

Roy Leonard Dommett

I was born in 1933, married in 1955 and have 7 sons, and a daughter.

The morris discovered me at Bristol University in the early 1950's where I met Alan Browning, musician, rapper enthusiast and friend of Peter Kennedy. Through sharing a room with Alan at the Royal Aircraft Establishment's hostel in 1954 I became a founder member of the Farnborough Morris, originally centred on the RAE, and over the years did most jobs, leader, announcer, fool, playing. I also danced for several years with another non-Ring side in the same area, the Border Morris, based at first at Woodlarks, near Farnham, and then at Holybourne, Alton, under the leadership of Miss Mary Ireson, a fine pre-war dancer.

The collecting started in 1958 as did calling for barn dances. A slack period at work enabled the copying of dance material from the Sharp microfilms in 1960 and there followed a short but very intense period of gathering mss material together, visiting many of the earlier collectors, including most of the survivors of the early Travelling Morrice tours of the Cotswolds. There were many collecting trips to the Cotswolds in those days by public transport, with Frank Purslow mainly. In this period there were interviews with old dancers at Abingdon, Bampton, Bidford, Eynsham and Ilmington and the meeting with men who knew something of the morris at Ascott, Ducklington and Leafield. This was complemented by uncovering mss on Ascott, Border Morris as the west midland dances are now called, Oddington, Stanton Harcourt, and Wheatley.

I was asked to dance with the Abingdon men through Frank Purslow's connection with them at the Reigate Ring Meeting in 1960. For several years the numbers were very low and my older children helped make up numbers at practices and on tours. The team survived the loss of Tom and James Hemmings and Major Fryer over a very short period. There was an invitation to teach the Abingdon dances to the Rover Scouts at Longworth in 1967 with Jack Hyde the Abingdon bagman. From this grew the recovery in numbers. My sons and I last went out with Abingdon in 1970.

An association with Thames Valley morris started at their feast in 1956 and we formed a club to revive dances from mss in 1961 that met at Jim Brooks and Chris Penton's houses. Lionel Bacon asked us to teach Oddington and Wheatley at the Instructional meetings in 1962 and 1963. For many years we enjoyed the October morris weekends run by the club at Sandy Balls, Fordingbridge. We did an Oddington instructional again in 1978. After 25 years of performance the TV Oddington is not a revival!

The filming started in 1962 when the future of all the traditional sides seemed in doubt. Since then I have tried to cover interesting interpretations and revivals which would otherwise be ignored, although over the years the emphasis has swung from the Cotswold morris to Clog and Border. It is now quite impossible to keep up with the number of exciting things being done.

Autobiography 2.

The local village mummers, who trace themselves back to 1880-ish in Crookham Village, asked me to play for them in procession from place to place in 1963. This I still do, having also tried being the Doctor, King George and Father Xmas, and having now had 4 sons in the play.

I met Tubby Reynolds first during National Folk week 1967 and the close friendship led both to an identification with Bath City Morris for about 10 years but also working together on instructionals across the country, teaching whoever asked whatever they wanted to learn. This stopped about 1980 after a very successful teaching tour of the eastern USA. Bath City learnt a number of little known traditions so that they could be filmed as well as worked out in a club atmosphere, these included Ducklington, Stanton Harcourt and Ascott-under-Wychwood and the girls trying the first of the stave dances. We did a tour of the Cotswold villages to do their dances in 1978.

My first ring meeting was in 1956 at Lichfield and since then there have been many. I was a guest speaker at Taunton, Ipswich, Cardiff, Isle of Wight and Reading and conducted the orchestra in the cathedral at Gloucester. For a few years I was an area representative on the Ring Advisory Council. I twice stood for squire when work looked slack and there was some anniversary coming along which I felt I could contribute to but each time I failed at the last vote. I did not spend enough time canvassing but concentrated on doing the instructionals, often with new, uninfluential sides.

The series of Advanced Morris Instructionals at Halsway in the period 1964-70 were most influential, indirectly affecting the growth of morris in the west of England and challenging many on style, standards and traditions. The attempts to interest dancers in clog morris and border failed at that time, although the border instructional at Ledbury in 1972 did succeed in interesting the local sides. Sidmouth has always seemed the best of the Festivals but it always seemed impossible to give top quality instructionals year after year so the visits have been limited to 1971/2, 1976/7, 1979 and 1982, giving a course of classes and lectures. The morris competitions and the celebration in 1979 have been good filming opportunities.

Some clubs have built up over the years a close friendship even though the faces may be changing. The OUMM first because there were collectors there when I was trying to meet the collectors and the tradition. May morning, Cotswold tours, Ancient Men tours, including the never to be forgotten Hampshire tours and the appearance at Llansgollen have helped build after 25 years some life long contacts. I helped Oxford City out for while when they were very short of numbers, as they and OUMM did for Abingdon. City in those days were a model of how a morris team should perform in a pub.

Another annual event now dead and gone was the Cardiff Morris weekends at Boys Town, St Athan, near Barry. Where else has anybody had to get another lorry load of beer delivered on a Sunday, sale or return? Some clubs have had repeat instructionals, Cardiff, Great Western, Chelmsford, Men of Wight, Chanctonbury Ring such that they are all old friends. Over a number of years Sherborne instructionals with the Kennett Morris raised them to the heights of an invite to Sidmouth and of course in my opinion the best Sherborne ever done! Sidmouth 1971 invented the term Women's Ritual dance - I taught NW dances. Only a handful of NW dances were known in 1965 outside the Manchester MM notebooks but by 1970 it was nearly 50 as people were encouraged to teach or pass on notations. A number of women went home and decided to form morris sides in the next few years, one of the first being at Bath University. As a defence against bad teaching of bad Cotswold by men I did some instructionals and got the WMF archive started, and later I supported the WMF notation group in producing a glossary and some descriptions suitable for inexperienced leaders. The arguments on who should or should not dance left me cold as it was not up to outsiders to tell anyone what they might do or not do.

I have run instructionals for the Ring, eg Ascott and Sherborne at Chippenham, foreman's weekend for the Morris Federation and Border and Fieldtown for Open Morris. New people with new ideas to graft onto the old tradition. I have seen a lot of the problems of newish clubs and have advised that recruitment etc will be a problem if attention is not given to it from the start. I helped the Morris Federation indirectly through close friendship with Betty Reynolds the first president, but then Marguerite and I have helped anyone genuinely interested in furthering the morris. I went to the USA on morris first in 1978 at the invitation of Tony Barrand and did an instructional tour. The following year I went to California, Berea and Knoxville as well as a tour with Tubby. Then in 1980 I did the Cotswold morris at the Pinewoods camp of the CDS for 3 weeks. Our great trip was to Adelaide for the Australian Morris Meeting in 1983. Abroad one has to accept mixed morris and goings on that would not do in England, but it does teach what is morris and what is just our culture.

I have tried to get at dancers in print through short articles in magazines rather than learned work in journals. It offends the few genuine research workers but it helps keep certain publications in circulation.

Like all old morris dancers, one slowly relapses into parochial activity. For a couple of winters I instructed Fleur de Lys at Godalming. Since late 1982 I have taught Minden Rose at Alton, a garland & short stick team, mostly interpretations or inventions. It has taken a lot of years to be confident enough to compose dances. I like to think I brought the idea of garland, ribbon and stave dances to the attention of the world. The stave is the most interesting, based on fragmentary sources, but now done by a number of southern clubs, my wife ran a side that did nothing else for a few seasons.

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