

**Follow Up Note 1**

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29th September 1997

**SOCIAL BACKGROUND TO THE COTSWOLD MORRIS**

There is always an interest in the social conditions under which the traditional Cotswold morris existed, albeit in the 19th century through decline from 1840 onwards. This booklet has been out of print for some time but amongst other things puts the morris into its context. It has a few inaccuracies on the morris which can be covered by studying Keith Chandler's books for dates for the actual persistence of the traditions, but otherwise it is a valuable adjunct and helps to show how different conditions really were and what a social gulf there is to today. It was inspirational to my first conference paper on how the morris ran into the 20th century.

Yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Roy', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

CUSTOM IN CONFLICT: THE MORRIS DANCE IN THE SHREWSBURY AND  
IRONBRIDGE AREA OF SHROPSHIRE

GORDON ASHMAN

I must begin with an explanation of the title of my paper, a point which many of you will no doubt feel bodes ill for what is to come. After all, if something as simple and straightforward as the name of the paper requires explanation, you may even now be asking yourselves, what will be required for the meat of the paper. The answer, I hope, is nothing other than a powerful digestive system and the ability to make a feast of the scraps from other men's tables and if, at the end of the paper, you have metaphorical morris indigestion, the fault will be entirely mine.

I would have liked to entitle what I am about to say: 'Custom in Conflict in Coalbrookdale'. Had I done so, I am sure that many of you would reasonably have concluded that I was going to discuss happenings in a tiny Shropshire village; a little place that time has left stranded in that collection of roundabouts and traffic islands called Telford New Town. Any recent map shows Coalbrookdale to be just that; a part of modern Ironbridge.

If, however, you had asked any reasonably lettered man or woman the question:- 'Where or what is Coalbrookdale?', some little time ago, the short answer, quoted perhaps from Charles Hulbert in 1837 would have been:- 'Why, the most extraordinary district in the World'.

Looking at de Louthembourg's 1801 painting of 'Coalbrookdale by Night'<sup>2</sup> where Moloch, in the form of the Industrial Revolution, was being built, it is not hard to see why everyone held this view. Incidentally, the painting depicts the Bedlam Furnaces, some one

85. Mary Fielding, conversation, 30 March 1986; Mrs Kate Thorpe, recorded interview, 13 February 1986.

86. EvJ, 26 May 1951, p.10.

87. EvJ, 11 June 1955, p.5.

88. Ibid.

89. Mary Fielding, conversation, 30 March 1986.

90. Mrs Kate Thorpe, recorded interview, 13 February 1986.

91. See Local Studies, by children of Mrs Thorpe's class, St James School (Chipping Campden, 1985) edited by Craig Fees (available Gloucestershire Record Office and Campden library). 1881 statistics compiled from 1881 census and admissions registers; 1985 statistics compiled by the children.

92. At the time of the 1901 census there were 1,542 people in Campden.

93. See Ashbee Journals, September 1919, Alec Miller to G. R. Ashbee; 19 October 1919, W. Huysh to Janet Ashbee. The battle was waged in public: see EvJ, 22 March 1919, p.8; 29 March 1919, p.7; 5 April 1919, p.8.

94. H. J. Massingham, who lived in the Campden area in 1930-1931 wrote extensively of this invasion in the inter-war period, but nowhere with more specific relevance than in A Countryman's Journal (London: Chapman and Hall, 1939).

95. EvJ, 29 September 1983, p.1.

96. This may be overlooking the factor of the novelty of the event. One does see a logic of spectacle emerging over the three years, a sense of story-line as the organisers become more familiar and perhaps more confident with the custom. Had the fete continued, they may well have constructed a more theatrically coherent event than is apparent in 1895.

97. I offer this tentatively, knowing that more detailed studies of the 1895-1897 fetes, fin de siècle Campden, and local culture generally may overturn all or part of this thesis.

