

# Morris Dances of The Welsh Border Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire

By Dave Jones

Much of the original material on this subject has now been lost. This is largely due to the disinterest shown by early collectors who considered it to be a degenerate form of the Morris. Blame must also lie squarely on the shoulders of local revival sides who had, and indeed in some cases still have, the opportunity to collect genuine material.

I have found the early form of the dance to have consisted of longways sets of up to at least twelve men. In several instances, at the time of collection, the set had shrunk to three, four or five men. We find examples of this at Brimfield (Four dancers and two musicians), and Stretton Westwood (Five dancers including musicians). It now seems clear that the number of dancers was not always relevant. Even so, all the evidence points to a primitive rather than degenerate form of the Morris.

## About the Tradition

Some of the oldest records of the Morris Dance come from the Welsh Border Counties of Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire. In 1609 a side of twelve dancers performed at Hereford Races, accompanied by four Whiffers (crowd controllers) and two musicians. Their average age was said to be 103 years. In 1652 a team from Broseley, in Shropshire, caused a disturbance at an alehouse at Nordley. In 1614 the inhabitants of Longdon (about nine miles east of Ledbury), entertained themselves with May Games, Morrises and dancing upon the Sabbath day in the Summer set aside for such purposes. A team were expected in Shrewsbury, especially at Christmas and in the Summer, sometime earlier than this.

It would seem from this and other evidence that the Morris Dance was fairly widely performed in the area, in the Seventeenth Century, at Christmas but perhaps more so in the Summer.

## The Form of the Dance

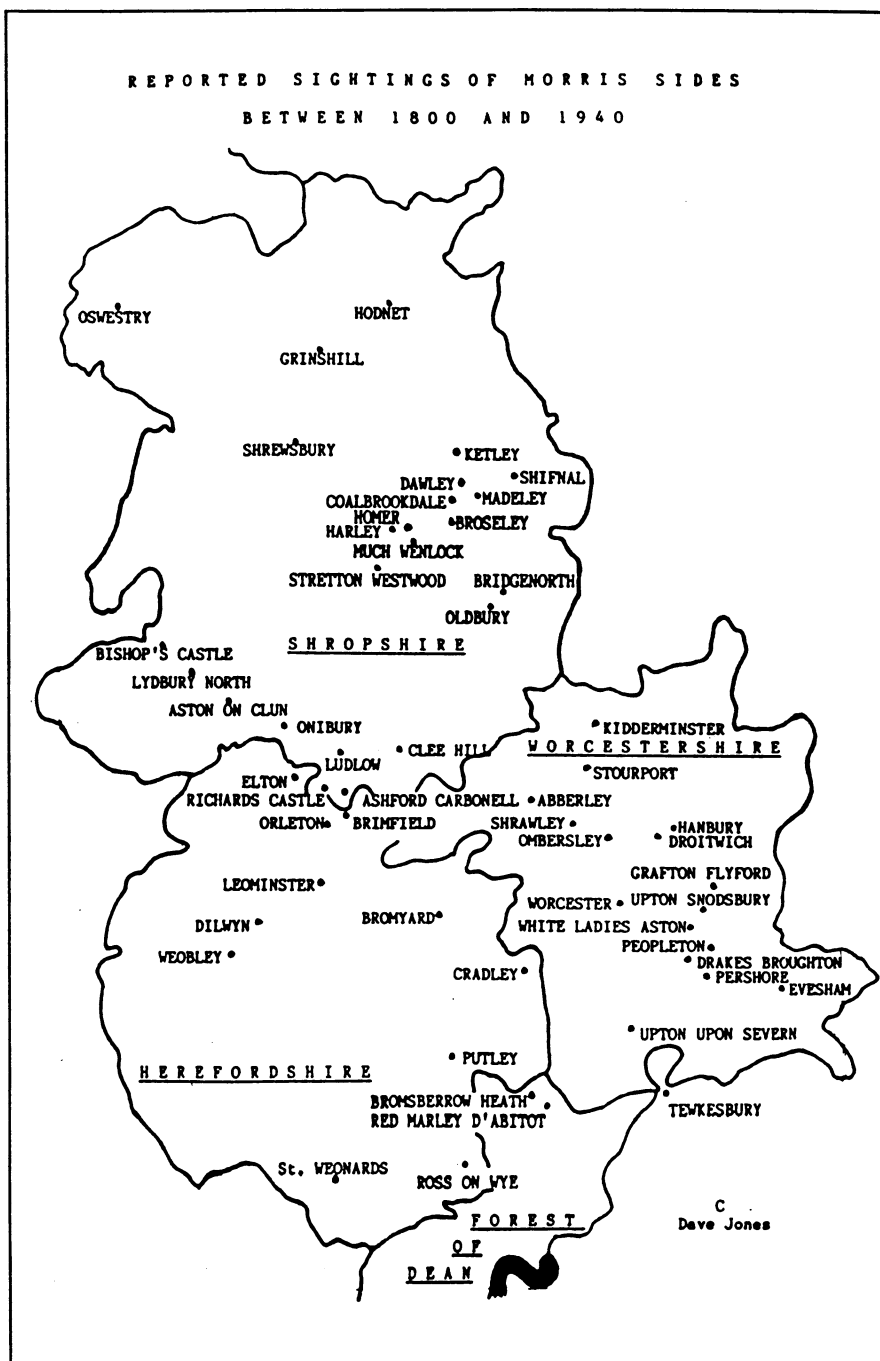
In the late nineteenth century and early nineteen hundreds, the Morris Dance, or Molly Dance or "N'fo' Joeing" as it is known to some living informants, was widespread throughout the old English areas of the three counties. It is from these sources we get the form and figures of the dance as it is performed today. Most of these records speak of the dance being performed at Christmas, and there is no-doubt that it served as a useful source of extra income for the performers at the festive season.

