

## FIRST ISSUE

### MY THOUGHTS ON THE MORRIS, ITS EARLY HISTORY AND ORIGINS by Roy Dommett, Friend of the Morris Federation, from a Sidmouth Lecture

#### KEY STARTING POINTS

The performing arts are ephemeral, and, like religions, needing to be constantly recreated to exist. This allows them to adjust over time to changing external social and cultural circumstances, as well as to internal choices.

**Morris is defined here as the public outdoor performance mostly accompanied by music by a group of costumed and rehearsed dancers for entertainment and consequent voluntary reward.** It excludes what are inward looking local customs, like beating the bounds, or town rides. There is no evidence of the survival in Britain of primitive community hunting or fertility dances as might have been performed by men and women respectively. This is hardly surprising considering the history of the country which has been one of constant change.

Today this definition could include groups from dance schools, Can-Can dancers, Egyptian Belly dancers, Bengali dancers with material based on Bollywood films, and other ethnic teams. I do not exclude the weird and wonderful or the avante garde, but these have to stand or fall on their own merits. The morris today implies some roots in distant past performances, although this cannot always have been so! The morris often exploits nostalgia in its appearance and behaviour to preserve past idioms and attitudes as long as they are still socially acceptable. Hence the difficulties that have arisen when some changes of uncertain future or value have occurred. The most obvious of these has been the reacceptance of women as proper heirs of the tradition.

**The morris is unique in Britain in that it goes out to find its audience,** which does not **have** to pay to watch, although the performers can be engaged for fund raising and celebratory events. It is often in its impact more carnival than artistic.

The morris is an event and accounts about it should properly be about its performance, not its history. For some intellectual reason its origins have appeared to be important, perhaps this is the fault of the propaganda thought necessary by the original revivalists, however it has not helped our cause and it contributes to the continuing dubious public image which has existed ever since World War One.

Of course you can believe what you like about the past, unless it affects your behaviour and any decisions that impinge on other people. The historic truth is hard to ascertain, but perhaps we are getting close to posing the right questions! However there is a difference between the imagined Past and the actual History which will have to be discussed later.

The accessibility of public records nowadays provides information about the lives of former dancers and musicians, but it does little for our understanding of the morris as an event or as dances in their traditional context. Even if it could, it is unlikely to provide a guide to what it is or could be today. There is perhaps a need to appreciate the social and cultural changes that have occurred, if only to recognise that attitudes and behaviour common in the past may no longer be appropriate or acceptable.

#### 1 TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE MORRIS

Human behaviour is inordinately complex, but a satisfactory theoretical background for the morris has to answer four key questions, for a serious discussion with critics.

- a **Why do humans engage in such activities?** We have no real idea whether morris like activities or organised religion came first. Immediately after the last Ice Age the country was empty. Settlers in a new country have always been pragmatic and responded to what appeared to them to be useful quickly or basic, whereas religions needed to develop intellectual concepts and to persuade other

people. The potential for a conflict has periodically raised intellectual problems because, although initially neutral, leisure activities have naturally always attracted local religious overtones, leading to suspicions of the continuity of its propriety when there were major cultural changes, such as when the Roman Empire became predominately Christian, or part of the Catholic world became Protestant.

**b Does it account for its persistence** through the various stages of our society's development? Since folk culture was first recognised as such it was assumed to be essentially conservative in the long term, even if there are periods of cutting edge creativity. The oral tradition implied is essentially a 'grandfather rule' as accessibility to the tradition is inherently limited by existing memories. Is modern recording and archiving distorting the process?

**c Can it explain the apparent diversity of activities** under the common title? Is there a universal element? Why do they do it? Why is performance often as simple as it can be to achieve the objective?

There has been in the past a basic urge to perform which adopts the local idiom, but in such a manner that each area exhibits similar motivation and conduct.

**d What is its role today?** What do its participants and audience gain to make it worth continuing?

Group rhythmic activity is uplifting, the cheerful attitudes generate 'feel good' factors, the physiological effects are significant, if not understood properly. But growing up within a morris team environment does not necessarily prepare dancers for the wider world.

These questions involve fundamental issues of continuity, leisure, clubs, and gender which have a wider significance. But morris' history ought to be able to be used to support the conclusions from any such larger debate, which will unfortunately have to be pursued elsewhere.

The problem with tradition is that it gradually erodes, so it also depends on a degree of creativity and on performers of exceptional ability who reinvigorate the content. The difficulty with preserving by oral transmission, or in our case by word of foot, is that complexities of technique as distinctive features often become lost because of the technical limitations of those who are trying to transmit it to others. These recipients in turn will not have access to any group from whom to derive any concepts of the degree of tolerance of variation or of excellence that had been acceptable within the original source.

Teachers or transmitters have of necessity to be selective in what is passed on. This involves value judgements which must inadvertently produce a drift in how movements are done.

Morris is yet another form of sport, in its modern existence it is seldom competitive except in the friendliest way. The past arguments used for its 'ritual' origins also apply to older sports in general. As a folk custom it is a community based activity, unlike folk song, story telling or superstitions, which are often transmitted uncritically by one-to-one contact.

## 2 "The Revival" - THE CONFUSION CAUSED BY RECEIVED HISTORY

Too much of what may have existed as explanation in the early twentieth century has been misleading. For many years it was stated that, and the quotes are from **Stephen Corrsin** in his book on Sword Dances,

"A few well educated middle and upper class English men and women rescued and preserved priceless jewels of English folk dance and music from degeneration and disappearance; they were able to collect and teach these jewels with unique accuracy; and they did so selflessly, without motives of personal advancement or support for particular political and social ideologies."

This activity was justified by pseudo science. It has been convenient to airbrush out its modern reinvention in real social concerns, including the activities involved with opposition to the Boer War, Votes for Women, the early Fabian Society and the early members of the Parliamentary Labour Party all at the start of the twentieth century.

"Sharp and other revivalists found intellectual support in the theory of primitive 'survivals in Culture' developed by E Tylor, long discarded by scholars, but not by the revival itself."

It has been very difficult to get people to reject the images of Frazer's "*Golden Bough*", as well as ignoring the unspoken consequential assumptions of subsequent collectors. It focussed attention into the wrong areas when people started looking for evidence. All of which has distorted our understandings of what had actually happened.

