

## THE COLLECTED BORDER MORRIS

This paper was originally prepared for the ROOTS OF BORDER MORRIS CONFERENCE organised by the Morris Federation at West Malvern on 29th February 1992. The author substituted for Dave Jones who had died not long before the meeting. The objective of the vufoil presentation was to cover some of the earlier historical background to the recovery of the traditional dances and to briefly describe the dances and offer some personal insights.

### WHERE ARE THE WRITTEN RESOURCES?

The existing material on the Border morris is neither very voluminous or accessible. The first publication of any dance was in Miss Leather's "Folklore of Herefordshire". She and others had led Cecil Sharp to some contacts, the results of which can be found in his MSS and Field Notes Books of which a microfilm of the former at least is available in the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House, London. There is a typed index that was made by Alex Helm. Most of the contacts with the tradition between the World Wars passed through Maud Karpeles, and since her death her papers have also become available on microfilm in the same library.

The Vaughan Williams Library has a small collection of its own, including some material sent to Douglas Kennedy and other staff members, which includes references to the dances at places such as Dawley and Malvern. Sadly Douglas Kennedy's earlier personal papers were destroyed by the bomb that fell on the corner of Cecil Sharp House during WWII.

Alex Helm and his colleagues made a transcription collection of ritual performance material, from which the geographic index published in the Journal of the EFDSS drew, and which is deposited in the Folk Lore Society Library at the University of London. His distribution map replaced that pioneered by Joseph Neednam in the J EFDSS in the 1930's. Of particular relevance are the extracts found in the Ordish Collection. Unfortunately I have found that Alex Helm was not quite a 100% accurate in transcriptions and identifications of material from Sharp's Field Notebooks. Dr Cawte, who was one of Helm's team, wrote the first major article on the Border Morris and this also was published in the J EFDSS, and included the results of his own investigations and some brief notations.

My own contacts with collectors and collections led to the circulation of a stencilled set of notes in the mid 1960's entitled "Other Morris". With extra material occasioned by later publications, it was collected together by Dr Tony Barrand and published in Vol 5 of "Roy Dommett's Morris Notes" by the Country Dance Society of America in 1984. My material had been copied to Dr Lionel Bacon to be the basis of the Border content of "A Handbook of Morris Dancing" published by the Morris Ring in 1974. About this time the Morris Ring produced an independent compendium of Border Morris source material with interpretations by Dave Jones, which occasioned some correspondance, most of which has been resolved in the last Morris Ring Booklet by Dave Jones which has included the results of his own more recent contacts.

Because there was some dancing in the 1930's, sometimes by children, it is still not too late to make contacts with old dancers. There has still to be

a systematic search of newspapers, local collections, especially for photographs, and of local organisation publications, for example by the WIs.

#### WHAT DID THEY COLLECT?

Although Cecil Sharp sometimes went off into the blue yonder to look for the morris, on most occasions he was following up leads provided by friends and local contacts. It must not be forgotten that Cecil Sharp was a nationally known personality who had taught music to the Royal family and had become a successful touring lecturer on the novelty and the beauty of English folk music, complete with concert level musical illustrations. Sharp saw the morris at Brimfield in fancy dress and a mixed sex team at Weobley and was introduced to traces of the morris in the Worcestershire villages. He was given the set of Morris Reels by William Kimber and finally visited Steeple Claydon after WWI. He was struck in these places by the the lack of "occasion" when compared to the best of the Cotswold tradition and thought that like the Cotswold survivors it was "degenerate" because it was not as he thought it would have been earlier, and he did not realise that the traditions would evolve to meet the needs of the times.

Maud Karpeles had accompanied Sharp since his visits to the USA during WWI and naturally followed on after his death in 1924 as the leading living authority. She adopted a charming conceit of numbering the pages of her collection following on Sharp's mss which she had typed out. She went to meet dancers or teams brought to the attention of the EFDS and later EFDSS and dealt with the correspondance about dances. Her papers and memories were full of the encounters with the apparent tail ends of the old traditions. She met a team at Much Wenlock and dancers from Worcestershire and received letters giving notations.

Miss Karpeles is best remembered now for collecting and publishing the Upton on Severn stick dance. The team had been discovered by Dr and Mrs Kenworthy Schofield and they took a party across from the Cheltenham Summer School to meet them. They must have been overawed because the side had been dancing before and after this event and could not normally have been as bad as the published J EFDSS description suggests.

