale Avenue, Hendon, late in 2009. I believe plans are afoot to move all microfilm copy from Colindale into a dedicated area at the St. Pancras site with all hard copy moving to Boston Spa (or elsewhere). Researchers such as myself have found the Colindale facilities a boon, if a trifle irritating. The current search procedure requires you to fill in the shelf number of your request docket, which makes the likelihood of the wrong volume being delivered to your desk more unlikely, although not impossible. For the average historian concerned at a single topic or location, this may not present a problem – you can go to your local county library and ogle the microform copy. This is wearing on the eyeballs the older you get, but easy peasy if you want a print out your results – cheaper in some parts of the country than others – 10p per page in East Sussex, but 50p per page in Kent.

My concern is the accessibility of hard copy, especially if your agenda is broad. It is too early to anticipate how any changes might affect you. My own recent searches into a project which might yet benefit Sidmouth FolkWeek depended on me accessing hardcopy published in Sidmouth, Exeter, Tiverton, and elsewhere. Microfilm copy was not available for all titles at either town or city, so Colindale provided my answers under one roof. My own requirements for hard copy range from preconceived – which could be met by remote delivery; to impulsive – which would require a second visit at cost, at a later date. Perhaps, all hard copy will become available on microfilm at St. Pancras – or even online, given time. You can but pray, but I am understandably sceptical. Watch this space.

George Frampton

January 2009

Memories of Bampton

I heard the other day that dear old Mr Francis Shergold had passed away. However with this sad news, it brought back memories of when we used to go and watch him and the Bampton Dancers. Coming originally from Bampton, I knew only of Mr Shergold from when I was young. Too young to know which 'side' was which, as I believe at present there are three Morris dance sides in Bampton. Whether that was the case when I was a child and attending primary school. I don't know. The time period I am recalling would be about 1975-79.

I can remember when May would come, the roads would become busier. Posters would be up advertising the various stalls and events. And throughout the day, you could be sure of seeing the dancers, dressed up in bright white, adorned with coloured ribbons and black hats. Ambling from one public house to another, being followed by a mass of people who would stand around clutching their drinks and watching the dancing intently. The roads would be closed off or marshalled as the dancers would take their places and the music strike up, usually a fiddle or accordion.

In those days, there were a lot more pubs in Bampton. Troupes would wander a short way from The Jubilee to the Morris Clown, The Eagle, The George and Dragon, Elephant and Castle and of course the Talbot. This last one (still surviving) is on the main junction in the centre of Bampton.

It is here where I recall most of my Morris observing days. For while I would be stood next to my parents, who would, more often than not, find a gap in the crowd for me and push me forward so I would get better glimpse of the proceedings. I was mesmerised by this old tradition. The dancers would perform their routine in unison, yet then from the corner of my eye I would spot the clown lurking and prowling along the front line of the crowd, keeping both a close eye on the dancers and another on unsuspecting children.

Every now and again he would shout to a dancer, presumably to keep them in time, then his attention would turn to the children and out would come the 'pigs bladder/balloon' he'd been brandishing. With a loud clump, he would whack someone. Some of the kids laughed, leered; others, the younger ones, would be frightened and cry. The clown though, unperturbed, would stroll on, circling the clearance between the audience and his team.

When he would 'attack' one of the dancers, or join in (with mock dancing), it used to amaze me how the others could remain in step and concentrate on their moves. The clowns I remember were usually brightly coloured and always would make you laugh. Happy days. To Francis, to Bampton Morris and to all the clowns, thank you for some marvellous street entertainment.

Andy Hilditch

January 2009

New tunes for the Morris – part 2

In the first of these articles (MM Vol. 27 No. 2) I wrote about the process used by Redbornstoke Morris in writing tunes for the dances in our “Amphill” Tradition – a process founded on the elements of the **rhythm** of the music, the **phrasing** of the dance and the **speed** of the music in relation to the dance.

This second instalment will focus on the dances in our Winter tradition, which we call “Marston”, after the village where the original workshops to create a new dance style were held. “Marston” also refers to a wider region of Bedfordshire, the Vale of Marston, where most of the county’s large-scale brick-production took place until very recently, and some of the spirit of the tradition, as well as many of the dance titles, reflect this industrial heritage and the community it served.

