

BEGINNERS & MORRIS BASICS WORKSHOP

The origin of this material was a workshop for Cotswold morris beginners at Sidmouth. The time available was insufficient directly to produce good dancing, but it did allow of explaining what they were trying to achieve.

To the "Experienced" Leader - If you do not work consciously on "dance" technique yourself or perhaps do not even know what this means, then you might not be well equipped to teach others who have difficulties, and you may be passing on bad practices and even creating confusion. It is therefore a potential handicap for a foreman not to have available analyses of the objectives, emphases, stresses and timings of movements, and to be entirely dependent on just "showing" what to do.

The normal club environment approach to beginners can take two or three years to develop a proficient Cotswold dancer, but better training methods based on a greater understanding could speed this up. However like in many sports, some degree of fitness and experience should be developed as well.

WHILE STANDING

Beginners - Other dance specialities expect to explain the whys and wherefores of their technique to participants, but this is not so currently in the folk dance world. The "traditional process" is claimed, but it supposes that locally there exist the good dancers on which to model. Although it can and has worked as a club policy, it is risky and it is often used as an easy option or as a cloak for inexperience or, at worst, ignorance.

Cotswold Morris is not disciplined in the same manner as the Clog Morris. Its characteristic allows greater personal expression through the dance movements. The beginner needs to be helped to develop a mix of body control (motor skills), and expression through action, and to learn the techniques of recognising and remembering movement sequences.

The first problem for a teacher is in seeing what is being taught from the beginners point of view. The training needs to have exercises that give the beginner a vocabulary of actions and words to which they can relate their attempts at the movements.

It is often forgotten by the more experienced dancer that beginners have a problem with the jargon, and with both the observation and perception of movements, so that they do not remember what they have been shown after a while without some reinforcement, say by extra description or explanation. In particular they are confused by the unspoken differences between nominally similar movements within dances, let alone those between 'traditions'. But the teaching techniques used need to avoid the risk of being bored or lost by too much talk.

We can only learn 'what-we-almost-know', therefore we must build from existing experience, learning and adding one thing at a time, trying to build up relevant movement habits, not just by saying it once, but through using sequences that can act as a continual reminder.

It is important to present visual images to learners, reinforced with words. I think that part of the general learning problem of translating the words heard into movement is due to the two halves of the brain, with their different skills, having to communicate across their boundary. Another trick of focussing attention onto the key elements came from Douglas Kennedy who always spoke of the need to present new movements both in "close-up" (detail) and in "long-shot" (overall impression).

Warning - We perceive our own movements on a different basis from how the apparently same movements look when done by others. One's own gestures are often much smaller and jerkier than we imagine. Actors on the stage theatrically exaggerate every day gestures to make them appear normal when under the undivided scrutiny of an audience. It is noticeable that people can appear physically "larger than life" when being closely followed, one is often surprised to find how small performers are "in real life". Actors are also trained to observe accurately and to replicate what they are shown when in "close-up", as on the TV or the films, but ordinary people unfortunately copy with a significantly smaller movement. A common personal experience that has occurred when teaching the Longborough high hand waves, actually a wrist movement, but often dancers move their hands to follow the motion appropriate to the handkerchiefs, showing that there is a mental image or movement analysis problem. Over a number of generations of foremen the quality of movements within a club can degrade very noticeably. It is good to work sometimes in front of a big mirror, ideally in a dance studio, but deep office or school windows can be adequate substitutes.

This note is written in the form of a workshop in which dancers try the movements as they are discussed, in order to appreciate the points being examined. Such a workshop should start by recognising that there will be potential anatomical problems, leading to aches, pains and stiffnesses, that can or may have already arisen, eg from the dancers' slight faults in physique, say because of small dimensional differences between each leg.

Feet - Walk around to get the feel of normal 'pronation', the natural inward rocking motion, as the foot rotates from heel to toe. One can tell if the movement is abnormal by examining the worn edges of heels or soles for evidence of any over-compensating action. 'Orthics', a form of shoe insert, are available commercially for the correction of anatomical faults, eg to straighten joints.