The dance seems to have originated as a longways set (Two rows of men), although

several collected performances, like those at Brimfield, in North Herefordshire and Bromsberrow Heath, near Ledbury were in their latter days performed in a single line.

The numbers of performers has not seemed to be of great importance. Unlike most Cotswold Morris dances with sets of six men, most Border dances were

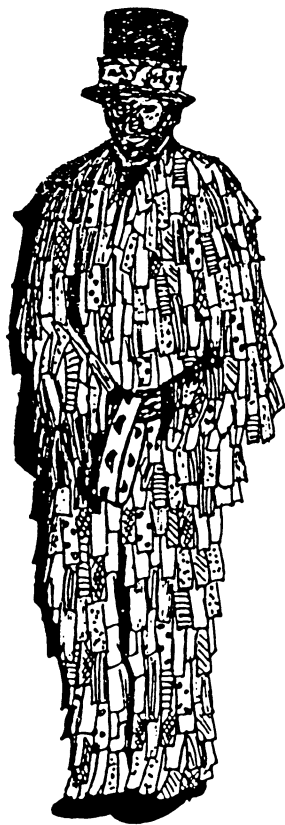
performed in longways sets with multiples of four men often totalling twelve men in all. Most of the dances are performed vigorously with short sticks, the exceptions being the handkerchief dances from Upton, Pershore and Evesham and the stepping dance from Bromsberrow Heath.



### The Dress

Apart from the Hereford side of 1609, which seemed to have had a benevolent sponsor, and one or two accounts of earlier teams, sides of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, typically wore white shirts or old clothes covered with brightly coloured or gaudy rags. In some cases it gave the effect of a tightly packed old fashioned rag mat as at Cradley, in others the ribbons were more sparsely scattered, as at Upton-upon-Severn. Sometimes sashes or rosettes were added. Headwear seems to have varied from soft hats covered with rags to top hats, bowlers or none at all.

In the early part of the twentieth century, some of the teams had discarded the traditional costume and wore fancy clothes. An interesting history of the Much Wenlock side tells us that the dancers wore tags of cloth on their ordinary clothes; later, the cloth was exchanged for paper, which was set alight by young mischievous lads. Finally tags were abandoned for fancy dress reminiscent of circus clowns, and some dressed as women. A recent informant who danced with another side at Much Wenlock reconstructed the costume illustrated, on the old pattern and was unaware of any changes to fancy dress.



