

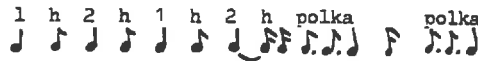
SECTION 2: ADVICE WHEN STARTING A CLOG MORRIS

## ADVICE WHEN STARTING A CLOG MORRIS

This article arose from discussions with leaders of new sides.

### MUSIC

From the start the music must be right. The two rhythms used are "jigs" and "polkas". The 6/8 jigs are played like "100 Pipers", what the Irish would call "single jigs" because of the basic skippiness, and frequently used for dances with hop or skip steps. The polkas, properly in 2/4, are frequently more exaggerated in rhythm than Cotswold Morris but not quite as the 19th century ballroom dance like "Can't you dance the Polka" where the hop in the step was much more exaggerated. The polka rhythm is "t'1 2 3", and it is very important that it is played exactly as the team like to dance it. The underlying beat for the stepping is not to be sacrificed for the sake of the melody. The tune is played to have a clear phrase ending for each dance movement. The tune repeats are chosen to fit the figures, not to suit the musician. The melody may be changed at each figure if one must. Marches are also used, eg Men of Harlech or British Grenadiers, but not in strict tempo but to the stepping, ditto for schottisches like the "Keel Row". The tunes must be played with a feel for the basic dance movement, eg. if the dance step phrasing is 2 bars skip, then 2 bars polka, a 6/8 is played,



Beware of country dance players whose playing is inevitably too fast and too decorative with no concept of phrasing to the dance or of having to fit to body movements. They must understand that as fiddle and banjo styles can be regional so playing for morris can be different from anything else.

A side drum is helpful as the music can be overwhelmed by the noise of the clogs, but in turn it must not dominate. Heavy on beat is deadly - it drives the dancers into the ground. Off beat is emphasised to give the dancers a lift as can be heard on good records with a snare drum.

Good dancing needs good music. In practice sessions play exactly the required rhythm and only the necessary notes. One should practice to music clear enough to be heard against the clogs but not the full band - it is better to have separate band practices. Older NW sides would practice to one instrument, often a concertina, and keep the rest including drums for major performances.

### CLOGS

The whole point of clogs is to hear the clear sound so one must practice in clogs to get the stepping together. Normally one needs two pairs, with rubbers for indoors and irons for outside. Note the team must be equipped for running repairs when out. Clogs are commonly used in Cheshire dances nowadays even though it was done by girls in plimsols and so was quite different in character.

The clog affects posture, it reduces the flexibility of the foot compared to other dance forms. It allows variation of the level of noise. It encourages stamps not jumps, so that there is no spread in time for the body rise and therefore no need to "stretch" the tune as for Cotswold Morris.

**STEP**

In the hop step it is usual to raise the knee high, perhaps till the thigh is horizontal, shin vertical. The leg is not pumped up and down but the knee is held up a while especially travelling.

The polka step has a characteristic change of balance - from standing on one foot it is "hop, hop, change, pause," the change being a switch of weight bearing foot. The differences in the step arise from the use of the free foot, tapping the ball of that foot on the first "hop" either beside the carrying foot, in front of it or with the foot crossed over it, or perhaps using the toe, and maybe with a wide swing of the foot either backwards or to the side before the change of weight. Minor variations arise from the height reached by the knee of the free leg and, when tapping across the foot, where the crossing of the legs is done between ankle or knee. Each team and even each dance has its own way - often without realising that there are so many possibilities.

**SPEED**

The music is slower than one might expect because of elevation in the step and covering ground with the usual polka step. To travel it may be better to use skips than polkas or slow down so that in certain figures the dancers have time to move. The dance should be in control not the musician. Putting the tallest dancers in the positions which have to travel furthest may solve some problems.