The Turn Out of the feet when standing is a part of the old style of movement, which remained fashionable for 300 years. In this sense the morris can be a museum! It can have significance - McCorquadales in the Wembley Olympics in London 1948, missed a medal in the 100 yds by less than a yard, experts said because of the distance lost by his foot turn out whilst running. Also in this 17th century style there was the swaggering swing of the leg when moving either forward or back, which action allowed room for the wearing of fancy boots with lace tops etc. The movement is still inherent in the morris backstep of several of the village traditions.

Stretching and Warm-Up - For both achieving the freedom of movement and the avoidance of injury, it is very desirable to start with a stretching and warm up activity. Not a vigorous warm up, one should still be able to talk naturally to a neighbour whilst doing it. One should also include a short

warm down at the end of a dance period to avoid subsequent stiffness, to remain feeling invigorated and not exhausted.

Beginners tend to tense all their muscles, so they exhaust easily. Their new movements are achieved by counterbalancing muscular forces, and this is not the same as a normal control of movement. We should work to avoid this tightness by "loosening up" the actions and relaxing the inessential muscles, but this requires building confidence. Such an approach produces a visible difference in the movements, which is the 'body language' by which we can recognise "experience" in a dancer.

UPS & DOWNS

Vertical Jump - Just try making one without using the major thigh muscles. The attempt demonstrates the need for an initial bend of the knees, the "plié", an action once considered so basic that it was simply called "the movement". Most of the effort and hence the velocity into a jump comes from using the big muscles in the thighs. The maximum height reached is helped by a rolling up on the toes with a full extension of the foot, as the rise comes from this roll-up plus the body's velocity that has been achieved when finally leaving contact with the ground. That part of the height gained in the air is severely limited by gravity, which pulls one down rather rapidly, so that the actual time out of contact with the ground is rather short. If the use of foot extension on the rise is deliberately limited, then it may not be being used by the dancer at the landing. The risk on landing is then that of jarring the leg joints, leading in the long term to the damage of cartilage and ligaments. The number of "g"s experienced in this can be as high as three. One can practice avoiding slapping the ground by practicing landing quietly in a short series of jumps.

The apparent achieved height is partly an illusion. An audience sees the total body/head rise and fall, including the drop while in contact with the ground before and after the jump, which will be to below the normal standing upright starting posture position. The clearance off the ground is exaggerated by the bending and lifting of the legs.

Jump - To explore the use of the arms, first swing them up together while jumping, from having the hands just behind the hips, till they are well up in front of the body and higher than the head. The opposite, of a swing down during the jump, feels quite different and less height is managed - more appropriate to a standing long jump! Incidentally this used to be a Much Wenlock Olympic (the heir to Dover's Cotswold Olympic Games at Dover's Hill, Chipping Campden) as well an early Modern Olympiad event.

What is role of the arms? After all, all control is ultimately only through contact with the ground. How does this small mass effect the amount and quality of movement? It is a dynamic effect. One major interaction comes with the swing up of the arms, the total force (reaction) onto (from) the ground is increased while the arms accelerate, and the body leaves the ground with more total momentum, ie velocity.

Once off the ground the path of the body's centre of gravity is determined. All that can be varied is the relative position of the body's parts to it. Remember also for later that half the time off the ground is spent in the

upper quarter of the trajectory (near apogee, if one is a space freak!). For achieving the maximum height, as measured by the head's rise in the jump, one must bring down (decelerate) the arms before reaching the top of the leap. The additional 'apparent' height comes from the downward shift of the overall centre of gravity relative to the head.

For the appearance of a higher jump, it can be made to appear to last longer by holding the 'pose' instead of wriggling the body and arms till the toes are touching the ground again and one is starting into the plié, a trick that can be seen to be used in the ballet. Gravity does not allow one to actually float!

