MORRIS DANCING

Morris Dancing is a popular activity in hundreds of villages around England. There are also morris sides in Wales, Scotland and growing numbers in Australia, USA, Netherlands and other countries, but England is generally regarded as its quintessential home. There are three organisations representing morris sides in England, viz: The Morris Ring representing traditional male sides, The Morris Federation and The Open Morris representing a mixture of traditional teams, mixed male and female teams as well as all female teams. All organisations have a mixture of traditional dance types including molly dancing, longsword, rapper, "Playford" dancing and so on. The three organisations can probably account for at least 800 teams around the country and overseas and allowing for teams who do not belong to an association there could be as many as a thousand "folk" dancing teams in the UK alone.

Where did it all come from?

The style of **morris** dancing in the East Midlands is usually referred to as "Cotswold" and has a history stretching back over 500 years, but if it wasn't for a chance event in Headington, Oxfordshire on Boxing Day 1899, it may have disappeared forever. A Cambridge educated musician named Cecil Sharp was staying with his wife's mother at Sandfield Cottage a mile east of Oxford. The weather was cold and the ground snow covered. The quarry, which afforded local employment, was closed.

As Sharp looked out of the window he saw eight men dressed in white walk up the drive. They were wearing ribbons and pads on their legs decorated with crotal bells. One man played the concertina and six men performed a dance involving handkerchiefs known locally as Laudnum Bunches. They also performed a dance with sticks called Bean Setting. They continued to dance other dances from the village of Headington, including Constant Billie and Rigs O' Marlow.

Sharp was transfixed by this display of music and unusual dance which he had not previously encountered and he spoke to the performers with great enthusiasm, particularly the concertina player, the 27 year old William Kimber (Junior). He asked Kimber to return the following day so that he could note down the tunes. When Kimber was asked where he had learned the tunes and dances he replied that they had been taught by his father and that he in turn had learned them from his father. Sharpe immediately realised he was witnessing something of great historical value and an art form not previously recorded or commented on by "educated" classes.

It should be mentioned however that Headington Quarry Morris Dancers like many village morris teams had ceased dancing during the 19th C. (1887) and Headington had been encouraged to resume activities by the Oxford folklorist Percy Manning.

Sharp was a teacher at Ludgrove Preparatory School and much of the music he taught his pupils was of German origin and he was aware of an inadequate supply of English traditional folk music. It is considered that the Headington experience was a seminal moment is Sharp's life, alerting him to a rick vein of folk culture which eventually inspired him to become the greatest of English folk song collectors and he busied himself with this activity from 1903 onwards.

In 1905 a request came to Sharp for English folk songs from an acquaintance named Mary Neal who ran a club (The Esperance Club), for working girls (seamstresses) in St. Pancras. Sharp also brought to her attention the dances he had collected earlier from William Kimber and Mary Neal quickly went to Headington to interview Kimber. Kimber and another dancer visited the Club and taught the girls the dances and in 1907 Cecil Sharp and Herbert MacIlwaine (Musical Director of the Esperance Club) published Vol. 1 of "The Morris Book" as an instructional guide. The books eventually covered 5 volumes (1913) and later editions were modified for improved technical information based on experience. At this time Sharp expressed gratitude to Mary Neale for bringing life and attention to the tunes and dances that would otherwise have just resided in his notebooks.

However, by 1909 Sharp had become concerned about the artistic interpretation of the ancient dances by Mary Neale's associates ("insufficient vigour and too much grace") and that the female adoption of the dances lacked a certain unique masculinity that Sharp had originally witnessed. He decided that he must take over first hand instruction himself and to that end created a School of Morris Dancing (with himself as Director) as part of Chelsea Polytechnic. The objective of the School was to "conserve the morris in its purity and teach it accurately". Sharp extended his collecting, recording the unique way in which the morris had evolved in over 20 villages.

Although there was general belief that the dances had "Moorish" origins Sharp was quick to dismiss these views.

"*There is no need to pursue this question further. The highest authorities reject the Moorish hypothesis, and see in the Morris the survival of some primitive religious ceremonial."*

"Shortly we may explain that it was one of the seasonal pagan observances prevalent amongst primitive communities, and associated in some occult way with the fertilization of all living things, animal & vegetable. The central act of the ceremony was the slaughter of a sacred animal to provide a solemn sacramental feast. The primitive mind did not draw any clear line between its dimly-conceived clan-deity, the human members of the clan, and the sacred animals of the clan-herd. All were of one kindred, and the object of the sacrifice of the holy animal and the subsequent feast was to cement the bond between the god and the members of the clan."

