

## EAST ANGLIAN MOLLY

This has to be seen as two traditions, the old Cambridgeshire style and the new of the Seven Champions. Neither used sticks or wore bells, nor normally carried handkerchiefs..

The dancing used to centre on two opportunities,

1 Plough Monday : The team could consist of ploughmen dressed as Molly Dancers, led by a Lord and a Lady, who was a man, perhaps also with a plough. It was said that it took two good women to dress a Molly Dancer (but only one bad one to undress him?) and a good deal of time would be taken up the evening before going out in dressing up. The team would perform during the day and then dance in the evening in the pubs in their ordinary clothes without their costumes and, as desired, including women in the set, treating the dances as social dances. Only men did the Molly within living memory.

2 The Village Feast : The pubs would open up the bars for dancing. Perhaps it would be for the Benefit Club and the club night consisted of a supper and dance, but it was quite different from the Molly centred occasion. The "Feast Dances" would be the same in form but not necessarily done in the same spirit as for the Molly, particularly as they were then danced mixed.

The Molly was once widespread through inland East Anglia although few traces of the dances have been recovered. Sharp saw the dancing near Littleport by Ely. Six men wearing white shirts, ribbons, sashes and box hats, danced a "set" jig. Some account of the Cambridgeshire Molly dances were first published by Needham and Peck in 1933. They wrote of the dancing around Cambridge and Ely as separate groups. Near Cambridge at Girton, Histon and Comberton the team was six dancers, one of whom was a Bessy or Molly, plus a musician and several cadgers. They would carry handkerchiefs and wear a form of wide baldrick with many rosettes.

At Girton the dances were *College Hornpipe, Birds a Building, Smash the Window, Double Change Sides, Gypsies in the Wood* and *Soldiers Joy*. Around Ely the best known was at Little Downham, because it was the longest lived, where the dancers dressed in ribbons and flower decorated hats. There was usually only four dancers in the final years so they danced couple dances, including tangos. They claimed to have had country dance figures and a four hand reel. At Haddenham it was said that broom stem dancing was done by the plough party and that elsewhere near Ely four and six hand reels were danced.

Russell Wortley and Cyril Papworth have published on the Camberton dances. Papworth in "*Polka Round*" taught a broom dance derived from members of his own family and the Feast Dances, *Birds a Building, College Hornpipe, Cross Hands Polka* or *Special Molly, Gypsies in the Wood, Six Hand Reel, Up the Middle and Down the Sides*, and *We Wont Go Home Till Morning*. He gave a consistent style for the dancing using a so called "Cambridge Polka", a 1 2 3 hop which is three small hops and a lift, bringing the free knee fairly high in front, but being light on the ground. A booklet "*...for a bit of sport'...*" by Richard Humphries summarised much of the known information, but also suggested that Sam Bennett's *Lively Jig* was obtained from a local man who had come from Little Snoring near Fakenham in Norfolk.

The first attempts by outsiders to present the old dances in their villages in the old style was not well received, as they were about the least spectacular dances that can be offered. Perhaps the approach used was wrong as the successors have been successful. There has been a marked regional interest in East Anglia in the tradition, and many teams can be seen in January at Whittlesey Straw Bear and some locally on Plough Monday tours.

The Seven Champions are as authentic and lovable as treacle mines. These are widespread in folk lore, although every place believes it is unique, and the stories are most likely to have been inspired by finding underground tar pits rather than molasses! The team is all about style and discipline, at its best more like a music hall act rather than an amateur road show. They have gone for heavy boots and a stamping step, slow deliberate stepping and non social dance interpretations of common country dance basics such as the swing. Starting from collected dances, their repertoire has developed in so many ways and they are very successful on the Festival and Day-of-Dance circuits.

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## EAST ANGLIAN MOLLY

The Molly Dance is the mid winter seasonal dance of Cambridgeshire and the neighbouring areas. It can be thought of existing now as two performing traditions, the old rural Cambridgeshire style based on simple longways social dances and the new approach commonly associated with the Seven Champions. Neither are seen as using sticks, wearing bells, or normally carrying handkerchiefs. The older collected dances are few, coming from a limited area and for a very limited time, when the seasonal custom was in terminal decline.

### 1 WHEN

The older traditional dancing used to centre on two performance opportunities which no longer exist.

