

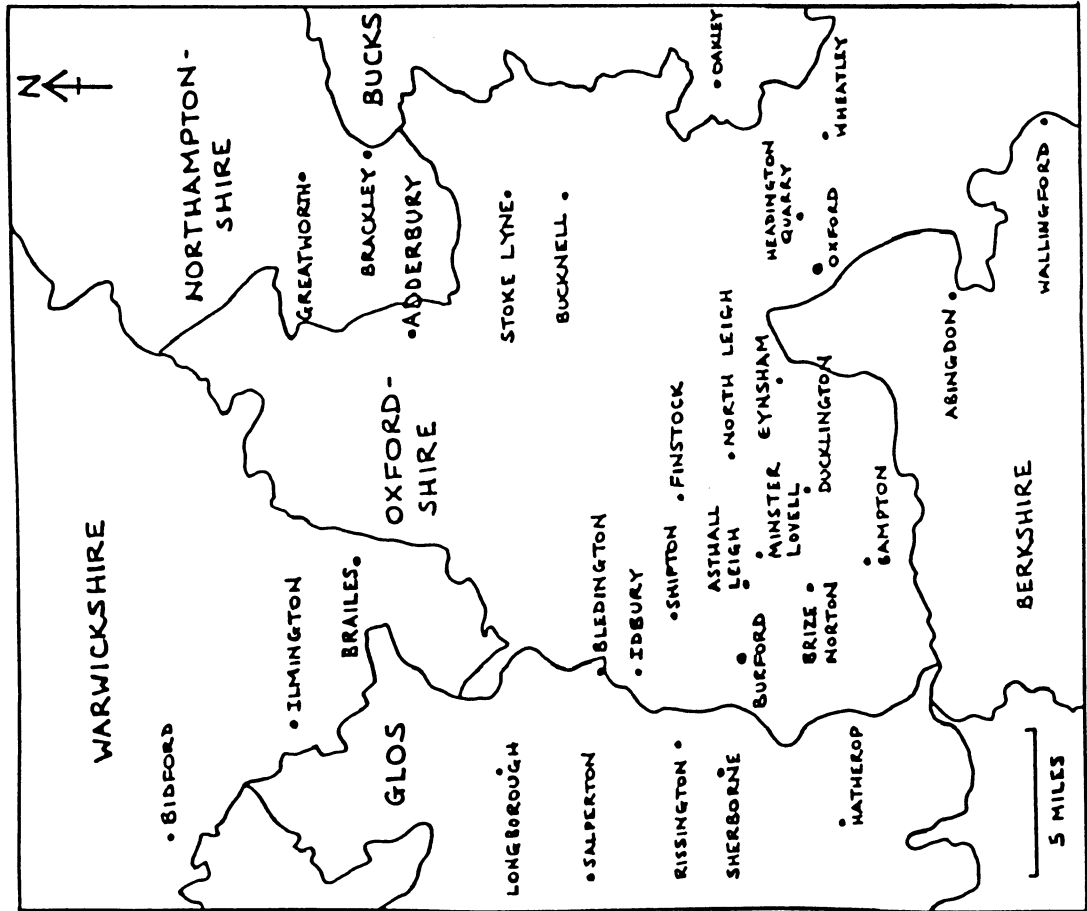
MORRIS DANCING IN THE SOUTH MIDLANDS: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND
TO 1914

KEITH CHANDLER

The main aim of this paper will be to examine a number of the historical aspects of the morris form formerly dominant within an approximately thirty-five mile radius of Witney in Oxfordshire and to indicate some of the ways in which official sources may be applied to specifically collected folkloristic material in order to illuminate the social and cultural context in which it flourished and then declined in importance before the advent of war in 1914.

Until recently, historical material has been largely recorded and interpreted from above and this is reflected in the comparative dearth of sources concerned with grass-roots history, of which the rural morris during the nineteenth century is one cultural manifestation. Thankfully there are a number of oases in this desert; although most of the early collectors who were interested in the morris appear to have been very selective in the type of material they chose to record. Tom Carter for example, hired by Percy Manning to acquire old relics as well as historical information,¹ typically noted a list of names of the men involved in a given dance side, sometimes their occupations, a date at which the morris was said to have been extant and often an anecdote or two,² while the steps, tunes, form and style of the dances were outside his brief. Cecil Sharp's chief interests were diametrically opposite and frequently he omitted to even note the names of dancers in a tradition, especially on those occasions when he discovered a living exponent of the local dance style. Other

THE SOUTH MIDLANDS



collectors had their own individual bias, although most - Mary Neal, Clive Carey, George Butterworth and the like - tended towards that approach favoured by Sharp. In practice this meant that the material was collected largely without reference to its contextual milieu.

