

ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE MORRIS

From the writings of noted authorities such as Sharp, Kennedy and Alford to the many morris handouts there is a similarity, with much speculation and a grasping at straws, and explanations developed from the minimum of fact. There is nothing wrong with speculation based on hints or general principles to provide a range of hypotheses to guide the search for the roots, but none of this should masquerade as the reality without some support, and even with credible arguments the real limitations of the evidence should be emphasised. We must be cautious in claiming too much and being found to be wrong later. The worst scholarship is that which parades some probably perceptive insights as "almost certain", without putting the effort into finding any evidence that others can explore or develop. The postulators' usual major problem is the "thousand year gap", the lack of evidence to link any records with the periods where the authors want to place the origins. A proper method is to trace it back through time, however this approach often narrows the options, because of the problem of recognising influences that have waned. It is believed that any activity carried on in a social context owes something to many threads out of the past, so that some forward tracing from potential contributors to discover if they actually did is also an acceptable practice. Like humour, which today has acquired characteristics from all the popular forms of the past.

Because the English are both insular and unused to admitting to outside influences, and the folk world is often unprepared to accept an early downward diffusion of ideas and techniques through society, I have watched for evidence that these processes could have been significant. The process shows up in fashionable social dance which has always been international, from the earliest records to today, because of people's mobility, and it is the relics, locally remembered and stylistically interpreted that form the corpus of the recovered folk dance. The seasonal, dressing up and so called "ritual" dance has drawn on the social dance where the form allows it, and it is in the use and exploitation of implements where the two are separated. The modern international folk festivals bring foreign teams together and, even though the tendency is to show off the peculiar and spectacular, the similarities are too great for coincidence. Where it is possible to see or read of a local European tradition in depth the visual matches to English traditions are even greater.

The issue is when and perhaps how did the early dance concepts diffuse? Fashion, armies, specialist industries, immigrants and tribal movements such as the gypsies are possibilities. There had long been a belief in the literature for a Spanish Connection and 80 years of the morris revival has failed to substantiate an alternative. Eleanor of Aquitaine, John of Gaunt and the Black Prince with the English King's Angevin empire which persisted in Gascony till 1453, Catherine of Aragon and their entourages might have provided the cultural links but there is no hard evidence and the dates seem difficult to reconcile as primary causes²⁻⁴. The morris did appear at the court of Henry VII, and he was exiled in Brittany and Paris where the French companies of fools and lords of misrule were active, and this is a possibility, even though the earliest English references are from 1458 and 1466. Various European countries claim reference to what they interpret as morris or an associated activity before the English sources appear. However there is no examination in English of the early European references or of the etymology of the European words for the equivalent activities to consult.

If the surviving European dances are compared with the choreography of the English dances then the relationship is far less convincing. A common mistake made is in assuming that all the elements of a "tradition" are of similar age and also that descriptive words still mean the same thing today. For example "Bedlam" meant mad and now by association with assumed typical behaviour in a madhouse means noise. The early collators ⁵ found that the dance forms when mentioned were not those to which we are now accustomed. The first expansions of the data base reported by John Forrest ⁶ and Mike Heaney did not change the picture. The dances seemed to include the mediæval chain dances, the circular dance around a central figure who was often a woman, and the processional done two by two. The latter was so common that a later pamphlet ⁷ c. 1659 compared Quakers with Morris Dancers as they went out on preaching tours in twos. It is not easy to distinguish professional performances in the records. The Earl of Berkeley's players, according to the Gloucestershire Notes and Queries, travelled the country between their regular commitments able to produce plays, bringing in the may, triumphal entries etc and of course the morris.

Why is there little pre-16th century? Even if potential evidence was generated uniformly with time, it is the nature of things that less of the older material would be around. Then what is recorded depends on what is of interest, but remember that social conditions from the Black Death (1349) till the War of the Roses (ended 1485) were different from earlier times and different again after the dissolution of the monasteries 1536-40. But it is as likely that it was not there to be noticed. How does one find negative evidence? It is partly by knowing for what one should be looking and partly by showing that the type of evidence did not occur in other fields either.