### Blackiered Faces

Many of the sides wore bells, and a common feature was the black face. A once more common theory for this was that the Morris, or Moorish dancing was brought over by the Moors and hence the

dancers imitated their dark complexion; but it seems more likely that, if indeed the word is derived from Moorish at all, it was used as a descriptive term, with reference to the black faces. So the black face is likely to be a much older feature, and if compared to other forms of men's ritual dance throughout the world, it fits in with the general theme of anonymity. In view of the trouble taken to black the face, and the hands in some cases, it seems remarkable that such a feature should still survive in the Border area. The general belief seems to have been held locally that you are not a Morris Dancer unless you black your face.

### The Music

Older accounts usually refer to one or two musicians, pipe and tabor being the oldest form of accompaniment. In the nineteenth century, however, the musicians seem to have increased, and in the area, there are many references to percussion instruments of various types. All of the following instruments have been featured: fiddle, accordion, melodeon, concertina, tambourines, triangles, drums, bones, tin whistles, flute, and pipe and tabor.

The tunes used were usually claimed to be of no great importance, but several villages in the South Shropshire and North Herefordshire area and indeed one informant from Pershore all refer to versions of 'Not for Joe'. Singing often accompanied the dancing.

### Where the Dances came from

Nineteenth and twentieth century sides have been noted before the late nineteenth thirties in the towns and villages on the map. No doubt some of the performances witnessed were of teams that were not from that exact location but also it is evident that more sides existed in the area that have not been recorded.

Before the nineteenth century instances of Morris Dancing have been recorded at Shrewsbury, Eaton Constantine and Broseley in Shropshire and at Hereford, Longdon, Eldersfield and Forthampton in the south of the area. Little is recorded and it would be impossible to say anything about the form of the dance at that time.

(Reprinted from *Broadsheet*)

## BRIMFIELD MORRIS DANCE

Miss Leather and Cecil Sharp saw Mr Trill's morris men from Brimfield, between Ludlow and Leominster, Herefordshire, at Orleton on Boxing Day 1909. Mr Trill had "learned his dancing Chepstow way" but his "morris dancing" at Brimfield. As far as they knew it had always been done at Christmas, as was all the morris in the Borders. "They never missed. People said it was no Christmas without the morris men". The troupe were six, four dancers, with medolian and tambourine men. There was nothing particular about the number, sometimes they had more and sometimes less than six. When there were more, they were able to introduce Country Dance figures into the dance.

In 1909, as the photographs taken by Miss Leather show, the men wore fancy dress, has their faces blacked with white painted patches, but had no bells or handkerchiefs, only short thick sticks. These were six to eight inches long and one and a half inches diameter. The dancers had box hats and the musician a large hat with feathers. The men said that they remembered when the dancers wore smock frocks, breeches, white stockings and gaiters with soft felt hats - "Jim Crow" hats after the style of the clerical hat of the time. They used to have a separate fool whose tunic and trousers were made of any gaudy stuff.

The melodian player had no fixed music for the dance, polkas were preferred but sometimes schottiches played rather slow. They used to have a fiddler, Tom Payne, but he had played since 1895 for the side at Richards Castle, two miles to the west. The dancing stopped at Brimfield with WWI.

The dance that Sharp saw was similar to the Four Handed Reel, except that when the dancers faced they did not "step" but clashed their sticks together.

**Set** : four men in a line, facing in pairs, 1 > < 2 3 > < 4.

**Steps** : simple, but suggest use step-hops throughout without any jumps

**NAPPING** : 2 and 3 hold their stick in both hands, resting their hands on the midriff, and keeping the stick steady during the tapping. 1 and 4 strike these stationary sticks from side to side as in "single stick" for eight bars in rhythm with the music. That is, in general hitting from right to left on the first beat of each bar and from left to right on the middle beat, but phrasing it overall according to the particular tune played. All step-hop (4/2 step), marking time during the "napping".

**FIGURE EIGHT** : alternately between nappings, 1 and 4 dance a figure eight not a key or chain, around 2 and 3, who remain in their place marking time. 1 starts by passing his partner by the right and 4 by the left, and 1 passes before 4 in going between 2 and 3, so that both 1 and 4 follow the same track. All call "Ho!" as they start the figure eight and use plain steps (4/1 step) or step-hops (4/2 step) taking eight bars to complete the move.