The tradition was devised as a form of dance which could be performed in cold conditions during the winter months. We had flirted, briefly, with some form of Molly dancing, but after a few seasons we decided that what we were doing was not really innovative enough, and we always felt “under-rehearsed”. What was needed was a new dance-style over which we had ownership, and which we could develop in the same “organic” way that we had done with the Amphill tradition.

We agreed that it would be based loosely on the format of the Amphill tradition (i.e. six-person dances with triangular shapes in some of the figures and an element of confrontation with the audience at some point in the dance). The step is adapted from the Amphill stepping, but without the characteristic “feet-together-jump” of the summer tradition. Instead, a 360° turn occurs between the double-step and the four single-steps. The basic step, then, is: double-step (one bar of music); 360° turn (one bar of music); four single-steps (two bars of music). When repeated, this fills the eight-bar sequence which is always used for the figures of a Marston dance.

The first dance we created in this new tradition was an adaptation of our Amphill dance, *Nodder Sway*, which features in my first article. We called the dance *Swaying Nods* as a working title, and haven’t thought of anything better yet! The basic step is flat – it doesn’t require the music to emphasise a jump as in Amphill, but the music needs to drive the dance on, otherwise the 360° turn (or “spin”) tends to provide an unwanted pause in the movement of the dancers. Clearly, the music used for *Nodder Sway* was not going to be suitable, if only because it would be too confusing (I wrote in the last article about the “tune-dance prompt”, whereby dancers recognise a dance by the tune), but also because the Amphill tune contains too many points of emphasis which are unnecessary for the more linear Marston style.

Various tunes were experimented with, and it soon became obvious that a polka rhythm was the most suitable to complement the stepping – a common-time pulse with the emphasis on the first and third beats of the bar provides good momentum for the dancers, while providing cues for the spin and the launch into the next sequence of stepping. The tune we finally settled on was an old favourite, *Jenny Lind*:

Jenny Lind

Trad



The “B” music is sufficiently different from the “A” music to signal the chorus, which in this dance is the same as in the original *Nodder Sway* (i.e. short-stick clashing, cascading up the set).

The speed of the music was another issue on which we spent some time experimenting. The dances tend to “jog” along to the polka rhythm, and, while not needing to be taken too quickly, the fact that they are to be danced in the winter time tends to inject a certain briskness into the playing and dancing, especially when dancing with a number of other teams with longish breaks between dances. Generally, we play the tunes at a tempo of around 120 beats per minute, which seems to work quite well!

Cardington Hanger (named after the enormous structure near Bedford, built to house airships in the 1930s) was the first of our “Teflon” dances (non-stick!). Based on one of our summer dances, the chorus involves each of the triangles (1,4,5 and 2,3,6) in turn performing a circular movement to change places in the set. This is preceded by a forward-and-back movement by the whole set, so the music needed to be in three distinct parts, but still a 16-bar polka tune. We chose one of the tunes from *The Sussex Tune Book: Untitled Polka (No. 52)*. As the tune comes from the manuscript of William Aylmore, a clarinettist from West Wittering, we call it *William Aylmore’s Polka*, although I’ve seen it referred to as *The Sussex Polka* in other places, notably the Posh Band’s CD *English*. This tune has distinct “A” and “B” music, but the first two bars of the “B” music are noticeably “flatter” than the third and fourth bars, making a distinction between the preparatory movement and the circular figure which then takes the dancers onto the track for their new positions.