"The collectors were deeply involved and active in their own societies. Their attitudes had critical impacts, for example, the morris should be rural and male. The role of women was unrepresented and in the revival marginalised, trivialised or ignored. There was a right wing bias until well after WWII."

Much more can be made of the apparent errors, superficialities and absurdities of past literature which often reflected the common understanding of the academic attitudes of the times, that have now yielded to scientific study in more recent years. It is better to accept that it occurred and then ignore it as irrelevant for today. Between the wars, the morris was organised and preserved in a Middle Class determined context, but without that phase it would not have existed to be rediscovered since World War II.

**Of course, when examining it in detail, nothing was really revived or replicated, neither the people, their condition, the costumes, the occasions, the instruments or implements. It was reinvented, eventually as dance troupes in a club or class atmosphere and usually in a year round weekly environment!** We also lack evidence now for the fidelity of the transmission of what we think has been preserved, because of the limitations of all movement notations.

## DELVING INTO HISTORY

### 3 THE EXTRAPOLATION BACK

The recognised professional approach to history, as advised for those constructing family history, is to work in reverse, starting from the recent and working steadily further back. History is recorded in either oral or documentary formats. Oral history has many recognised and well documented shortcomings, memories are neither perfect nor cover all that is relevant, but it does avoid the problem with interpreting old contemporary written material which should always to be considered in the light of **who** is writing **what** to **whom** to achieve **which** effect, now subject to what is often called spin. One problem is that some of what are actually the key issues were thought of as so common and understood by everyone that they did not get mentioned at all.

This point raises again the question of the fundamental difference between '**History**' and the '**Past**'. The former is the facts that can be established and is inherently full of gaps which published narrative accounts have to gloss over. This is why they are called Secondary Sources. The latter is that which is imagined or assumed and is what is normally used to guide activities and decisions and is not necessarily a true reflection of what actually happened. A narrative can utilise a wider base of knowledge than could have been available to the individual participants at the time, but it does not know what it does not know, and is therefore subject to revisionists who have perhaps obtained more detail or a more insightful approach. The usual result is that revisionists are able to make situations appear to have been more complex and past interpretations to have been too simplistic.

**That things in the past changed is beyond dispute, just think of the personal mental images associated with mentions of the Stone Age, Romans, Saxons, Normans, Tudors, Restoration, Victorians and even the 1930's,** or if you are old enough, what you have lived through yourself.

Changes are just as significant when considering much shorter intervals. Relevant to the morris, and roughly speaking,

- 2000 Documentaion of popular culture,
- 1950 Rediscovery by educated working class,
- 1900 Social reform, Fabians, Labour Party and Suffragettes, leading to a so called Revival,
- 1850 Rational Activities and redefining Women's Place, the killing of traditional behaviours,

- 1800 Napoleonic Wars and social disruptions, leading to economic necessities not good luck visits,
- 1750 American Rebellion and the Enlightenment, deference and the presumed heyday of traditions,
- 1700 The Glorious Revolution, really being conquered by the Dutch, with the start of a reinvention of culture after the Civil Wars, the Protectorate and the Restoration. An age when deference was a normal imposed part of life.

It was impossible to ignore the changes in society over the years and the morris as an event has had to adjust to remain acceptable or tolerable. The dance forms surviving were regional and each idiom naturally has a different history, reflected in its character and its performance.

- Cotswold** - Keith Chandler's publications show the continuity back to 1700, but few very long lived teams and there was a dependance for existence on external factors such as local patronage, ales, and clubs such as the Friendly Societies from late 18th century.
- Molly, Stave** - mid to late 19th C, contemporary country dance like.
- Salisbury** - an occasional morris out with the Giant and Hobnob the hobby horse on national celebration occasions.
- Long Sword** - the European analogues peaked before England had examples, and they had a greater variety of movements.
- Rapper** - needed the invention of flexible spring steel to be done, with an economy of numbers.
- Border** - not very country dance like. Used very short sticks or work implements, aimed at showing precision not strength, unlike today.

#### 4 EARLY MORRIS OPPORTUNITIES

This actually means here the pre 1800 period, before any oral evidence was available to the first collectors. But all the dance forms found later depended on local functions that no longer exist now as common living community activities, and many cannot be traced back before 1800, typically,

- Cotswold** - Ales and Clubs
- Processionals** - Rushcarts
- Border, Molly, Long Sword** - Mid Winter Slack Times
- Stave** - Friendly Society Annual Walk
- Rapper** - Pubs and Clubs Tours
- Seasonal Plays** - Patronage, outdoor and indoor performance styles

All were dying out in 19th Century, many of those left ended with the slaughter of the First World War, finally some reappeared through economic necessity during the 1930's Depression. Some changed their form, perhaps growing competitive eg. NW Morris spawning Carnival Morris for girls, and some were "Revived" in a completely new environment. Julian Pilling's collection of postcards of early NW teams showed a high proportion of women's sides which have been largely ignored in more recent historical accounts.

The original "Good Luck" visiting objective was often overlaid with the economic need for the money received, especially in their later years, so that largesse given became a part of the expectation. Several older Cotswold dancers commented that it got like begging. Reinvention in an emasculated form was also a typical Victorian response, reflecting changing attitudes.

#### 5 PERSISTANCE

The evidence from Tudor times is of a nationwide, if limited, use of the morris. The English Reformation that started during Edward VI's reign turned the Church and Civic Authorities against what they saw as a Popish activity well before the growth of the influence of 'Godly People'. It is a fundamental error for morris sides today to imply that Puritans or Oliver Cromwell himself suppressed the morris. James I and Charles I already had to publically encourage performance as a healthy exercise along with archery. The prohibition of maypoles and football matches

and the like was because of the risk of social unrest when there was no effective police force and the gatherings of crowds was thought could easily lead to riotous or seditious actions. The morris had collapsed by the time of the Protectorate and the Restoration, emerging again at some stage in various regional forms. For most areas the continuity is unknown, but the urge to perform continued and related activity has been mentioned in many places outside of the what are considered to be the conventional traditional counties.

