

# **Tweaking tradition: Cotswold morris workshop Sidmouth 1996**

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**Workshop notes by Simon Pipe**

An increasing number of respected commentators are urging nowadays that the morris should move forward - perhaps even re-invent itself. At the same time, they caution against "wild excess" and speak of the need to stay faithful to what has gone before, and draw strength and stability from the core tradition.

Creating new dances, even new styles, is one approach to the challenge of giving the morris new appeal. But where does that leave the "traditional" material? Many dancers have great reverence for the material collected by Sharp, but much of it has limited interest for an audience. Traditional dances are often repetitive and frankly, boring. One answer to this might be to "tweak" them, expanding on the original concept but exorcising some of the repetition. The aim of this workshop is to see how that might be done.

The workshop will begin with a group session, examining a "problem" dance or two, and then participants will be asked to break off into teams to tackle individual dances. It won't be necessary to be familiar with any particular traditional style - if necessary, the dance can be translated to another style.

The idea is not to have one or two people in each set dictating to everyone else. It's suggested that each group should start by discussing problems and solutions. Initially, all ideas should be given an uncritical hearing, so that everyone can feel they are contributing. Ideas breed ideas, and one person's half-formed notion may inspire someone else's. Trying ideas out will suggest more still.

There won't be time to produce complete dances or complete solutions, though time can be saved by not dancing figures such as foot-up, if they're as-standard, when trying ideas out.

There may be more than one solution - try as many as possible. It is very easy to dismiss an idea that sounds unworkable, but which would actually be extremely effective. The person who dreamed up the sword-fight in *The Three Musketeers* may well have had a hard time persuading anyone it could work.

Try not to get bogged down in minor detail. If tackling a conventional stick dance, which has the same sticking in every chorus, repeated every time after a half hey, it's only necessary to have a broad idea of how the sticking can be varied (ideally while retaining some essence of the original every time); you may also need to spend time tackling the problem of having an over-worked half-hey.

It's frequently said that an idea needs to be simple if it is to work and endure. One way to achieve an impression of complexity without over-taxing dancers' ability to learn is to use familiar rules - for instance, always using slows or figures in the same order, even if they're changed in some other respect. A standard column dance might be transformed if the slows are danced, in at least one chorus, on the move - so use a familiar pattern, such as the hey.

One justification for keeping simple dances is that they're useful for beginners. In reality, few beginners dancing out in public are so raw that they cannot manage a sticking routine that develops with every chorus. You can always have two versions of a dance - simple for teaching, interesting for performance.

Your favourite side-step-and-half-hey dance may well look and feel lovely, but that's no reason why it can't be exposed to scrutiny. You can always decide to leave it as it is - you can't change every dance at once.

## **Some thoughts on repertoire ..... for after the workshop**

Don't simply look at individual dances - you need to see them in the context of your overall repertoire (meaning those dances you perform regularly, rather than those which you could perform, but don't). It may be worth doing an appraisal of your repertoire, so you can identify which dances most need work, and what the potential is even for dances that are quite good. This can be a fairly casual assessment - or if you think team mates will read it, a written analysis. This would be especially valuable for teams that perform only a few dances - when every one counts.

Some teams may perform forty different dances in several traditions; others only ten, in one style. But if those ten are full of variety, and exploit the tradition to the full, which team has the richer repertoire?

You may think Ascott/Fieldtown Glorishears works just fine the way you do it, and you may be right (though it's probably better for the dancer than the audience - it has a lot of repetition). However, you could try dispensing with conventional figures, so that the set never need form the familiar six-person rectangle. There's a practical reason for doing this - it's easier to make the walk-round circular if it starts out as a circle. But there's another reason - if every other dance in your repertoire is based on the rectangle, then having one or more dances that avoid the rectangle altogether creates interest, for audience and dancers (to say nothing of the poor musician).

Of course, conventional half-gyps won't work in a round set (though unconventional ones might). But heys *can* work, and of course there's always rounds.

Ah, you say, but Glorishears is already very distinctive. True enough. But if you don't want to make Glorishears a circular dance, you're still left with a valid idea - so apply it to another dance. Most corner dances would look much "cleaner" and less cramped performed in a circular set.

There's not much point creating a dance if it's going to be very similar to one you already perform. You won't be able to do both in the same stand. In many of the core traditions, nearly all stick dances are identical except for some very minor variation in the sticking. Give us variety! If two dances are largely alike, "tweak" one - or drop it.

Are there gaps in your repertoire? If so, perhaps you could create or adapt a dance to fill the gap. So you need to think about the elements that are possible within the traditional framework, and note those you're lacking, and those you have in abundance (now there's an idea - a dance with buns).

Consider the various "shapes" in the traditional morris: columns; corners; dancing in a circle; dances with heys; possibly dances in a line; those in which one dances across the set; dances with cast-outs; dances that finish with everyone in the centre. And of course, a Morris On and a Morris Off. Which are you missing?

Then consider the steps - you may have several dances that feature slows, but do you ever have all six dancers performing slows together? The impression created is quite different. How about a heel-and-toe dance? And so what if your tradition doesn't actually have a heel-and-toe step? Invent one! If you want to be authentic, seek inspiration from associated styles (eg for Ascott, look to Fieldtown). Twizzles? Leapfrogs? Some steps are versatile - in several traditions, an Upright Caper can be danced in its simple form, or with a leapfrog, with a twizzle, even with a galley. How about chest-bounces? What other potential does your chosen tradition offer in this way, as yet unrealised? Exploring such possibilities is an entirely logical way to extend the range within a style - it's *almost* natural evolution.

Your repertoire may contain plenty of rounds and lots of slows - but do you ever dance the slows in the rounds?

Look also at sticking, if you do it. If you don't do a stick-throwing dance, there's a gap yearning to be filled. What about overhead sticking, as in Adderbury Lads a-Bunchum? It could be argued that Cotswold Morris is crying out for new things to do with sticks. Why not a stick-twirling chorus? It doesn't have to be taken seriously. Hand-clapping ought to be a winner - the "other" dance the audience can recognise, after "the stick dance" and "the hankie dance". Yet hand-clapping isn't popular, despite scope for humour, spectacle (high-kicking under-the-leg stuff), or even contrived violence (face slapping). A simple but entertaining clapping dance can bring a bonus for the audience - you can get the kids up to do it with you.

You could virtually invent a dance simply by drawing up a list of elements you'd like in your repertoire, but lack. A hand-clapping corner dance with twizzles? Get the tune, and you're half-way there.

### **It's all a matter of opinion .....**

You may be inspired by some of things written here - but your team mates may not. There ought to be something in these notes to cause any team to view its repertoire critically, as all performers should do. But if you want to push for changes - especially if you're not a foreman - do so gently. You may have to overcome suspicion from people who think you want to "ruin" the tradition, and people who have little awareness or concern when it comes to considering the audience, or the need for the morris to evolve ..... for whom tradition (whatever they perceive that to mean) is justification enough for what they do. It's important to be sensitive to those feelings.