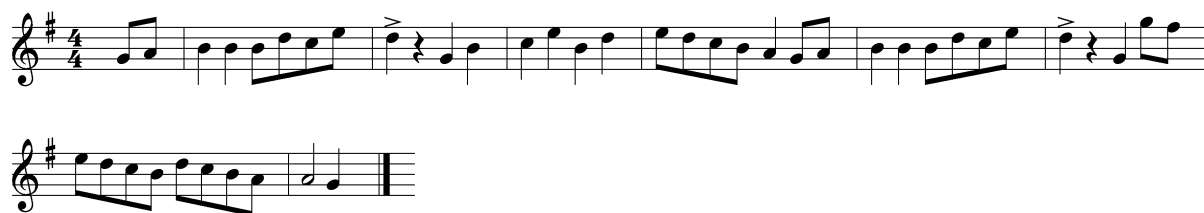
William Aylmore's Polka

Trad



Having achieved a style for which the music was linear and without any emphatic pauses, we then threw a spanner into the works by introducing figures with a “stamp” half-way through – indeed *Cardington Hanger* has such a figure in it! Naturally, this feature requires emphasis, so the music had to be adapted accordingly. The resulting alternative “A” music for *Cardington Hanger* looks like this:

William Aylmore's Polka alternative "A" Music Trad



A further complication was added to the tradition when a dance was devised which had a longer chorus than the standard 8 bars. The dance is called *Silken Chains* and involves a rather impressive series of arm-swings that don’t quite fit the 16-bar tune we had decided to use for it – *The Marmalade Polka*. With a little ingenuity, the tune was lengthened to fit the dance, much to the confusion of any musicians from other teams who might decide to play along, only to find that they’ve started the tune again before we’ve finished!

The Marmalade Polka Trad



In addition to this 18-bar dance, we also have one of 20-bars – *John’s Bunion*, using a minor version of the tune *To Be a Pilgrim* or *Our Captain Cried All Hands*, which is the tune for our Ampthill dance, *Pilgrim*. Although the dance bears only a little resemblance to its Ampthill cousin, the chorus of both dances is 12 bars long, structured rather like a blues with one long phrase of eight bars and a four-bar coda at the end, so the tune has an eight-bar “A” music and a twelve-bar “B” music:

John's Bunion

Trad. arranged
Barry Goodman



As with Redbornstoke's "Amphill" dances, the opportunity for the team's tunesmiths to produce new music for new dances has proven to be irresistible, especially for Martin Banks, whose tunes *Old Brown Boots* and *Vladivostok's Revenge* are used for the dances *Ms Ashby's Request* and *Meg's First Kiss* respectively. Relatively recent popular music gets a look-in with Jonah Louie's *Don't Stop the Cavalry*, which is used for a four-man dance entitled *Andrew's Oblivion*, written on the spur of the moment when snow prevented a full team from turning up at Elephant Up A Pole's Wassail in Coventry one year. The actual tune used on that occasion (played by a hastily-recruited musician from another team) was *Portsmouth*, a tune we liked so much that we now use it for another four-man dance called *Bricker's Ganger*.

Other tunes used for dances in the Marston tradition are *Three Around Three* (for *Marston Thrift*) and *Napoleon's Retreat* for a stick dance called *Sodexho* (named after the catering company on whose paper napkins the dance was composed at Cheltenham Folk Festival!). Our processional dance is performed to *Tip-Top Polka*, although we try to dance this as little as possible!

"Marston" was the second tradition to be invented and developed by Redbornstoke Morris. We dance it in black kit with red, white and green ribbons and black hats decorated with greenery. We generally dance in black from October to the end of April, returning to our familiar whites on May 1st.

The third of Redbornstoke's dance traditions is "Scouthall" (pronounced "Scuthall"), devised in a Cotswold style and requiring yet another individual repertoire of tunes to reflect the unique nature of the dance. This will be the subject for the last of these articles on New Tunes for the Morris, which will hopefully appear in a future edition of *Morris Matters*.