Until the 1950's there were very few people interested in collecting the dance traditions, after all they had been told that they had disappeared, there were no accessible mss to know what had been found, and no published indications of where it might be profitable to look, and in the case of the west midlands no local enthusiasts to go searching. The Travelling Morrice's annual tours over the years went through most parts of England and had some success in meeting dancers in places like the Forest of Dean and at Bromsberrow Heath. But such meetings were often just accidents. Where possible such contacts were followed up by Peter Kennedy, in the late 40's and early 50's then recording on a EBC contract, and some of the material is available on his Folktracks cassettes.

Jack Hargreaves met the survivors of the Evesham dance in 1940. In later years he was in a rest home voluntarily with day releases and his odd behaviour made it difficult to get on with him. He wrote to Ralph Vaughan Williams suggesting that he should arrange the Evesham tunes. When he visited the library at Cecil Sharp House he sat and played the piano and terrorised the librarian into asking for a male staff member to sit with

them. He came one evening to the OUMM to attempt to teach the dances and after covering many pages with sketches, despite the dances being so simple, and he left them more confused than at the start!

There have been a few other brief contacts. Dr Cawte visited the dancing areas and wrote up the experiences and I met a few people who remembered dancing and of course Geoffrey Menham met the ex Much Wenlock dancers when at Stratton Westwood in August 1949. It remained for Dave Jones to meet dancers who actually remembered the complexities of the dances.

#### COLLECTOR'S PROBLEMS WITH SINGLE VISITS

The major concern with most collected dance material is that it was gathered during a single interview period. Cecil Sharp was a master at this but the examination of his mss shows that the material could be very different when the visits were well separated, as for example at Abingdon and Brackley where he first went in 1910 and then again in 1922. The simpler Border dances now appear to have had their form because the sides had few dancers at the time and when more were available the dances were almost automatically more complex. A more recent experience illustrating the difficulties occurred when the Oxford University MM went to meet some male survivors of Sam Bennett's Ilmington teams from 1906-12. The side had to interpret what they were told without knowledge of how Sam's sides did the dances, and they were showing Sharp's reconstruction of how he thought they were done as long ago as 1860. Enquiry since has also suggested that the informants may have had less to do with the morris than they claimed.

All the collecting has been in good faith, whatever the inherent weaknesses. When the OUMM competed at Llangollen they went on to tour in the Derbyshire villages. At Winster they met women who had danced the Winster dances and who assured Julian Pilling that they had one using sticks. They taught it quite clearly and it is described in Dr Bacon's book. The more recent Winster revival has uncovered a complex history of changes to their dances, but no stick dance that was ever done by the men.

My own experiences were with casual contacts that always proved difficult to exploit. A first contact never seemed to be the right moment to enquire in depth about the social background and other details that in other circumstances would be considered as prying. No one seemed to know of other survivors, which now perhaps is not surprising with the knowledge of the rate of turn over of team memberships. I tried to follow up on other people's contacts but no one I met seemed very knowledgeable. Perhaps it was my technique that was wrong!

#### THE REVIVAL OF THE BORDER DANCES

The Upton on Severn stick dance was the only "Border" dance published and that only because of its structural similarity to Cotswold dances.

I taught the mss material at the Advanced Morris Weekends at Halsway Manor in the mid to late 1960's, but I am not aware that anyone took them away to actually dance them out. I was invited to an EFDSS staff weekend to pass on the dances which were seen as a possibility for mixed team performance for which a growing need was perceived that could not be met by the Cotswold Morris, at a time when the NW dances were hardly known.

Interest picked up enough to ask me to teach the dances at a first workshop for west midland teams in Ledbury Town Hall in January 1972 and I went on to teach them at Morris Federation workshops. Later there was for me a fantastic workshop for Open Morris in the Crypt at St Martins in the Fields. David Robinson also workshopped the dances widely, but he also suggested useful extensions and interpretations. This period coincided with the first publications of articles and notations. Having found some photographs I sent a Brimfield notation to English Dance and Song. Dr Bacon drafted a section for the Evesham dances but it was excluded from his Handbook at the request of Russell Wortley who had an intention at that time of publishing it first in the then Morris Section of the English Dance and Song magazine.

Initially the dances were seen as extras to existing repertoires to be used in special circumstances or when there was need to let off some steam. The Upton dances were occasionally used as the basis from which to develop a whole tradition, when that concept became respectable.

