

The Beginning

The hard beaten ancient paths around prehistoric monuments and the discovery at Stone Carr in Yorkshire of deer horns modified so as to be worn are suggestive that dance or some similar organised activity has been with us for a long time. It would appear that its universality is fundamental to human societies. The emotional and subjective side has much in common with other activities that involve practiced movement skills as diverse as the martial arts and the making of music. The difference between the morris and *folk-life* survivals, such as superstitions and songs, is that the latter depended only on one-to-one transmission, whereas the morris requires a consensus group to perform and another to watch, and its very existence is dependent on acceptance by the local community.

Some things never change. The continued throwing of money into wells or fountains is nearly as old as coinage itself. We forget how precious and poorly understood were sources of unpolluted water before the public provision of piped supplies from the end of the 19th century. It has been too easy to see the concern as superstition or even to be religious. Ideas live on as they are adapted to new circumstances, as an extreme example, obligations were once placed on settlements to provide hides in medieval forests to allow the watching of does fawning. These could have inspired the chimney sweeps later for their similarly constructed perambulating *Jack-in-the-Greens*. The problem in tracing back the contributing threads to the morris is in recognising what has been lost and replaced over time. A difficulty exists when people relate the later performance to the older and probably irrelevant motivations.

The word *morris* was first used in the 12th century for community celebrations following the stages of reconquest of central and southern Spain from the Arabs, and where the morris or *morisco* still occurs annually between *Christians* and *Moors*. But these little resemble our morris. However they are now just for fun, unlike the sectarian rituals in Northern Ireland, as unhappily all the Moors were ejected or forcibly converted by the reign of our Henry VIII, during the lifetime of Catherine of Aragon. The earliest surviving mention in England is from the end of the 15th century, occurring before the social changes initiated by Henry VIII, which grew out of the dissolution of the monasteries from 1536. The dancers were sometimes mentioned attached to the Robin Hood Games. These in turn had followed the themed King and then the May Game entertainments, which were simple and often participatory sports similar in spirit to modern fetes, but perhaps less sophisticated and uninhibited with more horseplay and vulgarity. Think of the older Robin Hood stories and the number of times someone falls into water!

England was invaded by the Saxons and then the Vikings and Normans but nothing like the morris survived in their home territories to suggest that they might have brought the morris with them. There is no evidence that such existed in Celtic communities except where introduced later as part of their Anglicisation.

The early form of morris is thought to have come to England via the various involvements with the continent, perhaps from what is now Flanders, Belgium and Holland, once the Spanish Netherlands, where similar sounding words had been used for their equivalents. In those days such places were closer by sailing ship than most of England was to London by horse. England in the late Middle Ages was to be thought of as only an off-shore island and a source of basic

commodities, rather like modern ex-colonies. We gained a considerable range of new technologies, many crops, and our modern business methods from Flanders and Holland during their Golden Age, which contributed to our Agricultural Revolution. That part of Flanders now in France has only been French for a limited time. During the last war the Germans saw them as more German than French and ruled them with Belgium. Incidentally a Dutch history of the early morris was written during WW2, but was not allowed to be published by the Nazis because of the mentions of the English!

Another example of the debt to the Netherlands is probably the earliest form of cricket, first mentioned at Guildford in 1598, believed brought by immigrants, along with words like *krikets* and *stomp*, which also developed into a singularly English pastime.

The Wide Distribution

Across Europe there are males who dance to show off, for socially acceptable boy-meets-girl encounters, for good luck visiting or the feel-good factor. Similarities with aspects of the English morris abound. Recent contacts with the folk performances in Rumania show that most of our folk expressions have an analogue there, without there having been a positive historical link, because both cultures have exploited almost all the things that simple people can easily do. In America the Spanish stopped many unacceptable native ceremonies but soon found it expedient to replace them, therefore they taught them the Spanish morris and the *matashin*, or stick dances, a separate style in the 16th century and then not part of the morris. These dance forms can still be seen in Arizona and Mexico performed by people of both Spanish and native descent. Troupes of men in northern Nigeria, on the other side of the Sahara from the Moors, still process in late medieval armour organised and looking like the morris. The link may have been two way as there are similarities between the appearance of some west of England *hobby-horse* customs and their supporters and West African performers. Not all such possible relationships are understood as yet.

