

THE COTSWOLD MORRIS WORKSHOP

Introduction

Often the dancer called upon to run a short Cotswold Morris workshop at a Festival or on a course has little experience of teaching people or of teaching movement. This lack can then be compounded by a failure to recognise that a public workshop is fundamentally different from a club practice. For example, unlike on a club night, all aspects have to be included in the one go, and you have the disadvantage that you unlikely to know closely anyone present. But the attendees at a workshop have paid and have an expectation both to learn and to enjoy the relatively brief instructional. This article draws on 20 years experience to present an example of a successful approach to the task.

Beginners need not be underestimated. They should be prepared for it to be difficult, so the leader's task is to present the dancing clearly. It has been found practical to teach the complexities of Sherborne to people with no preconceptions of dancing the morris. The converse is also true, dancers who may be quite confident and competent at their practiced traditions can still act like inexperienced ones when faced with something new, and might even have more difficulty than a newcomer to the morris because it is different.

That a tradition has been worked up in a club is not an adequate basis for a good workshop unless that is the specific objective, and the teacher both understands what has been done in the club and can be articulate about it. When well done the exposition of the insights is fascinating to all. All the same, the leader must have considerable familiarity with the chosen tradition, not just picking it out from a book because of the desire to avoid their own team's dances. It is a common courtesy to explain to the class the background to what is going to be done, whether it is based on someone's teaching, a club's performance, a personal interpretation or a development of ideas, otherwise what is done will be of little use to the recipients afterwards because it can not be related to other teaching.

Workshops need skills, knowledge and preparation.

Preparation

Not suprisingly there are a number of things to think about before the workshop starts that are easily overlooked.

- 1 If the workshop is going to need sticks, ensure that a supply is going to exist, even if you have to go out into the local countryside with a saw.
- 2 You need a musician who would like to know what is expected in tunes and method of working. If a full range of a tradition's tunes are needed then they may need to be learnt and the musician may have to adapt to your needs on the day, otherwise the musician must be able to read music and follow you simultaneously. The speed you want is probably the most important facet to agree beforehand. The precise melody line is less important than the correct phrasing.

- 3 Good dancing needs good music and it is especially valuable at a workshop. This does mean not accepting any odd musician, and making it clear at the start that bands are not sensible out of consideration for the dancers, as they obscure the phrasing and rhythm and the fitting of the melody by the official musician to the movements of the dance. If you need volume it should be obtained by amplification not numbers. Dance workshops really are not the place for inexperienced musicians to learn tunes or pick up style. You can tell when they are inexperienced because they will believe that playing is a good idea and will not understand your reasons for saying it is not.
- 4 Microphones may be necessary to handle a large crowd but it will need a special technique which has to be worked out beforehand. You have to modify your approach to overcome the problem of being rooted to one spot and as well meeting the difficulty of moving larger masses of humanity. Having experience as a social dance caller can help in giving confidence in handling people but the quite different degree of technical detail required leads to a different approach to the teaching.
- 5 The venue itself may cause problems. If the floor is unsprung, it will be hard on the balls of the feet, so dancers will not spring around for long or appear lively. The acoustics will affect who can hear and how they can dance to the music. You have to understand the acoustics before the start or the dancers will lose those all important first few speeches before you get the delivery intelligible. Learn to speak slower than in normal conversation, relax the throat muscle between words to avoid getting hoarse, and do not use too many words to pad out the explanation, no matter how much you like the sound of your own voice.
- 6 Preparing some background material on the tradition will help enliven the workshop.

Policy in the Workshop

The method to follow must be based on synthesis, building up from the elements, as the average dancer does not have the developed skills to learn from the top down by mimicing a total demonstration as can professional actors or dancers.

Each tradition needs its own approach, depending on the relative importance to be given to basic movements, complexity of figures or the variety of "steps". However it is important to start with basics, meaning the posture, jumps and plain stepping that go with the tradition under examination.