To the south of the Thames, from east to west, a presumed folk dance desert, there were at least,,

- a Lucy Broadwood's last Sussex Morris Man, who dressed in motley, played a trumpet, and danced fantastically.
- b At Puttenham under the Hog's Back west of Guildford, the morris died because one performer, the captain, insisted that he was to be buried in the only costume. As they were the local carters, they had danced against locals at the pubs in London which they visited,
- c Local references to parties of dancers with fiddlerS as musicians visiting houses in Old Farnborough and Old Woking towards the end of the 19th century.
- d The morris at Salisbury which appeared to use the same tune on all its outings but chose a different dance to perform on each occasion. Half the team were always dressed as women.
- e The annual mixed procession at Shaftesbury which was to pay for the town's water supply from a neighbouring manor followed by a municipally funded feast. The Bezant which was the exhibited centrepiece is in the town museum.
- f Simple morris like dances found in the East Somerset mining towns.

The local mummers often included a concluding dance in their show. The Christmas seasonal performance was often because of the hard times that occurred when some trades were frozen out and thus the workers unemployed. Just as the NHS and National Insurance killed the need for Friendly Society roles, so did the Benefit System of the Welfare State end the economic incentive to perform traditional customs.

Then there were also known to be Children's Games in many traditional formations including some with chain and wind-up snail movements, rather like the French farandole.

## 6 EARLIEST EVIDENCE OF THE PERFORMANCE OF SEASONAL PLAYS

What can we learn from other seasonal performances?

Early Medieval mummers were silent performers illustrating the plot being read out by a clerk who was in what looked like the more modern Punch and Judy booth. There is evidence later captured in the English Drama Records of playlets as well as the Corpus Christi Mystery plays. The surviving and collected Robin Hood songs and stories also are suggestive of some robust and probably comic performances, often involving the characters falling into water. Toni Arthur wrote a play for young people which exploited this feature, staged with a plank over a fishpond. The Robin Hood character soon got fed up with changing his costume after each soaking!

But the history of particular idioms does not have to have had to exist for long. The evidence is,

<b>Plough Ceremonies</b>	<b>since</b>	<b>1413</b>
<b>Hero Combat</b>		<b>1730's</b>
<b>Wooing Play</b>		<b>1760</b>
<b>Sword Play</b>		<b>1800</b>

We would like to believe that these were actually more ancient but the trail becomes vaguer and comments are much more generalised further back, and difficult to interpret. However the records of what was performed in the early 16th century before the first appearance of theatres show that the style of production was very comparable to that used for the seasonal plays of later years.

It is thought likely that the widespread texts, which have considerable similarities wherever performed, owe their origins to the versions printed in chap books, the cheaply available reading of common people in the 17th and 18th

century. The oldest collected text dates from about 1800. Often plays had local characters as well as the standard ones, and had local references and often local topical asides added, features often ignored by modern revivalists. The characters such as the Quack Doctor did not date back further than the end of the Elizabethan period and the Stuarts. The French and Spaniards were not both enemies until after the Great Armada. The Turkish Knights were once world famous as fighters, being the best trained and equipped in the world until at last bested by an Austrian Prince with superior firepower, for the Ottoman world had turned in on itself rather than continuing to lead technically. This is a potential problem with any centrally controlled economy.

The appearance of a troupe could be deceptive. The late Ted Duckett, a step dancer from Poole, told how his gang dressed up as mummers in paper streamer costumes and then, after formally announcing themselves in the manner of the sword dancers, proceeded to perform their party pieces in turn as did black faced minstrels.

## 7 ENGLISH TRADITION OF MASKING

Face colouring is the last vestige of a once common process of "disguising".

Unless it is a full body cover, it does not work to deny identification unless they have never met before which is possible in this day and age, but it is difficult to see how it would in a countryside of small communities with high interdependence. Poachers, like modern commandos, used face painting to avoid being noticed at all. Much more likely it was intended in customs to give the disguiser freedom to behave differently from normal, just as an actor, or as they would say "to free the spirit". It was really for the benefit of the performer. It should be remembered that face colouring, particularly all over, can be frightening, which is why circus clowns have their individual registered patterns of colours, with emphasis on the mouth and eyes.

- Full Body Disguise** - As with Horses and Bulls, Buryman, Straw Bear, Gullivers, Jack-in-the-Green etc
- False Head** - From the Middle Ages and related to what they knew. North Waltham mummers were paid to perform under heads based on medieval mss borders for a film in 1947 called "Uncle Silas"..
- Full Face Mask** - Tudor period and before, but may have derived from the classical knowledge that arose with the Renaissance, although such are common all over the world.
- Eye Mask** - As presumed for Highwaymen, then used from Masquerades to Fancy Dress.
- Face Painting** - Fashionable now with children and sports supporters.
- Blacking Up** - The 1731 Black Act forbade it, only one morris mention of it before 1750. Anything recorded as post 1843 is suspect because of the overwhelming influence of black face minstrelsy on all forms of public entertainment in the UK up until World War One. A point now forgotten. Also what other colouring was available then?

This blacking up is often brought up in connection with Border Morris. Eventually someone will take a morris to court over blacking up. It is very desirable that any evidence that it was a common custom, as distinct from an occasional one, is assembled because a barrister will run rings around anyone presenting the currently used arguments.

Much more attention should be given to the European usages of masks as well as the possible significance of the contact with the early and continuing disguising experienced in West Africa.

## 8 ENGLISH EXPERIENCE OF PEOPLE'S COLOUR

What were the attitudes to heavily tanned outdoor workers? The Middle and Upper Classes avoided being tanned themselves.

Dark skinned people as soldiers came with the Romans, were met during the Crusades and on medieval and early modern trade routes. Ambassadors and their followers from parts of the Islamic areas were at Queen Elizabeth's court. Blackamoors were exotic personal servants as early as the time of Catherine of Aragon. There were dark skinned Italians and Spanish. King Charles with his quarter Italian blood was known as "Black Boy" and is still commemorated on Inn signs. Later many Iberians were recruited for the south Wales mines in the nineteenth century and, because of their, to the locals, outlandish names, were often renamed Jones.