A **Plough Monday** : the first Monday after January 6th. This was Epiphany or the Twelfth Day of Christmas and the **climax** of the mid-winter courtly celebrations until the end of the Stuart Age, and which became Old Christmas Day as remembered in more modern times since the major change of the calendar. The Monday was the end of the workers' mid-winter holiday. Plough Sunday with its blessing of the plough is a modern creation.

The team could consist of several ploughmen kitted out as Molly dancers, led by a better dressed "Lord" and a "Lady" who was a cross-dressing man, perhaps also with a simple plough, although this was often taken round by a separate gang. A good deal of time would be taken up during the evening before going out in preparation. It was said that it took two good women to dress a Molly Dancer, one to hold and one to sow, *[but perhaps only one wicked one to undress him!]*. The gang would perform during the day and then dance again in the evenings in the pubs when out of costume, but treating the same dances as social dances by including women in the sets. Only men went on the Molly Outings within living memory to the 1920's, as would be expected for it to be acceptable to society in those times. No references to practicing the dances are known.

B **The Village Feast** : The pubs would open up the bars for dancing. Perhaps it would be for the Benefit Club and the club night could consist of a supper and dance for all. But it was quite different from the Molly centred occasion. The "Feast dances" would be the same in form but not done in the same spirit as for the Molly, again particularly because they were then danced mixed. Dancers would pay per dance, perhaps as much as 2d.

### 2 WHERE

The Molly Festival was once widespread throughout inland East Anglia, over both Cambridgeshire and into the neighbouring counties, although few traces of the dances have been recovered. Cecil Sharp himself saw the dancing near Littleport by Ely. Six men wearing white shirts, ribbons, sashes and box hats, danced what is recorded only as a "set" jig. Some account of the Cambridgeshire Molly dances were first published by Drs Needham and Peck in 1933. They wrote of the dancing around Cambridge and Ely as two separate groups of traditions. Near Cambridge at Girton, Histon and Comberton, the desired team was six dancers, although sometimes eight, one of whom was a Bessy, Betty or Molly, plus a musician and several cadgers. They might carry handkerchiefs and wore a form of wide baldrick or sash decorated with many rosettes. Also some would wear a

little decoration tied around the leg below the knees, if it had a few bells on it was sometimes called a "ruggles". The teams would have a walking tour through fenland villages or into Cambridge.

The late Russell Wortley has been by far the most industrious enquirer, and has recorded evidence of dancing in many villages, although this has not yet been analysed and published in terms of the eras of their occurrence. His papers are now in the safe keeping of the Centre for English Cultural Tradition at Sheffield. Other accessible East Anglian material exists in the Alex Helm collection in the Folk Lore Society Library. The distribution of sightings is given in the Helm article in the *J of the EFDSS*.

### 3 WHAT

At Girton the dances were *Birds a Building, Colledge Hornpipe, Double Change Sides, Gypsies in the Wood, Richard's Riddle* and *Soldier's Joy*. Around Ely the best known group now was that at Little Downham, because it was the longest lived, where the dancers dressed in ribbons and flower decorated hats. In the final years there were usually only four dancers so they danced as couples, reputedly mostly to the one tune, although there was a mention of tangos. They claimed usually to have had normal country dance figures, as elsewhere, and a four hand reel, although none of this was ever seen by any collectors. Other forms of dance existed. At Haddenham it was said that broom-stem dancing was done by the plough party, and that elsewhere, near Ely, four and six hand reels were performed. There never was any indication of an association with local mummers.

Russell Wortley and Cyril Papworth had published on some of the Comberton dances in *English Dance and Song*. Then Cyril printed his booklet *Polka Round*. In this he also explained the final version of a broom dance previously published learnt over a number of years from members of his own family. Mostly it was about the Feast Dances, *Birds a Building, Colledge Hornpipe, Cross Hands Polka, Double Change Sides, Gypsies in the Wood, Six Hand Reel* and *Up the Middle and Down the Sides*, a version of *We Wont Go Home Till Morning*, explained as danced as social dances. They had much in common with the published Girton dances. He gave a consistent style for the dancing using a so called "Cambridge Polka", a 1 2 3 near-hop, which is three small steps and a lift, not a true hop, bringing the free knee fairly high in front, but being light on the ground. A later booklet "...for a bit of sport!..." by Richard Humphries summarised much of the known information on places, happenings, dances and music, but it also suggested that Sam Bennett's *Lively Jig* was obtained from an East Anglian gamekeeper who might have come from near Little Snoring by Fakenham in Norfolk. A very commonly known dance in Norfolk was *The Long Dance*, a social dance that survived when most other longways dances had been long forgotten, and this is very much in keeping with the known Molly dances. There are widespread references to "jigging", in terms of "a set jig", "simply jigged about", "merely jigged about" and "just jumping about", all suggesting simple step dancing or at least a significant proportion of it within the dances seen.