98. Refer to my dissertation (see note 4, above); Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, Hansfried Kellner, The Homeless Mind (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Andrew Pearse, Metropolis and Peasant: The Expansion of the Urban Industrial Complex and the Changing Rural Structure, in Peasants and Peasant Societies, edited by Teodor Shanin (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp.69-80.

and a half miles from present day Coalbrookdale and if we return to Hulbert's remarkable book, <sup>3</sup> we find that his description of Coalbrookdale covers a very large area.

Hulbert called it 'the coal district' <sup>4</sup> and that remarkable folklorist Charlotte Burne called its people 'the Colliery folk'. <sup>5</sup> I include Shrewsbury in the area of my study not just because it is the county town, and thus provided law as well as administration and some finance for the colliery district, but also because that elegant town was almost a coalfield town, coal being mined at Meole Brace only two miles from the centre of Shrewsbury.

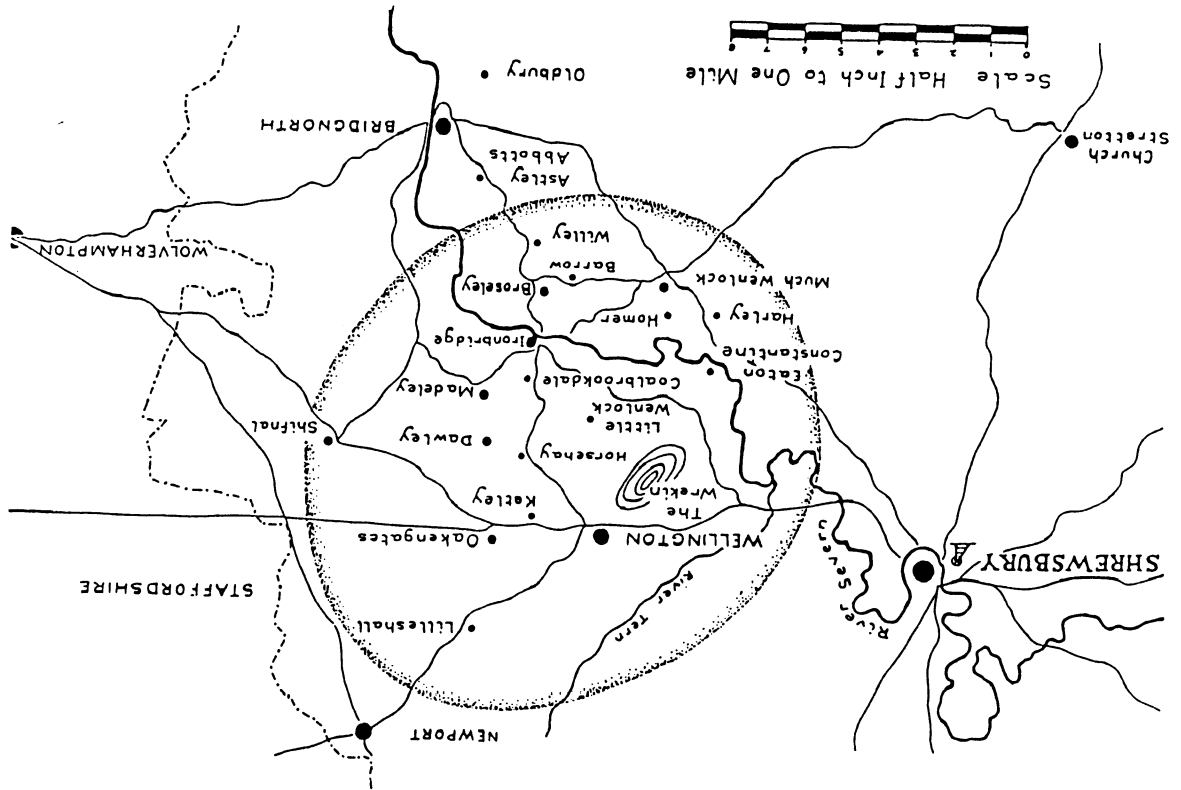
In short then, we have an area wherein great change took place in a relatively short time. Nothing in the world was ever quite the same after Abraham Darby successfully smelted iron with coal instead of charcoal and set in train the Industrial Revolution. The time it took to forge a billet of iron replaced the time it took corn to grow as the Coalbrookdale man's clock. Old ways came into conflict with the new, the morris dance no less than many other 'Customs in Conflict'.