Any hypothesis has to be consistent with the facts. The advent of the "Annals of Early Morris" ⁸ data base is a massive step forward. It provides about 800 instances of some sort of reference to morris. By its sheer comprehensiveness there has to be careful consideration of the class and source of the individual data when using the data in the tables to draw global conclusions. For example Kemp's Nine Days Wonder warrants 12 entries and many need to be ignored as appropriate in an analysis.

How realistic is it as a statistical sample of the references that once existed? Mentions of the morris are rare. The material is only glimpses and snatches. There are many known gaps in the official record series from which the total notice taken can be estimated, assuming that the known references are representative in numbers and dates, by a simple scaling dependent on each source. These are mostly indications of actual performances. Books and ballad sheets were registered but they are more difficult to exploit, however they usually refer to a generalised performance not to an actual one. There is a problem in extrapolating the geographical distribution unless there are records from places in the UK that have not been examined yet, perhaps for example through being stored abroad but this has been faced and some highly important conclusions have been drawn by Forrest and Heaney which could be used as guidelines. The Annals do not indicate where they have searched, only where they have been successful. Whatever there is still to uncover it can not alter the picture of the morris that has emerged. However the morris can not be divorced from its setting and there is much that needs to be understood about its relationship to the Games and to early drama. This has been partly addressed by others when independently interpreting the Robin Hood material ⁹.

WHAT WAS IT CALLED?

The Annals classified the sources under four types :

- a. morris : all words that end in the sound /s/ : moreys, mores, morrice, morisse
 b. moorish : all words that end in the sound /sh/: moorish, morish.
 c. moresque : all words that end in the sound /sk/ without a following vowel sound : morisk, moruske.
 d. morisco : all words that end in the sound /sk/ with a distinct following vowel sound : moresco, moresca.

DECADE SPAN

Name Class	a	b	c	d	a'	b'	c'	d'	E
1501-10	13		4		12		4		1
1511-20	12	1	3		10	1	3		12
1521-30	29		1	1	28			1	
1531-40	10				10				
1541-50	8	1		1	7	1		1	
1551-60	23			1	21				
1561-70	23	4		1	21	4		1	1
1571-80	35				29				3
1581-90	51	4	2	1	36	4		1	3
1591-1600	78	4	1	4	36	4		2	24
1601-10	67	1	1	3	44	1	1	1	18
1611-20	62	2	3	6	39		1		18
1621-30	44	1		5	28	1		2	12
1631-40	47	1	1	4	27			2	14
1641-50	16				4				5
1651-60	36	1	1	4	22		1		3
1661-70	34	1		17	28	1			3
1671-80	22	3	1	4	13				7
1681-90	15	1	1	1	9				2
1691-1700	7	1	1	2	4			1	1
1701-10	15	1		5	10			1	1
1711-20	22				11				8
1721-30	28	1	1	3	17				1
1731-40	18	1		1	15	1			
1741-50	13	1	1		13	1	1		
TOTALS	728	30	22	64	494	19	11	13	127

First the references are dominated (728:116) [type (a) : types (b+c+d)] by the words like "morris" and not by those that have often been seized upon for origin explanations. It is significant to consider the type of source that uses the more exotic names. From about 1600 many of the usages were found in dictionaries which can be assumed to preserve the less usual words and also to quote from previous publications. An analysis of the actual phraseology of the dictionary entries might be interesting. Incidentally a 1811 "Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue" defines "morris off" politely as "get you gone" making it the equivalent of rather more vulgar modern expressions! If the use of the words in dictionaries (29:37), music titles (17:18), plays, masques and entertainments (66:12), poems, madrigals and ballads (46:3), prose humour (31:2), polemics and sermons (27:1), and dance books (7:0) which show an awareness of the morris by educated people but whose particular usage may be a conceit derived from their intellectual background and are not reports of what performers called their activity, then the totals are those of the right hand side of the table (494:43). The totals are not consistent because of multiple data entries, or because they are like Kemp's.

