

SHROPSHIRE BEDLAMs

At the Morris Federation "Border Morris - Roots and Revival Conference" at the West Malvern Village Hall on the 29th February 1992, John Kirkpatrick spoke on the origins, development and current state of the associated Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhodens Tuppenny Dish teams which danced in the modern "Border Morris" style.

He started the Bedlams in 1975 and wrote an article about them in the EFDSS Magazine in 1979 which he still supports.

John met the morris at the age of 12 in 1959 with Hammersmith Morris under Hugh Rippon who was then in his mid-20's. When he moved to Shropshire he looked for something on which to base a morris. He had seen Chingford dance their development of Upton on Severn created by Geoff Hughes. There was the Dr Cawte article in the Journal of the EFDSS defining the Welsh Border Morris in 1963 and wonderful danceable sets of tunes from local fiddlers that he had found in the Sharp Mss.

The first step was to impose a style on the generally unrelated material, for example to find a standard step. The less that dancers have to think about the mechanics of what they are doing, the better the dance and the more they can think about what really matters. This was novel thought for its time. The inspiration was Hugh Rippon who had been happy to adjust the source for the sake of the dance. To be flamboyant it was necessary to slow down the music to gain the time, eg like Chipping Campden who are open and spacious but whose dances were not available for general consumption. Bampton just got on with it, nothing pretty or pretentious. The morris does not need words, there should be a magic and mystery about it. The more that you tell beforehand, the more seems to be taken away from it. He thought that there were very few successful morris fools and his solution was that all the side is the fool and any one can fool at any time, but they do not say anything.

The sequence found was 1 hop 2 hop, 1 2 3 hop ad lib. The emphasis is a drop down and kick up behind, not at all like the Cotswold Morris, but with no traditional authority either. The bells were on a string at the knee not in bellpads so that could not shake the legs to make them ring as in the Cotswold Morris. It was also the time of the first wave of interest in English Country Music which showed how to sustain rhythm with simple melodies at slow speeds.

The costume included top hats and long feathers, no flowers, to give height. There are no badges or stickers as these are cheap and demystify what is being done. They do not wear anything that gives away what it is. The "Tattered" jackets used a folk skill and made interesting movements possible. The blacking covers the face and the neck down to the collar and the backs of the hands. Being a little frightening is part of it all. They have a rule never to take their hats off because it detracts from what they are doing. The blue denim jeans and white pumos or trainers provide a modern bottom to a traditional top. They never appear in public in half dress as this then leaves them guessing. There are bells on the jacket arms.

The rest position is with the stick on the shoulder but plenty of

uncoordinated waving is encouraged. They do it all at "full tilt" with nothing polite about the sticking.

The two sides developed in parallel. It was an early decision for the men to have the sticks dances and the women to have the handkerchiefs. It was surprising to him that few womens sides had followed Martha Rhodens style.

In the early days they had some dances in common and two versions of the same dance. The processional was worked up to be fancied in pairs and it allows of much improvisation. Steeple Claydon was one of the first dances done and to the local "Old Molly Oxford" tune and quickly became the final dance and is the only one now for as many as are available. Brimfield was the first dance in two versions. The men did it with sticks. The women used a 6/8 tune and introduced two balance steps, a "heel-&-toe" (with the heel out first) and a "balance-&-kick" turning clockwise. They called it the "Three Handed Reel" even though it was for four dancers by analogy with another traditional dance.

Sheepskins was developed using the sheepskin hey and figures loosely adapted from the Leominster dance. The hey was done around three people rather than hats. So it became "Three Jolly Black Sheepskins" for the men who made it slower and took 24 bars for the hey and "Three Jolly Sheepskins" for the women who took it faster, 16 bars for the hey. They used the tune "All A Siden" from a local song book which introduced the phrase Martha Rhoden Tuppenny Dish and the tune title has become the dance's name.