Before getting down to the substance of the paper, it remains only to define 'Custom' and 'Conflict'. Conflict, I trust will not bring us to blows since it is simply from the Latin *fligere*, to strike. Custom may be a different matter, since the word has many meanings for many men. For my purposes, I will use the definition given by that fine parson of the little Shropshire village of Myddle, Richard Gough, who in 1700 wrote thus:

Custom is a law or right, not written, which being established by long use and the consent of our ancestors, hath been and is daily practised.

I hope to show later why these elements of long use, consent and frequent observance are so important.

THE EAST SHROPSHIRE COALFIELD



Having, at long last, explained the title of my paper, I can now get down to the heart of the matter. Any study of the morris danced in this area must begin with Dr Cawte's masterly article which appeared in the Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society nearly a quarter of a century ago. I feel certain that anyone who has researched this part of the world will agree with me when I say that he did an exceedingly thorough job and, in terms of documentary information, he left very little for those of us following in his footsteps. We should not, however, despair. As I shall later show, there is still vital documentary evidence to be found. Oral sources offer a wealth of material and, most importantly of all, old sources can be re-examined in the light of present day understanding of history and historical processes.

In a paper of this length, it will not be possible to review every early quotation and so one of the things I propose to do today is to examine a few key references in the hope that you will be stimulated, as I have been, to question commonly accepted views or to try to look at them with a fresh and open mind.

Let us take one of the earliest known references to the morris dance in England as well as our area of study. At the Visitation of the Parish of St Mary's, Shrewsbury in 1584, it was asked by the Official:

Whether there have bene any lords of mysrule, or somer lords or ladies, or any disguised persons, as morice dauncers, maskers, or mum'ers, or such lyke, within the parishe, ether in the nativittide or in som'er, or at any other tyme, and what be their names?

Dr Cawte cites this question and goes on to state: 'This does not prove that the morris dancers appeared, but it is interesting that summer and Christmas were expected to be their special seasons'. True, but what I find even more interesting is the fact that the population of Shrewsbury at this time was about 6,000. I live in a small Shropshire settlement, still referred to by all who live there as 'The Village', despite the fact that there are now some

6,000 inhabitants. It is the size of Shrewsbury in 1584 and yet, when I walk down the village street, I know, in the sense of exchanging greetings, at least six people out of ten and recognise ninety-five out of a hundred. Were anything as outlandish as 'morice dauncers, maskers, or mum'ers' to appear I would most certainly know it! To understand why the Official asked what was surely a purely rhetorical question, we need to know something of the man and the times in which he lived.

'John Tomkiss... was renowned as a 'painful preacher'', writes Barrie Trinder in his History of Shropshire. English understatement at its best, for the self-described 'Her Majesty's Stipendiary Minister of St. Mary's... with decided anti-Roman views on all points of Church order and doctrine...', had been appointed to reform, be it ever so painful, the ways of the people of Shrewsbury.

His position as public preacher was one of great power but, despite this, he was not always successful in his endeavours to put down Papist practices. In 1589

... great disturbances were in the town, occasioned by the setting up May-poles, and making bonfires, before the Shearmens-Hall, and in other places. Mr. Tomkies, Minister of St. Mary's, and public preacher, appeared among the people, and endeavoured to dissuade them against such proceedings; but he was ill-used by the populace, and the disturbances increased, until the bailiffs interfered and put a stop to them.

The matter did not end there for, two years later, the young men of the Shearmens' Company set up '...this green tree before their hall door as of many years before had been accustomed', and were promptly arrested, committed to prison and indicted. They came to trial nearly three months later before the Recorder when '...upon their submission, they were quit for their disobedience' and Mr Sergeant Owen determined that '...the usual tree shall be used as heretofore, so it be done civilly and in loving order, without

I could, but will not, spend the rest of this session cataloguing the conflict between John Tomkies and his parishioners' customs. I have tried to give something of the feeling of these times but, unless you can bring to mind the smell of burning human flesh and remember how close in time were these events to Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, you will not understand the intensity of feeling the Reformation aroused.