The Berbers took just seven years to conquer most of Spain, and became known to us as Moors. The English had direct experience of the Moors in Spain, first through academic learning centres with an access to classical writing resources, but also from employment in the Reconquest, and then settling the empty countryside after the ethnic cleansing, and also from trade. The *moresque* style of textiles and decorations were considered to be the best, and some examples can be seen in the Victoria and Albert museum, but also the Toledo steel as swords and halberds was thought of exceptional quality. Then there were the Barbary Coast Pirates from the Magreb who attacked the West Country and Ireland in the days of James I. From trade with the Levant following the Crusades there was familiarity with the Saracens, then later the Ottoman Turks, but also the exotic peoples, variously known as Ethiopian, Nubian, Nigerian, and even those from the Gold Coast, where the gold bullion for early English coinage was derived via the trans-Saharan caravans. Then the sub-Saharan peoples in West Africa were involved in the three cornered slave trade, which provided the funds to stimulate the start of the Industrial Age in Coalbrookdale, and incidentally probably affected the appearance and justifications of some West Country Customs. Trade with the Magreb improved after the Pope excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I!

Black dressed Satans occur in Basque and French/Spanish customs. Black still has negative implications in the West.

Black Faced Minstrelsy existed from the 1840's. So popular was it that by the start of the 20th century it was the most common form of entertainment available in London. After WW1 it became a typical amateur entertainment replacing older traditions, as it depended on performing existing party pieces rather than something especially learnt. But Minstrelsy in the USA promoted a derogatory image of Afro-americans and is now unacceptable.

'Taking offence on behalf of others where none is intended is one of the banes of modern life. Using the criminal law to enforce compliance with the doctrine of diversity is a form of fascism.' Dail Mail p17, 25.03.11.

Colour prejudice in England is reported to have fallen sharply after the abolition of slavery, although this did not happen as quickly as the date of the legislation would suggest, but it was rekindled by the US military stationed in Britain in both World Wars. Their coloured people were given mainly limited pioneer tasks. Did they not recognise that Christ was at least darkish, and that he did not speak in English?

The European experience could be different. "Black Peter" in Holland visits and gives presents on 5th December,

Colour prejudice still existed when I was at school in the late 1940's. An outstanding girl athlete could not gain a place in town or county teams even though she was a fourth generation from the West Indies, whose grandparents had been well known to my grandfather.

## 9 THE HARD EVIDENCE

There is much that is not widely known about the 19th century morris. How common were the sides at any one time? What were their catchment areas? How often was there inter-marriage? What else would we like to know? Perhaps decadal maps, or sites of graves. There is still a need to build up more evidence.

Heany and Forrest "*Early Morris Annals*" is the prime evidence for occurrences and mentions of morris up to 1750 in Britain. However quite a few of the references are entries in documents like dictionaries. Forrest's following book is a very good analysis of this evidence. The caution that has got to be given is that the earliest references to things with an association with the morris frequently quoted in club brochures prove nothing more than that morris existed somewhere in Europe and that the artifacts were no more than exotic imports, or even that the dancers seen may have been a touring company. William Kemp, Shakespeare's clown, toured Europe with his act, as well as doing and

publishing an account of the *Nine Days Wonder* of a processional form of dance from London to Norwich. The actor Chris Harris has edited and reprinted the account and toured with a one-man performance based on it.

Three Dance Formations have been found in the literature and illustrations of the 16th century. These are the **Chain**, the **Circle**, and the going **Two by Two**, but the morris is often just quoted as performing processionals. The linked chain was the common social dance of the ordinary folk of the time. It is still widely found in Europe in that role from France to Greece. The Circle is of dancers going around a figure standing or dancing separately in the centre. Unfortunately the convention for illustration purposes is to show every dancer doing something different although in practice they all followed the steps of the leader. This pattern is still followed by the Basques in their Sauts where each sequence of steps and capers has its own title which is called and continued until another is chosen. The closest approach in an English dance are the various leapfrog dances in which the dancer at the top performs a sequence, each in turn as they circle round, or as in *The Rose* or similar chorus movements. Going two-by-two, ie in pairs, is the conventional processional which can be for as many pairs as will.

**Spanish transmission to North America.** Early 1994 there was an exhibition in the Smithsonian in Washington about New Mexico that showed films of the similar morrises and matachins performed in Pueblo Amerindian and Spanish villages in that state. The implements and steps looked culturally dependent but removing these elements what was left was the structure of the common long set dance as found in North Wales, Lancashire. Provence and Northern Italy. The Jesuits had taken the then current Spanish dances to replace the native dances.

In a Penguin book called *'The World Turned Upside Down'* there was a reference to Quakers going out like morris dancers. Puzzled, I visited the Quaker library in Birmingham, to be told it was a dig based on the knowledge that preaching Quakers went out in pairs!

The Matachins followed the appearance of the morris as a dance idiom with sticks. It was not so popular.

A frequent mention were the Napkins. Handkerchiefs were invented by King Richard II or III to avoid using the long tails of the sleeves which had been the common practice. Kerchieves or Neckerchiefs were traditionally one yard square before hemming, just the right size to wrap a meal in, etc. The original pocket handkerchief was a quarter of this, eighteen inches square before hemming. This was the size of the morris handkerchief which when held by one corner the other diagonal could reach the ground. The modern pocket handkerchief is only one ninth, that is one foot square before hemming, and a 'ladies' is even smaller!

Records show that before 1800 customs now thought of as common to particular areas actually appeared instead in different parts of the country. The Cotswold form is deduced to have stretched at least from Bath to Bletchley and presumably to Wootton Bassett and probably further. In the 1740's the famous Bath team was invited to dance during a cricket match in London after it had performed at the Bartholemew Fair

## 10 INTERNAL EVIDENCE

What can be said about the morris from the evidence from its dances and techniques themselves? The classic morris step, as described by Sharp based on the performance of his oldest informants, needs a reasonably smooth dancing surface. That 'stepping' ended with a 'break', either a plain jump or a more complex cadence is typical of folk step dancing, but not of social dancing at any time, nor is the use of implements such as handkerchiefs. It is not normal for Morris dancers to have any physical contact except for handclapping patterns, whereas 17th century social dancing, at a higher social level, was full of handshaking, kissing and other movements suitable for social situations. The morris does not have progressive figures as with the Assembly Room longways for as many as will, as it is not a form of socialising

