

## FIRST ISSUE

### DELIVERED LONGBOROUGH TALK

#### INTRODUCTION

There are two basic approaches to writing HISTORY. The first is as telling a story linking perceived facts into an apparently meaningful chronology. To the people involved there was no such logical flow and the potential for alternative consequences was always enormous. However a history full of guessed what-might-have-beens and unfillable gaps is unreadable. The second is the discipline or art of fitting models to observations or deductions. If the result can be independently checked it is a science, if not, it is a religion. The "facts" used are never completely accurate, so the models remain as hypotheses. The modern experience of local newspaper reporting ensures caution in the use of past accounts. Always to be remembered is what is being said to who, by whom for what purpose, and that it is probably a one sided position statement.

Orthodoxy is usually the most satisfying explanation that fits the widest set of experiences. Heresies are alternative models. The interpretation of the perceived "facts" produces that view of history called "the past" which influences people in the present, even though it is not necessarily true. More facts or a new point of view can change this position.

The paper submitted for publication is an illustrative account of what happened to the Cotswold morris following the loss of general public visibility of it after 1840. It is in four parts,

- 1 The nineteenth century decline, which is largely unknown.
- 2 The collection and popularisation of the morris in a new context.
- 3 The Travelling Morrice and the Revival's contacts with the tradition.
- 4 Modern interpretations of the dances.

These phases also reflect the concurrent transformations which were occurring in our British society. This becomes an important cross check for consistency. Current research suggests that there was nothing special about the people who were dancers, therefore much can be deduced from a general knowledge of people of the period. The meaning of "tradition" is assumed and not further discussed. A problem is the growing specialist meaning in the use of the words "tradition" and "custom".

#### VICTORIAN VALUES

It has been a dedicated struggle for some just to find the key dates of births, marriages, deaths and the family relationships of most known or presumed traditional dancers. Some facts were meant to be suppressed, like the illegal practice of widowers marrying their late wife's widowed sister. There is extremely little surviving evidence about their lives, activities, attitudes or performance. It is mostly a few limited and mostly trivial anecdotes, but what would we have done with fuller biographies? Just seek greater self justification? The data suggests the importance of family ties, but this may just have been a prominent factor during the tail end of the persistence. There is very little insight into the even earlier morris in its presumed heyday of Ales and Competitions. Only a limited amount of work has been done to put the morris into its social context.

The Longborough and Lower Swell Morris remain very shadowy. What was the mutual interaction with Chipping Campden? Perhaps a couple of Campden dancers were with Longbrough at the last Cotswold Games, and later Denis Hathaway claimed a linkage for a Campden revival. What did follow Harry (really known as Henry) Taylor? There are hints of another generation of dancers or perhaps even of a boys side. The village was almost stimulated into dancing again in the 1920's, but young men's dancing then was still largely ignored by the current English Folk Dance establishment. It is difficult to see how the EFDS village classes and the traditional practices could be reconciled. They could neither lead, nor cope with the then current ills of rural society.

#### EDWARDIAN ENTHUSIASMS

Cecil Sharp had been discovered by Headington Quarry Morris Men on Boxing Day 1899, but he did not exploit the contact until he became involved with Mary Neal's Esperance Club. His serious collecting of the Cotswold Morris began with Jinky Wells of Bampton a few years later and was mostly concentrated into the 1909-12 period. Many of his informants were discovered for him by name through friends and colleagues. Preferred were those recognised as best of the older exponents. He cycled over to Longborough and found Harry Taylor working near a haystack. Sharp's technique at that time was to learn the tune and then to dance opposite mimicing his elderly source while he whistled, making limited notes in a pocket book. Very little of style and emphasis was ever noted. How could he as an inexperienced dancer know what was important? He was also still influenced by his perception of "Merie England" and the "One Morris". Neal and Carey also visited the Cotswolds. Sharp would complain that Neal used some of "his" stories in her lectures.

Sharp was collecting for exploitation not for the glory or benefit of the individual traditional dancers. He did not encourage contacts with them, whereas Neal had invited upwards of 30 to visit London to pass on their dances. Although their supporters complimented them on their sympathy with the dancers, it is clear from those on the receiving end that they were held in awe and that there was mutual incomprehension. Given the right encouragement much more might have survived, but what did seem to have depended on having had a strong local focus. The active morris involved young men, but their performances were criticised for being "different" from Sharp's and were not recommended.

The London based organisations attempted to spread the dances through classes. The Oxford Branch worked in many villages, but the approach was rigid and the leaders had a London not a tradition based vision. Tiddy worked at Ascott, but, as at Leafield, the recipients were too often school children and their activities dismissed by the local surviving traditional dancers. It was unfortunately a period when school children had become an exploitable resource. Even traditional dancers such as Hemmings, Wells, Simpson, Bennett and later Russell taught them.

## **RECOVERING ROOTS**

The Travelling Morrice was a new departure, setting out to meet the dance tradition where ever it could be found. The tourists saw the tradition as being people. It started the regular visits, although infrequent, being only every other year to the Cotswolds. They pleased by remembering what they were taught and did not exploit it. However they did not consult the earlier collectors or their material, so knew little outside of the *Morris Books*, and probably missed good collecting opportunities. However they did not "need" new material. There is no evidence of any interest in the social background to the old morris. Unfortunately the contacts were used by some as ammunition in the ongoing London based arguments. The full contribution of the TM to our knowledge was not made accessible outside the CMM until the 1960's.

The legacy of the TM is the Morris Ring. The EFDS and Esperance proved to be dead ends. The concept of the club, its officers, ales and feast derive from those imbued with the CMM club manner. The tradition did not contribute anything esoteric, or activities such as initiation rites, the culture of the mason or public school had had no impact. But the key persons who dominated and determined the Revival and the Ring were not from the traditional communities. By the time that it was realised that the tradition was more than just some dances, the contacts were gone and the opportunities lost for ever.

## **MODERN INTERPRETATION**

The last thirty years has been dominated by leaders who came through the grammar schools and their replacements following the 1944 Education Act. Their impact began in the mid 1960's as the influence of the pre-war generation waned. Many found that their traditional culture mattered, whereas to middle class academics it had not. However the morris is not part of the current working class culture, but it can still belong to those conscious of their roots.

The time gap is too long to claim continuity, and the surviving tradition is now too contaminated by the wider morris world to be a reliable guide.

We see a variety of approaches,

- 1 "Heirs" : to whom locality is important.
- 2 "Exponents" : who have the pursuit of excellence in mind.
- 3 "Contrasters" : the dance troupes looking for dance fodder.

These are emotive positions, but meaningless to the preservation of a tradition. But what do we know? The collectors missed or did not succeed in communicating the expressive, artistic part of the dance, the stresses, the emphases, effort levels, speed, spacing, show content, the person to person and dance to dance tolerance on performance, musical style and favourite dances. Thus what we do may be a logical development that owes something to the way it was, but there is considerable room for opinion and interpretation. For example, how were the Longborough hand movements during stepping, a flip of the wrist or a big sweep? The relative vagueness of past written notations is a strength, if the dance is to be a living tradition, As we have no other choice, that is what it has to be!

Also to be remembered is that the tradition responds to its current culture which changes responsively with the generations. The "tradition" is a concept that is fresh for every generation, as it is a relationship between the generations.

The performing arts as distinct from the fine arts are ephemeral, and only exist whilst being done. There is no permanent record and it has to be continually recreated. The "dance" in the first three phases discussed is now unknowable, although this is almost irrelevant, as meaningful morris performance in front of modern audiences has to be for today, not as a museum piece.

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