The attendees, many of whom have never met or heard you speak before, need an opportunity to get used to your voice, mannerisms and technical jargon, which can be quite confusing at first. Therefore having introduced yourself, talk about posture, balance, the feet turning out, stepping sequences rather than individual steps, and the technique needed in jumps and plain capers. Emphasis on basics is not wasted and allows the dancers to become attentive and builds

up the group experience that allows them to work together later. Speak clearly, in an interested sounding voice, warm not harsh.

One could start with a stick dance but few Cotswold traditions have such and it is an essential point that it is a handkerchief tradition. It is worth emphasising that the morris handkerchief is neckerchief size not pocket hanky, being a full half yard on side before hemming. The size and weight of the traditional piece has a significant effect on the dancing. The additional complexity coming from carrying a stick should be faced later. Beginners especially are usually dreadful at handling the sticks on their first meeting with the morris as they do not know what to do with their arms and hands let alone the stick. Do not confuse the ease with which a stick dance can be done after a little experience with those first few minutes when all is novel. Do not think either that because a simple stick dance is rhythmic and fun that everything else is eased. It can be an example of losing some of the progress already made by letting through some confusion in other basics.

The essential aim is to build steadily - not overburdening at any stage and in such an order that bad habits are not generated by letting dancers "fill-in" for the things not yet explained, for example hand movements. Dancers should only be expected to think explicitly about one thing at a time, so habit patterns must be built up to carry those things that have to be remembered throughout. It is impractical to expect everyone to remember everything and keep it all in practice through the workshop. The instructor has to salve his conscience by saying clearly at least once all the things that have to be said.

Gaps in the teaching, especially early on for rests, are dangerous in allowing attention to relax and letting other matters come into conversation. One must capture the attention and hold it. Talk through a rest and do not let the attendees physically or mentally wander. This is one occasion for the background material. The availability of drinks in a short workshop can also be disruptive to progress. Judging the pace in a workshop is important and momentum must not be lost by too long a gap in the dancing, by too little recapitulation allowing the growth of confusion or by too little control of the growth of bad habits in the dancing. The leader must have a "script" or plan to work from but must be prepared to modify the content by watching the dancers, all of them. It is a good trick to watch their faces for their reactions. This has to be a conscious effort as normal conventions limit the amount of eye contact between people who are interacting.

The teacher must have analysed beforehand what is to be taught to ensure that there are no hidden problems. As an example, when teaching basic stepping do not start the dancers from a feet together situation because the very first movement must then be untypical as somehow a foot must be raised to put it immediately on the ground. Putting too much detail in at the start can also be counter productive, as long as it does not mean that something would have to be unlearned later. The

trimmings, like flicks of the handkerchiefs with the arm movements, variety in phrase endings etc can be picked up on a reprise.

Never suggest that anything is other than the instructor's fault.

Format of the Workshop

I start with the basic four bar stepping sequence where possible, of say two double steps, backsteps and a jump, rather than working on the individual steps separately. It seems especially important to get the dancers to think in sequences and to build up these as habit patterns rather than trying to construct the sequence from its component parts at the stage when they are having difficulty with everything. The stepping sequence needs linking with the arm and handkerchief movements as soon as practical to gain the essential balance of the body, to help in dancing and expression. It is this basic step and arm sequence that must become automatic early on in the workshop.

The leader must recognise that there are technical difficulties and that they must not be hidden from the dancers or skated around or an easy alternative found. It is wrong to devalue the tradition. Peter Kennedy once said that the EFDS thought about inventing a beginners tradition for public workshops in particular so that the more complex real ones could be worked at at more leisure in a club atmosphere. The reconstructions of Ducklington and Station Harcourt were kept simple with this sort of use in mind.

The leader has to have made up their mind how far to press with height in the stepping, detailed discussion on the movements of the body as against the limbs, the emphasis in each step and the relative rigidity and uprightness of the trunk. The level at which it is pitched depends on the average experience on the floor. Some discussion of the natural rhythm of movement versus the actual rhythm of jigs and hornpipes will be understood by all.