The common double step as described by Sharp is not part of the surviving tradition in the 20th century. *Riverdance*, the Irish exploitation show that is always referenced when considering a major English display, showed dancers always up on the balls of their feet. In light soft shoes this was very morris like. Dancers such as Harry Taylor of Longborough liked to wear special light weight shoes for the morris, even though they could be worn through in a short period of dancing. Country boots were not the preferred footwear! The 19th century English tradition was athletic, a style copied by Sharp's first men's team who had been taken to meet traditional dancers. Some of the

sources had told Sharp that they learnt and practiced the stepping supported by two chair backs or between the rails of a sheep dip. Ballet dancers have to practice to make their ankle and foot joints strong enough. It is doubtful if traditional dancers of the 19th century had a strength problem, but the modern trend for thinner bones and lighter frames because of the different life style of modern urban based people indicates a potential problem. The classic stepping needs smooth floors, which came into existence about Tudor times. Before that it was threshing floors that were used for social dancing, but hardly for morris. As initially the morris was more of a processional dance, the first morris had to be suitable for typical urban road surfaces, presumably cobbles and the like. In the Middle Ages dancing appears to have been mostly out of doors, which would not have been bowling green smooth. Perhaps this explains the high knee lift in regional styles of stepping.

Other morris steps, for example galleys and capers, have similarities to some used in the galliards and Elizabethan Jigs, but they are far fewer, less elaborate and more economical. Unlike the Basque traditions, it is improbable that the morris contributed to the early development of the professional ballet.

The tunes found in the Cotswold morris are of various ages. Most appear in tune collections but spread over many years. Some such as Trunkles and Shepherd's Hey have not been found and may be ancient. Trunkles might mean Trunk Hose a 17th century fashion for a while. A few are quite late, such as Getting Up Stairs and The Rosetree (in Full Bearing). The former is considered to have been a Black Face Minstrel song first.

The English Country Dance was an upper and middling classes activity that started in the Elizabethan era. No lionage with the dances of the folk has been established. "Country" was from the spirit in which they were danced, and it meant country as in "town and country", where they relaxed and enjoyed themselves. Playford's first edition was published between the time of the battles of Dunbar and Worcester at the end of the Civil Wars with the object of use for dancing at home. Later editions were relevant to the growth of assembly rooms and showed the gradual shift to the more socially appropriate progressive longways-for-as-many-as-will form. The English Country Dance was spread to the continent and many of Europe's preserved folk dances are derivative. It may be necessary to remind that Thomas Hardy wrote that he remembered when he was a teenager the longways dances reaching the servants and country people in Dorset and the Fletts finding a similar spreading of the form into the Highlands and Islands within the living memory of their informants.

The pattern in Playford's first edition for the non-progressive set dances is very suggestive at first sight, but the established source of these social dances was in the theatre and masques. The very limited evidence is for their earlier form being very much simpler. The best conclusion is that social and seasonal dances may have had a common source, but the dance choreographers were far more prolific than the morris.

The standard figures which distinguish the English form of morris from the continental traditions are not those of the Playford dances.

Playford		Morris
Up and back a double twice	-	Foot up and down
Siding	-	Half Gyp
Arming	-	Hands Round

and no Cross Over, Back to Back or Rounds as regular movements. Where is the "something and half-hey" repeated pattern which was that which did occur in folk dancing often as a stand along structure?

There is no doubt that the Country dance was popular amongst the middling class, see the endless references in Pepys diaries for their commonality before the rise of the Assembly Rooms developed.

## 11 HOME GROWN THREADS

When society lived close to a subsistence level, ensuring fertility and a successful harvest could mean the difference between life and death. The technical understanding of farming was until quite late in history based on the writings of the ancients, which was largely empirical and not science based. Also the classical texts were for Mediterranean

climes, with their problems of adequate water supply and not those of the northern countries with their issues of enough temperature. It was a problem for the Romans who came to exploit the potential bread basket of the East Midlands and the opposite was found when we settled Australia. The farming practices depended on what appeared to work without knowing why, and there was resistance to any changes because that would be going into the unknown.

The question is therefore what would a real fertility custom consist of? It would not be just a good farming practice but either something which we would call sympathetic magic or an expression of hopes or fears for the current year. Mimicing procedures in a dance or a playlet would be understood by an audience but it does not deserve to be elevated to mean something more. Hitting the ground or capering high and other such Victorian/Edwardian fantasies would be known to be ineffective. But they would allow the performers to express something in terms of things they and their audience knew. Stone age cultures around the world still had hunter gatherer lifestyles as well as primitive farming practices and it was noted by Sachs that it was the men who performed the hunting rituals and the women the planting ones.

We must never underestimate what appears to be primitive cultures. They may lack some sophistication but there are inherently as intelligent as anyone. It has been the folly of West to impose their ill thought through standards.

So what would they have considered? Waiting for the right date or the right weather - such rules are still followed by gardeners, although the justification may be weak. Planting potatoes on Good Friday was one such practice, but even that may have been because it was one day that the gardener could expect to be free to do so. Transhumance, taking the animals up to the higher ground for the summer season worked to the calendar, such as going up on May Day and returning in September/October and having the associated festivities. Harvest Home, Christmas and Shrove Tuesday were traditional feast days to use up the provisions of different limited shelf lives. Killing and preserving surplus livestock that could not be supported through the winter led to having waste that had to be destroyed by burning about the beginning of November. Lent was a recognition that the period before the new crops grew were the starving months anyhow. All such customary activity became frozen into the farming calendar and are still recognised today even though the globalisation has removed the reasons. However the human body has been evolved to suit this old pattern and the current excess supply leads to the modern health problems. The seasonal round in England depends on the local climate, which varied from south to north and from west to east, implying a local view on seasonal customs that had to fit in with the vital survival activities.

The typical date of English Spring customs is not about the time of ploughing, sowing, germination, hoeing, or of lambing and calving, the people would have been too busy. However there was a slack period before starting hay making and harvesting the early crops such as salad leaves after the starving months, thus they were a celebration of apparent success. Unfortunately the past theorists were not gardeners or farmers and did not grasp the realities!

People would use props that they knew - for example heads or skins. There was no guessing at future trends or responding to speculations. There was no historic perspective. Their imagination was limited to what they had or had heard of, for example the largest object known was a ship, so a typical extravagant display was the ship of fools. Is this the origin of the idea of floats? Bobby Wells of Bampton told the story that when trying to explain to locals on his return home from World War One that he had sailed in a liner, the largest object they could think of for comparison was a train.