**STYLE**

The size of a set is larger than Cotswold - desirably stick tip to stick tip spacing rather than finger tip both along and across the set. Movements can take twice as long compared to a Cotswold dance because of the greater size and the polka step. Greater numbers are involved, traditionally 12 or 16 or even 24. The numbers are important for the effect created - and determine the room needed for practice. Today many dances are adapted for 8 but at great loss of impact and it is to be deplored even if unavoidable.

The arms movements are more definite than in Cotswold morris and to obtain the required appearance it has to be standardised for everyone in each dance. The slope of the arms, the plane of the arms, the orientation of the implement needs to be fixed for every figure with perhaps general rules for turns, stars etc, for both arms, not just the one in the middle. This detail is often the major observable difference between dances from the same area. It is also this fine detail which is difficult to collect and so is not always available.

No notation gives enough definitive detail and the leader may well have to make arbitrary decisions on where to hold sticks, when and why to shake bells. Another example is a reel, on which precise beat to pass, how far apart, what happens at the ends, how wide are the loops. All these become the individual team's interpretation.

**REPERTOIRE**

A traditional team would have its one or two dances. A modern dance troupe will need at least 4 or 5 and perhaps up to 12 depending on what can be kept in reasonable

practice. For variety the dances should include ones based on walk, skip and polka stepping. The patterns or figures should be recognisably different and the implements should vary. If garlands are carried the dances should use the garland rather than having it as a decorative feature. Avoid the trap of teams from the Basque country or Provence - they appear to have one family of steps and figures but a wide range of implements so that their "different" dances have no variety.

Teams need a good ending dance and possibly a public joining in dance, also some that are simple and perhaps some for only 4 or 6 dancers.

#### IMPLEMENTS

These range from very flexible to rigid and there is usually one for each hand. Slings were common in the Manchester area with a length chosen not to hit the chest. They can be knotted handkerchiefs, bound cotton waste or covered corks on a string. They can be rotated vertically in front of the body or in planes parallel to the forearms, "inside" and "outside", or horizontally above the head in "twists". As sticks are not hit they can be painted and made of dowelling or broom handles. They are held at the end or the middle and would bells and ribbons or streamers on the ends. The ribbons may be to damp the bells. They are waved, shaken or rotated from the wrist to make the bells ring and the ribbons flutter. The sticks can be developed into carnival wavers and, if two ended, become "fluffies" or "pom-poms", formerly made of crepe paper but now often of thin coloured plastic sheet. Intermediate are short sticks held by loops of leather or ribbon on the end. There are no traditional rules for garlands with regard to size, rigidity or material.

#### ROUTINES

There are a basic set of "glossary" figures - outside, inside, reels(chains), forward and back, cross over, hands across (star), partners turn, arches etc. Most dances draw on these with only subtle differences. To be effective a dance must have at least one original figure even though the rest are basics.

Dances are better with a structure. First with some repetitive element such as a walk-up (up-street) and perhaps a "step-&-turn" figure, once thought to be characteristic of the older dances in the Manchester area. The other figures should have some natural order of increasing complexity, becoming more exciting by more travel or be developing variations on a theme. Random sets of movements are entertaining only up to a point. Dances "by the yard" are difficult to enjoy unless very well done or the movements are technically complex so that the audience appreciates the achievement. One can incorporate complex movements not in other English traditions, especially those requiring 8 or more dancers to be done at all. Remember written notations are not a good starting point as they are often ambiguous, incomplete or need interpretation. If you want it right, try and see it danced or get it taught by someone who knows it. Of course you may be wanting your own interpretation in which case the written notation is just a tool.

#### THE PRACTICE SESSION

Start each session with (a) stretching - it avoids "tightness" and restrained dancing and its baleful influence on style and (b) stepping practice, both stationary, and very important, travelling. One may have more than one travelling step, eg a hornpipe. Getting everyone to do the same is a problem. Use mirrors, reflections in windows, standing close or holding hands and repeating sequences many times. For people who have a coordination problem, break each movement down to one thing at a time and do not put it all together too quickly while they grasp it. Letting them loose in a set too soon will just throw everyone. Use walking through as an effective way of learning the patterns, 2 walks per polka step and no hand movements. The Carnival girls have a simple practice step which is a step, then a tap of the other foot in front, changing weight on the next step etc.