Barry Goodman

January 2009

Biggles Flies Undone: The Kentish Christmas Mummers Play, December 2008

In February 2005, I attended a one-day conference at Cecil Sharp House: 'Life and Times', which I reviewed for 'Morris Matters'². One of its speakers was Simon Evans who has researched many aspects of popular culture and, today introduces a weekly programme of folk music for BBC Radio Kent. Amongst his experiences, he related how he and 'friends revived a local mumming play, and did their best to perform it in its 'authentic' form. It was fun for them, but didn't have much impact on audiences. 'We were trying to breath life into a cadaver.' Later, he worked with a theatre group, using the mummers' play concept as a basis for improvisation on contemporary themes. This was much more successful.' Mike Sutton, in reporting from notes he made at the time, told how Simon had concluded that 'tradition needs to be allowed to continue developing organically.' All I can remember at the time was that members of the audience took in a sharp intake of breath and remarked at the speaker's humanity – whatever that meant. I had the impression that he had curiously dissed an entire tradition that he and members of the Hartley Morris Men had researched, revived and continue to perform at Shoreham and Otford in the weeks before Christmas, raising thousands of pounds for charity in the process. (Yes, this is the same play that Chris Wood and his English Acoustic Collective have been taking round the nation to great acclaim according to the fRoots December 2008 edition). But let's look again at what Simon Evans really meant and how this relates to how Morris teams and related groups have tried to maintain the Christmas mummers play in both an historical and contemporary context in the community.

This has to be a selective process. My own starting point is in knowing what scripts and other published information there is about local plays, and viewing their revival among the eight Morris teams and dedicated mummers groups in the county who perform such fare today. The archetypal play is where a narrator and/or patriarch such as Bold Roomer or Father Christmas prologues the affair, introducing the key characters – notably King George or St. George and a series of opponents such as Bold Slasher and the Turkish Knight. Spillage of thespian testosterone ensues with the vanquishing of one or more actor, who is then brought to life again by a quack doctor. Fighting may or may not ensue with Father Christmas separating the warring parties. Enter the runt of the litter: Johnny Jack (with his wife and family on his back) or Jack Vinney, who takes on anyone left standing. Game over and largesse sought. Yes, it is irrelevant to the modern age – but then again, so is much of Shakespeare. So that argument isn't going to wash. For further clues, let's look briefly at the mode of performance, the anticipated audience, how scripts may or may not be adapted, and then adjudge this 'cadaver'.

I'll start by the ford at the River Darent on the Friday night before Christmas, which was a Thursday in 2008. The Wadard Morris Men are there singing carols with around sixty other people. Mince pies, hot chestnuts and mulled wine are circulated to friend and stranger alike. There is a pub called 'The Plough' thirty yards away, but that seems irrelevant. One hour after starting, they all adjourn to the village hall where they take part in a charity concert performing an adapted version of the Sutton-at-Hone Champions play which Mervyn Plunkett collected from Bill Hawkes at Cuckfield in the 1950s. The hall is packed – largely suited people at tables around a stage area, but I cannot deny its success. There are party pieces. There's the local Silver Band. It's the community at its best – its own celebration of Christmas. No cadaver this. The Wadard Men are contributing to the fun: the actors are in harmony with its audience.

² See Morris Matters Volume 24, Number 2

Twenty-four hours later, and I'm at 'The Bell', one of two pubs in St. Nicholas at Wade in the Isle of Thanet. The St. Nicholas Hoodeners have been performing their plays at a mix of private parties and public houses for 42 years, after meeting three participants from the 1920s then discussing a future mode of performance. In the end, it was an English teacher at a Ramsgate Grammar School who lived in the village who decided to write a play based on a death and resurrection theme. The result is a playlet about local and national themes centred around events of the year using hilarious rhyming couplets. This year, we had the credit crunch, Hadron Collider, Olympic Games, and 'Mamma Mia'.

The plot loosely starts with Moll introducing the actors who regret the current state of affairs, before the key characters of the horse and boy turn up. Both are overweight. The horse is constipated (it usually is!), and the boy handling it is obviously a few kilograms heavier than ideal! After discussion, it is resolved to send the boy on some kind of liquid diet, bringing in the sub-plot of binge drinking and childhood obesity. A drunken boy and horse return, so the others decide to fit him with a gastric ring. They try to escape when Sam the farmworker finds his penknife to make the first incision, resulting in the boy being knocked unconscious by the horse. A bag of money is then discovered beneath his coat, stashed away because of banks going into administration. Hilarious and topical as always! Great stuff - in a pub - what could be better on a Saturday night? Yes, there was an appreciative audience, but sparse considering that the finals of 'X Factor' and 'Strictly Come Dancing' were on television that night. The same was true at the second performance of the night at The Gate Inn at Marshside. I believe this a comment of the state of the public house in the television age within popular culture. I was told The Bell is usually well-attended on the performance immediate to Christmas itself. Whitstable Folk Club was packed when it was performed there three weeks earlier. However, love of this tradition keeps me from criticising it further.

