

## SHERBORNE WORKSHOP

### INTRODUCTION

**Source** - Nearly all the source material came from the Cecil Sharp interviews with George Simpson then living in Upton near Didcot, which was in Berkshire. He had taught a mixed children's team in the hamlet of which a photograph survives and he had a young local woman play the fiddle for it. His brother and another dancer have been met but they contributed very little. There is now an active team based in Sherborne village.

**Basis** - This material is based closely on transcriptions of the original write up of the collected material, in preference to Sharp's Morris Book IV and any other recent publications, and is as taught in many public workshops and to particular sides. Unlike other traditions collected by Cecil Sharp, there is little extra in his Field Notebooks. Other important interpretations and dances are discussed later. A structured order for learning the dances is followed but this is not compromised in order to teach the basics of morris which can be found in more detail elsewhere. Some use is made of helpful mnemonics used to call sequences of movements. The morris jargon is used extensively, unfortunately words such as step, out, set, down and up have multiple usages but the context should make it clear which is intended.

There are three types of dances in the Sherborne tradition, and they are grouped together for this workshop, although they would be mixed together in any public show,

1. Set dances in which all six dance more or less continuously.
2. Corner dances in which the distinctive part of the dance involves diagonally opposite pairs changing places in turn.
3. Jigs danced as solos or duals.

### BASIC FEET AND HANDS

**Stance** - The basic stance is upright with the weight forward over the balls of the feet, the stomach pulled in, the ribcage raised and the neck elongated, with head, eyes and shoulders level. This gives elevation and, by the stiffening of the upper body, provides a good foundation for movement. The feet are turned out with about a 45° to 60° included angle. This is not essential to the dance but it is characteristic of the Cotswold Morris. "Feet Together" means this position with the heels almost touching.

**The Double Step** - The basic Cotswold Morris Step is a quick change of weight from one foot to the other with the free foot in the air being swung forward parallel to the ground till the heel is in line with the toes of the supporting foot. The characteristic Sherborne double step is, in a mnemonic,

"step, hop, change, change"

which is different <sup>from</sup> to any other village, although George Simpson might have been the only Sherborne dancer that performed it this way. Smoothness is achieved by having confidence in knowing what one is doing and doing it, rather than trying for continuous control of the movement by counterbalancing tensions in all the muscles. There is a fair amount of rise and

fall in the steps, achieved by some bending of the knee as well as by the flexing of the ankle and the utilisation of the thigh muscles in lifting up.

Although there is a body sink inherent in each step, the emphasis here is given to the thrust upwards.

**Sequence** - The figures in the Set dances are mostly danced to a fixed sequence of steps, given as,

"1, hop, 2, 3; Step, &, jump, 'up'; Down, & a, down, & a; Down, together."

The first half of this sequence is normally danced travelling forward and the second half retiring backwards. In a figure this sequence would be done starting with the left foot and then repeated starting on the right foot. The '1 hop 2 3' is a normal Sherborne step, left, hop on left, right, left. From the 'Step' there is spring off of the one foot to land with both feet together. Immediately on landing - remember the feet should desirably be turned out from each other - the dancer rises onto their toes while twisting the heels to the left or right as appropriate, so that one foot is now straight and the other is almost at right angles to it, with the heel against the other foot's instep - this is 'up'.

how is this decided?

The Sherborne backstep as used for travelling backwards, is called **Shuffles**. It consists of moving from the 'up' position to a 'down' and back again as often as is needed to fill the music. The 'down' position is the mirror image of 'up', with the feet twisted to the other side, except that instead of the heels being high off the ground they are almost touching the ground. The rhythm of the sequence of shuffles is not even, more time is spent when up than down - 'down up &' = 'cha - chaah'. From the final 'down' there is a spring off of both feet to land with feet "together". The balls of the feet are in contact with the ground throughout. It can now be seen why the turn out of the feet is so large, so that the feet can be rotated without mutual interference. The emphasis is on the down and up of the body and not the twist of the feet, which is far less visible to the audience, and which can so easily degenerate into a flat movement with no grace whatsoever.

