

WHO SHOULD DANCE THE MORRIS?

In the quiet moments the philosophers of the morris talk about things old and new, right and wrong, about what they are doing and the happenings elsewhere. Sometimes there is unease about differences from the perceived 19th century morris, even though that itself was the end product of substantial, unknowable evolution and despite the vast social changes since, because there is no real continuity with the past. The revival of interest in the performance of the morris passed for a period through a section of our society not normally associated with preserving these traditions. Alternative justification to what is done today has been sought in aesthetics, street theatre, democracy or imagined history. Nothing is as clear cut in history as we would like, and there is always the difference between what actually happened and the perception that influences our actions. It is worth considering some of these uncertainties.

Who Did Dance the Morris?

Work continues to identify traditional performers, their occupations and kin groups. Eventually we will have a clear idea of the status of dancers in the community and whether there was a decline during the 19th century. Received wisdom suggests that there was a decline from the times when a farmer's son might join till it was done by farm labourers, but with an impression of never sinking to the lower strata as the morris was more respectable than the mummers, just as beer drinkers were above cider. One expects the leader to aim for respectability to increase the box. What is noticeable is that the same people today are active in charitable work in their communities and the leaders often become local councillors. Village society changed when so many died in the trenches, and it is difficult now to grasp the impact. The evidence from other dance traditions will be far less detailed than the Cotswold morris. At the moment it suggests that work or trade was a common element, miners in the NE, mill and workshop workers in the NW, craftsmen frozen out of work in the West Midlands. It is natural that a gang to dance was formed from people who were likely to know each other socially through work or drinking. Thus a team would be drawn from a small area because of limitations at the time on cost, time and distance of travel. Horizons are different today. Members of traditional groups this century have been drawn from increasingly wider territories as mobility increased. The tradition is only going to tell us that society has changed in 100 years.

Who Did Not Dance the Morris?

a. People from Closed Villages: One expects that morris would only happen in a community that tolerates it and when a village was dominated by one or two landlords their attitudes prevailed. There are cases where the big house tolerated or encouraged the morris. The opposite is difficult to demonstrate. There has not been systematic study of the character of the places with or without morris. Cotswold dancers could be drawn from a wide area so active local discouragement would not stop keen dancers although their employment opportunities might be restricted. This is the level of speculation at which the answers are unknowable because we have too few biographies

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at the required detail for any generalisations. Thus we are left with arguments based on common sense which will miss out the attitudes of the time because they are no longer familiar.

b. Children: The strength to sustain a day's dancing was not supposed to develop until after childhood and starting ages of 18 plus have been mentioned. However there are cases of dancers starting at 8 years and even now youngsters have been expected to do the long all day hike at Abbots Bromley. Each group may well have its own rules. A young dancer is an attraction if dancing well and it is easier to train and control someone still living at home. Young men can be a risky investment because of moving jobs and the distractions of courting, one reason why Bacup looked for married men. Health and stamina must be important but generalisations can not be drawn as it is very individual. How common essentially teenage teams might have been has still to be established. The revival at Bidford was one such gang. It would not be surprising if other teams were based on unmarried men. Was it common for most of a team to be drawn from one small age group? There have been children's sides in the Cotswolds from Keith Chandler's discovery at Sherborne to the odd sides from the turn of the century trained by traditional dancers from Abingdon, Bampton and Sherborne. The Cotswold morris was in decline and there were alternative attractions by the time that universal education was having an impact and the gathering of children into Church Sunday Schools, Orphanages, and ordinary Schools became common so that they could be an obvious source of dancers. Maypole dancing was promulgated through such channels since the turn of the century as was the later processional dances such as at Lichfield and on the Cheshire Plain. As dances went with leaders rather than communities it was possible for particular individuals to be responsible for teams of all age or sexes as is emerging from NW researches. Drawing examples from all the dance traditions implies the assumption that social forces dominate and were universal. This could be debated.

c. Women: During the 19th century and even into the 1920's girls left home about the age of 12-14 and went into service with perhaps no more than a half day off a week. They worked long hours and had no tradition of independent activity so there was neither time or opportunity or encouragement. In 1980 the United Nations reported that while women and girls constitute one half the population and one third of the labour force they actually perform two thirds of the work hours. Certain women were known to have been able to dance the Cotswold morris but it was not a common feature. As a woman's property was either their father's or husband's by law there was little financial incentive, which is one reason why there were so few women's Friendly Societies. Women did dance where there was either a trade or occupation that gave the opportunity, eg. milkmaids in cities and perhaps mill workers at wakes time, but there is no indication that this was widespread and it was confined to girls and unmarried women, remembering also that puberty could come late. 19th century culture still required women to have a chaperone to be respectable so was never a purely women's affair. Normal clothing was not suitable for energetic dancing either.