Instead of the figure eight the following can be interpreted as also having been used, although the mss is not clear that they are truly distinct moves.

1. "Swing in Pairs" : usual clockwise direction, either with right arm round partners waist, facing opposite directions and waving free hand, or facing partner and using a "cross-hands" hold.

2. "Setting" to partner to right and left for eight bars. Presumably more elaborate "steps" could be used and this would make it more compatible with the character of the rest of the dance.

3. "Link Arms", first right and then left, taking four bars each way.

4. Dr Cawte was told - Right and left hands across, ie a "star", eight (sic) bars each way. This is best started by 2 and 3 taking a pace to their left away from the middle of the set and 1 and 4 taking a pace towards the middle of the set to allow an immediate joining of right hands in the centre.

**SUGGESTED ORDER :**

Nap / Figure 8 / Nap / Set /

Nap / Figure 8 / Nap / Arming /

Nap / Figure 8 / Nap / Hands Across /

Nap / Figure 8 / Nap / Swing.

A personal suggestion is to use the arming, hand across or swing to change places with one's partner so as to share being on the receiving end!

With more dancers available the dance becomes quite different in character. Mr Griffiths told Dr Cawte in 1957 that they lined up in a longways set and the leader called out the figures. He especially remembered a "rounds".

**Sources :**

1. E M Leather "The Folk Lore of Herefordshire", p. 130. 1912.
2. C Sharp Mss Folk Words No. 2191, Folk Dance Vol 1 p.95,  
Field Note Book 1910 no. 1
3. E C Cawte "Morris Dance in Herefordshire, Shropshire and  
Worcestershire"  
Journal EFDSS Vol 9 No. 4 p. 197 Dec 1963. Reprint No. 13

## A MORRIS AT MALVERN

A R Williams wrote to the EFDSS describing a performance of the morris at Malvern many years ago. A little short of technical description it evokes the impact of the dancing. The dancers has learnt from older men for use in bad winters or in weather when they could not work. They wore heavy boots, breeches, thick grey stockings or gaiters. Most had a second waistcoat on top with sleeves instead of a jacket, of knitted brightly coloured wools, stripped flannel or moleskin, woolen wrappers round their neck. Some had hard hats, others slouched felt. Two or three had short drab tailed coats. Round their ankles, knees, wrists and hats they wore bands of coloured ribbons with strings of bells around ankles and legs. The short sticks had ribbons on the middle.

1. Walk (strut with feet liftd high) in circle.
2. With sudden change of tune they ran nimbly round in a circle. The tune changed again, regular intervals being emphasised by a loud aforsando. At these burts of melody the dancers leapt into the air. The tune quicken again. Hopping lightly from one foot to the other the dancers twirled round as they leaped, waving their staves. Suddenly concertina and dancing stopped with a final loud chord and a crash of the little bells and staves on staves. The men stood still for a moment as if petrified, their sticks held above their heads.
3. In two lines, pairs facing. Raised their staves and held them resting arch-like - slow wailing tune - men slowly clashed their sticks together, stooped, dibbed at the ground, clashed them together, then leaped into the air so that their bells rang their utmost. They shuffled a little to the side with a twisting heel and toe motion and repeated the slow clashing in the air and the dibbing and knocking together of sticks at their feet. The movements were all slow except the leap and the final clash, but very precise and determined, thorough and entirely rhythmical. After several repetitions of these strenuous motions the men suddenly relaxed.
4. A lively jigging measure. Dancers formed up into two rings, one inside the other, facing opposite ways. For a minute or more they danced round so, one ring keeping the outside all the while. At a quickening of the tune, they zig-zagged each man alternately passing in and out before the next one. As the did so they skipped lightly turning out the toes and knees with a fling much like a hornpipe. The staves were flourished in the air, thrown from one hand to the other and occasionally tapped together most often irregularly but at intervals with a simultaneous crash and stamp of the feet. Like the previous dances this o ne ended with a jerk as though music and energy were cut off at one clash.
5. In two lines. Danced forward with quick springing movements accompanied by plentiful flexions of the hands and arms and legs and feet. Passing each other the dancers danced forward till they were back to back several yards apart. At a louder chord from the concertina they all spun round in the toes, danced toward each other and passed again, repeating this half a dozen times with a light click of the staves in passing. Marked by only a slight acceleration of tune, the dance changed so that the men were together in pairs, prancing round each others, a pair keeping together as partners. This

## Malvern

dance seemed to allow for considerable variation in each couple's performance as they hopped and skipped, turned and twined and twisted and twirled, joined hands or arms in different positions, loosed again, tapped staves together, danced back to back or side by side and executed a whole galaxy of fancy steps within the bounds set by the tune of the music.

