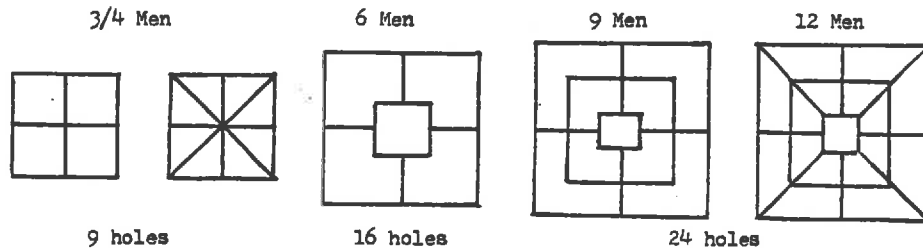


NINE MENS MORRIS

A phrase evocative of Tudor England, Shakespeare and the Betley and Kingston windows, a morris team and its supporting characters. Of course many of the literary references were to the game of Morris or Mexrels. This game was reputed to have been particularly popular in the Middle Ages and to have been suitable to play in church during a sermon. At least boards can be seen cut into seats at Norwich, Canterbury, Gloucester, Salisbury and Westminster Abbey. The game is very old, the earliest being in Egypt c.1400BC but also in the first city at Troy, a bronze age burial in Co. Wicklow and a Viking ship tomb of c.900 AD. It is still played in some Northern pubs.

The game is akin to noughts and crosses, each player in turn placing his tokens so achieve a row of three or "mill" which allows the removal of an opponents token. After all are laid they can be moved one at a time to form new mills until one player is reduced to only two pieces. Morris is a family of games with the number of men in the title equalling the number of tokens to each player. More tokens allows more complex boards, usually described by the number of "holes" or intersections of the board pattern. In Mid Summer Nights Dream Act 2 Scene 2 the reference is to a turf cut morris board. Its occurrence outdoors further confuses the literary references to morris.



These games could not have got their name because the players blacked their faces so there may have been some association with the dance, perhaps in the moving around on the playing area when out of doors.

We are used to struggling to reach 6 or 8 dancers and often our inventive bent has to go towards what to do with fewer. As a consequence there seems to have been little exploration of what might be done with 9. It allows a symmetry that is denied a lesser odd number, but three columns are difficult when one has been brought up on the two column longways with the idea of partners.

There have been occasions when a Bampton side has done Bonny Green Carters with 9. The order of the dance is of course FU, WH and Half Caper off in single file, probably in a spiral. The central column mirrors the left hand as does the even side in a 6 handed set, and the right hand matches the left hand column in the hey. The central man is last of the file in dancing off.

Nine Men Morris 2.

In the late 1960's the Halsway Advanced Morris weekends used to have a session on the Sunday morning where groups were asked to invent a dance against some set theme or idea. One such was to create an Essex Nine Men's Morris. It was so successful that it lasted in clubs' repertoires for several years and this was how it was done at the Blackmore feast on 6.1.73. Tallest dancer was in the centre.

All figures were done with a single step and ended on 4 plain capers.

The DF was an Adderbury hey along the columns followed by a similar hey across the rows. Each matched - there was no mirroring.

Figure 1 - Foot North, Foot East, Foot South and Foot West.

Figure 2 - 8 handed star around dancer in centre, ruffling hair!

Figure 3 - 8 handed ring, not ordinary rounds but "elephant rounds". All join hands in a circle, one at a time each swings right leg over right hand so that right hand is between legs and dancer facing to left, while other dancers single step. Set may be stationary or circling clockwise. Then break into "conga" rounds with conga step and yells.

Figure 4 - Layers, or All-in. Dance whole rounds and then all-in in threes. Nos 4,5 & 6 lay down with heads pointing to left of set, then Nos 7,8 & 9 lay across them with their heads to the bottom of the set and finally 1,2 & 3 lay on top with their heads to the right of the set.

One would guess there was no definitive version of this bit of foolery.

Great Western have a Nine Men's Morris, Fieldtown style.

The DF is all face up, crossed side step left in front, double step, crossed side step right in front, feet together and jump. The front 2 of each column then bend forward to be ready for the back row to leapfrog forward over them on 4 strong beats. Then all hop back step and jump, falling back one place so that now the bottom row are at the top. There are 3 DF so dancers end up where they started.

Figure 1 - Foot-up-&-down, all galleying left each half and ending facing up.

Figure 2 - Heys - half hey down the columns, half hey across the rows, half hey up the column and half hey back across the rows. The outer heys turn out to start and the central line follows the right hand one.

Figure 3 - Diagonals. While the centre dancer does fore-capers on the spot, the diagonals cross, first the corners, then the middles of the four sides and back again, turning towards the central dancer as they pass and hopbackstepping out to the new place.

Figure 4 - Rounds. While the centre dancer does upright capers on the spot, the other 8 dance rounds, going into the centre at half way and hopbackstepping out, and coming and lifting the centre dancer at the end.

Serious dances for 9 may be difficult, but with 12 now there is real scope!