The semi-systematic if somewhat haphazard collection of morris-related material was begun only during the last decade of the nineteenth century and this has undoubtedly distorted our knowledge of the distribution of dance sides in these south Midland counties by emphasising the period from around eighteen twenty onwards. The available evidence creates an impression of the middle years of the century being the heyday of performance but tells us little about the earlier period, during which the morris as a rural phenomenon may well have been more widespread.

There are currently around two dozen known recorded instances during the eighteenth century of what appear to have been sightings of authentic rural-based morris sides of the type designated by folklorists as "traditional". Geographically the area of performance³ is bounded on the four points by Wallingford, Hatherop, Greatworth and Richmond and encompasses much of the enclosed area; while the temporal span extends throughout the whole of the century, from the sighting of a visiting side in Hatherop, Gloucestershire, by Nicholas Blundell in 1703⁴ to the performance of a team from Burford at Sherborne Manor in 1799.⁵ This widespread evidence suggests that the morris was an important facet of entertainment in the annual cycle of at least certain communities. To what extent the performance of the dancing was continuous at any given location we cannot, for the want of sufficient source material, offer any concrete conclusions. It would seem logical, however, that the

morris did not merely appear full-blown at the beginning of the eighteenth century and we may therefore postulate the existence of a rural-based tradition extending backwards into the previous century at the very least.⁶ This pedigree encompasses radical and sometimes rapid technological development, both in industry and agriculture, in addition to an expanding population increasingly prone to migration and emigration and alternating periods of, on the one hand dearth and starvation and, on the other prosperity and plenty.⁷ Given these elements it becomes obvious that the social and economic factors which would have determined the continuation or abandonment (no doubt in some cases merely temporary) of performance were in a state of flux and it is therefore misleading to formulate inflexible generalisations.

Each performance of a morris team would have been (and still is) subject to a number of mitigating factors: the ability to raise a side of a suitable standard and more importantly a musician,⁸ the state of the weather; the degree of potential reward, determined by the number or status of the onlookers; the physical state of the dancers themselves⁹ and many others. This is not to suggest that the only factors in play were negative ones, but rather to observe the obvious yet seldom stated fact that every performance (indeed every dance) given by a morris side is a culmination of many variable circumstances, perceptions and motivations generated both from within the group of participants and from external social and cultural pressures.

Given these manifold temporal and geographical fluctuations it is obvious that in a paper of this length it will not be possible to present a comprehensive examination of those factors which appear, to me at least, to have most influenced the morris in performance.

where there was no great attraction to entice visitors,¹³ and also for migration to the larger centres of industry in search of employment, especially for the younger men to whom the onus of continuation of the dancing should have passed.¹⁴ The increasing tendency was towards a "taming" of the Whitsuntide holiday from one of extended license and unrestrained celebration to one of "rational recreation" and even teetotalism as the century progressed.¹⁵ The social fabric of community was disrupted by the agitation of the National Agricultural Labourers Union during the 1870s¹⁶ and there was an increase in the amount of alternative leisure pursuits available to the labouring classes.¹⁷

In order to establish the position of the men who were dancers in the social hierarchy of the communities in which they lived, worked and played it is necessary to know how they earned their daily bread. Having identified approximately 80% of the men known to have danced in the rural-based morris sides in the south Midlands prior to 1914, at least one census year or in the parish registers at either the date of their marriage or the registration of the baptism of at least one child,¹⁸ it is obvious that the majority of dancers were employed on the land as labourers, carters, shepherds, woodmen and the like. There are of course regional variations: in the quarrying areas to the east of Oxford, the so-called Redlands of north Oxfordshire and in isolated pockets of stone throughout the rest of the region we find a number of dancers employed in stone-related jobs such as mason, mason's labourer or quarryman. Similarly, in the small manufacturing towns such as Brackley, Abingdon and Bidford there were dancers who were employed in shoe-making, fellmongering and the odd example of men working for the railway companies. Even where a man's chief occupation might be,