What sort of Society does the Morris need? - a structured society and seasonal opportunities. But society was always changing, even today pubs are becoming restuarants and potential audiences are more static, and the morris has to struggle to make its impact.

## **BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES**

### **12 NATURE OF EVIDENCE**

Most of the surviving records are to do with taxation, legal matters, the monarchy, politics and the church. Drama and music development have been exhaustively explored both from the limited evidence and from their early links with religious expression. Relevant surviving illustrations are often peripheral to other sources, such as mss margins,

church wall paintings, stone and wood carvings, or incidentally in the use of contemporary images in what were intended as historical religious statements. Going far enough back in time there were the cave wall paintings. Interpretation involves degrees of extrapolation backwards of lessening credibility as the time gap increases.

The quantity of evidence surviving reduces the further back in time, both through natural losses, smaller populations, lower literacy and less complex life styles. The recording was less mature earlier, caring about fewer matters, and reading was more cumbersome and limited in numbers before printing existed. The interests were simpler and the spin placed on matters was coarser or more blatant, and the sense of historical accuracy much weaker. Often material is only found as complaints by the Church yet its consequent pronouncements, usually negative, were often ignored, which adds to the confusion. Unfortunately also some things were thought to be too commonplace to be remarked upon at all.

### **13 CAN WE TRUST MODERN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE?**

We cannot believe all the judgements of past publications, the available accessible material has often been skimmed over and views formed without a true regard for the evidence and reliance has often been placed on material from hostile sources. An example is the reputation of the Duke of Monmouth, for whom the evidence is derived mostly from James II, who was a superb dancer, along with his wife, just as were some of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers, and this skill has never appealed to academic writers. For generations senior figures excelled at war fighting until Tudor times when the emphasis at court changed to the social graces. Another example is Richard Cromwell, the son of Oliver, who was anything but *Tumble-Down-Dick*, but losers do not write history!

Three things are hard to explore through archeology, music, dance and trade, as they leave so little evidence. A consequence is that explanations of remains have tended to be in terms of ritual and religion, which even if appropriate, probably only applied to the later periods. A map of megalithic monument remains across Europe, which although they varied in form from area to area, shows that they were never a great distance from the sea, inferring that the underlying culture was probably a sea going one. Trade is evidenced from the wide distribution of items from tracable sources, such as hand axes from the Lake District. Local markets and seasonal Fairs have been evident from the earliest of records and should be assumed to have had even earlier origins. Both buyers and sellers need to know where and when to meet, hence the likelihood of fixed sites and dates for business of necessity related to astronomical calendar observations. However I doubt if these were held on the observable astronomical dates as it would seem unlikely that people would hang around at sites waiting for these to occur but would expect notification of it being held some days after the required observation had been made. It is unreasonable for actual fairs to occur on the same day everywhere as barterers/traders/sellers would have to be able to travel!

Another concern is that we were very dependent on particular sources such as Bede's history of early Britain, which was written many years after the events and for a king who needed to be impressed. For a long while we have believed that England was aggressively invaded by waves of Saxons, Angles and Jutes, but there is little archeological evidence of the associated expected damage or slaughter. The Saxon shore forts were probably more like trading posts for dealing with the new vibrant and stimulating cultures which were far from the ignorant impoverished barbarians of classical literature. The DNA evidence shows a gradual shift from Saxon to British genes going from east to west across the country which is hardly compatible with ethnic cleansing.

History can be manufactured by stringing together disconnected facts. Do you believe that the Chinese in 1423 sailed the world with a huge fleet and mapped the Americas, and in 1431 again sailed this time to Florence to share their encyclopedic knowledge and initiate the Renaissance? Did Columbus and Magellan have maps of where they were going when sailing into the supposed unknown. Did a tsunami wipe out Chinese settlements all around the Pacific? Did this cause the Chinese Emperor to reverse the country's policy towards the outer world for centuries?

### **14 THE GAMES**

The common theme was fund raising at a time when the tithes were for the support of the clergy, not for the building. Local aristocracy, guilds and perhaps incumbents did take responsibility for the upkeep of parts but it was seldom enough so they were dependent on what could be raised. Thus the Games, which were like modern fetes with games,

sports, competitions, food and drink, produce stalls and also organised entertainments. These varied over the years as fashions changed.

**Church Ales** were very common, after all there were eventually 10,000 parish churches. In the days when brewing was a very local and a mainly household task, the church wardens would organise a special brew, presumably stronger than normal, which was sold to lubricate the celebration of a local saint's day or the feast of dedication.

Organised entertainments would circulate around the neighbouring fetes. Such Ales would include the local expressions of the-world-turned-upside-down and other disrespectful behaviours. There were no police other than the parish constable and hence this behaviour was traditional with the licence that went with fools and clowns. The other names used did not represent much difference. The **King Games** - much of which were things to take the mickey about. The **May Games** - with a King and Queen, or Lord and Lady in charge, and also the **Robin Hood Games** - with little overlap in time with morris or Maid Marian and the stories allowing many opportunities for horseplay.

Early Drama Records - to be completed and then consequently studied. We need a current list of those volumes already published and the other in progress items. For example Hampshire is finished but due for publication and Gloucestershire is in work. These collectively should cover the period of the break up of the Middle Ages following the Black Death and the changes to society and the concurrent growth of secular entertainments. The booklet on Hampshire shows what is considered to be a typical history of the developments.

## 15 ANTECEDENTS

The English centric view of history is not helpful. We need to recognise our standing with other kingdoms over the early years, where the ideas originated and what was genuinely indigenous. Until the Tudors we were probably a backwater, a lagging developing country clearly being influenced by the outside world. Think colonies becoming dominions and no greatness until Elizabethan times and the rise of an effective navy.

Morris did not appear out of the blue. There are references to morris abroad before those in England. There are possible sources of importation.

Queens were brought in for dynastic reasons from various countries. They usually brought with them native courtiers and servants. Note the tender ages of most of them and their evident need for support in a strange land. It requires a map to show where some of these places were.