We recognise many recent male dances in Spain, Portugal and Southern France as belonging in the morris family. The Basques have some that appear even more like ours. On the losing side in the Spanish Civil War, they then shared their dances between the men and women to help preserve their ethnic culture as they were officially scattered around. This very ancient race, with a language that predates the Indo-European group, consider that they gained their dances from passing peoples. The English kings held Aquitaine, what is now France south of the Loire, from the 12th to the mid 15th centuries, on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compestela. English armies or regiments commonly fought as mercenaries in the Reconquest and the other wars in Europe, and some settled in the cleared interior of Spain. But the best connections were in the fishing fleets off Newfoundland and the mountain of very rich iron ore mostly exported to Britain. Commercial and social contacts were not surprising. The best long weapons for the Tudor English infantry were imported as *Morris Pikes* meaning to a Moorish design. However persuasive past suggestions that the morris was first brought by notables, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, John of Gaunt or even Catherine of Aragon, are not supported by any evidence and the dates would be wrong. But Henry VII was exiled in France before gaining the crown and could have been exposed to a form of the morris there, at least it was performed later at his court in England.

There is no mention anywhere of any ritual significance in the morris at this early or any later period, nor that it was in anyway associated with a survival of an older culture. The then Christianisation of the country is hard to grasp now after centuries of *dissent* and *reformation*. Before the Black Death about one in a hundred of the population was in regular, monastic or minor orders, and the church was by far the largest landowner. Supposed survivals were not. The modern view is that what is now called the *old religion*, wicca or witchcraft, like the masons' stories of the origins of the craft, has mythical roots created from the 17th century onwards, even though they both have a complex set of rituals, performed with great seriousness and guarded with secrecy. That something is not as ancient as is claimed does not invalidate its current form and achievements. Far from being a folk expression the morris was at first also in the repertoires of professional or quasi-professional troupes. The literary evidence indicates that it was first recorded in England in towns where the court would often be, then it spread as a popular entertainment across the country. Something in attitudes changed because it began to meet official hostility and had eventually to depend on private patronage. In any age the cost of newly outfitting a dancer was high and beyond normal pockets when everything was hand made, often representing at least a man's month's income.

During the 19th century the morris was thought of as contemporary with Shakespeare, and only by the turn of it was the idea of older roots hypothesised. A limited amount of *morris* appeared in the theatre. Until 1840 the morris was regarded as a continuing popular activity, but after it was one that was only *remembered*.

The Form

Early English references are for three formations of the dances, solo, a ring with a central person, and two-by-two. Solo morris dancers were last seen in Surrey, at Puttenham, and in Sussex, near Horsham, but there is no longer any indication of their style and the dances. Dancing in a ring survived in children's games, as did so many other former adult play activities. The early form had an individual, usually a woman, standing in the centre and the rest dancing in an uncoordinated manner around her in a circle. The Basques in their *sauts* simultaneously perform in a ring complex steps to the demands of their leader. But the form of a circle is so simple and obvious that its common occurrence could arise from independent invention rather than any long term survival.

The *two-by-two* form is a processional, as at Helston and in the West of England Furry dances, and as once at Shaftesbury and in Parkhurst Forest on the Isle of Wight. It is a natural for any custom involving travelling or visiting, particularly when it is for mixed couples. As a form it was so familiar that early Quakers were accused of going out like Morris dancers because they went in preaching teams of two! This simple format survived in to 20th century ballroom and sequence social dancing. There is suggestive evidence that processional forms grew out of the medieval Guild activities, with their dressing up in a common manner and going to church or chantry in ever grander ways with music and spectacle. The devotional orientation switched to secular forms of expression following the Reformation. The procession with symbolic displays on wagons, today suggestively called *floats*, is probably as old as the vehicles. In the early Middle Ages the culmination would be a replica ship, the largest and most impressive

thing known to the people of the time, and manned, as today, with men and women dressed fantastically, to be known as *a ship of fools*. The modern style Carnival procession probably dates from the middle of the 19th century, one of the earliest in the south being at Shaftesbury in Dorset, with its tradition of jokey posters in the style of contemporary theatre bills, giving comic names to all the entries. Carnival still pulls a community together and attendance is a social statement of local allegiance. The public visibility and good feeling generated by processions was and still is exploited by club and church walks, and even in the revivals of *beating-the-bounds*.