Three days later saw me at The Six Bells at Woodchurch on the fringe of Romney Marsh. Flirby and I arrived a quarter of an hour early to an expectant public house awaiting the arrival of the Woodchurch Morris Men who were to perform their bespoke mummings play 'Biggles Flies Undone' – very loosely based on Captain W.E. Johns' much-loved character. The script paralleled the archetypal Mummings play. It was introduced by Capt. Johns himself, who brought on Captain Bigglesworth in RAF blue, looking for women to make love to rather than seek great deeds of derring-do! There is interference with Mata Hari and a German spy, before Biggles' colleagues Algy, Ginger and Bertie finally despatch the Teutonic infiltrator. There is a comic interlude where the helmeted foursome fly through enemy fire on camping stools, before they are shot down, using said stools as parachutes. Then in the final scene, Biggles is shot by the interloping German (I know, incongruous isn't it?) A doctor is summoned, but only the love of a fair woman is guaranteed to bring him back to life again. (Yes, you can guess the rest!) What more can be said? Packed pub – high degree of expectation – bespoke play – collection for charity. Shortly afterwards, pub attendance halved to give some idea of the motive for its visitors there.

Last year, I went out on the Saturday before Christmas to see the Darent Valley Champions perform at Otford. I only visited the first two venues, both of which were 'gastropubs', and the short play was performed in each of the bars at each – the clientele warmly received the group, but I hardly had the impression that anybody had come out of their way to see them, or even what they made of this surrealistic intervention. The play itself is one of a few plays collected by Simon Evans and the late Charlie Jacobs, and includes a mad Scotsman called Scots and Scars who has one line so far as I remember. It was remarked at the Cecil Sharp House

conference how the version collected from octogenarian Herbie Smith differed from other published versions in Shoreham village. Analysis shows that the actors taking part before the Great War were frequently teenagers performing when there was no restriction on age in public houses, whereas the other scripts came from an older generation.

To transpose the Shoreham play to a different audience, let's look at how the Christmas Champions play was received on tour in the words of Colin Irwin in interviewing Hugh Lupton and Chris Wood. Hugh: 'I'm more interested in why people did it (the play) than when it started. What matters is that it clearly speaks to people with echoes of something much older.' The usual reaction at the end of the show last year was a telling pause before an emotional outburst of applause. One comment afterwards which (Chris) Wood thinks best sums it up is 'This is deep England ... when people are moved, really moved by something, they don't know what to say and they talk in clichés. They just can't explain it critically – that was very much the reaction.' Yeah, well? It has to be observed that this was a public performance that people paid to see, and they were not disappointed, being pleasantly surprised at the high degree of imagination input into the presentation.

There are many issues here that could start a debate in which Morris dancers of all varieties should feel culpable. For myself as a researcher, I don't feel that the Christmas mummers play is a 'cadaver' – and, I confess, I had to look up the word in a dictionary! (Noun: a dead body, a corpse). Heritage is something that many people are interested in, whether it is family history, visits to National Trust properties, or re-enactment societies such as The Sealed Knot. It is up to Morris clubs, mummers groups, folk music performers etc. to tap into that interest and correctly identify performance opportunities to avoid the 'one man and his dog' audience situation. Entertainment is paramount.

As an observer, I have seen mummers plays where 'bit' parts include more characters than the text has use for – just because the researched script says so. For example, in comes Johnny Jack (with his wife and family on his back) claiming he will do a 'do a dance to please you all' and off he disappears – where's the dance? Then there's Beelzebub and don't you think he's a jolly old man? Well, perhaps we would, if he did more than just walk on and off with his two lines of poesy. Give him a use; make him collect money in his dripping pan – something - anything. Simon Evans may have been acting as a social worker when he identified the problem with his theatre group. Job satisfaction as a performer does come into it (or it ought to), and this is where the idea could fall flat – only an adapted text could be used to elicit the passion needed to give a satisfactory performance using a set of actors unaware of its historical relevance. Given the right conditions, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Well, it's just a thought ...