There is a team problem which arises from aiming to get people of different sizes to appear to bob up and down together. It is easy for shorter people just to rise less, whereas all should rise the same. Therefore a consensus has to be found on the height to be reached while extending the foot. Shorter footed people have to work harder! A useful practice technique is to form a circle facing inwards, with each dancers arms extended sideways so that their hands are resting on their neighbours' shoulders. They can then be sensitive to relative height and timing differences as they dance together. For the convenience of making progress in a workshop the leader should mix the experience in a set but aim for groups of similar heights. They have to be told of the problem with a greater mix. The togetherness is what makes kolos and other ethnic and historical chain dances so exciting even when very simple in content.

There is a naming problem that can confuse beginners because "jump" is used variously to mean the take-off, the movement from take-off to landing and the just the landing. Often morris dance notations will refer to a "step-&-jump" meaning a jumping off of a step and then landing. If it ends "feet-together" it means landing on both feet, placed side-by-side (1st position).

Posture is important and it is visible all the time to the audience, not just while dancing. They see the implied 'body language' and it should say "eager". At rest one should be upright with a stretched not slumped neck and be balanced on the balls of the feet. Bringing the weight back onto the heels for a 'rest' introduces the problem of achieving snappy acceleration or 'drive' into the next move, because one is no longer 'poised'. The overall impression then looks slack and suggests sloppy morris.

There is the issue of the best height for heels on shoes, as yet unresolved. The optimum position for the foot is with its heel just off the ground and this is reflected in shoe design. But shoe heels reduce the flexure available at the ankle joint. In England there is commonly a difference in the choice of shoe heels between the sexes. Heels reduce the height achievable. Most European folk dancers favour a very light weight dance shoe, equivalent to those used by the Scots, with little or no heel - but one must remember that the Bluebell Girls, Can-Can dancers and hoofers like Ginger Rogers could achieve quite a lot on high heels! It is important to practice in similar shoes to those used to dance out.

A rigid torso seems characteristic of the Cotswold morris. There are traditionally few flexible movements of the body other than a twist about the near vertical with some of the 'side steps'.

Turns - To examine the significance of 'roll inertia', start with some non-travelling jumps, and try simple jumps (start with a 180° turn, to end facing the opposite way). First keep the arms down at one's sides for a few jumps, then to keep them fully extended out to the side for some more, (both are hard work, showing that the arms actually do have a role), then finally draw them in while turning, usually one finds that one overshoots! Normally arms are used quite naturally, ie without conscious effort, to control the turn and landing, including an initial wrap of the arms in the opposite sense to the turn. Such arm control to compensate for ground friction in a turn while in continual ground contact should be part of the morris man's technique for performing galleys and hooks.

Keep the body straight in a jump. Of course one must thrust up through one's centre of gravity to avoid tumbling in the air, but this does not mean sticking the stomach out or arching the back. Such body movement is ugly, and, while having no ground contact, is difficult to control, as well as being a significant contributor to injuries. Aerial contortions go with gymnastics, high diving and tumbling to music, but not with the morris!

Although small the head is a mass that significantly affects the dynamics of one's body movements. One action to avoid carefully is the drooping of it during a jump. Get someone to watch what you do. Stretching the neck up and looking forward would look much better, and is a fundamental tenet of the Alexander techniques for better health.

"Spotting" is a technique for obtaining stability in a horizontal rotation. Fix the eyes on a distant point and let the head initially lag the turn, then snap the neck round, say to the final direction if doing a 180° turn. Surprisingly, one is less likely to sway in the turn. It must be something to do with the role of the inner ear in providing an attitude reference. Conventional dance pirouettes, ie turns with foot-to-ground contact, are not part of the Cotswold morris. The equivalent turns are the galleys and hooks.

Breath - This should be 'abdominal' with an outward stomach movement, not pulled in as one breathes in, as this leads to 'stitch', because then the diaphragm is working the wrong way. The pain is actually the muscle spasms. To avoid it, it helps to take some deep breaths before starting, these also assist both poise and readiness. Actors use this technique to control their nerves before stage entries. Once a woman at a workshop concentrated so hard that she did not breathe at all during a dance, she went blue and had to be taken to a hospital for some oxygen treatment to ensure recovery!

