FIELDTOWN

The Place

The core of Leafield is a small and fairly open area on a hill in the centre of what was the post-Roman Wychwood Forest. It was originally named ***La Felde*** by the Normans, not being recorded as Leafield until the 18th century. The settlement in it became known as Fieldtown (the tun or homestead in the field).

Wychwood Forest was a managed park woodland of copses and wide rides. Before its enclosure in the mid nineteenth century the forest was the primary source of wood and timber for more than twenty parishes from many miles around. It is on Oxford Clay over Forest Marble, with a cap of glacial drift on the hill at Leafield. This was relatively barren. The Roman potteries around Oxford had disappeared in the 5th century and the Medieval potteries in Wychwood in the 16th century. They were started again in the 18th century by a family Goffe, who were also farmers, using the surrounding forest for fuel. Because the local Oxford Clay contained iron the pottery was red or orange when fired, when glazed the colour ranged from orange to brown, unlike at Shotover nearer Oxford where the Wealden Clay produced whiteware. The local trade in country potter's coarse earthenware contracted after 1850 as longer distance transportation improved.

Wychwood was not ancient woodland. It was settled at least in Roman times to provide ranches (colonia) for retired army officers. The outlines still existed in Saxon charter and parish boundaries. By reputation in the nineteenth century the people were reckoned gypsy folk because of their closeness and independence, but this is unlikely as the hamlet is much older than their arrival in England.

There were two families involved at Leafield, the Williams, who were purely potters, and the Franklins, who were brickmakers as well, but even they ceased making pottery by 1900. Some examples of ware produced by the Franklins are displayed in the Oxfordshire Museum at Woodstock. There is no surviving evidence of intermarriage, but several were dancers or musicians. The potteries were actually owned by the Vokins and then the Grove families. In later years, once the local production had stopped, they sold pottery brought in from other sites, such as from Colliers of Tilehurst. The site of the pottery moved from Witney Lane, owned by Vokins and worked by the Williams, to Chimney End by The Fox Inn off the green, and then to The Crown Pottery up the Shipton Road. Percy Manning wrote a MSS description now in the Bodleian Library of the Crown Pottery and the work processes following a visit in May 1906.

The local rights included expression in the Whit Hunt for deer in the eighteen Chase Woods in the segment of the forest near Witney. The village church was built in the late nineteenth century and before that they had to use those in the neighbouring towns. There is a story of a funeral party who put down a coffin to chase a squirrel and could not find it again for a while in the snow. Hunting squirrel vermin who terminally damaged hardwood trees was often associated in England with 30th November, but the occasion was frequently used as a cover for general poaching.

There was shortage of local surnames leading to many being known by their family nicknames. Reg Pratley of the Jubilee Inn Bampton, who has grown up in

Leafield was a "Samson" Pratley through a relative who as a strongman had been able to pick up a horse.

The locality name of the local morris side varied over the years with the changes of leader and his domicile. Locally it was reckoned by dancers from the early EFDS class and the school that the later Ascot-Under-Wychwood sides were the local heirs to the tradition, which view might be supported by the similar long dance lists from both places.

The Source

Our major source on the dances was Henry Franklin who left the village about 1858, although some little snippets have come from other dancers. These include George Steptoe, once a noted prize fighter, and Henry's much younger brother Alec, who survived until the late 1930's. Cecil Sharp found that Henry was not completely sure of all the details and this led to some differences in what was collected on different visits, as in *The Rose.*

Henry and Alec once walked over to Kelmscot to show Sharp's team how to dance at a major show. Because they were not allowed to dance Henry wrote complaining about it to the Oxford Times. Henry badgered the local EFDS branch so they arranged for him to show his jigs at a display at Christchurch college.

The boys in the village who danced before and after WWI learnt Headington as their basic tradition. The local dancers considered this to be not the real morris. In the early 1960's it was still possible to have a whole set of dancers up with a pianist in The Fox to perform their school learnt morris. When Alec had retired as a potter, so said Reg Pratley, he would sit outside The Fox in a shepherd's smock with a crook and empty glass waiting for passing motorists.

The Fiddle

The fiddle was a natural successor to the pipe with a similar sharp edged note but more colour and therefore more expressive and lyrical, but with less rhythmic possibilities. Fieldtown danced to a fiddle played by Charles Busby at the end. Al;though no local player for the morris was ever met, some of the recalled tunes were very distinctive and confirmed by more than one informant. There were two quite distinct versions of *Shepherd's Hey* and *Molly Oxford* in use. Other tunes such as *Dearest Dicky* and *Old Woman Tossed Up* were not the usual versions but variants of tunes known as *Lads a Bunchum* and *William and Nancy* elsewhere. Dancers from south of Wychwood claimed that it was difficult to transfer dancing from the pipe and tabor to the fiddle, which suggests that there were significant differences in style and idiom. The few recordings that were made of old morris fiddlers show very simple styles, almost childlike, with none of what is now called the "English Country Music" style of modern times.

Sharp met several fiddlers from the Stow area but little about their style was ever recorded. However what may be assumed is that the fiddlers knew the dance idiom and were far less influenced by other dance and musical styles than anyone is today. It seemed unusual for a musician to play for the morris and for other

forms of dance as did Richard "Dick" Butler of Bampton or his father Edward who had a mobile dance booth.