George Frampton
December 2008

Been and Gone – events and news

➤ MBE for Norris Winstone

Congratulations to Norris Winstone, musician for Kemps Men, a regular contributor to Morris Matters and now an MBE - awarded for services to folk culture. He has been involved in morris from schooldays and at 95 is still playing as much as possible.

See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/norfolk/7805305.stm

(Thanks to George Frampton for spotting this)

➤ Deaths of Francis Shergold and Son(ny) Townsend

Toward the end of 2008 Bampton lost two of their longest serving morris men.

Francis George Shergold
Born 31st January 1919
Died 27 November 2008

A dancer and mentor to others since 1935
Last out Whit Monday 2008

Thomas Albert [Sonny] Townsend
Born 24 May 1914
Died 24 December 2008

Dancer and long time fool to Arnold Woodley's side

Bob Prince

Keith Chandler commented: “In an obituary for Arnold Woodley, written thirteen years ago, I said that the morris would never seem the same again. Those sentiments are certainly echoed here. It will carry on now but, without the presence of Francis, that sense of history, extending back to into the dim and distant past before many of we aficionados were born, will be missing, and the whole thing seem ever more rooted in the 21st century”.

For full obituaries see

www.mustrad.org.uk/obits

www.guardian.co.uk/2009/jan/13/obit

➤ **Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival : 30th Anniversary 9 – 11 January 2009**

'This is the coldest I've known it' was heard many a time around the town and cold it was! I would have taken my hat off to everyone, dancers, musicians, audience and volunteers alike who turned up but it was far too cold to do that.

The processions around the town took on a different form this year. The morning procession took the bear, plough, band, and dancers to the Market Square and the dancers then went to their organised dance spots. The 12.00 and 1.30 processions comprised the band with the Straw Bear, accompanied by his German counterpart, being lead around the town visiting some of the pubs en route before returning to the Market Square at 3.00.

There were nearly thirty sides representing all styles of the morris. Throughout the day they danced at various spots around the town also ending up at the finale in the Market Square at 3.00. The weekend also offered story telling, concerts, a barn dance and a Cajun dance. Musicians can usually find a session in one of the pubs. Sunday offered more dancing and the Straw Bear bonfire.

The Straw Bear Festival in 2010 will be a week later than usual – 15th, 16th and 17th January. For more information visit www.strawbear.org.uk

Jane Brice

➤ **Mary Neal Event: Cecil Sharp House; 7 February 2009**

A hundred years ago Mary Neal got people dancing. She was an instigating spirit behind the English folk song and dance revival, but her pioneering work with the Somerstown sewing girls and children of the Espérance Club has been overlooked - until now. For the last three years, her great, great niece, Lucy Neal, on inheriting Mary's personal papers, has travelled from Kings Cross to Thaxted, Abingdon, Littlehampton, Birmingham and New York to find out more about the legacy of Mary Neal and the great Espérance experiment. Join us for a day-long celebration of the fruits of this search with artists, children, morris dancers and folk musicians who have been involved along the way.

The day - which affords a historic reconciliation between the Neal/Sharp stories - unpacks an old box to create something innovative and new: a celebratory encounter between contemporary arts and English folk practitioners to look at tradition with fresh eyes. The afternoon will include a handover of the archive to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, dance and singing workshops and a presentation about Mary Neal; the evening will be a concert featuring Abingdon Morris, Laurel Swift and others followed by a ceilidh (Glowworms).

Tickets available from <https://www.wegotickets.com/f/574> or by phone:

Afternoon or evening only £15 (£10 concessions); full event (2pm to 11pm) £20 (£15 concessions) www.efdss.org

Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regent's Park Road, Camden, London NW1 7AY phone 0207 485 2206

➤ **Fire, Feasts & Frolics: Cecil Sharp House; 30 January to 25 April 2009**

A celebration by Doc Rowe of seasonal events, folklore and traditions from the British Isles and Ireland is presented in association with The Folklore Society. The English Folk Dance and Song Society are delighted to present an exhibition of work from serial-archivist Doc Rowe.