From the number of references, the early morris was at a peak by the beginning of the 17th century and was dying away by the Civil War and the following Interregnum. The Puritans did not oppose dance or music, or even maypoles, but did object to its performance intruding into Sundays and to it occurring in the church. The division of the country into supporters of the King and of Parliament appeared to be as much determined by the people who wanted either a serious or a festive approach to life, particularly outside of work and especially on the Sunday so called day of rest. The Puritan legacy of Sunday is only now being eroded under modern circumstances.

The Restoration appears to have deliberately encouraged a *revival* of older remembered celebrations, including seasonal bonfires and the morris in central England, where the new dioceses formed by Henry VIII appeared not to have prosecuted the morris to extinction, as happened elsewhere.

Set dances involving a finite number of dancers, from four to eight, appeared in 17th century social life as *Country Dances*. They were probably adopted by the morris some when after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, because there are many obvious similarities. The dances of the country people were likely to have been the reels and stepping, as explained by Thomas Hardy. The name *Country* was not a reflection of a folk origin but of its lively contrast with the formal Court dances. Even today we talk of Town and Country!

Social dance is for participation not watching. But there have always been some more elaborate display dances for showing off skills which required both training and practice. As the older dances fell out of fashion they would be remembered only by the elderly and the country folk and were then *collected*. Many have been recovered and become the *stock-in-trade* of modern local folk groups all over Europe. In England the Old Time Dance community rather than the English Folk Dance Society preserved many Victorian and Edwardian set and couple dances, such as the Quadrilles, Lancers (1850), Valeta (1900), Military Two Step (1904), Boston Two Step (1908), St Bernard's Waltz (1913) and Gay Gordons (1915), known for years as *party* dances. They have moved off into modern *sequence* dances, whereas the folk dance world built on the remembered *longways* dances of Old and New England. Other party dances which have reached a folk status were the Palais Glide (1928), Lambeth Walk (1937) and Knees Up Mother Brown (1938).

Although stick dances are now common, they were not once, appearing to have diffused down from the Midlands, where it may well have been known as the *Bedlam Morris*. Their modern popularity is due to the undoubted impressiveness linked with only limited demands on the dancers' technique. There has been no connection with sword or other military drills, despite the wide experience of them by country folk, or with the one time English Martial Art of cudgels.

A Country Sport and its Decline

The morris is dependent on the social structure of the communities served. In the middle ages attention was more focused on the church and the vast number of clerical orders with only a small aristocracy. The secularisation led to a growth of minor gentry, and the funding released led to the *great rebuilding* of houses and farms. The development of a genuine middle class provided a wider base for patronage but also led to the greater separation of classes and more exploitation. Land owners moved into other areas for income and became less concerned over the impact of land exploitation and the consequent depressed conditions for workers. The second half of the 19th century had a series of wet years with bad harvests and with the importing of cheap staple foods it led to many emigrating, but they did not take their dances with them.

It has been a common experience since the 16th century that native community-involving customs are seldom maintained by immigrants to the new countries.

The Cotswold Morris flourished until the start of the 19th century, supporting events like fund raising Church and Morris Ales, then Village Friendly Society Club Days and similar occasions, as well as having an annual outing in their own locality at the recognised holidays about May Day, Oak Apple Day or at Whitsun. In England this was a slack time of the agricultural year before the first hay making. There were several widely known annual events which had the morris attending, the Cotswold Olympick Games on Dover's Hill by Chipping Campden and Kirtlington's Lamb Ale are examples which still occur. But the Much Wenlock Olympic Games started by Dr Brookes in copy of Dover's Games never had the morris, because for example the local dance tradition was a mid-winter not a mid-summer activity. The morris was noted as present at some major celebrations, such as the laying of the foundation stone at Blenheim Palace and an heir's 21st birthday at Stowe House. Later the growth of *improving* Victorian alternative activities such as flower and produce shows also provided performance opportunities, although they also drew off potential participants.

