

STYLES FOR CLUBS

The newcomer to the morris is hardly likely to question their club's set up or way of doing business and will seldom think about other ways until they are in at the start of a new side. There are a number of possibilities around which new teams might find worth thinking about.

The Traditional

In the 50's and 60's the traditional sides were still markedly different from the rest. There was usually a family involvement and the oldest members and even the female side had a say in achieving the consensus over arrangements for the major events. At the same time there was a recognised leader who combined the jobs of president, secretary and teacher and who was probably free to invite dancers to join "his" team. The leader was not necessarily considered the final authority on the dances, there being long serving and ex dancers around. Usually great tolerance was shown over most things yet great divisions could occur and quite often two groups would appear reflecting irreconcilable attitudes. The cohesive point was their "day" of community involvement, quite different from a "day of dance" during which a large group can insulate themselves from the world. It could be seen as a different emphasis to the priorities in the team's motivation.

The Cambridge MM

The Cambridge Morris Men recognised very early on the separate tasks of foreman, squire and bagman and took the traditional terms for a team's number one, fool and baggageman and applied them to the teacher, leader and treasurer/secretary. Their leadership in the morris world between the wars, in the Morris Ring, the influence of their annual feast and the many derivative teams formed by ex-CMM dancers ensured the general adoption of these terms in the revival and eventually in the tradition. It also brought with it the concepts of election and regular replacement. It is essentially a club format and although common because of its strengths it also has limitations outside of middle class leisure groups.

The Usual Forms

1. Single Point of Leadership

This was very common in the early days when only one member had the knowledge and the drive to form and hold a team together. The Ring's requirement for admission emphasises that this is not a basis for a long term viable club because of the inherent weakness arising from the dependence. But then the Ring is intended only for long lasting democratic clubs and it is believed that jobs should be shared and responsibility moved around. This is not to say that other forms are not appropriate in particular circumstances.

2. Sharing the Leadership

This form brings a number of concepts,

a. Training for Tasks

The club has no reason to let someone ignorant practice on their club, but people do not learn the skills for nothing, so they must expect to be designated

the next incumbent and serve an assistantship or apprenticeship.

b. Constitution

By forming a club whose workings are regulated it is possible to preserve the objective of the morris being a hobby and the principle of it involving a small group of friends.

c. Identification of the Tasks

The jobs that need to be done to support a team that performs in public can be identified and split amongst the members. These include monitoring the address list, collating the agreed dance notations, organising the beginners practices, being the characters during performances, acting as conductor of the shows, producing the drinks or coffee during practices, supervising costume manufacture and upkeep, handling the correspondence for events, providing the implements, supplying handkerchiefs of the correct size, editing the newsletter, printing it or distributing it, doing the posters and sticking them up, public relations, being photographer, keeping the scrapbook, at least.

d. Elections

Jobs need people with experience. It is difficult to find enough in the early days of a club so some have to learn on the job. A procedure is needed to cycle the jobs. All the time it is necessary to be looking for the replacements and considering how they are to gain some experience without mucking things up for the club, yet still keeping in mind that it is a leisure activity. Sympathy exists for all officials when others have tried the jobs. Apathy exists when no one has a chance to share in the tasks.

3. Other Structures for Clubs

a. No Leader - or King for the Day

At the club's AGM it is possible to agree the dates for going out in the summer and to share out the organisation of each occasion amongst the members, especially if there is a recognised pattern for a weekend's morris. Thus each person does all the jobs once. It works best when the club's outings are limited in number but long in time, perhaps including Friday evening as well as all day Saturday. Potes would then fall naturally into the pattern, providing both somewhere to go and a free tea, as well as having time to be able to wander around and enjoy it and so spending about as much as has been asked for as a fee. It does need within the club several people who can conduct a day, but it is easy to train people as it can be done in pairs. It produces an element of competition to see who can produce the best or most interesting weekend.

b. Background Figure

Sometimes the expertise is with the musician, or perhaps a woman teaching or organising, this was much more common 30 years ago. Maybe the dance teacher does not go out with the side, for example a man helping an all women's team. The jobs

have still to be done but it can be all emotionally easier as the background figure is there as a referee.