The men did the Upton on Severn stick dance and invented some words to "Brighton Camp" which led to the dance being called "Half a Farthing Candle". It was written for six dancers but can now be done for ten. Most dances have a verse to sing and the men often write another. The Three-Tops figure lead to ideas for rotating the sets and a Three Reel was developed with this feature and called "Speed the Plough". Bromsberrow Heath was developed with its particular exaggerated Brimfield like sticking using the tune "Rickett's Hornpipe" and it was called "Maiden's Prayer" after a remark from one of the team. Leaning back for 16 bars is quite a strain, so is standing there while the other dancer beats the shit out of the stick.

The dances are not derived from pagan or primitive times but they try to get at the pagan and primitive side of human nature, the uncivilised part of all of us. The morris is almost socially acceptable, because one can get your local morris to express these feelings for you.

"Mad Moll of the Cheshire Hunt" was inspired by the Headington Morris Reels. "The Big Ship" from Brimfield and the "Blue Eyed Stranger" from White Ladies Aston. The Evesham Stick dance sticking developed from the composed Bledington Black Joke sticking bringing in the concept of tapping with a neighbour, which is now exploited in several dances. Pershore was danced to a version of the "Staffordshire Hornpipe" now called "Toddly Hill" (not sure). The women used "Bonnets So Blue" for its handkerchief dance. The women developed versions of what were at that time acceptable dances for women such as Abram, Bluff King Hal, Hindley, and the Ilmington dance "Lively Jig". The men did the Ilmington "Buffoon" but added to it. After trying simulated smacks and backside kneeling it was found that it did not have the desired effect, it looked pathetic, one should not pretend, now they actually do the

slapping etc.

Following the visit to Sidmouth in 1977 John received a letter from Roy Dommett including other exploitable dance bits. The Oldbury U-hey figure was worked into a dance to "Morning Star" and the Peopleton "Pop Goes the Weasel" was developed into "Three Penny Halfpenny Treacle" using a made up tune "Tuppenny Rice". They dropped the Three Hand Reel and developed a version for five with a 4/4 tune. This became part of a growing interest in dances for odd numbers. There is a dance for nine in a square where all but the centre dancer does something different in each repeat. The Figure Eight movement reminded of the crossings in motor cycle displays so it was called the "Triumph" to the tune "Shreds and Patches". It was the only dance that was done to a single step throughout. A seven in line dance was done to "Hunt the Squirrel" and a five in a Cross dance to "Getting Up Stairs" with its hey up the middle and the outsides going round. Both were local tunes from Sharp's collection. A dance for nine women was done called "Churning Butter" and a dance for four to a version of "Greensleeves" from Herefordshire called "Green and Yellow Handkerchief". "Boyne Water" was used for "Last Night with Archie" and this introduced the idea of taps on the women's soles and heels for the effect. More recent have been "Old Towler Eightsome Reel" and "Over the Moon" a square for eight.

All the teams have contributed ideas, words etc. "Beating the Oak" had napping with either hand. "There's No Doubt About It" was a circle dance for 10 dancers. As Sue has not danced regularly for 2 or 3 years some of the women make up dances. Creation is part of the life of morris.

It all feels very organic to him still. He still has ideas for dances but there is no rush as there is still a lot of material to get on top of.

"Each team makes up its own atmosphere and energy."

Notes taken by R L Dommett
Video was made by Sue Swift
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PERSHORE "NOT FOR JOES"

There were several dances, to different tunes, with a stick, sometimes a stick and a handkerchief, and very occasionally two handkerchiefs. Neither the form of sticking or the choice of figures was fixed.

Source : Dave Jones book "The Roots of Welsh Border Morris".
Steps : Hop step with free foot swung across to be in front of other.
Stick : 18 inch long by 1½ inch diameter.
Music : For BLACK BOY used "Not For Joe", for MONKEY COCKED HIS TAIL UP used "Keel Row" also used "John Peel" and two others.
Set : 8 dancers in two rows of 4. Dances start with sticking.

