

SECTION 2: THE MORRIS IN A CLUB CONTEXT

THE FUTURE OF THE MORRIS - A LATE 1970's VIEW

Today's Morris is of the 1970's and looking forward. It is time to stop the separation into the "tradition" and the "revival". Many revival sides have existed longer than 19th cent village teams. Most traditional sides now have the characteristics of revival clubs. It is still important to be aware of the roots in the villages and it is essential to have available what is actually recorded about the morris of the 19th cent and to have a detailed baseline description of the dances and their style of performance. It is impossible to produce an authentic notation, only an account of current practice. The character of a "tradition" that shows through in a performance is an interpretation by the group doing it and is dependent on the skills, experience and technique available in the group. That this varies with the personnel is obvious when seeing the adjustments made annually at Bampton. A good interpretation of a tradition, whether an attempt to recreate from mss or an extension on artistic grounds, can be very stimulating, as with Jockey MM's Ilmington or Russell Wortley's Sherborne. A relevant analogy is with Shakespeare's plays where the inherent quality of the material allows both orthodox and exciting new-light presentation.

Invention usually works within self imposed constraints on what is "right", although the recorded material indicates that the old dancers were far more free in what they introduced, like coconut shell halves for hand clapping. Good, simple ideas are hard to come by. It is easy to adapt dances from one style to another. If a team is permanently specialising this is one way of generating a satisfying repertoire. Following tradition, a viable repertoire is never more than 24 set dances and jigs and this would include dances with more than one tune. A practical aim, based on experience in other fields, is to have three times the number of dances needed to support a single show. The common situation of a lack of knowledge, experience and talent is justification for a club maintaining two contrasting "traditions". How much can be added to a "tradition" before its character is affected? The doubling of the number of dances available for public performance at Abingdon has changed the feel of the dances overall. Achieving a uniqueness is one possible aim for a club.

Invention must not be complex. Morris is not elaborate pattern making nor is it evocative stepping. It is interesting that no side seems to have imported or invented steps from outside the known corpus. Invention is parochial. After all it is to make the team different, not to give to the whole Morris world. Local references in the titles are good if they are significant to the dancers or the audience, but it must be recognised that the significance can be ephemeral. Abingdon once called a dance "The Aeroplane Dance" during Wings for Victory activities, possibly because of a fancied resemblance of the distinctive figure to two propellers. It was renamed when the title became an embarrassment.

When considering what to do, sides should recognise their "good" points and exploit them, for example Cardiff women with cross-back-steps and Bristol MM with capering. The converse is also true, to a point, but standards will only rise by setting

challenges. In general women's sides are poor at capering. There is no physiological reason why they can not be athletic; the problem may be sociological. Men have a natural brio in our society and it fits easily.

In the future there will be more general awareness of technique, not only of good dance but also of good teaching. The real technical difficulties in each tradition can be recognised by bringing together the experience of many teachers with many sides, and between them they probably have the answers to effective learning. The idea that sharing experience and learning from good teaching will lead to stereotyped morris is wrong. What one does is a conscious choice, especially if one has mastery over one's own movements. Morris as a hobby needs to allow self-expression or it holds little attraction. It does not mean the toleration of individual deviant performance.

The number of sides will continue to rise rapidly and the national organisations must reorganise themselves to cope. In recent years the Morris has been opened to a wider part of Society, faster than the available system of training leaders can work. It takes time to develop dance skills (why have we not estimated the average numbers of hours on the hoo?) and gain experience and knowledge. There is a strong obligation on existing sides to help. It should be in their own self interest to avoid bad performance of the morris in their own vicinity. It is reasonable that many sides will have short lives under modern conditions. Dancers will change clubs frequently. When sides are thicker on the ground this is probably the better way of broadening experience in the dance and may slow down the constant urge to do it by introducing too many new dances into a club repertoire.

I hope that prejudice remains against mixed Cotswold morris. I wonder why we never have to worry about the odd man dancing in a women's side? Some women's sides dress and dance like the men, but to be generally satisfying this must remain exceptional. A more difficult question is that of having a musician of the opposite sex. Leaving aside the cases when they are foreman, where does the musician, unless they are exceptional, get their experience of the dance to play with an understanding of movement? The subtleties of rhythm and phrasing are the difference between good and average dancing.

With the growth in numbers of clubs, there will be a growth of interest in the byways of the tradition, both to be different and to be local. There is not the same wealth of material, as available for the Border Morris, to be welded together, as done by the Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhodens, for most parts of England, but local material does exist if looked at without prejudice and preconceptions. The number of Molly dances, Ribbon dances, Garland and Stave are limited. One will have to turn as did the original 19th cent performers to contemporary social dance material. With care some forms can be augmented by using similar continental dances. The legitimacy of grafting is a problem for each individual club. It depends on whether it is a necessity because of constraints that the club has set itself, or whether the drive is to preserve local ritual or to be in effect a folklore troupe. Often a local ritual is more a question of the custom and the costume than the content of the dance, as at Salisbury and

Shaftesbury. It should be remembered that most traditional forms had a start somewhere and arose out of something related but different. Is it legitimate to transplant some forms outside of their region why not others?

It is still possible to collect dance material, particularly the NW morris which is the richest and most recent of the UK traditions. Because of social mobility dancers will be found anywhere, I have only collected one NW dance north of Oxford!

POSTSCRIPT

This article was written 10 years ago and used in the first issue of Morris Matters. It is still my view that this is the way it is happening.

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