

GOTSWOLD BASICS

Good technique is the basis of good dancing. There is a school of thought that traditional dancing does not need a conscious grasp of fundamentals. It might be true where there is a small intake into a group of skilled dancers, but many of the old leaders, like Harry Taylor of Longborough and more recent ones with the traditional sides, were most insistent on style and standards whatever they lacked in analytical knowledge.

It starts before you move with good posture. One stands poised with weight over the balls of the feet, not also spread back over the heels, a stance that has arisen since people got used to substantial heels. All the time taken to accelerate and move off balance is life lost from the dance. Good posture is having the head, shoulders, arms, ribs, hips, legs and feet in correct relative position. Bad posture can result in slump, with the pelvis pushed forward with rounded shoulders and drooping head, or a sway, with pelvis pushed back and a hollow look to the lower back. The alignment is achieved by having the buttocks firm, the abdomen pulled up and feeling flat and raising the rib cage. The shoulders should be low but not pulled backwards. The eyes look forward, not down, and the eyes should not wander around.

From the 17th cent (c. 1620) the morris acquired a turn out of the feet, obtained by rotating the legs outward from the hip joint. The turn out helps easy movement off to the side or the diagonal. It arose at first because of a style of movement of the leg requiring a curved path of the foot. The circular movement is preserved in the swing and swagger forward steps and in several types of backstep. The angle between the feet should be 30 to 40 deg included. The balls of the feet will be far enough apart to be appropriate for a rear-up, shuffles or cross back steps.

The basic step can be traced back to the 1400's in Northern Italy where with the appearance of smooth dancing floors a technique of dancing developed based on the rise and fall of the body called elevation, from the instep. An effect of lightness is obtained by the control of the rise into the air and the smooth lowering through the instep with the weight over the supporting foot. The quality of resilience in the instep is developed by practice. Regular practice by oneself outside the weekly club meeting is essential in early days rather like learning the piano. The rise and fall is so fundamental that it was called "The Movement". There are three body skills to be developed:

1. A firm muscular control of the hip girdle. Many people have never tensed these muscles.

This is the thing usually difficult to describe about very good dancers.

2. A pulled up knee with the leg not just straight in the ordinary sense but the knee joint locked by contraction of the quadriceps, the big muscle on the front of the thigh. With a relaxed leg one can move one's kneecap, with the thigh muscle tensed you can not. The

braced knee allows the transmission of the thrust from the foot directly up into the back without risk of wobble or deflection. "Weak-kneed" is an old English phrase to be recalled.

3. The sprung foot - the elastic strength in the combined ankle and instep which allows the feet to be used as the natural levers and shock absorbers they are.

Basic stepping owes much to the 16th cent technique of bracing the knee and keeping the leg straight and to the 17th cent when all movement of the leg was provided from the hip and all vertical movement of the body was from the instep.

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The morris step is a quick change from one foot to the other. The free foot is moved about the foot's length forward. Too far and it looks all legs and tends to appear grotesque. The foot is not particularly pointed but it is at least kept parallel to the ground. The change of foot should be practiced initially starting very slowly and then gradually speeding up before introducing the hops. In the 17th cent people were taught to get the correct feel of the movement in exercises taking the body weight by placing their hands on a table. Traditional dancers spoke to Cecil Sharp of doing this hanging onto a beam or the sides of sheep dips.

The movement of the foot is forward and back and not driving into the ground. Full use is made of the resilience of the instep and ankle to minimise the shock and hence damage to the knee. Dancers who affect a tapping style often develop physical disabilities. Beginners usually are too tensed up and attempt to limit motion by excessive muscular restraint and still tend to "flailing". Quite important is to remember proper warm-up exercises as the vigour of the morris can lead to strains and pulled muscles. Any movement in the morris that gives the impression of driving down into the floor is unlikely to be authentic.

Good stepping has a clear sound on the bells. Practice basics wearing them.