The emphasis of the movement of the body in ordinary stepping is upwards, achieving elevation. The emphasis of the movement in a Cotswold backstep is in the downwards drop, even though more of the time is spent 'up' - the switch or contrast from bar to bar is another attractive feature of the style - but the 'down' movement occurs here on the strong beats of the music not the weak. The beats of the tune mark the time of the first contact of the foot with the ground for each step. It is self-evident that most of the body's movement occurs between beats, which is why it is easy to show movements but not to describe them.

There are no held poses or even momentary holds during the morris dance phrases as are used in classical dance forms, as they break the flow, but if those moments of change of direction in a movement, eg in arm swinging, are truly together around the side the effect is impressive. The regular rise and fall of the body continues right through the stepping sequence and is characteristic of the tradition.

= performed precisely together by the side as a whole?

**The Arms** - Arm movements are to add style and balance to the dancing and to help dynamically in performing jumps and turns. During the fixed stepping sequence, the arms move together as mirror images, not alternately.

The arms movements are with the arms "comfortably" straight. The starting position is with the arms horizontal at shoulder level, parallel, in front of the body, hands lightly clenched and palms downward. The arms are brought back to this position every time the dancer lands from a jump and are not raised any higher. This is another characteristic Sherborne feature.

How are  
hands  
held?

The usual arm movements swing the arms back and forward, the hands passing close by the outside of the upper thigh. During "stepping" the hands, in swinging back, do not pass the back of the body and in the swing forward, do not come more than half way up to the "starting" position. The same form of arm swing is used with other "steps", although perhaps being more emphatic or larger as would be appropriate to the "step".

During a stepping sequence in a figure, then, the arm movements are: starting from the arms in the forward, horizontal position, a swing down and half up on the '1 hop 2 3', a swing back and raise up forward again on the step and jump, a slight drop to hold at the half down angle or a little higher for the shuffles so as to balance, and then a swing back and up to the forward starting position on the final 'down and spring to land feet together'. There is no "snatch", nor a "scoop" or swing out to the side. The arm position during the shuffles may be thought of as either as they would be if two short sticks were being carried and held crossed up before the face as in "Constant Billy", or as they would be having just released someone from a hug! This particular arm position is called "out".

It is not easy to coordinate arm and leg movements when both are unfamiliar and some structured practice is desirable.

#### THE SET DANCE FIGURES

In the figures the first half is usually done beginning with (ie onto) the left foot and the second half starting with the right foot. Each figure therefore requires its stepping sequence to be done twice. The first four figures of set dances described use the stepping sequence already given.

**FOOT-UP** - The set faces up, towards the music, and dances the sequence in that direction, turning to face directly away from their opposite on the final jump. The set then turns to face down, with backs to the music, and dances the same sequence in the other direction, turning the shortest way to face across towards their opposite on the final jump. The facing "out" at the half way point is a distinctive Sherborne characteristic.

**SET** - sometimes it was called Half Gyp. Opposites start facing across the set. The dancers move forward to be just past each other, right shoulder by right shoulder, that is, bearing a little to their left as they go forward. The travel is on the '1 hop 2 3' and 'step'. From the 'just past' position, they jump backwards a little, to land to be actually shoulder to shoulder and then shuffle, step-&-jump backwards to their starting place, facing the same direction throughout. This is then repeated starting with

the right foot, bearing a little to their right, moving forward and passing left shoulder by left shoulder etc.

**BACK-TO-BACK** - This figure starts similarly to SET but the dancers have to pass round each other, still facing the same direction throughout, hence the name back-to-back. The dancers move a little further on the '1 hop 2 3' so that the 'step' can be done across and behind their opposite and they can land from the jump on the other side of their opposite, shoulder to shoulder. In this movement they will be left shoulder to left shoulder before the shuffle in the first half and right shoulder to right shoulder in the second half of the figure.

**FACE-TO-FACE** - sometimes it was called **Whole Gyp**. The path is the same as BACK-TO-BACK but the dancer rotates during the travel instead of facing the same way throughout. As the descriptive name implies, the dancers start by moving round each other keeping face to face until they have swapped sides and are facing back to their own position. They do not go very far past, being quite close before the next movement. On the 'step-jump-&-up' the dancers rotate in the opposite sense to that to which they have been turning so that they end shoulder to shoulder again ready to shuffle back to place. It should be remembered as bearing to the left while turning the body to the right, till facing back, then turn left with the jump to end left shoulder to left shoulder. Repeat going the other way and with opposite rotations. This turn at half way may be recalled as "bum-to-bum".