"Particulars will be given of the survival in two Oxfordshire villages….of ceremonies closely associated with the morris dance in which an animal was killed and afterwards eaten."

(Cecil Sharp & Herbert MacIlwaine, The Morris Book 1912-1913, EP Publishing)

It seems surprising that with no evidence or further research Sharp should so certainly jump to this position. Why did he do this and who were the "highest authorities"? The highest authority was quite probably Sir James Frazer, another Cambridge scholar and the author of a massive twelve volume work called the "Golden Bough" (1890) which had a huge bearing on contemporary thought concerning the origin of folk tradition and popular customs. Frazer was a social anthropologist who put forward theories concerning the influence of agriculture, paganism, tree sprits and fertility on the development of religions and customs along with communal aspects of primitive society. This led to a proliferation of theories of religion at the

turn of the 19th C. By current standards much of his work is considered unsound but Sharp and Neale expanded this thinking as the origin for morris dancing.

It didn't seem to occur to their sophisticated thinking that village folk might want a social event, roasting an ox with a bit of dancing and singing as we do today. There certainly doesn't have to be a sacrificial element to killing the animal.

Another possible factor in concluding a pagan origin was that morris dancing tended to happen in the spring around Whitsun at the time of the earlier pagan festival of Belthane or Roman festivals like Floralia or Parilia. However, Whitsun was a natural time of the year for a holiday break for agricultural communities and Whitsun (Pentecost) had been superimposed on top of earlier holiday periods at the time of Christianisation. "Moorish" (the accepted derivation of morris) was also a word suggesting paganism as it was used to imply anti-christian activity during the moorish conquest of Spain. There was also plenty of criticism from the puritans between 1570 and 1660 again suggesting anti-christian activity.

"They strike up the Devil's Daunce withall: then martch this heathen company towards the church and churchyards, their pypers pyping, their drummers thundering, their stumpes dauncing, their belles jyngling, their handkercheefes fluttering about their heads like madde men … in the church like devils incarnate"

(Philip Stubbes "Anatomie of Abuses" (1583))

So, in the early 20th Century with the influence of Frazer's work and the appearance of the morris in the Spring, the association with fertility, rebirth and luck became widely accepted and it has become difficult to replace this romantic view with that revealed by proper research.

Much of our present understanding of the history of morris dancing is due to the work of John Forrest (State University of New York), Michael Heaney (University of Oxford), Ronald Hutton (University of Bristol) and other scholars.

The Moors came from North Africa (the name survives in **Mor**occo, **Maur**itania, etc.) and occupied Spain from 711, progressing as far as Poitiers in France (732). Although Christian groups recovered Spanish territory, the Moors survived in Grenada until 1491. The house of the last Moorish king survives in Ronda (Andalucia). This period was a zenith of Islamic culture, exemplified by buildings like the Alhambra and the Great Mosque of Cordoba but also in poetry, art, law and learning. The Moorish influence was powerful throughout Spanish society but also through entertainment in other European courts; many activities acquired the description Moorish, Mouresque, Morisco, etc.

Researchers have discovered that the first recorded Morisco was at the marriage of the Count of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer, to Petronilla of Aragon in 1149. Many other events similarly described are recorded in Paris, Brittany, Burgundy, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, etc. between 1389 – 1500. Apart from Moorish dancing and style being fashionable other events such as mock battles between Christians and Moors became known as Moriscos (or sim.) For example "The Moreška" is still celebrated annually in Korčula, Croatia. The growth in fashion for court "moriscas" may have related to the expulsion of the moors from Spain.

English links with Spain were extensive. Henry II ruled a kingdom stretching to the Pyrenees and his royal successors formed many marital and military connections. Edward I married Eleanor of Castile, Edward the Black Prince campaigned in Spain for restoration of the King of Aragon, John of Gaunt married the daughter of the King of Castile and campaigned in Spain. Castile and Aragon were united in 1469 and Henry VI's elder son Arthur was married to Catherine of Aragon who became Queen of England on re-marriage to Henry VIII. Subsequently when Henry's daughter Mary married Phillip of Spain, England became almost a province of Spain. In summary between the reigns of Henry II and Henry VII some 10 generations of soldiers had witnessed the Moorish customs of Spain.