Like all the good morris instruments the notes from a fiddle have a sharp leading edge, which is used to indicate the pulse, which is why most accordionists are poor, unless they use the bellows like a melodeon. There can be much debate about where in the note the foot touches the ground, the major effort to slow down or to rise occurs etc.

Tricks of the Trade

The handkerchief was normally half a yard square before hemming. The Sharp photograph of Kimber in the Morris Book shows that the opposite diagonal to that held would touch the ground. Men's pocket handkerchiefs were a third of a yard and ladies one quarter, but they were never intended to be waved except for a goodbye. It is important to make the handkerchiefs do the work not the hands. The two are often confused when copying someone else's movements.

To gain height off the ground, which was an avowed Fieldtown purpose, the force on the ground has to be maximised, and this is helped by accelerating the arms upwards while in contact with the ground, and lowering them while off the ground to bring the body up compared to the centre of gravity.

A similar appeal to mechanics shows that during galley the arms and legs are hung out to maximise the roll inertia and gradually brought inwards as the body turns to decrease it and so keep up the rate of turning.

Steps and Hand Movements

Some detail of the dance style have been preserved. The tradition allows of considerable expression in its movements. The morris step is not forced, there is "bounce". It is particularly noticeable that there is a preparatory bounce at the end of bars into the next stepping.

The arm movements are not violent, nor is there a high swing or even a snatch. The handkerchiefs do the work. Effort in the arm swing is on the "up" to help in gaining height for the head and body. There is very little emphasis in the Cotswold Morris on "downward" movements, which tend to look and feel poor, whatever the foreman thinks. It is also clear that it was intended that the hands during a backstep sequence trace a small figure eight rather than be held stationary, going out and down and then in and down. When holding a morris stick while doing this, it should wave slightly either side of the vertical. In the half-gyp and other crossing figures this movement avoids hitting one's partner while passing.

The backstep was carefully described by Cecil Sharp. The key is that the sole of the forward foot is not lifted off the ground but scuffed, and the foot is twisted with the heel across on the off beat. Of course the emphasis in the morris step is "up" whereas in the backstep it is "down".

The sidestep was collected by Sharp as a closed crossed-over movement and by Schofield as an open one. The Bampton dancers who met old Fieldtown men before WWII said that they all danced a "heavy" step, ie like Eynsham, and put the forward foot in line with the back foot! However in each case the hand movement was an "up", either straightish or as a show, but never with a snatch down, only a "float".

Figures

Foot-Up : face in at half way and at the end.

Back-to-Back or Whole Gyp : the latter less frequently. Compare with the differences between sides at Bampton.

Rounds : danced to opposite diagonal place using back-steps around the ring as at Bampton. Going into the centre, which belonged to *The Rose* only, has come into common usage since 1951. It does not fit well into stick dances for which it should be avoided.

The Hey : the backing up/down the line involving an extra body twist compared with other traditions was taught to the Travelling Morrice in the 1920's. The first two bars are normally danced with sidesteps.

Dances

Sidestep dances

1 *Gary Owen*, the march past of the US Seventh Cavalry, and known at Leafield from the once popular song words as *The Walk of the Tuppenny Postman*.

2 *Blue Eyed Stranger*, collected by Schofield from Alec Franklin.

3 *Month of May* and *Molly Oxford*, usually used for jigs.

The important point is that the rhythm affects the dancing. The 6/8 tunes best fit a bouncing style whereas the 4/4's constrain movement.

Shepherd's Hey

The chorus is a whole hey usually danced with three sidesteps and a jump or just a rise and fall followed by a pause of half a bar (one bounce worth). The characteristic is the opening up and out of the arms to end out sideways for the pause. This movement has led to being called in the past "Signposts" or the "Ritual Cursing" dance.

Trunkles

The tune comes from Minster Lovell. On the B music pairs in turn crossed over and galleyed to face back, and then danced on the spot and galleyed the other direction. This is long winded, so it is more usual to either delete the dance on the spot or to have all the set do both parts simultaneously. Following a modern

78.

interpretation it is satisfying to have all the corner crossings to the C and D music together with the start of each corner delayed a little, so that Nos 1 and 6 move off in bar 1, Nos 2 and 5 dance on the spot in bar 1 and move off in bar 2, and Nos 3 and 4 dance on the spot in bars 1 and 2 and move off in bar 3.

Old Woman Tossed Up

The collected version has each corner in turn crossing over, then each corner in turn dancing slow capers and finally each corner in turn crossing back to place before the next figure. This is so long that often modern sides only do half the dance. An alternative commonly seen is for the capering to be done simultaneously by all the set, and even to delete the immediate corner crossing back to place. The suggestion here is for all the set the dance the corner movement simultaneously to cross the diagonal, all passing right shoulders in the centre, all cross the set changing with their partner on the slow capers, and then all dance the corner movement back to end opposite their starting place simultaneously.

Dearest Dicky or *Dear Is My Dicky*

The collected version is also long with the corner movements being danced in turn leading off on one foot and then repeated to place off the other foot before another figure is danced. It has become customary to delete the immediate repeat. A more effective dance is produced by having three dancers at a time move, Nos 1, 4 and 5, then Nos 2, 6 and 3, each going round two places. Another impressive idea is to dance with eight and have the corners done by four at a time, first Nos 1 and 6 and Nos 3 and 8 change, then Nos 2 and 5 and Nos 4 and 7 change, and finally the dancers in positions 3 and 4 and 5 and 6 change.

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