Name	Life	Reign	Wife	Origin	Life	Marry Age
Henry II	1133-1189	1154-1189	Eleanor	of Aquitaine	1122-1204	1152 30 b o/l
Richard I (Lionheart)	1157-1199	1189-1199	Berengaria	of Navarre	1165-1230	1191 26 o/l
John (Lackland)	1167-1216	1199-1216	Isabella	of Angoulême	1186-1246	1200 14 o/l
Henry III	1207-1272	1216-1272	Eleanor	of Provence	1222-1291	1236 14 o/l
Edward I	1239-1307	1272-1307	Eleanor	of Castile	1244-1290	1254 10 b
		Marguerite of France		1282-1317	1298 16 o/l	
Edward II	1284-1327	1307-1327	Isabella	of France	1292-1358	1304 12 b o/l
Edward III	1312-1377	1327-1377	Philippa	of Hainault	1314-1369	1328 14
Richard II	1367-1400	1377-1399	Anne	of Bohemia	1366-1394	1382 15
			Isabella	of Valois	1387-1410	1395 8 o/l
Henry IV	1367-1413	1399-1413	Mary	de Bohun	1369-1394	1382 13 b
			Joan	of Navarre	1370-1437	1403 33 o/l
Henry V	1387-1422	1413-1422	Catherine	of Valois	1401-1437	1420 19 o/l rem
Henry VI	1421-1471	1422-1461, 1470-1471	Margaret	of Anjou	1430-1482	1445 15 o/l
Edward IV	1442-1483	1461-1470, 1471-1483	Elizabeth Woodville		1437-1492	1461 24 o/l

Edward V	1470-1483	1483	unmarried				
Richard III	1452-1485	1483-1485	Anne	of Warwick	1456-1485	1472	16 b

b = king married before reigning, o/l = queen outlived the king, rem = queen remarried after king's death.

There are only three in this period who were mature at marriage. Berengaria never set foot in England. Eleanor of Aquitaine had a very turbulent life, although from the home of the troubadours, she and her husband did not get on, and she spent 15 years imprisoned. That leaves Joan of Navarre who is of the same period as the Black Prince and John of Gaunt who invaded Spain.

As late as 2008 a book stated,

'This most peculiar of English country traditions seems to be a hand-me-down from an altogether more lethal and martial ritual brought home by John of Gaunt (1340-99). His Spanish expeditions brought him into conflict with the Moors, who impressed him with their hyper-violent sword-dance in which those who lost the rhythm could well lose their head to boot. Public demonstrations of Morrish dancing caused the ritual to move into English rural tradition as Morris dancing, in which the dancers wore black makeup and the swords were replaced with wooden ones reflected in the little stick that dancers "fence" with today.'

Amazingly this was repeated on BBC's Radio Gardeners Question Time at the beginning of April 2011!

The classic account, eg. Young's "*History of British Music*" (1967), has, 'in 1381 John of Gaunt set up a Court of Minstrels at Tutbury in Staffordshire, which presided over by an elected King, was allowed to exercise authority over all of the craft in five of the midland counties. Five years later John of Gaunt brought back from Spain a troupe of Moorish dancers and the combination of their practices with those proper to the traditional English Fool's Dance is said to have provided the basis for the Morris Dance. It was in honour of John of Gaunt, therefore, that the Robin Hood and Morris dancers continued to wear his emblem - of three ostrich feathers - and the Red Lion on his shield after his marriage with Constance of Castile provided the name of inns which were for centuries the starting point for ceremonial May Day dances'. Note there is more to it than moors.

But what is the source of this story? The early morris records do not talk of sticks or of makeup. There is a gap of a century to explain as well. Is there any historical account of the development of Spanish dances to give a clue? The Baques recognise that there were Spanish dances with similar titles to theirs but naturally do not accept that theirs have any debt to them.

It would seem that it was the uncharacteristic expensive celebrations by Henry VII for the arrival of **Catherine of Aragon** that triggered the first appearances of the morris in its 16th century role. That court dances were not common to different countries was found when the princes met Catherine at Dogmersfield House in north east Hampshire on her way up to London. When they tried to dance together it was found to be impossible because of their quite different interpretations of the court dances, so each party had to dance with their own people.

The European wide contacts must not be underestimated. Besides trade which perhaps did not involve a large number of people outside of the wool export business, there were the many contacts through the churches. It is unlikely that the monasteries were involved but there were many church councils, of which the Council of Constance was of major importance and that brought leading prelates together for many months with their entertainments organised by the various attending groups as part of their public relations campaigns.

## 16 OTHER FACTORS

### A THE CHURCH

The analysis of surviving Church Warden Accounts covering fund raising and its costs shows that it is not clear what entries mean, therefore it is unknown whether if the entertainments are local or brought in. The cost of kit was such that some places had to borrow kit and equipment. The reading of entries has to take into account the analysis of changes in language and in the topics covered. The Renaissance brought in new jargon, and the use of drama to

illustrate issues, there was the impact of printing and the consequences of the availability of bibles in native tongues. These changes in attitudes were important.

The role of senior church prelates was altering with a switch to role of being more of a Civil Service. This was because the church was the only source of trained bureaucrats who were not soldiers. It had an effect on how the church responded to what was happening in society. We see the Church as opposed to festive culture, a Protestant view from Edward VI's time. But the attitude persists. A few years ago when invited to dance at a church fete held in the churchyard at Silchester, the Abercorn Stave dancers were asked to dance in the track outside as they were not quite sure about the propriety.

England lagged Italy by up to two centuries. The link of "folk" behaviour to medieval practices recognised as early as 1725.

## **B MIDDLE AGES**

This was a period of New Technologies - some western, some eastern - making the first Industrial revolution, from spinning wheels and wind mills to, mining. There was a fully developed religious life, which accumulated riches, partly from exploitation of the wildernesses, with varieties of Monks, Friars, and finally the Jesuits. There were the massive buildings which were impressive. The Normans rebuilt in stone replacing the Saxon Crosses and Minsters. The decorative and performing arts gradually flourished with the urge for only the best for God, leading to a taste for extravagance, as can still be seen in the decoration in Catholic churches abroad

The period led to the concept of nations with the associated need for loyalty and emphasis on prestige forms. But Europe was always fighting with itself.