The easiest way to reinforce the basic sequence is to learn the figure (CF) that use the basic sequence without confusing the issue with choruses (DF). Those figures where the stepping is different, for example having a galley instead of a backstep, can then be learnt next. It is found that building up a dance figure by figure with the choruses is overall slower because of the greater variety of steps and movements usually introduced and so having to be remembered and practiced together. Even without the choruses many dance skills can be encouraged and suitable points made.

By now you have had to introduce the idea of a set of dancers, usually six in number and arranged in two lines. Many workshop venues are too cramped to allow the full space for a set with everyone up, but it must be pointed out that the usual size is finger tip to finger tip separation both along and across the set. This not only neatly copes with different sized people or different ages but indicates what is sufficient room for figures and for working with one's opposite in choruses. The instructor should give some thought as to how the number of sets

formed should be arranged for mutual visibility. It must be remembered when demonstrating that facing the dancers makes you a mirror image of what you want them to do and some people will only be able to visualise their own actions if they see you facing the same way as they are. Do not worry about very large numbers of dancers because they will expect you to take longer to organise them. Unfortunately with large numbers it is not so easy to stop everything for the odd dancer or set going wrong and you may have to store the necessary comment or advice or recap of what they missed until the end of the particular exercise being danced. The danger to the instructor is just following a few of the sets rather than looking around for problems. It is all too easy to prompt call based on a set doing well. It is no disgrace of course in such situations to have a few stewards to assist you. I do find in small workshops that I do give more attention to the set with the local squire or the workshop organiser in on the assumption that they are the ones who have to get the most out of it.

The figures can be built up in stages, walking through, stepping through, perhaps in slow time without music with you calling the steps in sequence. Build up the dancer's awareness of where the opposite dancer and the others should be. Few new dancers have any experience of dancing in a team and there are a number of points that will have to be made several times during the workshop about working together. Keeping the lines - there comes an automatic "set consciousness" for experienced dancers but others need the suggestions on who should be watching the lines or adjusting position. Comment can be made about length of the steps, matching the surge forward on the strong beat, on how much forward movement there should be off a jump into the next figure, so that the workshop is aware of the points and can use them to dance together. The danger in aiming for set cohesion is that it must be some sort of compromise, possibly a lowest common denominator of the set's dancing ability.

There is no doubt that some things can be left to look after themselves, but in general drawing conscious attention to some point makes its achievement and retention much more likely. Attention should be drawn to "space" and the need to be aware of how it changes during figures, for example rounds, perhaps by walking dancers through it slowly with attention on the relative spacings rather than the steps, so that the shape can be preserved in the full speed movement.

Remember also that it feels different from the various places in a set so there is the possibility of moving dancers around during the workshop if they look as if they can cope with it. The move can be used as an excuse for a recap of a movement without losing the pace of the workshop.

Just like a social dance caller it is necessary to prompt call at the right moments during the dance, not too much ahead of the new movement that the dancers break into it too early, or forget what you have said before they get to it, nor too late for them to actually think what you mean. Somewhere about the end of the

3rd and beginning of the 4th bar is about right. Think out the key words to be used so that they are effective reminders, and do not ad lib too much as it will just be verbiage and distracting during the dancing. Dancers with some experience will know a jargon which may not be yours so avoid slipping into short hand too soon.

When one gets onto dances, these continue to practice all the figures and the constant repetition of them in each dance helps to fix them further. Getting the choruses correct is not so important as they seldom include key elements of the tradition. As confidence builds on the floor it is possible to return to the figures and improve them. For example the size of the loops in the hey can be changed so that the other dancers have the time and the space to get round. This does matter if the tradition has the half movement done in two bars so that the other two bars can be danced facing. It is probably the heys that evolve away the most from what is first taught.

In fairness to the dancers it is desirable to start on dances with standard structures such as a side step and half hey repeated chorus. These are the "whole set" dances in which all move all the time. Then possibly it would be wise to do the stick dances before embarking on dances with abnormal structures or which include slow capers. Slow capers are not difficult to do and they are easy to teach if emphasis is given to clear presentation, to balance and to where the "effort" in the series of movements is supposed to be put. As with all teaching it is important to be clear on all the details and not to forget to mention key points at the right time.