If we now return to the question Tomkies asked in 1584 in the light of what I have just said and, if we remember that the year before Tomkies asked his question about morris-dancers, Stubbes' diatribe against many customs Englishmen regarded as their birthright - The Anatomie of Abuses - had been printed,<sup>14</sup> I think you might, like me, see the question in a new light. Indeed, you may well conclude that far from being even a rhetorical question, it was actually a statement that such things as 'lords of mysrule...or morice dauncers...or such lyke' would not be tolerated, at least by the Preacher of St Mary's. I feel sure that had morris dancers appeared in the streets of Shrewsbury, they would have heard the sharp tongue of the Reverend Mr Tomkys M.A., and would have had all his reforming zeal brought to bear upon them. Had this been done, I am convinced that it would have been recorded by Shrewsbury's early historians.

I therefore conclude that rather than being evidence that morris dancers may have performed in Shrewsbury in the late sixteenth century, the Visitation question makes that possibility seem somewhat unlikely.

The disapproval, or even attempted putting-down of a custom, has sometimes backfired in the face of the would-be suppressor. I think it very unlikely that we would have any inkling of how the inhabitants of a tiny Shropshire hamlet spent their Sundays in the

seventeenth century, had not their recorder been preoccupied with sin, and thus in conflict with local custom.

Let us come forward in time, roughly fifty years, to see the villagers of Eaton Constantine. We see them through the eyes of another zealous preacher, the celebrated divine, Richard Baxter. Whilst many of us would have had troubled souls had we lived through the horrors of the Civil War, Baxter's loathing of the pleasures and pastimes of his fellows often exceeded all reason. In his autobiography, Baxter begins by writing of the incompetence of the local clergy (in the High Erccall and Eaton Constantine area), and goes on to describe how Sunday was spent in his youth in about 1627:

In the village where I lived the reader read the Common Prayer briefly, and the rest of the day even till dark night almost, except eating-time, was spent in dancing, under a maypole and a great tree not far from my father's door, where all the town did meet together. And though one of my father's own tenants was the piper, he could not restrain him nor break the sport. So that we could not read the Scripture in our family without the great disturbance of the tabor and pipe and noise in the street.

Elsewhere he records with an even greater sense of outrage:

...and we could not on the Lord's day, either read a Chapter, or Pray, or sing a Psalm, or Chatechise or instruct a Servant, but with the noise of the Pipe and Taber, and the Whootings in the Street continually in our Ears; And even among a tractable people, we were the common Scorn of all the Rabble in the Streets. ..And sometimes the Morrice-Dancers would come into the Church, in all their Linnen and Scarfs and Antick Dresses, with the Morrice-bells jingling at their leggs. And as soon as the Common Prayer was read, did haste out presently to their play again.

We can find a hint as to the reason for his detestation of the dancers in the following extract from the Reliquiae Baxterianae, since in his youth:

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Many times my mind was inclined to be among them, and sometimes I broke loose from conscience and joined with them; and the more I did it the more I was inclined to it. But when I heard them call my father Puritan it did much to cure me and alienate me from them.

We might also be indebted to indigestion for Baxter's acidulous view of life since he tells us that:

I was much addicted to the excessive gluttonous eating of apples and pears; which I think laid the foundation of that imbecility and flatulency of my stomach which caused the bodily calamities of my life.

A well man might have been more charitably disposed to his fellows and we might not have such a fine description of village life.

We need to remember the terrible times Baxter had lived through. They had killed a king, brother had killed brother, the Witchfinder-General had stalked the land, and morris dancing was not merely an idle pursuit, but the damning evidence of a soul lost. Had Baxter not felt as he did, we would surely not have such a marvellous description of the classic, archetypal, dare I but say it, 'Cotswold' morris dance in the heart of the 'Border' area.