Timing - We go back to the jump to bring more of the elements together and illustrate by trying the 'up-&-out' Longborough type arm movements. Start with the elbows bent at right angles, the upper arms almost horizontal and out at the side of the body, and with the hands out by the sides of the head at ear level. Raise the hands up, straightening the arms and opening them out during the jump, to end, on the landing, with both the arms horizontal and out to the side of the body.

Where does the beat of the music come in a jump? Certainly to just touch down on landing on the beat - but when on the take off? Surely not as one loses contact with the ground? The note of the music is of necessity of finite length as it has to be heard, the "beat" is the maximum stress

perceived at its leading edge. The maximum physical and musical effort is on the beat, but a full movement is across the beats, hence the physical and psychological appeal of dance as a form of self expression. To get the effort timed accurately there must be anticipatory preparatory effort. Jumps need preparation, they need time to accelerate the body, and, as a jump is usually longer in the air than a step, the musician often stretches the music to suit (and of course never catches up again!).

Jumps (and turns) on the move require consideration of additional technical points about the appropriate body tilts to be used. These are dynamic situations requiring a more subtle understanding of motion. A forward drive into a travelling movement comes from being off balance, thus one should land from a jump leaning into the direction in which one wants to move off.

The initial emphasis so far has been on jumping because it leads to a desired style for the 'morris stepping'.

TRAVELLING

The movement possibilities are determined by the floor surface and the Cotswold Morris follows the style of stepping that was first developed at the Renaissance. James Burke's TV series and his book "Connections" discussed the change in building style following a worsening of the average weather in the early Middle Ages and the consequential appearance of flatter floors as social life moved indoors. Before the change, the most available flat surfaces were the barn threshing floors, realistic for community social dancing as the surface has to be consolidated, but not for ritual dancing.

Unfortunately there is another naming problem as "Step" is used colloquially both for a single movement and for a sequence of them.

Step - The basic movement is a quick change from the weight on one foot to onto the other. The style was described in the earliest dancing books and was not a knee lifting like the medieval 'clod-hopping'. The knee lift that is typical of the traditional English country dancing and other seasonal dance traditions presumably developed to avoid physical contact with partners and neighbours on small crowded dance floors. Start by standing on the ball of one foot with the other in the air, about the length of the foot in front of the supporting foot. The free foot is kept about horizontal and relaxed during the movement and neither curled up ('Turkish Harem') or pointed down ('Schoolgirl Ballet'). Really it is irrelevant to practice stepping on one spot as one is seldom dancing without travelling, and then only with some special emphasis. A little thought will show that real movement sequences involving stepping usually start from jumps or otherwise having the feet together, but this introduces complication at a first teaching of the steps which can be avoided. Although it is natural to start practicing with very little lift, the early development of a reasonable amount of spring in the step is essential. It puts the meaning into the phrase 'weak-kneed'!

In the Cotswold Morris it is customary to have the musician play a 4 or 8 bar phrase as a 'Once-to-Yourself' before starting to dance. It focuses the dancers attention, captures the audience and allows the team to check and absorb the speed and rhythm. I like it long for workshops but short for public performances. Practice in a club as you intend to perform out.

6/8 Jig Time - Begin with two "steps" per bar (almost capers, which are the same action as a 'step' but with a greater lift and a more exaggerated arm movement) - also start off from standing on one foot. To keep them 'symmetrical', ie with equal effort off each foot, start by accompanying them using circular waves of both arms, at one per step, with the stress or emphasis on the upward rise or "lift". "Up" in a step or a spring takes longer than "Down" due to the directionality of the effect of gravity. The tune's rhythm is important. Compare a jig in 6/8 with a hornpipe in 4/4. There is less life in dancing the latter as the more even rhythm constrains the body rise that is possible. True polkas, as distinct from polka tunes played as hornpipes, have an irregular rhythm (they fit the clog morris polka well) and are best avoided with beginners, because they induce bad dance habits. Marches in 2/4 or 6/8 have a different feel yet again.