6. Two lines - no music. Men stood shoulder to shoulder. Setting their faces sternly they marched towards the opposite line of men. The march was made with the greatest dignity and hauteur, every muscle strained, feet were rigid, chins out, hands held up, chest arched, left fists clenched in front and staves grasped in a tight grip before the faces. At this step the knees were raised high, the toes pointed and the feet put down firmly. Then almost touching, the two ranks of men stood facing staring each one to his vis-a-vis with a threatening scowl. They clashed their staves together once, hard and loud and in perfect unity, gave one heavy stamp with the right foot, then assuming a disdainful expression of countenance retreated in perfect order but not turning using a peculiar rear-kicking step. Three times this proud and fierce set of minatory movements were gone through, each half dozen men moving in perfect accord as one body.

7. After this display of masculine bellicosity, the twelve young fellows threw down their staves on a heap and danced round them. The accompanist played a lively jig as fast as he could and the dancers went round in a ring with endless variety of individual motions. They threw their bodies and arms and legs into all manner of postures joining together in twos, threes or fours and separating again, excuting as many fancy steps as their wit and ingenuity could devise.

Transcribed by R L Dommett

## MUCH WENLOCK

There are a number of interesting dances for 6 or 8 dancers in circulation generically called "Much Wenlock" but with little evidence of being based on collected material. The dance collected by Maud Karpeles in 1937 and seen again in 1949 was very simple.

- Source** : collected by Maud Karpeles from Baden Minton, a miner, then aged 37 on 30.3.1937, when Mr Minton, as the melodian player, came to the Raven Hotel in the evening with 3 dancers, two stick men and a tambourinist, to show the dance.
- Music** : various tunes, including jigs. The band consisted of melodian, bones, triangle and tambourine, depending on numbers available.
- Sticks** : stick 14" long and 4" in circumference, not decorated.
- History** : The dance came from Homer a mile away in the 1880's. The old team last came out before WWI and Mr Minton danced with them. He revived the dancing in 1926 involving workers from the limestone quarries where he used to work. They used to come out first on Christmas Eve and dance from 6pm till midnight, then again on Boxing Day, and sometimes every day afterwards until the New Year. They believed the dance was to celebrate the birth of Christ. Dr Cawte met George Walters on 29.5.57 who joined the side in 1917 and Nick Rowlands on 29/30.5.57 who joined in 1897. These dancers originally wore tags of cloth on their ordinary clothes, then later the tags were of paper and finally they went to fancy dress with top hats because the boys used to set the paper tags alight.
- Costume** : All blacked their faces and hands, and no one wore bells. They wore any fancy dress, such as that of an Italian clown, King Jester, and Sambo the Black. Some dancers dressed as women, which idea Mr Minton said he had introduced. There is a photograph of the team in the Shrewsbury Chronical of Friday 5th April 1935 under the headline "Wenlock Tells the World".
- Set** : The dance could be performed by from 5 to 8 dancers. There were always two "standards", a bones and a melodian player, who did not dance.
- When 8 in troupe : there were 4 stick dancers and 2 tambourine players who danced in a set of 6.
- When 7 in troupe : there were 2 stick dancers and 2 tambourine players who danced, and a triangle player who did not dance.
- When 6 in troupe : there was no triangle player.
- When 5 in troupe : there were 2 stick dancers and triangle player who did not dance, but no tambourine player.

Thus the set for the dance was either,

T	S	S		T	S		S
(top)			(bottom) or (top)			(bottom) or (top)	(bottom)
T	S	S		T	S		S

- Bars 1/4** : Partners cross over, passing left shoulders, and take a half turn to the right to face back.
- Bars 5/8** : Partners cross back, passing left shoulders to places, and then arm once around with the left arms linked, to end in place.