

THE TRADITION IN THE SOUTH : BACKGROUND

South of the Cotswolds and between the "Hooden Horse" of East Kent and the "Broad" of the Gloucestershire-Wiltshire border north of Bath there have been a number of regular customs with associated dancing.

The best known was at Salisbury. During the 19th cent, at an average of every 7 years, the Giant, hobbyhorse and regalia came out with a fife, drums and morris dancers. A walking processional and one set dance for stops, not apparently traditional but worked up for the event. The last time in 1911 the side was dressed as 2 men, 2 men-women and 2 Red Indians and danced to the Oyster Girl. In its time the Bezant at Shaftesbury was justly famous. To pay the lord of the neighbouring manor for the water drawn from the wells at the bottom of the plateau a procession went each year on the Monday before Holy Thursday. Led by a newly married couple, the Mayor and Aldermen and townspeople danced "fantastically" to meet the lord's steward. A very expensively decorated gilded ornament, based on a pineapple shape, called the Bezant and now to be seen in the local museum, was carried along together with a calf's head, a pair of gloves and purse with the money. The procession returned to a feast and a ball but eventually the Marquis of Westminster had to stop it because the town could not really afford the celebration.

Still active is the Faggot Dance at Great Wishford near Wilton. When the Normans established Grovely Forest a deal was made with the local hamlets for maintenance in return for rights to run cattle and pigs and to collect timber and wood. The usual May Day celebration occurred to signify the taking up of the animals to the forest and the gathering of wood to repair the summer huts of the herdsmen. When the Earl of Pembroke became lord of the manor disputes began which were settled at the start of the 17th cent by a charter, which among other things required the villagers to go to Salisbury Cathedral, to read the charter, make affirmation and do their customary dance. For a long time this went with a fair in the Cathedral Close, moving to 29th May after the Restoration, then reverting back to the village in the middle of the 19th cent not to return till after WWII. Four women of the village made a token visit each year. When the village celebrations came under the formal control of the Oak Apple Club, 4 women were allowed to dance in their memory. The present 2 figure dance, to Blue Bell Polka and the Oyster Girl, is probably no older than the turn of the century, but it is done at the Cathedral about 10am and the village at noon.

Good luck visiting for "boxes" with garlands, either on poles or hanging from a cross piece, in May was reasonably widespread although in later years just done by children as at Dogmersfield near Aldershot and around Arlesford. Early writers were scornful of the introduction of Maying with its rural dancing to the detriment of real old English activities. At Arlesford and St. Mary Bourne it was blamed for the decline in morality, but it continued as a festivity into the 19th cent, moving eventually to the anniversary of Waterloo. The May Day procession to and from the forest in the Isle of Wight involved dancing in double column and the carrying of a bough, bent in an arc like a Bacup garland. Up to the middle of the 19th cent guide books told of the procession of the fishermen and ferrymen of Itchen Ferry, now Woolston, behind a large statue of their patron saint, St. Peter, on the saint's day accompanied by a band and dancing. Very Popish. The similarity with Spanish celebrations was noted.

In the South.2.

Cecil Sharp was given the address of a local morris dancer at Faringdon near Alton but he did not appear to have followed it up. At the end of the 18th cent, Puttenham, near Guildford was famous locally for the skill of its dancers. Furlanger was the only dancer at the end who wore the bells in the village and the dancing dropped when he died. On one occasion Furlanger, who was the carter, and two of his friends took a load of carrots up to London. At the house where they were staying the night there was a morris dancing competition and Cranson, one of the party, won the prize. It is suggestive that a recognised form of the morris closer to London was nothing more than a solo performance. Florrie Warren, chief dancer of Mary Neal's Esperance Club, used to do a set of step dance figures collected in Somerset which had been called a morris dance by the source. Exhibitions of solo skill were not uncommon. Baccapipes was done over swords and crossed flails as well as church-warden pipes. In Sussex a 4 handed broom dance was collected from Scan Tester which was often done with walking sticks and could incorporate step dance movements. Clive Carey published another dance for 4, over sticks crossed on the ground, as done by Sussex mummers.

The church accounts at Crondall, near Farnham, tell of money paid to the fiddler of the morris. Local histories show that teams of men dancers with fiddlers were competing for money with the mummers at Christmas around what is now the old parts of Farnborough and Woking in the later half of the 19th cent.

A club in the south attempting to capture a southern flavour must perforce produce something which is a mixture from many sources. The obvious distinctive traditional costume is that of the mummers which had suprisingly large variation across the region. More relevant perhaps were the sashes, ribbons, rosettes and banners of the village Friendly Societies and above all their club staves, often 4 to 6 ft long and decorated with flowers, ribbons or other haberdashery and in the West with magnificent brass poleheads. The Societies usually ended their annual walk with a dance and in some places danced on their rounds. Hunt the Squirrel, 4 hand reels and step dancing have been mentioned. In the area where Somerset, Wilts and Dorset meet several clubs danced. Mrs suggests adapted versions of social dances as the notations are couched in early 19th cent dance terms. In this part of the country the reels and step dancing were the norm of dancing. Thomas Hardy remembered as a boy the arrival of country dances for the common people.