It's not too surprising then, to find that when Sir John Arundell of Lanherne House in Cornwell, a general in Henry VI's army, provided entertainment he turned to the European custom of Moorish dancing. This is one of the first recorded morris dancing events in England and it took place in 1466. Later, Henry VII, who had been educated in exile at the French court in Paris, brought the English court up to date by introducing what he would have witnessed in France. The Privy Purse records Henry paying £2 to minstrels 'for playing the mourice daunce' in 1492; almost coincidental with the moors final departure from Spain.

It is an important observation that prior to 2 references in 1458 no evidence in word or image has been detected relating to morris dancing. Mankind has always been keen to record customs and lifestyle as shown by ancient illustrations in Egypt or for example in the cave illustrations of Lascaux or Altimera (over 16,000 years old) and the absence of anything prior to 1458 is strong evidence that the introduction of the custom to England must have been around this time.

More entries in court records followed during the reign of Henry VIII, and they were expensive and elaborate affairs but the King introduced the morris to the people during the 16th C., first close to court in Kingston and Richmond, but then spreading to Westminster, Marlow, Reading Abingdon, Oxford, etc. along the principal transport route of the day: the River Thames. The morris became very popular in the Whitsun Sportes, May Games, and Church Ales. Another inclusion was the legend of Robin Hood, to encourage archery practice and the characters of Friar Tuck and Maid Marion blended into the same events along with hobby horses.

As the organisation of Whitsun activities spread to the parishes it fell into the hands of the church wardens, whose records give us a good picture of how morris began to arise in local communities: from 1500 Cathedral Cities, followed by Richmond (1502), Kingston (1507), Marlow (1595), Reading (1513), Oxford (1598) , Abingdon (1560), Thatcham (1566), Wantage (1570), and Didcot (1580). The records indicate that morris dancing activity sponsored by the church authorities peaked around 1580 to 1630. Maypole dancing became widespread and maypole, morris and associated characters became an established part of the Whitsun celebrations. Both Elizabeth I and James I were entertained by public displays of morris dancing.

By the 17th C. 'morris' included such a diversity of events and dance styles it became impossible to trace the original. Many Elizabethans were critical of the frivolous (or dissolute in their eyes) behaviour accompanying morris dancing.

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Morris dancing in the parishes had evolved beyond church control and was now in the hands of the peasantry. The tendency for drinking and unseemly behaviour in parish teams assisted the puritans in their condemnation of the morris as non-Christian and the Devil's work. There are reports of vagrancy and arrests associated with the morris (e.g. in Wolverhampton, Streton and Lapley ca. 1650). The support from Gentleman's houses and churchwardens dried up and gatherings were frowned upon for fear of spreading plague.

Despite the loss of respectability (or maybe because of it?) the morris persisted with over 130 events recorded in the latter part of the 17th C. and 100 sightings between 1700-1750. However Francis Douce, the English antiquary writing in 1800 predicted that the custom would disappear within a short time. The effect of the industrial revolution (from ca. 1760) made these old customs seem anachronistic and irrelevant in the modern world. The morris became more isolated in the more remote villages of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and Gloucestershire, (some 61 villages had teams at the beginning of the 19th C.), but as times changed most village teams danced their last around the 1850's.

Douce may have been proven right if not for that chance event on Boxing Day in Headington in 1899. Cecil Sharp went on to form demonstration sides through the English Folk Dance Society and these were followed by the 'Travelling Morrice' from Cambridge University who endeavoured to take the morris back to the people of the Cotswolds. Their first tour took place in 1924, the end of which coincided with the death of Cecil Sharp. But enough had been done to revive and rejuvenate the tradition. The Cambridge team joined with other revival teams from Oxford, East Surrey, Letchworth, Thaxted, and Greensleeves (Wimbledon) to form the Morris Ring in 1934.

Since this time the morris has continued to prosper and today is again widely performed throughout the country and overseas, although somewhat changed from its early origins. The original dance is thought to have been an extremely energetic and flamboyant dance demonstrating individual skill; elements of this may survive in the present day "jig" for a single dancer. But by the 16th C. there seem to be three possible dance forms emerging. As well as the jig, a processional style of dancing occurred and a ring dance for six dancers surrounding a lady (or a "fool") where the dancers competed for the lady's favour (symbolised e.g. by the presentation of an apple). The dancers acted as individuals but changes occurred during the 18th C. with a greater emphasis on team performance in the development of village teams. Villages developed their own styles, and competitions took place (e.g. five teams competed at Standlake ca. 1850, with Leafield winning).

The dance style of today broadly represents the preservation of 19th C. versions which may be slightly more complex than those of the 18th C. The dancing at Bampton for example shows that evolution of the dances has been one of variation and modification through competition rather than major innovation.

