

## ***Morris Dancing***

*by Ken Childerley*

The survival of the Folk Dance Tradition owes much to the enthusiasm and effort of Cecil Sharp, after whom the Headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society - Cecil Sharp House in Regent's Park Road in London - was named. His first experience of Morris Dancing was at Headington on Boxing Day 1899.

Early records show that Morris Dancing became popular in this country towards the end of the sixteenth century. The tradition has been kept alive in several counties of England, with Oxfordshire among the most prominent. As with the May-day Revels in Oxford, dancing usually began on May 1<sup>st</sup> and continued throughout the summer. Sometimes Morris dancers would also appear at Christmas with the Mummers.

Some dancers such as the Bacup Britannia Coconut Dancers from Lancashire blacken their faces. This gave rise to the thought that Morris Dancing may have had a Moorish origin, but the Moorish or Morisco dances bear little similarity to the European version. The face blackening was a ritual used to disguise the identity of the dancers. Some think that the dance was brought to England by Eleanor of Castile, the Queen of Edward I, or by John of Gaunt when he returned from Spain. Alternatively it may have come from France or Belgium where it was danced in the 13th century.

Another explanation is that Morris was first Maris and referred to Mary's Men. Mary was perhaps the ancient sea-goddess Marian whom the Greeks called Aphrodite, also associated with the Moon-goddess. Maybe the name morris came from southern Europe for a type of dance already in existence and simply meant pagan.

As with much of our information about the past the early reports of Morris Dancing in this country come from churchwardens' accounts which show that it was a common form of dancing during the reigns of the early Tudor kings. It was an important part of the seasonal customs of country life up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - particularly in the Cotswolds. Village communities began to break up during the Industrial Revolution and Morris Dancing had almost died out by the end of the century.

Morris Dancing had its beginnings in the rites designed to celebrate the rebirth of spring, to ensure the safety of harvest, the fertility of the flocks and herds, and to appease the gods by ritual slaughter. This was basic to the early culture of Northern Europe which found expression in these dances.

As well as the dancers other characters involved were Betty, Betsy or Moll who was a man dressed as a woman, thus representing both sexes, and the Fool who carried a bladder on a stick with which he struck both dancers and spectators. The Fool was also leader of the team

and known as the Squire. The performers often included Jack-in-the-Green in his leafy cage, the Hobby Horse - half horse, half human - and a man with a beribboned sword on the end of which was a cake. This was shared among the spectators as it was supposed to bring good luck.

In the sixteenth century a folk play called Robin Hood Games became involved with Morris dancing. Characters included Robin Hood and Maid Marian, interchangeable respectively with the Fool and the Betsy, Friar Tuck and the Merry Men. During the play Robin Hood died and came to life again, this was supposed to encourage the crops to grow and summer to return. It is interesting to note that the Abbots Bromley Horn Dancers from Staffordshire are also accompanied by a Robin Hood and a Maid Marian.

Morris Dances have very distinctive features. The stamping, kicking and capering was originally expected to bring the crops out of the ground, the bells to rouse the earth spirit or drive away evil demons. Some dances need staves or swords - the sacrificial instruments.

Most of today's dancing is based on three styles; Cotswold, Derbyshire and Lancashire. The Britannic Coconut Dancers from Bacup in Lancashire wear red and white shirts over black breeches. They black their faces and hold wooden discs made of cotton reels or bottle tops which they clap against similar discs fastened to their knees and waist. Derbyshire Dancers have teams of sixteen, one side dancing as women with fancy hats and scarves. Their Betsy is a black-faced witch. Cotswold Morris teams consist of six men plus their 'Fool' and use handkerchiefs or sticks for their dances.

At Bampton, Headington Quarry, Abingdon, Chipping Campden and Eynsham an almost unbroken tradition has been maintained from earliest times. Revival teams, like our own Icknield Way, first appeared when Cecil Sharp formed the English Folk Dance Society in 1911. In 1934 the Federation of Morris Clubs known as the Morris Ring was formed. Member clubs meet together several times a year, one of the most regular meetings being held annually at Thaxted in Essex.

#### ABINGDON MORRIS - ELECTING THE MAYOR OF OCK STREET

In the eighteenth century around the Feast of St Edmund (June 19<sup>th</sup>) it was the custom to roast an ox and give the meat to the poor of Abingdon. Sometimes during the first half of that century (opinions differ as to the date) there was a fight between men from opposite sides of Ock Street as to who should have the head, horns and tail of the ox. The battle was eventually won by the men from the east side when a man named Hemmings, one of the Abingdon Morris Men, captured the horns. He was proclaimed Mayor of Ock Street. Since then an election is held, the candidate usually coming from the Morris Men. The winner celebrates by drinking from the 'Mace', a wooden bowl with a silver ring thought to be two hundred years old. He is carried in triumphal procession through the streets by the Morris Men led by the horn-bearer, who carries the ancient horns mounted on top of a pole. The date 1700 is painted on the pole but mention is made of this team in local church records of 1554.

#### THE ICKNIELD WAY MORRIS MEN

In 1958 whilst a teacher at Icknield School, Miss Mary Shunn decided to introduce Morris dancing for the boys as well as Country dancing for boys and girls. A qualified Morris dancing instructor, Miss Shunn was a close friend of William Kimber, musician and instructor of the Headington Quarry Morris Men, and danced with this team during the Second World War while some of the team were in the services.

After leaving school the boys continued to dance and soon attracted other interested people from outside the school. The Icknield Way Morris Men's first season of public performances in the villages around Wantage took place in 1965 and in 1974 they were accepted into the Morris Ring.

The emblem of the team is the Wyvern, a winged two-legged creature, a forerunner of which appears on the Bayeux Tapestry as the dragon of Wessex (King Alfred's Kingdom). Members of the side also display the familiar White Horse of Uffington. As a revival group the Icknield Way draw freely from many sources for the dances they perform. Their repertoire includes traditional Oxfordshire dances from the villages of Adderbury, Bampton, Ducklington and Stanton Harcourt as well as Bledington (Glos.) and Lichfield (Staffs.) There is documentary evidence of the presence of a Morris side in Wantage in 1885 but sadly any traditional Wantage dances remain undiscovered.

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Summer 1988.

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL  
Telephone: 01235 771447