In the mid 1970's there sparked off the modern idea of black faces, rag jackets and the showmanship, including noise and a degree of wildness not previously associated with the morris, led philosophically as much by the Kirkpatricks as anyone, even if they did not intend to set a fashion. Although many dancers were captivated and wanted to capture the unique spirit, most missed the underlying discipline which made the Shropshire Bedlams, and the Molly equivalent, The Seven Champions, able to hold their own with teams following the other English traditions.

There are now some black face sides with poorly thought through behaviour and costumes. Shouting enhances excitement but does not generate it. Their success appears to lead them to large numbers of performers and impressive street presence but without a comparable growth in dance skills. This can be seen in the Border like entries for the annual Ritual Dance Competition at the Sidmouth International Folk Arts Festival. Numbers, noise and vigour is used as a substitute for the skill required by the rules on the basis that this was the tradition. The audience cowers unless there is humour as well. But they are not putting themselves into a traditional situation but presenting themselves like a Cotswold display. I also detect a trend towards the ridiculous, self parodying as do the Seven Champions, and to arbitrary choreography like the self proclaimed "Street Dancers". Perhaps this is their reaction to an artificiality in what they do.

The vast growth of the "tradition" is the last decade or so is not the concern of this paper, although there have been major contributions from certain individuals, but the creation of dances in the "style" has enabled me to run annual all-day workshops just for fun, in which I have not had to repeat dances yet!

#### OBVIOUS GENERALITIES ABOUT THE OLDER TRADITION

The first obvious point is how different the no more than a dozen individual dances are from each other. The variety provides one springboard for developing new dances. There was a large range of costumes between the teams, even between individuals and from year to year. This suggests that it was a tradition on the cheap, and that the public had no particular expectations. The usual implement was an undecorated stick but they varied between teams from 6 to 30 inches long. The music was limited because the

dances known to a particular team were so few. They had percussion, often played rather loudly, even at the expense of helping the dancers.

Very little is known of the social background in which the morris fitted. There is a strong presumption of it having been done by people who had seasonal occupations and who were likely to be frozen out during bad winters. This would imply that the annual performance could vary a great deal. The dances do not require much preliminary practice although there is some evidence that occasionally teams worked on them for several weeks. The tours that have been mentioned vary from the odd evening out to quite long trips spread over several days. The later may not have been very frequent, we have to expect the natural exaggeration of folk retelling. The teams passed the hat for collections, even dancing along streets and knocking on the doors as they passed. The morris appears to have been enjoyed by their public but there is no indication of what were the official attitudes anywhere. That they were not revived later for national events such as Coronations and Jubilees suggests that they were thought of as begging customs and not as a part of acceptable local culture in the 20th century.

Some of the dances were passed through generations, sometimes to daughter sides at other places and occasionally surviving with children. This happened also with the "Johnny Jacks" at Salisbury, Wiltshire. No revivals have however been based in the villages in Worcestershire or Shropshire.

#### THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS MENTIONED

	F I D D L E	C O N C E R T I N A	M E L O D E O N	T I N W H I S T L E	T A M B O U R I N E	T R I A N G L E	B O N E S
ASTON ON CLUN				X	X		X
BRIMFIELD			X		X		
BROMSBERROW	X	X	X		X	X	X
DILWYN	X						
EVESHAM		X					
LEOMINSTER			X		X	X	
MUCH WENLOCK			X		X	X	X
ORLETON			X		X		X
PEOPLETON		X			X		
PERSHORE	X	X		X	X	X	X
UPTON ON SEVERN		X			X		X
WHITE LADIES ASTON		X	X		X	X	X

The number of concertina and melodian instruments in use, when compared with the Cotswold Morris in the 19th century as described by Keith Chandler, indicates the later period from which the Border Morris data has been drawn, as these instruments became cheap and readily available by the turn of the century. The percussion instruments were also those associated with the Nigger Minstrel Troupes which had been wildly popular since the middle of the 19th century and who of course blacked their faces.