A closer look at the "moorish" family shows that half of the 21 non dictionary usages are from two places, Plymouth (4) 1567-70 and St Columb Major (6) 1588-97. There is reference to jackets and bells but not to dance type or music. Not unexpectedly of the 30 dictionary citations 23 have multiple type descriptions, but none quote a specific setting, place or date of performance, or mentions the music, but 7 of the 8 that mention a dance type refer to a combative format.

Occasional usages occur throughout the period considered and do not cluster early as would be expected if the exotic names derived from a recent origin. It suggests that we search for the origin of the morris within the "morris" family of words, and see the other words at best as minor threads.

WHERE AND WHAT

The type of source varies with time and this has been used by Forrest and Heaney ¹⁰ to gain several valuable insights into the history of the morris, which are summarised in the next paragraph.

Some venues have more importance than others. Royal and noble locations are paramount at the outset (1510-40), quickly overtaken by urban (1540-1600), which in turn are usurped by village (1600-1720), with private houses beginning to make inroads as the period ends. The trends for who gives financial support are very similar going from the state, to guilds mostly in the London area, the church, local towns and villages and finally individuals and households. The key role of the church in the transformation of the official attitude to the morris is plain. From being supportive in the 16th century, there is an expansion of church legislation against dancing coinciding with the shift of dancing from urban to village settings, except in a small area of the south Midlands, so that the later shift to 'private' support appeared largely in that area. There are intimations of a classic pattern of diffusion. From 1450-1630 there was a general expansion from the London region, then there was a marked thinning over the whole area (1630-90) consequent on a period of some secular (1570-1600) and then intense church prosecution (1600-30), followed eventually by a renewed support away from London, most notably in the south Midlands. They confirm the lack of a real link between Maid Marion, the Hobby Horse and Robin Hood

An early reference¹¹ has Henry VIII showing off 'Jane the Quene' at the 1536 City of London Whitsun festivities by watching the setting of the City Watch, involving a torch-lit procession of 2000 men and hundreds of constables in scarlet cloaks, and it was claimed in later years that it included morris dancers and elaborate tableaux, but Mike Heaney has stated that this one of what has to be classified as a spurious reference.

Diffusion as a process for folk activity that requires community acceptance was seen later. Thomas Hardy recalled the Country dance form spreading into the social life at the common level in Dorset about 1840, the Fletts established the spread into the Highlands and Islands in living memory. The National Museum of Wales¹² has documented the spread of the "French Custom of Bringing in the May" into mid and north Wales. Some fashions, such as the plaited maypole, have spread very quickly, given the right circumstances.

The late concentration of the morris to the south Midlands is suggestive of the growth of the morris form there as a village enterprise. The zone free of persecution does not match any particular county or diocese. The south Midlands shires were set up by King Edward the Elder in 911-2 for the defence of the realm and although they have engendered much local loyalty more recently they were not well matched to natural or social regions. Until the dissolution of the monasteries (1536-40) the south Midlands was in the Lincoln (formerly Dorchester) diocese then Henry VIII divided it into the new bishoprics of Peterborough (including Northants) and Gloucester in 1541 and Oxford in 1542. The civil war saw the loss of church courts.

Those sources which are from entertainment, excluding reading, for example plays, poems and songs, are totaled in column E and they show a peaking into common parlance from 1590-1640, matching the apparent maximum in events, with a marked turn off with the Commonwealth and the Restoration, matching the change from records of a formal role for the morris to a popular entertainment. One difficulty in making comment based on the Annals is that there is no comparable related material readily available in a similar form¹³, for example on other dance forms or drama. Quite a few references can not be considered contemporary to an event because of the nature of the source and this makes detailed interpretation of the decadal data suspect. Forrest and Heaney analysed in 30 year spans which equals a generation. Only 77 of the total tabular entries, that is only of order 10%, mention the dance form and only 23 relate this to specific places and these are insufficient to suggest that there might have been regional differences. However it is possible to perceive a change with time.

	circle			files			combat	mixed	solo
	ring	centre	maypole	proc	2 file	1 file			
	a	b	c	d	e	f	h	g	i
1511-1547		3					1		1
1579-1629	1	2	5	5	4	1	6	8	8
1650-1690	1		4	2	6		3	7	2
1702-1736					11		3	9	1
TOTAL	2	5	9	8	21	1	13	24	12