Many of these social variables, both positive and negative, in general and more specific contexts I have analysed elsewhere¹⁰ and hope to elaborate at greater length at some future date. At present it is possible only to briefly outline some of the more overt factors. One point in favour of the heavier weighting of source material, concerning the second half of the nineteenth century, is that it enables us to trace in some detail the decline of the morris as it gradually became less of an integral facet of community life and, it is largely for this reason, that I have chosen to elaborate on certain aspects of performance during a time span of approximately one hundred years prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

By correlating the fortunes of the dance sides with what appear at least to have been disruptive and negative trends within the society of the region, it becomes possible to suggest factors which seem likely to have contributed to the virtual disappearance of the morris in a community context before respectability was regained for it by the educated urban folklorists during the first decade of this century.¹¹ These would have to include economic fluctuations in the agricultural base and hence the degree of largesses available to those members of a community from whom it was expected by the performers. Emigration to the colonies and other areas, which was increasingly available to craftsmen and agricultural workers at subsidised rates of passage from at least the eighteen-thirties and continuing, despite fluctuations in intensity, until the outbreak of war in 1914.¹² The establishment of the railway network by about eighteen-seventy provided increased opportunities both for trips away from the home area at holiday times and hence a reduction in potential patronage for morris sides performing in communities

for example, carpenter or blacksmith he would probably have spent at least part of his working life on the farms, perhaps as a youngster¹⁹ but more especially at labour-intensive periods such as harvest time. Throughout our area community life was intimately bound to the cultivation of the soil for, with minor variations, the agricultural propensity of these south Midland counties was overwhelmingly arable.

Farms throughout the region tended on the whole to be fairly small in size and to keep very few men in full-time employment and hence a degree of geographical mobility was necessary. In the village of Kencot for example - which fielded a morris side probably during the 1830s or 1840s - there were only four farms in 1851. Out of a total population of two hundred and six souls three of these farmers between them gave work to twenty-five men, while the fourth employed none at all.²⁰ Albert Townsend, who kept the Elephant and Castle at Bampton for many years earlier this century, said of the local agricultural labourers, "some of 'em used to walk from 'ere to Kelmscot",²¹ a journey of six miles each morning and evening which reflects the lack of sufficient suitable work in their home parish. This situation often meant that alternative occupations had to be pursued and a man might change jobs frequently within a single community. Raphael Samuel's work on Headington Quarry has perhaps shown this most explicitly,²² with oral testimony indicating a variety which cannot be gleaned from primary official sources such as the decadal census enumeration books,²³ the Anglican parish registers and the reports of local and quarter sessions which may be found in most local newspapers during the nineteenth century. These sources, however flawed, nevertheless tend to note the contemporary occupation of at least the adult males where they

impinge upon the recorded flow of officialdom and thereby provide virtually the sum total of the extant evidence which may be used to illuminate the social structure of the communities with which we are concerned. Lamentably the sources are subject to the often idiosyncratic and indiscriminate use of occupational descriptions by the individual enumerator, registrar or reporter and may thus be deceptive and conceal innumerable periodic fluctuations. The terms agricultural labourer, field labourer, farm boy, wood labourer, woodman and sometimes simply labourer cannot begin to describe the type of work pursued, the seasonal variation of the work, the degree of geographical mobility or the frequency of unemployment. Other designations such as agricultural carter, cowman or shepherd offer an impression which is a little more concrete but again fail to consider periodic fluctuations.

Sometimes however it is broadly possible to pursue a man as his occupational bias undergoes (by and large minor) temporal transformations. The Finstock dancer Edward Oliver for example is recorded over the twenty-one years covered by the census between 1851 and 1871 as "dealer in fruit" then "woodman" and finally "hawker".²⁴ Richard Bond at Idbury went from woodman in 1851 to agricultural labourer ten years later and then back to woodman in 1871;²⁵ while his brother Benjamin (as far as we know not a dancer) would appear to have elevated his status from field labourer to carter between 1851 and 1861.²⁶ Another of the Finstock dancers, Charles Dore, pursuing the family trade of carpenter in 1851 and 1861 was enumerated as a sawyer ten years later which implies a reduction in occupational status.²⁷ William Bellinger, one of three brothers who danced in the morris side at Brize Norton - probably during the 1840s - told Carter that his brothers Henry and

Charles worked as quarrymen yet the 1871 census returns show that they both were agricultural labourers at this date. This handful of examples and the numerous others which could be cited merely confirms the necessity for occupational flexibility in order to exploit the fluctuating patterns of employment in operation in a given locality over a period of time.