Diagram?

It is a fine point that dancers should do the 'up' to start the shuffles such that the body (bum) moves away from their partner, thus it is different in the SET compared to the subsequent two figures.

Experience shows that the dancers should first practice the stepping sequences on their own, then to the track of the above figures and finally ~~to~~ add in the arm movements.

Each dance has distinctive movements specific to the dance, commonly called CHORUSES, which usually occur between the FIGURES and which are often the same thing repeated or with small variations to a common theme.

#### SOME OTHER STEPS

**Plain Capers** - These are high springs from one foot to the other, two to a bar, that is at about half the speed of ordinary stepping. The objective is achieving height, lifting the body centre of gravity up, rather than in kicking the legs out in front. They require a good preparatory sink so that the thigh muscles can properly contribute to the lift. The lower leg is not kicked forward but allowed to hang down fairly straight from the knee without real tension in it. The arms do large swings back and forward, one or other movement per caper.

The movement is very similar to that needed to jump over a horizontal stick held 12 to 18 inches off the ground.

**Galley** - usually called **Gallery** by George Simpson. Although it was a common movement in the Wychwood and Stow areas, the Sherborne method of dancing it was peculiar to the team. They especially prided themselves on the gallery

which they used at all 'corners' ie turns. Elsewhere, for example at Longborough and Fieldtown, the dancer used the galley to turn smoothly through the whole movement and it is essential to clearly distinguish this from the Sherborne way. The first step is forward, without any turning of the body, unlike elsewhere, then the dancer does as high a spring as possible to land on the same foot, turning in the air as much as possible for what is needed for that point in the dance, followed by another hop on which the turn can be completed or adjusted. The free leg is raised till the thigh is nearly horizontal as the first step is made and the thigh is turned out about 45°. If there is a turn following the step, the free leg is twisted across in front to help the dancer to turn quickly. During this 'twist' and the following hop, the raised free foot is turned in two small circles in the horizontal plane alongside and at about the height of the knee of the supporting leg. The foot is not pointed downwards particularly.

The direction of the small circles is clockwise or anticlockwise looking down according to the free foot being the left or the right. The Sherborne dancers did not usually make galleys that included a complete turn on the spot but preferred to do the galley without a change in the direction faced. The movement must not develop into a leaning back with the free leg out in front, throughout the dancer has their weight over the ball of the supporting foot, leaning a little forward, with the twists of the free foot under the body quite close to the other knee.

The 'turn' part of the galley, which often is used alone, is frequently finished by a 'step' and landing with the feet together. However it varies somewhat from dance to dance and even within dances, so that it can be followed by two plain capers or by putting the feet together, jumping and landing feet together again. Sharp published the latter consistently throughout all the dances and it was probably the declared objective of the dancers to do it this way if the music or movement allowed it, however Sharp mostly noted the 'step-&-jump' and this should be considered the norm.

The arm movements in the galley are "out" at the sides as in the shuffles and "down-&-foward" as in the 'step-&-jump' following the shuffles in a figure. So the arm movements are the same as they are in the corresponding part of figures which do not have the galley. Traditionally a galley with turn is called a "galley-out" because the direction of the turn is "out", that is away from the centre of the set. In turning out the dancer always galleyed with the leg most suitable for the direction of the turn, on the left going anticlockwise etc.

#### THE SET DANCES

The first dance given can be practiced<sup>s</sup> with the following chorus and the figures already described, although it would not be complete.

#### CUCKOO'S NEST

CHORUS - All 6 dancers face down, away from the music. The bottom pair, Nos 5 & 6 only, dance 4 plain capers on the spot starting with the outside foot, odds with the right, evens with the left, while the other 4 stand still. In the next two bars Nos 3 & 4 repeat this in their places while the other 4 stand still. Then the tops, Nos 1 & 2, dance on their own 2