STICKING

Strike Sticks : first one line then the other hits, one handed, right to left and left to right (two or four bars each turn).

Double Batting : hit tips right to left and butts left to right one handed.

Clapping : one side hits while other side hold stick still in both hands.

Always dance and sing at the same time as sticking.

FIGURES

1. "Circles" : half rounds either way, sticking at half way and at end.
2. Set rotates as a whole while sticking.
3. One side dance across set and circle partner 3 times and retire to place.
4. "Longing Shank" : No 7 goes up outside his side of set, turns in at the top and goes down the centre to No 5's original place. The rest have moved into the centre to meet (Suggest half gip - right shoulders) and retire backwards to be one place round clockwise (Suggest Nos 1&8 do a 180° turn when in line). (Suggest repeat four times to reverse set)
5. "Hands Round" : in 2's or 3's (Suggest add ninth person such as musician at top to make 3 stars of 3).
6. "Cross Diagonals" : 8 goes to be in front of 1, 2 in front of 7, 6 in front of 3, 4 in front of 5. Path is in front of the others, in that order. It is not a hey. Repeat or other side do it. (Suggest the latter to get set back to starting place after fig 4)
7. "Long Cross Over".
8. "Bicycle Chain" : progressive reel from top.
9. "Dance Across" : shunt like movement 1 to 4, 4 to 5, 5 to 3, 3 to 7 etc
10. "Whole rounds" : at the end of the dance.

Other figures remembered. (but not recommended).

A. In fours, diagonals change and back in turn.

B. "Back to Back".

There were other figures not remembered, but they all appear to be simple.

STYLE AND SPEED

While these tunes are all in regular use to accompany dancing, they are not necessarily played here exactly as we would in performance. All the dances of The Bedlams are essentially done at the same very slow speed, in 4/4 time. Martha Rhoden's dance more quickly, and have a few danced in 6/8. To avoid tortuous monotony, different speeds, instruments and keys are used to present the tunes in a more acceptable format.

from 5 Mill Street, Aston on Clun, Craven Arms, Shropshire SY7 8EN.

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MORRIS JOHN

Just why is John Kirkpatrick proud to be a Morris dancer? Ex-Morris person Colin Irwin hears all.

Morris dancing, eh? Come on now, *no sniggering!* Burning questions of our time; why is it that whenever any body mentions morris, everyone titters and makes embarrassed gurgling noises... and yet they cheer and clap like lunatics when confronted by a good morris team outside the pub on a Sunday lunchtime. Such are the mysteries of life.

John Kirkpatrick doesn't understand it either and if anyone should, then it is he. John is currently celebrating 30 years as a morris dancer, man and boy. It was his first love, and while he's done a few other things on the way - like become one of the finest squeezebox players in Christendom, an outstanding singer, a notable songwriter and Richard Thompson band stalwart - it remains his most consuming passion.

"It's the most exhilarating thing I could ever imagine. I'd say it's given me more pleasure than anything I've ever done..."

Blimey! He means it as well. So you really had better stop that sniggering.

"It's a very powerful, magical thing with a tangible electric atmosphere. People who do it a lot get whipped up into this frenzy and it does create very high feelings. When everything's going right you can really fly - it's sensational!

"See, you have to really work hard physically and mentally to overcome all the learning stuff. And once you've got over all the thinking about what you have to do and you just get right on and do it, then it's a bit like meditation with the constant repetition and chanting. It switches off your brain and you start operating on a different level. You don't dance around worrying about the mortgage or whether you've cancelled the milk... it's an enormously liberating thing, it's very powerful..."

So why do people deride it and take the piss out of it all the time? Why is there such a stigma about morris?

"I don't know. There's a stigma about almost any form of folk music. I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said 'All English folk music is either bad or Irish'. People get embarrassed about it. Maybe it's the stiff upper lip thing about English people... they tend to be very restrained and undemonstrative in large areas of their lives and because folk music is a very emotional thing quite often, English people can tend to be embarrassed about it.