Workshop Timing

It is my experience that a workshop as short as one hour or less or as long as two hours or more is difficult to programme and give the attendees satisfaction, unless they are quite expert and are being given a polish. About 1½ hours seems ideal for introducing a single Cotswold tradition. It should take about half an hour to get the first complete dance going to a modest standard. It should take another hour to give a fairly complete presentation of the rest of the tradition. If the workshop goes on for more than 1½ hours then one starts a reprise of dances done. At the end it is also helpful to run through, perhaps briefly, the key points made during the workshop and the special characteristics of the tradition done. Finally it makes for good will if you can stop and talk afterwards, perhaps going through a notation with someone. I can not recommend the spending of most of a workshop on one or two dances so that they appear to have been learnt thoroughly, unless the sets are nearly all drawn from particular clubs so that the dance has been learnt as a club rather than the individual who then has to take it back. It is my experience that no matter how well a dance seems to go at first teaching it is not learnt until the dancers have gone through it number of times at successive club practices.

Problems

It is frustrating to see dancers forgetting or even apparently not trying to do what is asked. Sometimes they have already learnt it before differently, they may not even recognise your teaching as different, and perhaps they are not going to change just for you, not even as a courtesy to the other dancers. One must never lose one's temper or shout or take issue. Simply state at the beginning of the workshop the basis for the teaching and request cooperation from the experienced dancers. If it is an interpretation or in some way not the strictest orthodoxy you ask the dancers to try it and allow them the privilege of rejecting it all if they wish, but after the workshop not during it. In the morris world as it is, the final arbiter on what is done is the club not the workshop instructor and all there are at liberty to change anything later if they chose to use anything of what you have taught.

The allowing or encouraging of the wearing of bells is a difficult decision even though the sound is essential to the morris and enhances good dancing because the noise cuts across the instruction. Modern bells jingle, not like the 19 century musical tinkles, and people do fidget. On the whole bells encourage average dancing rather than steadily improving one's dancing - it would be nice if some way could be found to introduce the bells some way through the workshop.

In the bustle and confusion people are not all that clear on which is their right or left, particularly with regard to turns, so do not be afraid to push or help them round. Their mental block is in translating your words into movement and the push can short circuit the problem for them. The English avoid physical contact with strangers, but in the workshop you are sharing yourself and building up an intimacy.

It is difficult for the instructor to remember the problems of actually being a beginner. They are uncoordinated, unused to moving relative to other people or to listening, either to you or to the music. The work in the class should be intensive but aimed at enjoyment so as not to kill further interest. Beginners try to exercise control by rigidity of limbs, stiffening all their muscles, jerky not rhythmic movement results and it is very tiring. Further it does not allow balance in jumps, especially when a turn is required as well. The class may need loosening up right at the start of the workshop. Practice jumps, teach "spotting" in turns and emphasise that the head and arms should be steady in a turn and not jerked or snatched or the dancer will lose balance.

The mix of ability in the workshop is quickly recognised but can not be planned for, nor is it easy when dancers are in mufti to know if they have common origins. One has to be aware that it may be better to let the dancers form up with people they know, or people of their own standard. However poor dancers get up late, hide in corners and sometimes desperately need to be spread around and helped by the more experienced.

Working against you always is the feeling dancers get for a consensus in a set so

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that dancing together dominates doing what you have asked. Sometimes you can see a deviation spread around the workshop from set to set if it is done confidently by one set initially. Of course the group feeling for dance is actually what one wants cultivated - except in your workshop! But it is when they settle down to dance together that they remember and take back to their clubs not what you have so carefully coached. It comes as a surprise at first what oddities you are quoted as being the authentic source.

I think that the way to judge the success of a workshop is to listen to the degree of togetherness and rhythm and phrasing that can be heard in the dancing by the end of the session.

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