In the time gaps there is nothing! Of course the elements recorded are those that caught the attention and there could have been multiple dances, and mixed forms, and there could have been links between the processional, two files and combat forms. Treating these as a group would suggest an origin for the later Cotswold form. However the Abbots Bromley Horn dance with its procession in pairs, circling and challenging which could look like serpentine heys and the combative forward and back and crossing, could fit many descriptions so we must beware of hindsight seeing what it wants! Interestingly nearly a third of the sources after the "set" dance appeared mention that they were mixed!

Playford first published The Dancing Master in 1651 as an answer to the prevailing condition in which many people stayed at home and were cut off from the dancing schools, and his books circulated widely in England, France and America. The characteristic form of three "Introductions" followed by a figure repeated or three unique figures has no known antecedent yet nearly 70% of the first edition, in all formations, had this structure. Also they may have been taken for granted and have been used even more frequently than the Playford volumes state explicitly. The interest is that this feature corresponds roughly to the later Cotswold Morris structure as well. There is no linking evidence except the similarity of date and the likely ubiquity of the form in the 17th century, and its persistence till the development of the Assembly rooms which took dancing into a social atmosphere away from the family and servants home environment.

ITS APPEARANCE

Over 200, a quarter of the references, quote some aspect of the dancers' costumes, but there are very few near complete descriptions. About a half mention bells and a third the coat or jacket and all the other elements are at under 10%. Bells and Coats occur mostly before 1630. Was this significant or just the effect of a greater familiarity existing so that such features could be taken for granted?

Out of 218 occurrences the following counts are found, Bells (116), Coats and Jackets (70), Hats (25), Feathers (19), Shoes (18), Handkerchiefs and Napkins (14), Ribbons (11), Shirts (10), Sashes and Scarves (10), Swords and Weapons (8), Baldricks (3), Belts (2), Sticks (1).

The lacks and absences are equally interesting. The morris was not a stick tradition? At the beginning of the 17th century only members of the landed ruling class were allowed to carry weapons and the meaner sort of people and servants were even normally excluded from serving in the militia. Incidentally do the 19th century crossed baldricks, as suggested by Douglas Kennedy, owe much to the uniforms of the army, militia and volunteer companies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries?

There is no mention at all of the blacking of dancers faces! The study of masking in other cultures and its degenerate face painting forms suggests that masks would have had a larger role in England at some time than appears evident now in our folk cultures. This needs further investigation.

There is tremendous amount of relevant background material accessible now that can put the development of the morris into its contemporary social

context, as was intended by the publication of the Annals. It was probably important that from 1620-1650 there was great financial hardship, economically amongst the most terrible in English history, that from 1641-1660 there was no effective censorship, and there was a great overturning, questioning, revaluing of everything in England. It is unrealistic to produce a detailed bibliography, but there are entry points via agrarian, economic and industry histories and I enjoyed Calder's book ¹⁴. Some very relevant background points have proved to be very difficult to research. Just how many people died in the Black Death cannot be calculated but it was probably between a quarter to a third of the population, and the impact on the structure of society is unclear, but half the clergy perished in Oxfordshire and two thirds of the villeins in the Witney manor, and it has been noted that some village populations at the first census in 1801 had only recovered to their former levels.

Technology development can give historical clues. Modern ribbon making started at the beginning of the 18th century and centred on Coventry. What were the few references to ribbons about before that time? When were small bells suitable for morris costumes first mass produced, surely they were not all hand made?

The wealth released by the dissolution of the monasteries combined with a growing shortage of building grade timber led to the "Great Rebuilding" of the 16th century in stone and brick and the rise of the County Gentry. After the Commonwealth and the Restoration, the 18th century saw a great new building ¹⁵. Where there were at the start a few big houses and manors, at the end there were a large number of prosperous houses and farms to encourage good-luck or box-seeking visiting. Some counties like Northamptonshire lost the 'parish gentry' of the 1640's due to the growth of large landed estates and this must have influenced the nature of the patronage available there for the morris. In 1705 music, morris dancing and about a 100 buckets, bowls and pans filled with wine, punch and ale accompanied the laying of the foundation stone of Blenheim Palace.