A team needs an agreed signal word for stopping immediately, like Whoa! When stopped do not drift about but wait for the instructor to sort it out. The leader has to decide if it was a one off mistake, a genuine confusion; bad or wrong teaching. Recognise that some movements are difficult to recover from and one may have to go back to some earlier point in the dance. Some errors like mistakes in steps or arm movements, do not impact on the set and can be left till an appropriate moment for comment. Have a policy that mistakes will be reviewed, that there is nothing personal about it, just to sort out why and for everyone to benefit.

The team needs to agree what to do if there is a mistake in an interacting figure like a reel or grand chain, either to stand out or trying to recover. The danger is one dancer falls out of the correct pattern and throws the rest.

The leader will have a problem with other people helpfully teaching, arguing with each other or post morteming when the leader needs to teach. There is no real harm in this but everyone must recognise a signal when it has to stop.

#### NOTATIONS

Write a full notation of all the detail you have agreed. A leader has to decide how much effort is put into dealing with a technical difficulty before it is changed or deleted. Persist with difficult dances for a reasonable length of time - really difficult ones can take a couple of practice seasons. Try difficult dances to different tunes, for better list, or even different rhythms and stepping. Discard what is unpopular, proven to be beyond you, difficult to get a set up to do, at some proper time like the AGM, when it can be a consensus - just letting it drop out could be offending some of the side. Have an AGM, ask everyone to comment in an environment free of risk to the club. Prompt all the team to make constructive comment about the dances and difficulties. One can run a club just using common sense but some thinking about it and remembering that it is all about people will help.

#### POINTS AT PRACTICE

A leader for each dance has to be trained, agreeing what signals and when, use of voice or whistle, and where from if it is a long set. Should a separate conductor be used and should they face up or down and use arm signals for control?

Clog Morris Advice 5.

Practice as you intend to dance out. Entrances and exits during a show and changing implements need organising and practice to avoid time wasting. Any slackness or laziness inside will carry over outside. Do not let the team get casual over forming up. It is easier to integrate newcomers into a clog side as there are fewer technical difficulties. It is not for exhibitionists as there is little room for self expression. One usually finds a newish side does a dance well the second time through. To get everyone to remember the dance, run through it beforehand slowly - if you dash into it and get it wrong that confusion has to be removed as well as the uncertainties that pre-existed. Initially designate places in the set to people and practice it hard from there before trying somewhere else. Have a chart of who should dance each dance and from where when going out so that there is no hesitation in public performance. It is worth having a register of who was there and learnt a dance and who has done what position. For the same sort of reason leaders should watch who is late arriving, early to leave, has a long break in the bar and misses key sessions, because you may find yourself depending on them when they can not do it. Experience suggests that new material is best introduced at the start when everyone is fresh rather than after a hard session for example working up a show. To get in all that is desired one should have a rough plan for the evening. Do not imagine that the best way of learning a dance is to keep at it till it bores. Most people find that last week's problems can disappear when properly learnt a second time round, so work on it a bit and then make more progress the next practice. Take time to be sure that the patterns are understood by everybody and remember those watching do not pick it up as well so bring them in for repeats. Eventually everyone should learn the dance from every position in the set. Clog morris is quite different from Cotswold. The pattern comes first and the style is worked up later. The standard NW tunes are well chosen. Tunes must fit the club style for the dance so it is often difficult to find the "right" tune. Do not ignore a good tune just because it is well known.

SUMMARY

Some advice has been offered based on experience. These suggestions and solutions are not necessarily for all teams but the issues have to be met somehow and the chosen alternative must have its own justification.

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