I would like now to consider slightly different forms of conflict. The first is a conflict of evidence and it leads to what is, I suppose, the classic form of conflict in our field of study: that between the squirearchy and the morris dancer, even in detail.

It begins innocently enough with a nice little snippet about a spirited old lady:

In the churchyard of Willey is a gravestone, dated 1756, to a Margery Brider, aged 113, 'who danced with the Morris-dancers the year before'.

As Dr Cawte points out, there are parallels with the account of the old men of Herefordshire.

In following up this reference, I came across an item in a parish register concerning the lady. The cynical among you will conclude that it positively confirms that she was a morris dancer since the entry for 20 July 1701 notes that on 8 July, Margery Symons (alias Brigger), had given birth to a bastard son Joseph, and blamed it on one Thomas Pritchard, a Vagabond.<sup>21</sup> The next task was to visit the churchyard to see the gravestone but, long before I got there I felt uneasy. In this tiny hamlet is Willey Old Hall. Not far away is the magnificent seat of Lord Forester, Willey Park. Close by is the tiny, old church held by the Weld-Forester family for some 400 years.

I was not in the least surprised when I was unable to find Margery Brider's tombstone, neither did it shake me to discover from the Parish Register that there had been no burials at all at Willey between 1754 and 1758.<sup>22</sup> What would really have surprised me would have been to see the lords of the Manor of Willey permitting such an immoral individual to be buried in their personal churchyard.

Margery Simmons was buried some way from Willey on 17 January 1756.<sup>23</sup> Her remains are to be found somewhere in Barrow Churchyard. No stone marks the spot and it reminds me very forcibly of the need for researchers, wherever possible, not to accept even apparently sound evidence without walking the ground and attempting to understand the place and its people.

I suggested a little earlier that vital documentary information was still to be found, even today. We come to such a find and I hope I can do two things at this point. The first is to communicate the excitement I felt on first reading this document and the second and much more important point is to make clear my debt to Keith Chandler who passed the cutting to me and Mike Heaney who found it in Henry Ellis's personal copy of Brand's Antiquities. It must be very tempting to hug such a find to your chest, at least for a while, but their generosity must already be known to many of you.

It is such a splendid piece of information, packed with fact after fact about living and working conditions and attitudes to working men as well as the most marvellous description of morris dancers from a period about which we know very little that I give it here in full.

QUEEN SQUARE.- MORRIS DANCERS.- John Cadman, Rowland Fowler, William Fowler, Edward Herbert, and five others, were brought before the Magistrate by Benjamin P. Capper, Esq. of the Alien-office, under the following circumstances:-

It appeared from the statement of Mr. Capper, that these nine men, were decked out in all the colours of the rainbow, by means of ribands of various colours, white, red, and yellow paper round the edges of their hats, to imitate silver and gold lace, and other absurd imitations of finery, made their appearance before the doors and windows of the Alien-office, in Crown-street, Westminster, between 1 and 2 o'clock in the afternoon; one of them bearing in his hand a tamarine, and the others with sticks in theirs, and began dancing in their usual grotesque way. In a few minutes a great crowd was collected, and Mr. C. having heard or read of some morris-dancers who had annoyed different neighbourhoods about town, thought, as they were so near the office, it would be right they should see the inside of it, and hear what the Magistrate would say to them.

Mr. FIELDING told them they had committed a great breach of the law in thus arraying themselves, that they were amenable as vagrants, and as such liable to be sent to prison.

He observed that on a paper in front of one of their hats was written "Colliers from Shropshire;" it would grieve [sic] him, he said, particularly at the present moment, to deprive the harvest, which is fast approaching, of the exertions of nine such stout, young active lads as they appeared to be; but he must do his duty, and, however painful to his feelings, put the law in force unless they would solemnly promise him, upon their word of honour, that they would leave the town immediately by two different routes, five in one party and four in the other. This they very readily promised to do. Mr. F. then asked them what money they had about them? They instantly emptied their pockets, and their whole store was found to amount to about 2s. in halfpence. He then asked them how much they had earned a day since they arrived in town; they answered, never more than 2s. a day each.

