

COMMON FAULTS OF WOMEN MORRIS DANCING

If you are honest, who on earth wants to watch second rate morris through choice? Excuses about spirit and enjoyment and gaining experience are just excuses not a justification.

1 TOO MANY DANCES, TOO SOON

It takes time to make a dancer, it is not fair to burden the memories at the expense of working on basics. Who wants to watch a load of mediocre dances? Interest is maintained by novelty. Initially this can be achieved by variety in the material, but later by the variety in the occasion in which the material is used. An understood, structured programme of learning should overcome the need for endless dance fodder. Keeping a balance during learning requires skill. New sides and new foremen must realise that they need help, advice and guidance. Principles are no substitute for good dance basics. Most cant about the "tradition" ignores that the tradition had very good and experienced examples to copy, and that the teachers in the traditional sides, this century at least, have been insisting on good grounding. Dancing out is part of the making of a dancer. It should not be delayed but introduced with care.

2 SET TOO SMALL

A Cotswold set should be spaced at outstretched fingertip length in each direction. It should be necessary to stretch out to clash sticks in figures. One should have to take a positive step forward for hand clapping with one's opposite. A small set is often due to how the side fits into its practice room. In this and other things a set should practice deliberately as it intends to perform in public. A narrow set can be due to laziness in practice. It also goes with little effort and slow acceleration into figures so lacking life. In other words "dull". Cotswold morris is dependent for its effect on jumps, capers and drive, and this does not necessarily mean speed.

3 WEAK STICK TAPPING

The stick is an implement not an extension of the hand like a handkerchief. It should be wielded like a tool, with confidence and vigour, with a good preparatory swing but no follow through. Accidents happen through this particular lack of control. If this is thought to be unfeminine then you do not understand the Cotswold Morris, and you probably play lousy tennis and can not chop wood. Stick tapping should be seen. The impact point should be head level or above - the audience stands behind the dancers and needs to see what is going on - it also reduces the chance of accidents.

4 WEAK POSTURE AND FITNESS

Pulling the stomach in and raising the rib cage gives the dancer a sense of elation as well as elevation. Slack body leads to slack mind and to slack dancing. To put height into stepping requires strength and this has to be developed in the correct muscles. It takes time and understanding in training. Stretching, exercises and warm up as well as cool down must be appreciated and exploited as needed. Do not be afraid to ask experts in other than Morris Dancing. Tucking the head down in jumps is common and obvious to the audience and bad. One should have a straight, proud back, not a curly one - it comes back to raising the rib cage and not being afraid to raise the arms away from the chest. A constant review of basics is important as dancers do improve and can be upgraded. In stepping the curling of toes up, that is not rotating the foot at the ankle so that the sole of the foot is nearly parallel to the ground, looks comical!

5 SELF DISCIPLINE

Can you recognise the following faults? Talking in the set and delaying Once to Yourself or missing calls. Arguing in public especially having post mortems as soon as the dance stops. Temper. Sloppy on and off. Begging the sixth dancer to come and dance. Behaviour in pubs - its not your pub, you have obligations. Who likes to see women the worse for drink? Whatever your personal beliefs on sexual roles and positions in society, the Morris is no place to sail against accepted conventions. Too much dancing by an individual or a side in the summer is "overdancing" - to lose the "magic" of an event, to get bored so that numbers drop, is not worth it. The traditional dance season was short and in the late spring - do not overdo a good thing.

6 CARING

Because it is recognised that people dance better and make a better show if they care about their dances it is allowed that sides go their own way, make their own choices of how things should be done and develop club style. This was never intended as a manifesto for anything other than better dancing. Sometimes it is used to justify abuse of our heritage.

The way dances are sometimes passed on makes one wonder - we all know of workshops that reflect more of the leaders own ideas than tradition - often people are not honest about what has been changed or developed from the original - finally care is not taken to see that the dance has been learnt, noted etc accurately. even when the learner actually wants a particular interpretation.

It is surprising that sides do not often choose local names to identify themselves nor introduce local associations into dance titles. The dance movement is not wedded to a tune otherwise there would be only one tradition.

The public announcing of the village of origin of a dance that has some resemblance to the one to be performed still mystifies an audience - are the dancers ashamed of not having dances of their own?

7 COSTUME

The "Costume" - the choice of the word is reflecting an attitude, as does "kit" or "regalia". It is seldom chosen with the needs of dancing in mind. Often it is fixed before the side can dance and know what is suitable. It is not often related to the clothes one practices in.

A good skirt is as effective as a second pair of handkerchiefs. Petticoats prevent seating - round buttocks may be nice but they do not need to be emphasised! Petticoats, an apron or a long (lined) tabard provide the weight to prevent distracting riding up. If the skirt is very long it restricts the choice of movements and removes the point of others. Usually something has to be deliberately done to compensate - noise with the feet, emphatic jumps. A well designed costume can emphasise the upright posture needed for NW Morris.

Should women wear breeches or jeans? Bums are extra fat that develops at puberty. Women's dress has evolved to cover this shape attractively. We remember the ribald comments when women first started to wear pants - the observations are still true. Sides that go for trousers are not all slim - do they have policies of dieting, exercises etc? It must be admitted that some sides manage to look gorgeous!

Height in the heel of shoes throws the weight back and this is wrong for the Cotswold Morris. To maintain the appearance of the morris step with the soles parallel to the ground, that is not to curl the apparent shape and look comical, requires that the toe is "pointed" downwards which strains the leg the wrong way. A heel reduces the shock absorbing travel of the foot and ankle muscles in landing in steps, jumps or cavers. The strain on muscles is greater, the risk of injury higher, the stepping looks abnormal and there is not the distance for acceleration to get the body up off the ground or smartly into movements and the "guts" goes out of the morris. Look at the height of a "character" shoe.

The advent of the bra liberated women by allowing them to participate in active sports without embarrassment or discomfort. We do not believe anyone can come up with a good aesthetic reason why breasts should fly around in the Morris. Wobbly fat is distracting where ever it is on the body. There is the choice of tailored bodices (Irish), good waistcoats (American morris), coveralls (tabards) pinafore tops to provide control. This is the way chosen by most genuine European Folk Costumes. There are other ways - please recognise it as a problem.

Women appear to move in a way protective to their breasts thus inhibiting good arm movements, good clapping and good stick tapping. Arm movements should always be large and expressive and the hands well away from the body at hits, claps etc. The technique has the same objective as stage movements - to look normal to an audience it has to be exaggerated in performance.

These comments are based on the long conversations we have in going to and from instructionals although this was written over a plate of spaghetti in an Italian restaurant in Bath.