A noted characteristic of a cultural diffusion process is that it is found that there is the largest variety near the origin and the minimum of variety or complexity near the edge but it is more vigorous there, being newer. The available evidence about the content of the south Midland dance from 1860 has been analysed ¹⁶ and it is very suggestive of there having been a spread even within that morris.

Little explored as an influence is the long period of contact with the trend setting cultural leading north Europeans, the Burgundians, Dutch and Germans ¹⁷ as well as the north Italians. The peak of wool export was the mid 14th century and then it changed to the export of cloth through to the 16th century, mostly organised by the Dutch through Antwerp, who also organised the export of Spanish merino wool from the ex-moorish areas. Because of the restrictive practices of the town guilds, English cloth making had spread to the villages by 1400. The Cotswold broadcloth was much in demand on the continent by the late 15th century while it was still of high quality and much was exported undyed and undressed. The Dutch came to the fairs and set up collection depots. The wealth it brought to the Cotswolds can be seen everywhere in its buildings. It would be interesting if the guilds that later sponsored the morris were found to be associated with the northern European trade. Technology was being imported from Holland in the 17th

century, the Dutch draining the fens, and the heavy four wheeled wagon and the first stage coaches came from Holland, along with cabbages and turnips as stockfeed, the new "clovers", clover, lucerne, trefoil and rye-grass, and the best madder plants for dye. Even commercial crops came to England through Holland, such as tobacco and hops. The best 19th century morris bells that I have heard were expensive in their time and either appearing silvery or reputedly made of "Dutch Metal" which was an alloy of copper and zinc made in thin sheets to imitate gold leaf. Equally important was the establishment in England of large groups of Protestant refugees due to Catholic persecution on the continent, eg following the St Bartholomew's Day slaughter of the Huguenots in France and the war that continued against them till 1640.

New research¹⁸ in Dutch Archives suggests that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was under Dutch duress, London having been under Dutch military occupation for 18 months. There seems much still to be understood in our history!

COMMENT

By analogy with elsewhere in the world, a young man's spring celebratory dance should have existed as long as there was the time and opportunity for its performance, as showing off, boys-meets-girl and lack of money for ale are universals. We should look for the similarities within the peripheral behaviour of more modern morris men. The morris with its relationship with patronage needs large socially structured communities and without it dancing elsewhere in Europe has been inward looking and self indulgent and not geared to public show. So that people dressed up, danced and celebrated seems very reasonable, although any continuity with historical or even modern morris is problematical, the morris absorbing such elements into some new manifestation.

Cecil Sharp and his followers developed their ideas on the history of the morris in the wake of Frazer's Golden Bough¹⁹ with its massive collection of unrelated facts linked by some concept of a common human experience. The reality is much more complex and the generalisations do not stand modern examination, even though modern research suggests that all our societies might have had a common origin 200,000 years into the remote past.

Published history is all about the big things and themes. Getting at the history of ordinary people is a new phenomena with a long way to go. It is hard to visualise the past, we need more films like "Far from the Madding Crowd" to give appropriate images. In detail it was so different from today, isolation, silence, dirt, insects, monotony, as most work was solitary, was before powered machinery and before sealed surfaces, most people were close to poverty, and everything was seasonal and life itself highly dependent on a successful main harvest, without benefit of the modern understandings of the whys and wherefores or access to world wide supplies.

I have had to change my perceptions of the early morris, particularly with regard to the peak of interest from 1580-1630, and that Kemp actually was exploiting a popular activity and King James' exhorting was not just an appeal for a return to old ways. It does not provide a background for the other English Morris traditions, which must therefore be more recent, but these can be explained in terms of 19th and turn of century activity, except

yet for that in the black-face stick-based Welsh Marches Counties, but the history of blacking up, from poaching to minstrel troupes, at the popular level needs more exploration to decide where the initial impulse arose ²⁰.

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