Mr. F. also informed them they must immediately disrobe themselves of all their fantastic finery, give up their "spirit-stirring-drum," with all their other implements

of morris-dancing mystery; of all which they immediately divested themselves, and they were given in charge to the officer present.

Thus restored to a state of natural appearance, they looked like what they really were, stout, well-made, and some of them rather handsome young men.

Mr. Fielding then informed them they must leave the town this day, and must endeavour to obtain employment at the first place where they could any of them meet with it; and those who could not get it must make the best of their way in search of it in some other place: and in order to make them somewhat more easy, in once more turning their faces towards their native county, he would (not doubting but they would keep their words which they had pledged) order them to be paid half-a-crown each to cheer them on their way.

Mr. COLQUHOUN also advised them to be very cautious in their conduct, and by no means to attempt taking up again, as they passed along, the mystery they had just laid down; for if it came under the cognizance of any of the country Magistrates, they would most assuredly be sent to prison. The Clerk was then desired to give them half-a-crown each, and they departed, after very respectfully returning the Magistrates' thanks for the kind treatment they had met with.

I literally could not sleep on the night after I received that cutting. My mind was simply whirling round at all the information, implications and new questions it raised. Suddenly the origins of the strips of cloth or paper on a Shropshire Morris dancer became clearer. The tambourine, used in living memory in my area, had long antecedents. The dancers were such a long way from Shropshire. How and why had they gone there? Why were the Magistrates so lenient in their treatment of the miscreants? There is no mention of the blackened faces which later accounts mention. There are many more questions and comments to make but, given the constraints of time, I would like to put before you just a few of the ideas that come welling up.

We have been conditioned in the belief that, until recently, the rural population of England was born, grew up, worked a lifetime and died, never having travelled more than a day's walk from the parish of their birth. Just how false is this belief is shown above, but I am sure it will surprise many of you to know that the Shropshire colliers were doing no more than following their sisters

and sweethearts to London. By 1817 the annual expedition to London by Shropshire pit girls was well established and its purpose was nothing so soft or effete as morris dancing. The girls from the Ketley pit banks went to carry the strawberry harvest from the fields of Isleworth or Richmond into central London in 40-50lb loads on their heads, making several journeys each day.

A year before these events, the post-Napoleonic war depression reached its height in Shropshire. Only ten of Coalbrookdale's thirty-four furnaces were in blast. The few colliers who were in work and accustomed to earning 4s. a day were reduced to working for 1s-6d. Two shillings a day for morris dancing suddenly takes on a different perspective. In June 1817, the monthly agricultural report for Salop mentioned: '...the uncommon drought of last month...all lanten crops and seeds were at a stand...Some wheats... have entirely perished.'<sup>27</sup> It was fine to be told by the Magistrate to find work harvesting but there must needs be something to harvest.

Perhaps the colliers gained from hard-working reputations enjoyed by their Shropshire sisters, who had reputations of working until they literally dropped dead from exertion in the fields around Barnes.<sup>28</sup> Maybe the magistrates, mindful of the general unemployment which had led to the Spa Fields Riots only a few months earlier,<sup>29</sup> were simply trying to reduce quietly the population of a ragged and potentially rebellious element which might be added to the thousands of destitutes on the streets of London.

As I suggested earlier, these are but a few of the points which this marvellous reference opens up. The names of the dances must be followed up. Not an easy task, but an intriguing one since the name Cadman, unusual perhaps to those of you not from Shropshire,

was common in the Ketley-Wellington-Oakengates area and, indeed, was used by Mrs Cameron, a prominent writer of religious tracts at the time, as the name of the hard-drinking, bull-baiting wife-abusing, pitman anti-hero in her novel, Oakengates Wake.

In short, the reference poses at least as many new questions as it provides answers, but should give heart to any researcher who has been told that there is nothing new to be found in their field.

Now to turn to an internal form of conflict: that is, one within me, and one from which some of you may gain. I am sure all of you must have known the dreadful experience of visiting your county Record Office or local studies library, devoting a day, a week, a month, to ploughing painstakingly through record books in spidersy writing (whence, I wonder, came this myth that our forebears wrote in immaculate copperplate) or hacking your way through a year of your local newspaper (on badly scratched microfilm, of course) only to find.....absolutely nothing.