The records show that the earliest costumes used for the court moriscos were elaborate and expensive. For example Henry VII paid £40 for costumes of white and green jackets with pendant sleeves of Flemish satin adorned with setters and spangles. The Scottish court paid £58 for costumes of red and white taffeta. The parishes copied the courts with silk costumes but because of the expense rented then out to other parishes to 'bring in the May' on a different day.

Later, with the spread of the morris amongst the ordinary people, they adopted the standard athletic costume of the day – cricket whites and straw hats. The brightness of colour was created by rosettes, baldricks and seasonal flowers (completing a circle with the Roman festivals).

Today, the use of the word "morris" describes a variety of styles as well as the 'cotswold' style of dancing. Handkerchief dances derive from the morris of the 16/17th C. When pendant sleeves went out of fashion, handkerchiefs were introduced to compliment the arm gestures. Some dances, e.g. Bampton jigs, use no handkerchiefs. During the 18th C. two types of morris were referred to, the second being 'Bedlam' morris danced with sticks (substituting for swords) and no bells. This was possibly a descendant of 'Matachin', a masked clownish 16th C. dance. Bedlam morris was added to the established festive occasions, the influence being stronger in the East Midlands, and the two morris's merged in the 19th C. Stick dances never became absorbed in the South Midlands styles, i.e. Ducklington, Bampton, Eynsham, Abingdon.

The use of bells is a defining feature of the Moorish dance and is of great antiquity (e.g. Jeremiah 31:4). The very earliest records refer to leg bells for the Moorish dance. Morris bells (correctly called crotals) were being unloaded from ships in the Port of London in 1568. Early drawings indicate that only a few bells were used, but by the 16th C. the number had increased to as many as 20-40 per leg of the 'enclosed type'. In some cases they were of different sizes and arranged in regular musical intervals to be 'tuneable'. This was still an objective in Illmington in the 1800's. There is a crate of 'crotals' in good condition in Dubrovnic Museum recovered from a ship wrecked in 1690 in the Drevine region off the coast of the Koločep Islands.

Originally there may have been one accepted tune to which the morris was danced, a version of the present day 'Staines Morris'. One of the oldest tunes 'La Mourisque' was used in the 16th C. for the court morris. The reference musical works covering the period such as the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book (1610), D. R. Wilson's Historical Dance, Orchesography (1589) by Jehan Tabourot (aka Thoinot Arbeau), and Tylman Susato's Book of Dance Music (1551) are really aimed at recording the Pavanes, Galliards, Branle, Allemandes, Tourdion and other formal court dance styles rather than morris (mourisco etc.). Another possible tune was The Kynges Morisco; present in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, a tune of Moorish origin and popular throughout Europe in the 16th century.

The popular tunes used by the common folk went unrecorded until they were collected and published by John Playford in 1650. Some morris tunes 'Bobbing Joe', 'Staines Morris', 'Greensleeves', Country Gardens', were in the first edition. Other common tunes may have been derivatised from court music to suit the instruments of the common folk (essentially the pipe and tabor). The 'country' morris was danced to this accompaniment until the fiddle was introduced in the 1850's and later the portable reed instruments, concertina and melodeon.

Many country dance tunes came to be used for the morris and a number of tunes came from popular music of the time like Gay's Beggar's Opera (1726), 'Orpheus Caledonius' (1725), Felton's Gavot (1700), 'Rosina' (1783), and 'Lillibulero' (pre-1688). Many of the tunes pre-date the date of publication. A lot of tunes or variants are widespread among the different village traditions, e.g. there are some fifteen versions of the popular tune "Jockey to the Fair". Occasionally however a particular village tradition exhibits some unique music (e.g. Leafield and Adderbury) reflecting a strong individual musical contribution in that village.

MORRIS DANCING IN WANTAGE

The Vale of White Horse certainly joined in the Elizabethan performance of the morris. The Churchwarden's records and official records of the day refer to items of morris regalia in Wantage (1570), Didcot (1580), Abingdon (1560), and Stanford-in-the-Vale (1607). The Wantage records reveal Church Ales at Whitsuntide and Whitsun Sportes from 1581 to 1623, and payment to 'Our minstrelles for their Bord'. In 1570 16d (pence) was paid for a dozen 'morrys belles' and in 1590 costumes were provided by John Eshmond for 4s-6d. The Wantage tabor player was John Rowland who was paid 17s-6d for playing several tunes at Whitsuntide as a young man. He died in 1635 but music was also provided by Richard Kimber (d 1651) a fiddler.