The available information is too small to be sure of what was not done in the past and there is a danger of developing too narrow a definition of what is in character. However what is needed for today has to be acceptable for current performance. It is necessary to analyse for possibilities and for why the past and the present may be different.

## 4 TODAY

The first attempt by outsiders to present the old dances in their villages in the old style was not particularly well received according to some of the villagers interviewed later. They can be made to appear about the least spectacular of the English traditional dances, perhaps contrasting poorly with the mature Cotswold dancing given before. Perhaps the approach then was wrong as their successors have now been successful. There has been a marked regional interest in the wider East Anglia in the local tradition and many teams are active either as purely Molly sides or with the Molly as their mid winter expression. Also many are mixed sex following the modern trend. Whittlesey Straw Bear, now on a Saturday in early January, brings many of the groups together, and several have their own Plough Monday tours. A video is available of the Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival that was made in 1993 by VPR Video of Spalding.

A strong and inspirational influence in the current revival of interest has been the impressive Seven Champions from Kent formed in 1977. They are as authentic and as lovable as their oft quoted treacle mines. These are widespread in folklore, although every place appears to believe itself unique, and the stories are most likely to have been inspired by the finding of underground tar pits rather than molasses! This team has been about style and discipline, at its best more akin to a music hall act than an amateur road show. They have opted for heavy boots and a slow deliberate stamping step and non social dance interpretations of the common country dance basics normally associated with that which had been collected. Starting from the collected dances, their repertoire has gradually expanded and developed in many ways as has been explored by George Frampton in a 1988 conference paper. They are the stars of two videos, one from the Sidmouth based JKL Video Services that recorded *An Hour with the Seven Champions* in August 1992 and their own *Pan-Galactic Guide to Molly Dancing*. This video is a pseudo history not a set of dances. They have been for some time very successful on the Festival and Day-of-Dance circuits. Their existence and success has widened the dance options available. Both Cyril Papworth and The Seven Champions have found the need to enhance the simple available notations.

It is not unusual to find that published notations were intended as basic or "core" descriptions with the elaboration and extensions left to the performers. A similar assumption is consistent with the tradition.

## 5 VIDEO SUPPLIERS

J.K.L. Video Film Services, 58/60 Temple Street, Sidmouth, Devon, EX10 9BQ  
Tel : (0395) 516233

VPR Video (R.Harrison), 33 Park Avenue, Spalding, Lincs. PE11 1QX.  
Tel : (0775) 710564

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Important as the first public recognition of a regional form.
- Cambridge                **Russell Wortley**  
Morris                    Cambridge Morris Men, Cambridge 1980 and 1983  
  
A memorial collection of articles by Russell Wortley including.
- R Wortley                **Molly Dancing in South West Cambridgeshire**  
C Papworth               *English Dance and Song*, Summer 1978  
  
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- E Porter                 **Folklore of East Anglia**  
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A typical reference with anecdotal information.
- Ann-Marie Hulme        **Social Dancing in a Norfolk Village, 1990-1945**  
P Clifton                 *Folk Music Journal* 1978
- C Papworth               **Polka Round - Folk Dances of Cambridgeshire**  
Published by himself at Cambridge in 1984.  
  
Used as a basis for his many workshops and orientated to the social dance format.
- R Humphries             **...for a bit of sport!...**  
Published by himself at Linton, Cambridgeshire, in 1984.  
  