For over forty years, Doc Rowe has been consistently recording and filming cultural tradition and vernacular arts, folklore, song and dance of Britain and Ireland. Continual documentation of annual events, using a wide variety of media, has resulted in a unique archive of images, film, video and audio recordings on past and contemporary popular culture and vernacular art.

With its particular emphasis on seasonal custom, the collection has won international recognition. Starting in 1963, with a Mayday visit to Padstow in Cornwall, a passionate interest in people's art and celebration has led Doc on annual visits to events such as the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance in Staffordshire; the Haxey Hood Game in Lincolnshire; the Burry Man of South Queensferry in West Lothian ...and more.

This exhibition is seen foremost as a celebration of the diversity, vitality and richness of the organic, living vernacular and participatory arts found in the contemporary folk culture of these islands - generally unknown, overlooked and, all too often, trivially treated. This exhibition also features models created by Doc and his partner, Jill Pidd.

"One of the most important English collectors since Sharp" (Living Traditions Magazine), this is a fascinating and illuminating view of the world of British folklore.
Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 5pm. Admission Free.

Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regent's Park Road, Camden, London NW1 7AY phone 0207 485 2206

➤ **John Gasson Website**

From Tracey Rose: "I have been trying to find pictures of John Gasson for the Jig Competition website. Has anyone got pictures of John either in kit (Mr Jorrocks, Headcorn or Seven Champions) or as himself that you would scan/copy for me so that I can get them loaded on the website. Also any good ones of entrants in the competition. If so please send to her at traceyrose7@btinternet.com

See the web site in progress: www.johngassonjig.org.uk
(Ed: I've had a sneaky look and it makes good reading)

➤ **Caption poser**

Only one reader came up with any captions for the photo opportunity posed by Mabel Gubbins in the last issue – thank you, Brian Mander, for:

1. Five surgeons, one appendectomy: not such a good idea.
2. The giant ninja team at last year's DERT proved to be poor losers.
3. I told you to beware the Ides.

I like number 2 best!

Derek's Ninth Letter To The Truncheons

A homily on life and the morris, by Rev 'Call-me-Derek' Bream, vicar of St Just-near-Trunch, Norfolk.

“Hello. My name is Rev Derek Bream, but I do hope you'll call me Derek. Now, are you sitting comfortably? - really? Well, I expect you can get something from the chemist later.

Do you know, I saw something recently that really made me think. No, it wasn't on the telly. It wasn't 'The Weakest Millionaire' or 'Who Wants To Be A Link?' In fact, to guess what I saw you'd have to do more than phone the audience, or ask fifty friends. So I'll put you out of your misery and tell you what it was. I was hiking through Hempnall when I saw a motley of merry morris dancers. How I love their bells and hankies, their cheerful music, and their jolly costumes. Who could fail to smile at the floral hats alone? Indeed, I was smiling at their hats when it struck me.

No, not a pig's bladder, wielded by a fool dressed as a bearded lady. What hit me was this:

Life is like a morris dance, isn't it? We all have our steps to take. We all have our ups and our downs. And no doubt, at one time or another, we all look like total plonkers.

But if we do our best, and don't trip up our fellow dancers, or drop our hankies, we too can have the satisfaction of successfully doing the dance of life – before ending up exactly where we started from.

So I have this to ask you - in your life, are you a good morris dancer? Do you leap as high as you can? Do you keep in time with your fellow plonkers? Or do you pretend to have a bad ankle, and skulk behind the fiddle player? You see what I'm saying, don't you?

When you finally dance for that great fiddler in the sky will you be praised for your smart kit and clean hankies, or will you be found wanting, with tarnished bells and soiled pumps? And when the very last note has been played, and you take the hat round the heavenly host, will you receive gold and silver, or just a used bus ticket and a couple of bent washers?"

© Chris Sugden, 2006

Thanks to Chris and to Channel 4 radio who originally broadcast this as part 3 of "A Kipper Country Code" (www.channel4radio.com).