All jumps, leaps or hops require a bend of the knees for the push off into the air and again after the jump to cushion the landing to allow the thigh muscles to contribute. In the air the body should be aligned, the feet fully arched. Most spectators will notice how well a jump is done more often than the height reached. The knees and instep act as springs so that the jump appears light and bouncy. Do not anticipate the floor by relaxing the points of the feet until they have just touched the ground. Land from toe to heel. Some exercises are,

1. take small jumps on spot with feet side by side, aiming for soft landings and no noise.
2. jump from two feet onto one and back onto two etc aiming for balance.
3. slow lope around the room going for height not travel.

Usually the arms are raised on a jump. It is important to get the correct timing of the lift with respect to the spring. The arms do appear to help in getting height because the lift does encourage the right movement of the rest of the body. One way to practice is to jump and reach high as if trying to grasp something above or to touch the ceiling. Often a jump is done to round off a movement sequence but of course leading into the next. Good Morris has a drive or a surge on the first strong beat of a sequence. To capture this the body has to be off balance to go into it. The trick is to land with the feet about half the foot's length behind the take off position.

To make say a complete turn in place on a jump it helps to using the technique of "spotting". The head is erect and the gaze should stay momentarily on a fixed point straight in front of the body at eye level as the turn begins. The head then leads the turn arriving at the same fixed point before the rest of the body. This enables a dancer to turn without becoming dizzy. Watch a good ballet dancer. If it is not found to be easy practice by revolving slowly in place while taking small steps on both feet.

There is a great variety in the backsteps, almost every side had its own interpretation and care is needed to clearly distinguish between them. There is one common element, the

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weight goes down on the strong beat whereas on the morris step it rises. Also the body should lean forward not backwards. The biggest stylistic danger is dangling the free foot in front. Too often vigour is translated into kicking forward rather than rising off the ground with the feet underneath the body and it is not surprising that the effect is of a Can-Can version of Knees Up Mother Brown.

A sidestep is open if the first movement is to the side and separating the feet, even if the next step brings them together again, and it is closed if the first movement is across so that the leading or working foot is in front of the other. The essential features of the movements in the Cotswold morris are that during the sidestep the relative angle between the feet is maintained. The rear foot is not allowed to rotate to be parallel. The sidestep stepping is expected to be rather energetic and showy. Traditionally there was very little turn of the body. Dancers who exaggerate the turning lose the true emphasis on the step.

The oldest mediaeval rule for starting foot was left foot going forward and right foot going backwards arising from the times when dances were often in a circular formation and these were the natural leading feet. In the days of symmetrical dances this became left foot first half and right foot the second half. Step and Jig dancers should always lead off on one foot and then repeat the sequence off the other. The Cotswold Morris has preserved this left foot lead although some teams applied it to both halves of a movement.

In the 19th cent morris competitions the points judged were the starting foot, the direction of turns and any very obvious boobs. When the rule on starting foot was incompatible with a later movement such as a galley one either adjusted the stepping to be on the correct foot by the time one got to the later movement by supressing a hop or changing a step to another hop or one slipped in a fudge step. Traditional dancers frowned on the fudge and liked the stepping clear and with no fussiness. After all the fudge made the bells ring and it could be heard! In jig competitions judges would place their hands under the dancers heels and dancers would be eliminated for touching. In Baccapipes dancing the floor would be sprinkled with flour or sand and the winner judged on who got closest to the centre without disturbing the pipes.

The dances are a sequence of movements. As they are demonstrated they should be imitated using the minimum of energy at first so that muscles do not tire as they help to learn the movement. Traditionally it was right to use a simpler practice step to conserve energy and this is of particular value when working up spatial awareness of ones position in evolutions and learning to keep spacings and lines. Do not expect to learn several points simultaneously but expect to have a structured learning plan. Beware of developing bad habits when filling in the bits of movements or sequences that have not been taught yet.

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