Both sexes' dance opportunities were restricted and we need to know more of how the ones that did dance were able to find the time.

One result is that there are few specifically women's dances from the 19th century. That makes it difficult when as now women do have the opportunity and desire to dance using traditional material. Whether their position was always so needs further consideration for the 18th and 17th centuries but it might extend back to the times when society considered women to be chattels. We are witnessing a similar debate about women priests in the Church of England appealing to emotional and historical truths which range from a "new" understanding of equality and the need for "justice" and the need to do "what is right", to saying that the arguments are only a part of the whole picture and the past should not be set aside because the male role contains a truth about human nature that is permanently true and can not be put aside.

Public Schools and Separation of the Sexes

Once society escaped from cooperative farm work involving the whole family where everybody did everything, there grew different roles and expectations for the sexes and "men's things and women's things" were recognised. Public schools began separate education, boys first then girls, even Sunday Schools started this way. Pubs, Trade Unions and leisure activities reinforced this division by being male centred, so there then existed a separate male culture - the rugby club or sports team, public bar drinking with darts, skittles and other games - which built up its own language, behaviour comraderie, small groups with common interests - ie gangs - which became the natural basis for traditional dance teams. It is not that this is wrong, it is a fact that it is so, and it could be old as single sex peer groups. Equal opportunity and sexual discrimination legislation has to exist to mitigate the worst excesses. We are heirs to "old" ideas as well as "new" and the relationship and separation of the sexes is ingrained. The insistence on "mixed" morris in some parts of the world loses an aspect of our culture to gain something else felt to be important. The fact that a word has to be used for it shows that there is a difficulty. Are we not in the business of preservation as well as innovation? What is wrong with keeping the traditional roles and arrangements as long as they are recognised for what they are? Morris or any street entertainment should not be the battleground for sexual or any other politics when the morris has to be socially acceptable to be tolerated at all by the people at large.

The Revival

By this I mean the Cecil Sharp initiated spread of the knowledge of the Cotswold dance outside of its native Cotswolds. The more dramatic sword dance did not have the same impact and even today they are at least two orders of magnitude less. Until well after WWII clubs were fewer and smaller. There was very little street performance of the morris and the world at large did not know what a morris dancer was, where he came from or why. The EFDSS spread a knowledge through school teachers but that did not lead to street performance by either children or women. Other dance traditions, clog, border, molly, garland only appeared in strength in the last 10-15 years.

Some happenings in the same timescale were not revivals but new flourishing. For example the NW at the start of the 20th century and the girls on the Cheshire Plain between the wars. Changes in child employment patterns and the growth of youth organisations made young peoples teams practical. Whiteladies teaching college promulgated the Maypole and May Queen and Mary Neal the idea of morris and country dancing for schools and this grew up with Empire Day, May 24th, and similar opportunities for public display by troupes with the 20th century's emphasis on the cult of the child. Perhaps the oddest turn about is that the older children's tradition in Cheshire is being collected and danced by adults.

Who Is Doing It Now?

The EFDS objectives recognised that the dance should go back to the ordinary people. It could not depend on educated organisations, vicars or school teachers, yet there was no way of breaking the barrier. The EFDS led classes in the Cotswolds taught morris country dancing and sword and enthused a generation but did not get them to dance in their communities or on the streets. The key step has been the 1944 free education act which brought people from the right background to meet the preservers. The first break out in numbers dancing came in the mid 1950's. Then there was their discovery of new Cotswold traditions and the other English dances which spawned its own waves of teams and the process is still going on. Teams come while others go, it is the way of the world. The dancers now are still often professional people, financially middle class but socially still with roots below. There are now a large number of people who can teach the morris of such diverse backgrounds that someone suitable for any group can be found.

Are We There?

If the aim was to restore a situation of local dances in local communities then it has not been achieved. Clubs exist that fit today's society but drawn from wide areas. There are no family, work or community ties to hold them together nor community expectations to cause them to get a team out each year. Only with the Combe Martin Horse has the community taken up and taken over a revival. Elsewhere, like the Whittlesea Straw Bear the community is taking its own group to its heart, but the normal is of dance troupes doing their own thing as an occasional entertainment. If the morris arose from seasonal good luck visiting (ritual) why is it so obviously absent? Dancing at Fetes, shopping centres and outside distant pubs is not being a part of the community but going for ready made audiences and keeping at a distance. What there is is a response to current social conditions but it has much more in common with medieval travelling players than the likes of Helston or Padstow. Ah! you should say, was the morris ever a part of the community? I can not produce hard evidence one way or the other, but I would not be suprised if conditions today are close to the way things always were, with much of the morris self centred. Community involvement is my ideal. It remains to be seen if the existance of women's morris has slowed or speeded the transition from dance troupes to community involvement. The truth is that if people want to dance they will, and if you do not like it you have to help, not hinder!

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