It was also the period of the development of privacy and commerce, buildings had separate rooms. Trade grew with far wavy palces such as the Levant and the Magreb.

The Black Death , which had struck before in the 6th century, as well as the 14th, killed half the population and led to a major cultural shift

## **C THE GUILDS**

The Primary objective of the early Merchant or Trade Guilds persisting until quite late was religious observances and only secondary was trade regulation. Their activities included processions dressing up in expensive liveries, if one existed, not only on their own days but in support of other organisations, to show their status and to emphasise their prestige. They paid for musicians and no doubt in due course for morris. Funds were needed and raised through various procedures, as such displays also needed patronage. The guilds like the monasteries were obvious targets for Henry VIII. The selling of the properties led to the great rebuilding of the countryside, the redistribution of wealth, the glories of the Elizabethan age and eventually to a civil war.

## **D BEFORE ALL THIS - THE PAGANS**

The Dark Ages have become better understood over the last 50 years. We are no longer dependent on biased documents produced long after the events. Survivals from that period would have been wider spread than traces of traditions would suggest. The Christian Faith dominated life from the time of St Boniface. England was thoroughly catholic and the most catholic in Europe before the Reformation. This has the biggest impact on activities that require community approval or participation.

The Church, particularly the monasteries, led with the dramatisation of services, the introduction of Mystery Plays, the painted walls, the stained glass windows, and the illustrations in stone and in mss, all intended to educate and inform.

## **E WICCA**

This is a modern phenomena with no continuity with pagan times. There are no historical statements suggesting Morris was ever involved although the Pagan Times has listings of modern Morris Events!

Magic is basically a delusion, dependent on unsupportable unscientific ideas, eg. Homeopathy, alternative medicine and placebos. It assumes Sympathetic Magic exists and this opens up another discussion area outside of this paper.

However it involves a good caring and living style, see the book by Prof Hutton of Bristol.

## 17 RECOGNISING THE AGES OF THE MORRIS

**Prestige Age** - in the initial phase, essentially the 16th century, the morris appeared in prestige events. Sponsored locally by the church and civic authorities with expensive costumes. Alternatively, it was done by professional player touring companies who offered plays, triumphal entries, interludes and the morris. One must be beware of assuming that local references to some aspect of the morris, such as the purchase of bells, refers to a locally recruited team. The evidence of who actually did the morris dances in this period is very sparse, but some sources suggest it was yeomen rather than those of lower social status. Status was defined in terms of annual value of property and land owned. With the death of Henry VIII, the administration of Edward VI started a full scale move to Protestantism and the reduction or elimination of anything considered Popish. This naturally included the prestige morris.

Luther approved of dancing, Calvin did not. The English Independents (Congregationalists) did the Presbyterians did not. The modern United Reformed Church is the modern combination of the two, but it is no longer an issue since the Victorians had their way..

There was a gap through the 17th century with all its social upheavals and endless rethinkings.

**Heyday Age** - the 18th century - Following the Restoration of Charles II there was some return to Merrie England with maypoles, bonfires and other seasonal behaviours. But not exactly as before as attitudes had developed with the new generations. Through the 18th century the morris appears to have flourished but not in its first form. This is the period of the good luck visit, for which the recipient uses the opportunity to practice their philanthropy, from May Garlands carried by children to Bringing in the May by adults, to the morris and mummers and the various touring hobby animals.

**Decline Age** - the 19th century - The licence of the 18th century with its drunken behaviour and crudities and the habit of St Monday were counter-productive to the growing need for economic effort to support the Agricultural and Industrial developments of the time. Production needed a disciplined workforce. The objective of cultured society was to establish rational recreations, codification of sports, a woman's proper place, and a woman's customary wage, a straight jacket that still bedevils today.

**Revival Age** - the first half of the 20th century - The artistic merit inherent in folk culture, in song, music and dance, began to be appreciated at the end of the 19th century. Societies were founded, lectures given and displays and concerts organised. The activities of the Esperance Club sparked off an enthusiasm rapidly spreading to all the counties. This was interrupted by World War One. After the war it became an activity formed by Middle Class attitudes, descriptions fixed, clubs, classes, standards set and displays arranged. There was seen to be a need to have men involved and there was a slow growth in one sex teams, the discovery of touring, and the realisation that memories could still be tapped. The invention of squire and bagman, ales, feasts and instructionals.

**Reinvention Age** - the second half of the 20th century - The discovery of the morris by the people who benefited from the growth in education after the war and who came from families who could have been the heirs of the traditions. The growth in interest in local things.

## 18 CONCLUSIONS

a All of today's Morris has been "Reinvented"

- b** What is preserved from the 19th century morris is actually unknowable in the detail actually required, because of the limitations of the available notations.
- c** The old morris forms predate modern sports, all of which were codified in the 19th century, as part of the urge for rational recreation.
- d** Most forms are linked to simple Country Dance forms, or elements but with no repetitive progressions, nor quadrilles or waltzes.
- e** The Tudor Morris would probably be unrecognisable today, perhaps only Abbots Bromley.
- f** Opportunities for the first Morris events grew out of the changes from the medieval to the early modern world.
- g** A huge time gap of nearly 1000 years still exists to get back to truly pagan times.
- h** Superficial similarities in costume, although intriguing, are no guide to choreography.

Illustrations, Maps and references have to be added.

To begin to understand the morris it has to be recognised that people have a need for leisure and that humans in a crowd have an in built desire for festive behaviour involving music, dance, dressing up and sharing food and drink. It can be seen today at sports fixtures where people go to participate rather than watch and even in political demonstrations of processions and picketing.

That is not the belief of all. Our Civil War divided the country between those who wanted a festive culture and those who did not. The Protestant work ethic was responsible for the eminence of the country through the 18th and 19th centuries.

## ANNEX

### THE RECOGNISED HISTORICAL AGES

Terms in common use.

#### **Black Death**

#### **Renaissance**

#### **Reformation**

- Abolition of the Monastries

- The Great Rebuilding

#### **Early Modern**

- Civil Wars

- Restoration

- Dutch Invasion (Glorious Revolution) & new technologies

#### **Enlightenment**

- Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions

- Georgian

- Regency

- Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars

#### **Modern**

- Victorian

- Edwardian

- First World War

**Depression**  
**Post Modern**

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