I had certainly reached the point early last year when I was prepared to admit defeat in both my primary, historical field of work as well as my secondary area, morris dancing. I had spent ages working through some of the most turgid literature known to man. Not only that, much of it had been written by some of the most smug and pompous creatures ever to put pen to paper. I had spent months looking for certain types of calendar or popular custom and was bitterly disappointed not to have found them. I had to rediscover the lesson that what is not there is often almost as important as what is there. To a soldier entering an area it may be a matter of life or death to know that it has not been mined or that there are not enemy tanks waiting for him. I had in the past spent much of my working life gathering such information. It was probably on the road to Dawley rather than Damascus that my conversion took place. I suddenly realised that I had been investing the subject of my research with a quite unmerited mystique.



Applying what I had learnt in military intelligence gathering to morris dancing gave a new perspective to the hours spent with say, 'An Honest Penny is Worth a Silver Shilling',<sup>31</sup> or the days spent wrestling with 'The Posthumous Pieces of the late Rev. John William de la Flechere',<sup>32</sup> or the aeons of narcolepsy spent with the diaries of the ladies who were described by an enthusiastic writer on the family as ".....those frightful Darby women".

If those who had spent a lifetime cataloguing the major and minor sins of the miners of Madeley and I shall go on to give you a few examples, had failed to mention morris dancing, then we may reasonably infer that there was not much of it about. Consider for a moment Fletcher's list of sins to be avoided:

....taking the Lord's name in vain...Sabbath breaking, uncleanness, drunkenness or tippling, or going into a public house or staying without necessity; fighting; quarrelling; bowling...attendance at balls, plays, races, cockfights and bull baitings; gaming; song singing; needless indulgence; putting on gaudy and costly apparel...

Surely if he had seen any morris dancing, combining as it does so many of the foregoing sins, Fletcher would have condemned it with all the others. Incidentally, the quotation shows how well Fletcher knew the area and the men, since he condemns '...going into a public house and staying without necessity'. I think he recognises the need to slake a thirst, but knows that under the charter-master system (sub-contracting of labour), the men were invariably paid in the pub.

A decade later he was still condemning theatrical performances, annual wakes, horse racing, cock fighting, man fighting and dog fighting, and his opposition to bull baiting was such that the Madeley Wood colliers were intent on setting their dogs on him instead of the bull.<sup>34</sup>

Fletcher had no doubt as to why the miners of his parish were so sinful as he noted that: 'They plead for the old customs: they will do as their fathers did, though ever so contrary to the word of God.'<sup>35</sup>

My notes and records are full of such invective from the pens of many men and women recording life in the colliery district over some two hundred years, and yet the mentions of morris dancing are few and far between. The lesson which I had to relearn, and which I hope will save some of you from the anguish I felt when hours of drudgery failed to reveal what I hoped to find, is that negative information may be nearly as important as the positive when you are trying to establish quantitatively, the part morris dancing played in the lives of earlier communities.

Let me now talk very briefly about what many people would consider to be the essential characteristic of the morris dance in the area under examination. 'You're not a morris dancer without a black face', an old man told Dr Cawte.<sup>36</sup> Come with me in your imagination to a day out with the morris side in which I perform. Our black faces fascinate the watchers and I can guarantee they will ask: 'Why do you have black faces?' The answer, of course, is: 'It's traditional', and is immediately followed by the corollary: 'We've done it for hundreds of years', a bit of information I find quite breathtaking since I personally persuaded the side to adopt the custom less than six years ago. Please for the moment keep that in mind whilst we go back to some early references.

Consider the ones I have already mentioned. Consider Baxter's or Fletcher's howls of outrage or the cynical reportage of The Times reporter. I am certain that had they seen blackened faces, this would have been noted in no uncertain terms. Indeed, try as I might, I have found no references to blacking up much before the middle of the nineteenth century.