

#### COTSWOLD MORRIS

It is impossible to trace the Cotswold dance tradition back to the 17th century although it is realistic to suppose an origin in the revival of Merrie England associated with the Restoration in 1660 in the districts covered by the Royal Palace at Woodstock and the major Royalist Estates north of Oxford. A growing number of references are being found for the 18th century over the area we already associate with the Cotswold morris although not in the places with which we have grown familiar.

In the 19th century the morris was maintained to some extent by the annual round of Ales, Games, Club Days, Village Feasts and parish customs which could have their origins back in the Middle ages. At any one time the number of active sides was small perhaps as few as 16 - certainly it was never the case of every village simultaneously as suggested by the Needham and Helm maps. Each team had a modest territory. They did not have long lifetimes if measured in terms of continuity of leadership and outside of the towns the centre of the team, that is the leader's residence, would move around and some of these family trees have been traced by Mike Heaney. It is to be noted that many of the teams were from what where at one time considered towns, Abingdon, Bampton, Brackley, Chipping Campden with regular weekly or annual markets. The history of small ephemeral groups concerned with activities not essential to the main stream of living is too diverse to draw generalisations. However even the best established accounts are just a series of anecdotes and we are only just beginning to understand the morris in its social context. The implications of kinship, marriage or working relationships to gain membership of an essentially closed group for whom the economic aspects were as important as the artistic or recreational. Not that country men were allowed recreation. Such topics have been opened up by Keith Chandler now that relevant public records have become available.

Teams were usually drawn from the extended family group or from a corpus of good dancers within a wide area, rather as today, except then men would walk up to 10 miles for a practice. Practice season had to fit in with farm or trade work which tended to make it the short period between Easter and Whitsun. Once the harvest started with hay making in June the opportunities to dance would be few till Harvest Home. Foremen could easily impose their own ideas on the dances. By the time we have much insight into who did the morris there were only a limited number of musicians who played for the morris. Hence the variation in detail in the dance but not in the music.

There are many reasons why the morris should start to die in the mid 1800's, loss of the social events that sustained the good times for the dancers, the growth of counter attractions for young men that were often better approved of by their employers and the general change in the attitudes and character of the countryside following the Agricultural riots of 1840's, bad harvests and emigration in the 1870's. If there was a hey day it must have been 1780-1800, before the well documented

period of course, but after the major upheavals of the village enclosures when the opportunity for 'good luck' visiting for largesse was at a maximum, and social stratification not so important.

The development of the morris in the period 1860-1910 and since is an indication of the rate at which the tradition can diverge, suggesting a period in the not too distant past when all the morris was much more similar. The urge for change is either forgetfulness which comes with revivals or new introductions or the nearness of rivals which reflects on the density of teams and perhaps it is true that left alone a team settles down and does not evolve.

The Cotswold style has its roots in the Renaissance making it the oldest dance around. At its best it allows a great deal of self expression as well as team work. Its effect on the audience depends on the jumps and capers and the subtleties imposed on the music and rhythms of body movement. The quality and interest inherent in the dance affords the tradition the ability to form a show with a minimum number of dancers and characters and a minimum of special costume, so that it can be almost the purest expression of dance of any English custom. It has the strength to support endless interpretation, to be enjoyed with good or bad dancing, and used in circumstances and situations far removed from the tradition in the Cotswolds, even adjusting to foreign culture the world over.

Through Sharp and his workers about a dozen 'traditions' became known giving nearly 100 dances. For many years the pattern set by the grades and certificates of the EFDSS ensured that a common standard and a common repertoire was had by all. So much has changed. Now there are over two dozen traditions available, all rather stylised, each with several interpretations and many with added dances to enhance the repertoires. Over 350 dances have been made available and probably something like that number composed or translated from one tradition to another.

Trends can be discerned in the performance of the morris over the years, the quest for excellence in the dance is not that common and basics are often poorly addressed. Little attention is paid to repertoire, show construction or the role of the characters in performances.

The Cotswold morris allows a team to have a set of dances with common elements rather than a series of different dances as faces most other dance groups. This allows a theme to run through and encourages a club style. Diversification into several traditions always seems to degrade standards or lead to mechanical dancing. The form of dance adopted by a dance group should meet their characteristics and needs for expression and even if Cotswold morris is for you care then has to be taken as to which traditions within that tradition.

The Cotswold morris has four types of dance - either all moving at once or not, subdivided into using sticks or handkerchiefs, and into having special jumps or not. The tendency to use stick dances frequently is not the old tradition, where stick dances were not common. Much is lost if it is forgotten that the handkerchiefs have to dance.

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