Another form of near ceremonial dance occasionally done where the ribbon dances. At East Coker near Yeovil one was danced, latterly by school children, to the standard English processional tune. Other dances have been collected in Devon, Dorset and Surrey too elaborate to be casual social dances. If the bridge to social dances can be crossed to build up a corpus of southern material for use in displays then there are the 8 hand reel from Brixham, the 5 hand one from Dummer near Basinstoke and a 4 hand reel from the New Forest as well as local variants of Up the Sides and Down the Middle which use stepping. There is a rather vague book of New Forest Gypsy dances. There is also the Sailor's Hornpipe. Ingenuity could make something of the swinging firebaskets used on Nov 5th at Hartley Wintney or of the idea of a group of Gypsies at Poole who not having a mummers play, dressed the parts, introduced themselves in turn and then each did a solo cabaret turn.

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MORRIS DANCING IN THE SOUTH

George Frampton, "May Day in Guildford" M/M 4/3 slightly misquotes Ruth Dugmore's "Puttenham Under the Hog's Back", published Phillimore 1972, perhaps because of the fanciful reconstruction as an illustration on page 83, and this could mislead readers more used to the team dancing of the Cotswold Morris. The source for the book was the papers of the Rev Charles Kerry, curate in Puttenham 1868-74, now in the Derby Public Library. The book says, "at the end of the 18th century this was a favourite pastime and Puttenham was famous locally for the skills of its dancers. Furlanger, the carter, wore bells on his legs and ankles and was always loudly cheered as he danced down the Street. On one occasion he and two of his friends took a load of carrots to London. At the house where they stayed the night there was a Morris Dancing competition and Cranham won the prize. Apparently Furlanger was the only dancer who wore the bells and when he died this picturesque custom was dropped." It is important to note there is no mention of a side.

Daryl Dawson of Derby Crown has been going through the Kerry papers and there is a section "Morris Dancers" in a collection entitled "Fairies, Pharisees & Night Hags, Spells & Divination". Pharisees are bad fairies. From Volume III, p 121 & 123, "Puttenham like most other places had its morris dancers in former times but no one of the present generation remember having seen the performers with bells as was the ancient practice. But Mr Hudson states that Thos Furlanger his fathers carter wore them in the dance - that he was the best dancer in the whole neighbourhood the bells on his legs & ankles keeping wonderful time with the music.

Master Strudwick was one of the most famous of the modern school though he danced without the bells. Cranham says that when he was young they went to London together with a cartload of carrots for the market having looked to their horse & made all things right for the night came to the house where they had agreed to sleep. Here they found a cockney dancing to the strains of an old blind fiddler. After a while Cranham informed the company that there was a countryman present who although he had walked with him 35 miles that day he dare "back" against the Londoner. The challenge was at once accepted & it was agreed that the fiddler (being blind) should be the judge (the parties of course not being made known to the musician). Accordingly Strudwick having taken off his shoes danced first, when he was succeeded by the townsman. When all was over the old fiddler declared that the first man had beaten the second "out & out" both in precision & delicacy of step. The countryman won the day - from Cranham 1869 then aged 79 years old."

The fuller version gives quite a different impression to the book. Where is being cheered down the street? Strudwick not Cranham won a challenge for a bet not a competition.

According to the Broadwood Morris handouts, apparently quoting from the publications of the Sussex Archaeological Society, most of the dancing Lucy Broadwood the folk song collector would have seen was of the social kind at harvest homes and the like. The only occasion she recalled a morris dancer was on May Day 1870 when "there appeared on the carriage drive at Lyne a man with blackened face. He had a white shirt and ribbon and fringes of paper on him. Later, I realised that I had seen my one and only Sussex morris-caperer". Miss Broadwood provided a drawing of this strange character.

It is tantalising. Dancing down a street, dancing without shoes, capering. It does not suggest what we would recognise as step-dancing. It reminds one of the most usual form of the morris in the 15th to 17th cent which was described as highly exotic, acrobatic, savage and danced by a ring of men, each dancing alone for a prize from a lady. Perhaps the south did preserve the oldest form of the morris in England. The earliest illustrations show grotesque gestures and movements - perhaps references to morris in the south are being missed because attention is not being given to solo performances which include bells, leaps and grotesque movements, or they are being confused with step-dancing.

The more usual form of southern celebration is mentioned by William Marshall, the 18th cent agricultural historian who wrote "The Rural Economy of the Southern Counties", 1798. To quote from "Historic Farnham" by Ashton Booth, "another time was Hop Sunday, when the celebrations led to various 'excesses' and the parade of hop pickers..... The finishing frolics exceed even those of Kent. The pole puller is given a shirt (ie lincloth to make one) by the pickers. This he wears sashwise, ornamented with a ribbon. The women likewise decorate themselves with handkerchiefs, ribbons, finery, and the companies then parade through the streets of Farnham - a fiddler at their head - singing and shouting in tones of true licentiousness. The evening is closed usually with dancing and always copious libations. Next morning those living at a distance are sent home in waggons, their various colours flying, forty or fifty in each with a fiddler in the midst and with altogether a sort of glee and merriment which in these decorous times (1791!) is rarely met with."

Has anyone more of these local titbits to build up the picture? R L DOMMETT

Pat. Farnham

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