*Derek's letters 1 to 8 appear in *Cod Pieces* by Chris Sugden and Sid Kipper (pub Mousehold Press) – see www.sidkipper.co.uk*

Morris Dance: A Eulogy

The Morris Ring sadly announced the death, following a long illness, on Monday 5 January, of Morris Dance.

The family respectfully request no flowers in hats and no dancing on the grave. No bells are to be rung.

Long Lankin offers a few graveside words of consolation and farewell.

“Morris Dance finally slipped away from us after a long, wasting illness. Despite a few last appearances to great popular acclaim the last caper has been cut and the last leg hooked. No more will we hear the soft jangle of bells through the morning mists of May Day or the squeezebox wheeze on a summer’s evening to the flash of whites outside a village pub.

Let us remember Morris in its vigorous youth: trim bodies that flew to the music and having danced would dance again with barely a bead of sweat. Leapfrogs that a PE Instructor would be proud of and lines crisp enough to raise the envy of a Grenadier Guardsman. That was the Morris who enthralled us with its raw energy and deceptive simplicity. Yet even then the desire to explore and experiment clashed with respect for tradition.

This clash of experiment and custom was also reflected in its dress sense – or lack of it. It persisted in britches and multi coloured socks long after they were popular and the idea of hats heavily decorated with flowers never caught on. Heavy rag coats in summer and white cottons in winter, Morris wore them all with relish. Even its taste in make-up was extreme and unsubtle as if, having decided to wear make-up, it did not know when to stop applying it. How we all laughed at some of the results though I am not sure Morris always wanted us to – sometimes it could take itself very seriously.

Let us remember too Morris as a mature and powerful adult. The fascination it held for us with the subtleties of the slow capers to augmented music and the rich diversity of style with reinterpretations of the old dances and the creation of new ones. We accept that not all of Morris’ performances were great ones even in this period. The price paid for this diversity and experimentation was quality and consistency, even Morris accepted that at times this was a high price – sometimes perhaps too high. Yet Morris was always tolerant and encouraged participation. It asked only that we each gave our best, whatever our ability.

There was also Morris’ friendship and camaraderie. Whether at a weekend gathering or a weekday evening there was always the good company, a few drinks and perhaps a song and a tune. And if it developed its little rituals and idiosyncrasies as time went on - we loved them too.

Finally there was Morris in old age: less capable and without much of the youthful energy but still precise and proud in its precision. We loved it still because it reminded us of our own youth. Yet ultimately Morris faded and its final appearances were almost caricatures of itself. It was as if it had become the joke that many had always thought it.

So finally we have gathered here to bury Morris - to leave it in peace and to give it a final dignity as a lost tradition of a mythical rural England. Its memory will live on in the Readers Digest Guide to Olde England and as background activity in countless TV light dramas.

RIP Morris Dance”

According to the Morris Ring, Morris dancing is close to terminal decline and will have ceased to exist within the next twenty years. Their plea wasn't really helped by some of the stock library photos that appeared of old men scarcely getting their feet off the ground and the Ring's own persistence that it is something done by men only, although some of the stories did acknowledge that there were "a few women and mixed sides" around.

Nor is it necessarily the correct message. It would be a shame for the tradition to die out but no tradition or custom has an automatic right to exist unless it can find some contemporary relevance and appeal. Presenting it as something done by old men with scarcely any energy or awareness of the audience is not going to appeal to young people when compared to other forms of street entertainment. Anyway, who wants to take something up if it is about to disappear from the face of the earth?

Of course it is not that simple. The mistake the Ring has made is to see itself as the Morris. It may well be that within twenty years all the Ring sides will be too old to continue and that the Ring will fold but I suspect there will still be Federation and Open Morris sides performing.

And even if Morris sides do disappear totally the dances will remain as notations, as photographs, as films and as recordings. At some point somebody will suggest trying them out and the whole process will start again.

Morris Dance may even be the better for the rest.

Long Lankin

January 2009

Morris Matters is published twice a year by Beth Neill with help from Jill Griffiths. Subscriptions are £6 for two issues (£8 outside EU countries) published in January and July.

Please make cheques payable to Morris Matters,
27 Nortoft Road, Chalfont St Peter, Bucks SL9 0LA; phone 01494 871465