#### ABOUT BLACKING UP

Has blacking up anything to do with the appearance of peoples elsewhere? The strange was always admired as well as being viewed with suspicion. Just consider the various attitudes to the Gipsies, once known as Egyptians, who first reached England only a few hundred years ago. Why do we call the characters appearing in the mummings plays Nubians, Arabs, Moors, Saracens and Turks, all dark skinned, but not black, but never have any of the other varieties of Afros, Asians or Red Indians? Negroid people had been known since the explorations of the West African coast and the start of the slave trade but they did not make it into our folk culture until the mid 19th century. The possible relationship between the decoration of the West Country hobby horse disguises and Africa has hardly been explored. On the continent, where folk performers also black up, but where the cultural experience of dark skinned people is different, black faced performers were often called Devils or Satans. One would have to explore the symbolism in medieval theatre to show if this was an English explanation as well. Blacking up was even done by Henry VIII and by later court masquers. However the early morris research group did not find blacking the face as an element mentioned in association with the morris up to a cut off date of 1700. Therefore it was different thread, now unrecognisable, in our culture at that time.

There is a common worldwide tradition of wearing face masks, both realistic and representational, which existed in the UK during the Middle Ages but was generally lost or prohibited by Tudor times, although there may have been some local survivors of animal disguises, and this behaviour is still around today in corners of Europe. Covering the face with a mask, as in the early theatre, is less for the disguise as for the chance to have a different persona for a while. As a disguise it only prevents a person previously unknown from being recognised without the mask. We forget how in the smaller world of the past everyone was known in their neighbourhood. Painting the face is a poor man's mask.

Blacking up was done by poachers, and perhaps highwaymen and smugglers, who would be out at night. It was so bad in some parts of the country in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as the Woolmer Forest, that the law accepted a blacked face as proof of intent. Hence there still is an association with being up to no good.

The Nigger Minstrel character was created in the early 19th century and was extremely popular as an entertainment for the masses in the UK from the mid-19th century to the start of WWI. It soon became a folk entertainment and replaced or followed the mummings in many places up till WWII, being at its most popular in the 1920's. The show was easy to put on, it had a simple formal structure built around individual rather than group skills, and was easily mobile. It needed a leader and end-men and used songs, solo dances

and simple skits. Without more research, it is not clear whether Minstrels were acceptable because they picked up elements of existing Christmas traditions like the morris or if the Border groups had gathered attributes from the Minstrels. There are references to the troupes singing and stepping.

Colouring the face introduced problems. When it is all over or nearly so can be quite frightening to children. Why do people find it disturbing? Clowns have patterned faces. Blacking up can also be seen as racist and some clubs have had difficulties with their local police, hence a number of non-black colour choices!

#### WHAT HAVE BEEN THE POPULAR DANCES

Within my experience in the earlier days of watching the growth of modern Border Morris, the popular collected dances were Upton on Severn, Brimfield and White Ladies Aston. Note that these were not the simpler ones once thought to be characteristic. Others became popular once a well known team showed a good interpretation of the dance, and now all of the collected dances can be seen in some form. Availability was the key, as few were confident enough to create their material from scratch, after all what was the tradition?

Of those dances composed more recently that appeared to be popular in my workshops were the various Sheepskin Hey dances, the simple Valiant Soldier (The Paradise Islanders's Uncle Ned), the clever Mr Dolly exploiting an idea (South Downs), the Seven Hand Reel (the core of Hunt the Squirrel) and the Maiden's Prayer because of its vulgar possibilities (Shropshire Bedlams). Some dances go down well in workshops because of their challenging content, such as the Morning Star, the Triumph and the Raddled Tup (all from the Shropshire Bedlams) but these are mostly too difficult for normal club use. I wonder what has been other people's experience?

#### DISCUSSION

This paper is not a history of the Border Morris tradition. There are a few place names, dancers and dates known, but few anecdotes and they can all be found in the literature, but this is of little help in understanding the why, what and wherefore of the tradition. We know very little about the Border morris and what we do have would be considered heresy evidence in a court, as there is extremely little corroborated evidence! However it is very unlikely that any collector would have tapped what we now recognise as the core and the appeal of the tradition. They were not very successful with this in traditions where the information was much greater! We must be careful when comparing across traditions that the Border Morris we have coincides with the Cotswold survivors not its heyday.

There is precious little hard evidence to show that the way the dances are presented today has any resemblance to the way it was. Probably the concept of a "show" did not exist for static audiences that lasted 15-20 minutes, although there is the Malvern description. There are not enough facts to form generalisations. Was the Border Morris ever as popular as the Cotswold Morris? The other mid winter custom the mummers could be very thick on the ground if there was enough patronage around.