The original dancing area may have been an area of land near Limborough called Dauncing More belonging to Will Talbot. The maypole is referred to in 1611 and 1625, this may have been on a recreation area (now Broadway Motors) at one end of Garston Lane. The Garston (garstane) was a field set aside for rejoicings, May festivals, maypoles, etc. and this may have been a later dancing spot. The last maypole in the Vale remained at Longcot. One November in the early 1800's it was stolen by men from Ashbury and erected outside the Crown Inn reaching high above the roof tops. It was then stolen by Uffington men and a subsequent threat from Lambourn ensued. Parson Watts of Uffington ended the episode by ordering that the maypole be cut into logs for the poor.

Wantage held fairs of national renown. When the spread of plague became a serious problem, Charles II issued a special proclamation in 1665 'Prohibiting the holding of the faire at Wanting or Wantage in the County of Berks.' The fair attracted people from all over the country, but apart from this interruption there have been (and still are) three traditional fair days in Wantage since the Fitzwarrin family held the manor in the 13th C.

The next reference to the morris locally was in 1885 when the morris was danced by 'Laddes of ye Royal Burgh of Wantage' before the sports began at the Lockinge 'Festival of ye Summer Quene' an Elizabethan pageant created by D'Arcy Ferris. Nothing is known concerning the side that danced but the dance was reported to Cecil Sharpe in 1910.

In the 1950's Mary Shunn, was a teacher at Icknield School in Wantage, that stood by the ancient Icknield Way as it passes through the town. Her interests were in folk music and dance, and she was a member of the Oxford branch of the EFDSS through which she met many people associated with morris dancing around Oxfordshire & Berkshire. She was a close friend of

Charlie Kimber at **Headington,** (William's cousin), and had helped to maintain the Whitsun dancing in Headington during the War when menfolk were in short supply.

Miss Shunn, was a strict disciplinarian who taught English, Geography and History and was a Deputy Head. She introduced country dancing and morris dancing into the school activities but being a traditionalist taught only boys the latter skill. Many men who live in Wantage still remember those classes. As well as Cotswold morris Miss Shunn instructed on rapper and longsword, and there are extant photographs of 1950s pre-IWMM groups of dancers associated with Icknield School and Miss Shunn's endeavours. Many of the dances she taught had been learned at close quarters from her friends at **Headington Quarry** and **Oxford**.

One September evening in 1958 a group of ex-Icknield School lads were standing in the Market Place discussing their options on what to do, since the Youth Club was only open one night a week. As they had learnt some morris dancing at school it was suggested that they might approach Miss Shunn concerning the possibility of starting a club. She was keen to give it a go, and started Wednesday night sessions at Icknield School, instructing the dance with her piano accompaniment.

Those original men whose idea eventually created Icknield Way Morris Men were local men and they were soon joined by other ex-schoolboys who were younger than the "pioneers". Apart from being school friends the men had close personal family relationships, with many inter-family marital links being formed. The lads needed to make a decision on naming the side and Icknield was preferred to Wantage because of the school connection. The school emblem of a gold wyvern on a blue background (from the battle pennant of the Wessex kings), was taken for the kit, featuring a blue tabard.

The dances taught were from Adderbury, Bampton, Bucknell, Bledington, Brackley and Headington. Mary had friends in **Oxford City MM**, **Kennet MM** and **Abingdon TMD**. These men were happy to give time to get The Icknield Club underway, instructing on chosen traditions and providing music for dancing out and other morris engagements. Jim Phillips who was Squire of the Morris Ring from 1958-60 also used to attend Icknield practices with two other **Headington Quarry** men, and gave detailed instruction on the Headington tradition.

For the first 5 years the team mainly danced "in camera" much like a club session, at Icknield School. Mary Shunn, ever the traditionalist refused to accompany the side "out of the classroom", and always sought male musicians. The main reason the side didn't dance out much was the absence of a permanent musician. That problem was resolved in 1967 when Joe Marns, an experienced accordionist joined the team and provided regular music for the next 20 years.

The team were invited to dance at the 100th meeting of the Morris Ring in Oxford and later joined the Morris Ring in 1974/5. The 267th Meeting of the Ring was hosted in Wantage in 1996, both Joe and Mary Shunn attended.

The team have featured in a number of events such as the production of a national Jig-Saw featuring morris dancing, an episode of Midsommer Murders, an episode of 'The Tudors', a production of 'Larkrise to Candleford' and many other prestigious events and festivals around the country.

Further information may be found on www.icknieldwaymorrismen.org.uk

M A Seaborne February 2014