He mistakenly tries analogies to other regional traditions ignoring the origins of the dances in the social dance.
- G Frampton              **Repertoire? - or Repartee? The Seven Champions Molly Dancers**  
*Lore & Language* 6/2 1987.
- Not consulted,  
Ethel Rudkin             **Lincolnshire Folklore**  
Beltons, Gainsborough, 1936, EP Pub, Wakefield, 1973
- John Glyde               **Folklore and Customs of Norfolk**  
1872, extracts EP Pub, Wakefield, 1973
- Enid Potter              **Cambridgeshire Customs & Folklore**  
Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969

4 **FOUR PAIR TRIPLE MINOR** - only three pairs at any one turn

①	②	③	④
2 4 6 -	- 2 6 8	4 6 8 -	- 4 8 2
1 3 5 -	- 1 5 7	3 5 7 -	- 3 7 1
⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧
6 8 2 -	- 6 2 4	8 2 4 -	- 8 4 6
5 7 1 -	- 5 1 3	7 1 3 -	- 7 3 5

5 **FOUR PAIR WHOLE SET or TRIPLE MINOR** - with a slip to the bottom

①	②	③	④
2 4 6 8	4 6 8 2	6 8 2 4	8 2 4 6
1 3 5 7	3 5 7 1	5 7 1 3	7 1 3 5

6 **THREE PAIR DUPE MINOR**

①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
2 4 -	- 2 6	4 6 -	- 4 2	6 2 -	- 6 4
1 3 -	- 1 5	3 5 -	- 3 1	5 1 -	- 5 3

7 **THREE PAIR TRIPLE MINOR and WHOLE SET**

①	②	③
2 4 6	4 6 2	6 2 4
1 3 5	3 5 1	5 1 3

There are also non progressive dance constructions,

8 **FIGURES plus CHORUSES** - Cotswold like in structure,9 **JUST a sequence of FIGURES** - North West in structure.

Finally There are the **THREE, FOUR and SIX** hand reels that have been mentioned which may or may not have a changing order element.

## 4 GYPSIES IN THE WOOD - duple minor

Tune : *Smash the Window*

A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 hands three (circle or star) round and back.

A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 hands three round and back.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back.

B2 First two pairs swing and change.

[Suggest combine circle one way (hands round) and star the other (hands across)]

Other dances mentioned were *Richard's Riddle* and *Soldiers Joy*. The latter tune was used by Papworth for his version of the dance **Double Change Sides**

## COMBERTON

Source : *Wortley and Papworth, English Dance & Song Summer 1978*

Music : Fiddle or concertina.

Steps : Walk and change-hop-step. Strength of the hop and the general vigour depended on the dance. Upper arm hold was suggested for the swings.

Set : Six or eight dancers.

Kit : The first pair are Lord and Lady and are more elaborately dressed, the Lady as a woman in a skirt. The rest wore four inch wide sash over left shoulder, a waistband, broad arm ribbons and narrow hat ribbons of mixed colours. The rosettes were stitched to the broad ribbons. All were worn over an ordinary jacket, [because of the season].

Extras : Two cadgers or collectors using ladles.

In duple-minor sets the first two pairs alone start and the rest are brought in progressively. In triple-minor sets the top pair swing to the bottom of the set at the end of the time through that leaves only one pair below.

## 1 COLLEGE HORNPIPE - triple minor

Tune : Version of *Sailor's Hornpipe* or *Jacks the Lad*.

A1/2 Circle hands six to left and back, eight change-hop-steps each way.

B1 Double cast to the left in pairs and back to places, waving a handkerchief in their free hand.

B2 First two pairs swing and change.

[Does not say if danced half way round or one and half in the swing for a progression. Assume that the direction for travel in the swing is the conventional line of direction in a ballroom of anticlockwise.]



## 2 CROSS HAND POLKA - duple minor

Tune : Collected tune *Cross Hand Polka*.A1 Nos 1 and 4 half turn by right hand and half turn back with the left.

A2 Nos 2 and 3 repeat.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back with a walk step.

B2 First two pairs swing and change.

## 3 SIX HAND REEL - triple minor

Tune : *Girl I Left Behind Me*

A1/2 Nos 1 and 2 cross over and cast down outside of set, cross again below third pair and return to places. Four bars or polkas for each side.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back with walk step.

B2 First two pairs swing and change.

## 4 SPECIAL MOLLY DANCE - whole set.

A large handkerchief or ribbon is held between each pair [by the right hands].