What is a good morris tune? It needs to be able to be played to fit the effort profile of the movement sequence, in particularly to stress the lift on the first beats, and not effort on the off-beat. Modern tunes do not lend themselves to matching this movement characteristic.

The traditions surviving into the 20th century have acquired an off-beat emphasis, with a strong movement on the weak beats (in practice this is a rhythm originally called a Schottische). Although no Ragtime or subsequent popular musical style has stuck with the morris (ignoring some individual and limited examples eg **Eclectic Morris**). It has led to the villages teaching a basic single step with a foot lift up and a kick forward style, which is not the classical stepping style recognised by Sharp that has been introduced here.

The jig rhythm encourages hops. Starting from the simple capers, put in the hops, still keeping the action symmetrical with each free foot travelling forward the same distance and the body rise being the same off of either foot. The drive is off the ball of the foot, just as for the jumps.

Look out of a window and watch the relative motion of the horizontal frame or bars against the scene as an indication of ones own body motion. There are 4 rises per bar, the first and third are larger than the second and fourth. Hence these main beats are called the "Strong" and those in between the "Weak" beats.

To get a feel of the meaning of differences between "traditions" and of the problems facing beginners, try this simple stepping with appropriately different arm movements.

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| 1. Down & Up | both arms in parallel,
in vertical plane | (Hinton) |
| 2. Alternate Arms | as in exaggerated walking | (Chipping Campden) |
| 3. Forward Flick | of both hands together | (Bampton) |
| 4. Low Circular Waves
in vertical plane | forward facing, at side,
at hip level | (Brackley) |
| 5. High Circular Waves
in vertical plane | at mid chest level | (Badby) |

Note the feeling of a "help" on the UP part of the arm movement. Thus the character of the movement as perceived by the new dancer will depend on the tradition being taught.

Arming Sequence - Do it first without stepping but simulating the body bounce. Beginners can have a problem of coordinating arm, leg and body movements new to them so there is some value in a little practice of these separately. Because of the additional problem of stepping and arming coordination, practice arm sequences alone for a while to obtain the flow, but not for too long, as they are slightly modified by the body actions when actually stepping. Note that there is an opinion that good dancers would not move their hands in front of their face as this would cover an important informative part of the image being presented to the audience.

A **Left Foot Lead** is of medieval origin. Then they danced in a linked curved line and moved first to the left and then to the right. To go with the sun was lucky, to start to windershins, as supposedly did witches, was not. The left foot lead, as with the military march, is natural because it allows a thrust off of the nominally stronger right foot to get moving smartly.

Left handed people are at a little disadvantage in the morris. Some such dancers can be slower at picking up directional calls. The major problem of course is with using the right hand for holding and manipulating sticks.

Form a set of 6 dancers, in two files of 3, numbered 1, 3, 5 (the "odds") in the left hand column, and 2, 4, 6 (the "evens") in the right, as facing "up" towards the music.

Perhaps a word is needed about the morris compass. "Up" is towards the musician who conventionally stands at the "top" end of the set which has already been defined as by dancers numbers 1 and 2. "Down" is the other way, towards the "bottom" of the set. Confusingly "Up-and-Down" are also used for arm movements. Facing one's opposite is "in" or "across the set", and turns in that direction are "inward". The contrary is "out" and the turning is "outward".

Attempt dancing something very simple but illustrative, deriving here from Chipping Campden's "Constant Billy". The following is a condensed dance description. For a better understanding of the terminology, try consulting the Morris Federation's published "Glossary of Terms".

Face one's opposite across the set for the playing of a "Once To Yourself", then in the last bar jump and turn 90° in the air to face left, odds facing up, and evens facing down. The whole set dance a complete "whole rounds" clockwise in 8 bars, ending as at the start by facing across the set, and continuing by approaching one's opposite in 4 more bars, ending the move with a jump to stand with one's feet together side by side, and facing one's opposite. Now clap hands with the opposite dance as described below, then dance past one's opposite, passing by the left shoulder. Turn to the right in the opposite's starting place to face back and approach again etc. Repeat the crossing and clapping a few times, then end the dance with the "whole rounds" figure again.