It was a period of growth of ideas of independence and self help and the beginning of confrontational politics. It perhaps started with the degradations of the Speenhamland system of Poor Law and included Chartism, the village Friendly Societies, which grew into national organisations, and Trade Unionism, with its eventual spread into the agricultural areas. The Cotswold morris had mostly collapsed by the mid 19th century, although we now know that it faltered on in many places, even up to World War One.

In towns it had become customary for groups from some occupations to parade and dance for gifts or *boxes*. The chimney sweeps brought out the jack-in-the-green and the milkmaids their garlands, often a tall portable structure decorated with any shiny things. These disappeared for the same reasons as Christmas boxes for tradesmen and now tips for waiters, because of the modern connotation of charity rather than being deserved.

In north western Europe, when looking at the full content of a culture, it always appears to be changing. The *loss* of customs and other *traditional* non-essential behaviour is a part of the natural progress of adapting our society to current opportunities. Tradition is a lagging but still a moving window on to any society.

The morris is not immutable but a heritage and not to be treated as if it should be in a museum.

At Lichfield in the 19th century the morris led the perambulation by the winning candidate at parliamentary elections. At Banbury they chaired the disadvantaged fool of the Adderbury morris in a protest against the limitations of such elections. Elsewhere, particularly in the towns in the Thames and Kennett valleys, there were regular *elections of Mock Mayors*, one of which at Abingdon still happens on the Saturday nearest the 19th June, the date of the old horse fair, involving the inhabitants of Ock Street, and organised by the local traditional morris.

The 19th century saw the morris as one of the relics of 18th century life, coarse and leading people into disrepute. Those who recorded such comments now appear to have been biased. Others saw them as nostalgic survivals. The 19th century rediscovered chivalry and the developed *correct* attitudes for gentlemen such as fair play and the value of *improving* behaviour. The *women question* exercised them as to the proper place of women as in the home and not in the workplace. It became less acceptable that young or married women appeared in public displays. It is not surprising that there was little reference to women in the morris in the 19th century, although a third of those mentions of the gender of dancers in Tudor and Stuart times implied that they were mixed. However most women in the 19th and early 20th centuries went into *service* at thirteen, with only half a day off per week, and aimed to be married by twenty one.

In its decline the social background of the dancers fell. At one time farmer's sons were proud to join, but by the end they were mostly farm labourers dancing for the money, and linked by family and workplace rather than dance skill. But the atmosphere had changed and dancers spoke later of giving up because it *got like begging*. The running costs of a dancer were not trivial, new shoes, bells in dutch metal at 6d a time and a dancer might need thirty six or more, so most were dependent on patronage or inheritance.

We have today some knowledge of only how twenty three teams or *traditions* danced out of several score that are known to have existed in the Cotswolds. Each was deliberately distinctive with variations on only a maximum of seven *steps*, which were simple movement sequences, and built around four to six regularly included *figures*, each with a descriptive title. Those that survived longest were actually associated with what were thought of as small towns rather than villages, for example at Abingdon, Bampton, Brackley and Chipping Campden. The old teams would be linked by name to their current leader and where he lived or could be contacted, thus they could appear to drift around their catchment area.

Most would have been irretrievably lost if it had not been for the local responses to Queen Victoria's Jubilees and later national celebrations.

Rediscovery

The morris was not the first of the dance types now considered traditional to be discovered. The old maypole was a tall decorated post which could be danced around as a symbol of rights and licence, not fertility. The plaited ribbon form, familiar now for a hundred years, was, along with garland and other ribbon dances, part of the stock in trade of entertainment arrangers. It diffused into