

THE MORRIS AT BRAILES

Brailes is 2/3 miles east of Shipston on Stour on the road to Banbury in Warwickshire.

Cecil Sharp met two old dancers, Edwin Clay who was not very helpful, and William Stanley, aged 81, b. 1831. Stanley, like many of the Cotswold dancers, had been found for him, this time by Mrs Stanton of nearby Armscote. He believed he was the last surviving dancer and was in 1912 living in Shipston on Stour. He, unlike most dancers, had not started the morris till aged 40. He danced in the middle but only for 2 or 3 years till the morris broke up. 2 or 3 dancers came from Sibford the next village down the Banbury road. Earlier they used to dance against a Sibford side who were reputed good dancers. They did not go beyond the bounds of their own parish to dance. The dancing had stopped about 1874. As soon as the weather and ground was fit in the spring they used to meet and practice in a meadow after work in the evenings.

Clay said that they wore gaiters and bells, rosettes and caps with red ribbons. Stanley said that they wore white shirts but anything they could wear, some of them were very ragged in dress.

The leader wore a long skirted coat, the collar of a different colour to the rest and he wore a box hat, white if he could get it. He carried the spare bells on his hat. The music was a tin whistle till the last few years when they rose to the dignity of a flute. They never had a drum.

The man who carried the money box was called the King or Master. They had a man dressed as a woman in a long petticoat with girt big sleeves and a slouch bonnet and ribbon on his shoulders. This character ran in and out among the others and also like the fool made jokes for the crowd.

The fool wore a battered box hat and blacked his face. He wore trousers but no bells. He had 3 or 4 coloured ribbons on his shoulders. The fool had a piece of a calf's skin tied on with string over his shoulder with ragged hairs and legs hanging down in front. The boys would come and catch hold of the legs and try to pull them off. When he was pestered by the boys he would pull the skin in front by pulling the string and thereby wallop the lads with the tail which he had hanging down his back. He had a stick with ribbons on one end and a bladder tied to a hole in the other with string to give about a foot's play. The fool was remembered for saying "I dont say but what I'm not fond of you but I specially like you a lot better if you'll give me a copper or two". The fool ran in among the dancers when they were busy dancing, then the dancers would cuff him and knock him out of the ring. He had a stick and would pretend he was lame and would have to lay down and then would jump up after the boys.

They had both stick and handkerchief dances. The sticks were plain and about 2 feet long and a good inch in diameter. They had about half a dozen dances. One was a hand clapping dance to the tune The Jolly Waggoners. Clay mentioned Constant Billy and Shepherd's Hey and that some danced jigs. Stanley added Trunko, Blue Eyed Stranger and that sometimes they danced over the Baccapipes. Molly Oxford was danced as a jig.

The dancers always walked round first. As soon as they were prepared the foreman would say "my men I want you to enjoy yourself and I want these other folks to enjoy themselves." They had a running dance called "Galley Out" with which they always began. They ran round the ring at a fast pace 2 or 3 times before they settled down to the dance. In Shepherd's Hey they clapped with their partners and then whole rounds. The dances lasted as long as they liked, but at the end they all closed in in a small circle like the Headington "All-in".

Stanley talked of Hey Away and remembered the galley and sidestep when Sharp did them.

The Ilmington men said that it was a fight with the Brailes dancers on a speculative tour in 1867 following dancing at the Shipston on Stour Flower show that led to Joe Johnson leaving the village and the morris stopping.

© 1950 Roy Donnett