"There's also this thing about English people knowing their place - they are not used to expecting anything, or deserving anything. It's very frustrating being English!"

Some people feel it's very unnatural for a load of blokes to be leaping around waving hankies in the air with bells on their ankles...

"Well, it's very difficult for a man in England to admit to doing dancing of any kind. If you admit to being a ballet dancer people pass you on the other side of the street. It's this butch image you must have all the time. Yet when you see morris dancing being done well it's such a sturdy, masculine thing. It's incredibly sexy. You do get some teams that mince around a bit, you know, the old Morris Ring type of clubs who don't have much imagination and just churn it out, but good morris is very sexy and powerful."

It all started for John Kirkpatrick when he was a mere lad of 12 years old. He used to sing in a local church choir, and a country dance club was affiliated to it. John didn't fancy country dancing ("well, at that age I didn't want to hold girls' hands") and to get out of it he went along to its offshoot - the Hammersmith Morris Men - instead.

"The teacher was Hugh Rippon who was full of missionary zeal. He got me playing as well. He stuck a melodeon in my hand and said 'learn to play that'. I couldn't have asked for a better teacher - he wasn't afraid to bend the rules a bit and it was all very exciting. A complete explosion happened in my life. I tried to find out everything I could about it - I went to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library every spare second I could and I remained with Hammersmith Morris men for 12 or 13 years until I left London."

It beggars wonderment to consider the general attitude towards morris in those days. If, in these times of so-called enlightenment the very thought of morris dancing inspires guffaws, it makes you wonder what on earth it all inspired in the early '60s.

"Actually, this was at the beginning of a kind of re-thinking of morris things. When I first started doing it there were lots of terribly well-spoken chaps in sports jackets. It was all done just the way Cecil Sharp said it was done - they believed that the way he noted it down 80 years ago was the only way it should be done. And we all used to go to those Morris Ring weekends. Dreadful things. There weren't too many women's teams around then, I can tell you. Now there's as many women dancing as men.

"People now realise it's a living tradition. Cecil Sharp himself said he took those he considered to be the best dancers in the team and only noted the way they did it and not the others. He also said that once you've mastered

it correctly you can use your discretion... but people forget that side of his teaching."

It's an important point. Morris controversies are legendary. To dance the Cotswold way or not. To allow ladies to dance the morris or not. To wear hats or not. Blood has been spilled over such matters and there was almost a civil war in the Oxfordshire village of Bampton (one of morris dancing's most revered centres) over the way the morris should be performed.

John K. laughs wryly when asked about the Bampton splits and other life-and-death matters. "Yes, it does inspire high passions... it's like in *Gulliver's Travels* they had a war over which end to open an egg."

An advocate of a modernistic approach to morris himself, he nevertheless adheres to certain principles. He doesn't, for example, like the idea of teams dancing without hats (because hats were always an integral part of individual anonymity within a team). Equally, while he's enthusiastic about the upsurge of women's teams, he's against the idea of the mixed morris teams which are beginning to emerge. Yet he laughs like a drain at the old habit of teams slavishly copying the steps of their forefathers to create a replica of a certain tradition.

His approach became focussed firmly when he finally left Hammersmith morris and moved to Wolverhampton with his wife, Sue Harris. He joined the local team, but felt uncomfortable with them without knowing why. When they moved to Shropshire some time after, the same thing happened. After being asked by a local teacher to show some kids how to dance, he decided the only solution to his dilemma about finding a suitable team to dance with was to form his own. And so began the Shropshire Bedlams - now acknowledged as one of the finest dance teams in the land.

"One thing I always felt was that a lot of dancing was done too quickly. If you dance too fast you can lose a lot of the power. I wanted to

The Shropshire Bedlams



Photo: Brian Shuel