It is worth noting that there is a role in any organisation for a reference on standards, who is prepared to be critical when necessary, and be an "elder" without interfering with the others gaining their experience. Sometimes such people are called ex-foremen!

A job always needed, especially with younger dancers, but seldom recognised is that of "mother", someone who is otherwise not very active but can be talked to about all the non morris problems.

House Styles

The manner of doing is the style of a club. Decisions have to be made about such matters early in a club's existence and probably rethought every few years.

1. How Much Practice?

How much practice and to what purpose follows from the club's objectives. These may be in terms of social activity, type of dancing or type of event to be adopted. Is the club night to be a social event as well as a practice night for the participants? Does it include drinking as part of the socialising or should there be a separate social get together? How much time should be given to business and to dancing? Does the team need to meet before Christmas, should part of the practice season be completely devoted to the beginners? Is the team always learning new dances or is everyone trying to raise their personal standard of dancing? Can the club survive each year with a long period of inactivity? How can the club survive when the members have no leisure time for anything but morris?

2. One or More Traditions

After a few years with one tradition most dancers do not need regular winter practices but only a refresher in the spring before dancing out and this can be bound up with teaching the winter's beginners to dance in a set, they having spent the earlier winter learning the steps and jigs. Having just one tradition must lead to a concentration on the other aspects of the morris as a performance or street theatre.

With more than one tradition the team becomes a dance troupe with the dancing aspect uppermost, having to be concerned with contrasts between traditions reflecting just those points that led to the particular choice of traditions in the first place. It is usually found desirable to have a number of dances from each tradition to be worth working up the distinctive characteristics without boredom from constant repetition. The tradition and revival experience is that 12 to 14 dances in full practice is enough for any Cotswold side plus any jigs or stunts. The simple rule seems to be to have enough material for three performances or shows without repeating.

A balanced repertoire seems to be either,

- a. one tradition enhanced with adaptations from other traditions plus inventions,
- b. two or three traditions that are complementary.

There is another option growing up of doing dances in their true season, a Cotswold tradition in the summer and a selection of Border dances in the winter.

3. Image

The team's involvements determine its image. These can range from,

- a. local involvements - looking towards their near communities and becoming part of the available entertainment scene and the public life around. The team will be readily recognised locally and often requested to be part of what is going on in the communities.
- b. a dance troupe that is inward looking - probably thinking that aloofness and mystery are part of the ritual they are preserving, who have a wide territory, often with a name of no particular local association and going for money, festivals or personal jinks. Usually no one outside of the team has heard of them in their area and when they do no one thinks of inviting them to anything outside of the folk world.

4. The Season

Some clubs have a regular practice night all the winter and then in summer dance out on the same night, having given up practice for the summer, and at weekends as well, sometimes from April till October. This is the over dancing that should be objected to, not the too many teams appearing at the same spot week after week. Dealing with the first cures the second. Too many outings forces reliance on a hard core of dancers if the club is to survive. In the USA and Australia they are forced by the climate to a shorter season or perhaps two short seasons, and they find it retains the magic and gives them something to look forward to in each practice season. A long season is the antithesis of the tradition as it was. The public presentation of tired or lack lustre morris can indicate a lack of caring both for the audiences and the impression of morris against which the rest of us have to perform.

5. Relations with Other Sides

Local sides actually have little contact with other morris sides in their area and even less with other types of dancing or entertainment. Morris sides are not really gregarious and when they meet they are naturally competitive whether it is at an Ale, a day of dance or a tub stop.

Summary

Thank goodness there will be as many forms of clubs and styles of behaviour as there are clubs. It is the variety that makes it so interesting to the old hands or the new audiences. Problems are solved by caring about the participants and the audience as individuals not abstractions. And as a Polynesian said on TV (the morris) is a living form which does not preserve the past but borrows from it.