A1 Opposites go forward and back and cross over - ("dodging") first going to the right into a line right shoulder to right shoulder, retring a little, and then passing left shoulder to left shoulder to actually cross over. [Handkerchief held up so as not to throttle the partner!]

A2 Repeat with the same shoulders to cross back to place.

B Nos 1 and 2 down middle under the arches, followed in turn by the second, third and fourth pairs and all coming up the outside ("edging") in turn to their original places, like a sword dance "roll".

[With practice the roll could be done twice through]

C Nos 1 and 2 swing down the middle to the bottom of the set, [under the ribbons].

**COMBERTON**

**Source :** *"Polka Round" by Cyril Papworth*, published by himself, Cambridge 1984

**Step :** A walking step is used for the lead down and back. The Lead Down is done holding right hands only, turning inward at halfway to face up, and leading back with crossed hands, ending in a swing hold position, holding opposite's arms just above the elbows, and all facing up and down along the centreline of the set. Perhaps a call of "set" or "sit" by the leader to indicate a pause (or a bob down) before the next figure. This was thought by Cyril to be important for displays.

"Cambridge Polka" - three short steps and a lift, raising the knee of the free leg in front to mid-thigh height. Start with the right foot, as he always did!

**Set :** Eight dancers in four pairs

In the original form the dances were slow, with the movements repeated and some dancers standing inactive.

1 **BIRDS A BUILDING** - duple minor, wider than usual set.

Tune : *Flowers of Edinburgh*

A1/2 First and second pairs move round four sides of a square, passing partner right shoulder and giving right hands shoulder high, then pass next **in the same way** to place, 4 bars per change, one to meet, two to pass giving right hands, one for quarter turn at the corner. All turns are the shortest ie "easiest" way.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places and "set" as described, ie bob down.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

2 **COLLEGE HORNPIPE** - triple-minor, perhaps only six dancers.

Tune : *Jacks the Lad or Sailors Hornpipe*

A1 Six hand circle left for eight bars with polka step nearly twice round.

A2 Circle back to the right for eight bars.

B1 All face up, odds place arm round even's waist, evens put hand on odds shoulder. Double cast to left, dance to bottom and up middle to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress.

3 **CROSS HAND POLKA** - duple minor

Tune : Own collected tune *The Cross Hand Polka*

A1 Nos 1 and 4 whole turn once round with the right hand and then all the way back with the left.

A2 Nos 2 and 3 repeat.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

4 **DOUBLE CHANGE SIDES** - duple minorTune : *Speed the Plough.*

A1 Nos 2 and 4 take inside hands shoulder high and lead forward and back with a walking step between Nos 1 and 3 who stand still : Nos 1 and 3 then lead forward and back between Nos 2 and 4 who stand still.

A2 Repeat A1.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

[A more active alternative is to dance A1 and A2 throughout with the polka step when moving]

5 **GYPSIES IN THE WOOD** - duple minorTune : *Smash the Window.*

A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 circle four bars clockwise and four bars anticlockwise, once round each way.

A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 circle four bars anticlockwise, picking up the new dancer moving in the direction already travelling, and four bars clockwise.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round one and a half times to progress.

6 **SIX HAND REEL** - triple-minor, or three pair setTune : *Brighton Camp* or *Girl I Left Behind Me.*

A1/B1 Nos 1 and 2 cross over, passing right shoulders, and dance all the way around next two pairs, passing right shoulders again below third pair and then coming back to places.

A2 Nos 1 and 2 lead down the middle and back to places.

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress.

The dance is less tedious if A1/B1 is compressed into eight bars. In triple minors pairs work up set as seconds and third pairs alternately. In three pair sets, top pair goes through second place to bottom

7 **SIX HAND REEL** - a more active alternative.

A1 Nos 1 and 2 cross over and dance around the set and finish up in the second pair's place, Nos 3 and 4 polka sideways to the top during the last two bars.

A2 Nos 3 and 4 repeat and end in their starting place.

B1 Nos 3 and 4, followed by Nos 1 and 2, lead down and back.

B2 First two pairs dance round once and a half to progress, while the third pair cross over and dance all around the other two rotating pairs but themselves ending in the middle pair place, between the other two pairs.