I have stated that during the period under examination the known tradition bearers of the morris were overwhelmingly drawn from the pool of manual labourers and small craftsmen, yet there is a certain amount of evidence to suggest a degree of commingling within specific morris sides between men from several levels of the social hierarchy. It is impossible to accurately define the often minute gradations within a defunct societal structure from the limited amount of evidence currently available and to do so would require a knowledge of individual perceptions and expectations which is largely denied us. These factors are, however, sometimes implied in the sources and an example will later be found in the brief examination of marriage patterns, yet a qualitative statement is elusive. Nevertheless, in 1886 the antiquarian George Rowell recalled that at Kirtlington during the early part of the century it was sometimes the case that the sons of farmers - undoubtedly perceived by the community as socially superior to the labourers who formed the basis of the dance side - "did not decline joining the dancers, but rather prided themselves on being selected as one of them".²⁸ It may have been that the transformation of labour relations between farmer and employees engendered by enclosure and the accompanying intensification of agricultural production techniques²⁹ had not by that date yet created the social rift which is apparent during the latter half of the century. That there were

gradations within the generic group labelled "farmer" is evident from two examples of men involved with the morris around the middle years of the nineteenth century.³⁰ Masfen Hart, a dancer in the same Brize Norton team as the Bellinger brothers, was born the son of a farmer at Stonelands near Asthall Leigh in 1813.³¹ By 1833 he had married and moved to Brize Norton, where he is recorded in the parish registers at the baptism of a daughter as a labourer, implying a reduction in status.³² This trend was rectified by 1841 when he is enumerated as a carrier,³³ a trade with a far greater degree of security and remuneration than that of a labourer. By 1851, Hart was living in Little Minster Lovell where he farmed three acres and employed one man and the route by which this social elevation was achieved appears, at least partially, to have been the acquisition of land on the Chartist estate at Minster Lovell.³⁴ Assuming that the dancer and the Mr. Hart of Brize Norton who gave a meadow party during May 1848, at which nearly forty couples danced,³⁵ are one and the same, he would appear to have already gained a certain degree of social status locally by this date. By 1852, Hart was living in the schoolhouse at Charterville where he was responsible for the cultivation of empty allotments on the estate.³⁶ Thomas Langford, piper for teams at Finstock and Ascot-under-Wychwood, was described as a farmer of four acres in 1851 and as "landed proprietor" ten years later.³⁷ Certainly both of these men appear to have been smallholders, farming on a very small scale indeed; and the problems inherent in any attempt to define perceived status within a given community is illuminated by these examples. Obviously a farmer of two hundred acres who employed twenty-five men would have been accorded greater respect than those in a similar position to the two dancers cited above; yet the distinction between such smallholders and the day-rate labouring group, to which

the majority of dancers active during the nineteenth century belonged, is considerably blurred. The problem is further compounded by the example of Masfen Hart: born the son of a farmer yet by the age of twenty working as a labourer.

This predominant occupational mode was however conducive to the pursuance of the morris dancing, for Whitsun and the preparation of the morris for public performance was slotted into the lull in the annual agricultural cycle which fell between the spring sowing and the hay harvest in the early summer.³⁸ Similarly, in those communities where men were predominantly employed in wood-related trades the seasonal nature of the work meant that these men were likewise available to dance at Whitsun, for the important task of stripping the bark from the trees in order to obtain flax to be used in tanning started in March and lasted for about six weeks. Samuel has noted that:

"[Flaxing] was a major harvest, drawing extra hands from afar, as well as providing employment for woodlanders themselves..."³⁹

Once again this distorts the evidence of the census which, other than in 1841,⁴⁰ was normally taken about the beginning of April.⁴¹ Small craftsmen and artisans, generally self-employed, were better able to regulate their free time and would also have been in a position to dance with the morris sides. Amongst those men in this latter category were William Jaycock, a journeyman blacksmith at Stoke Lyne; the Walton family at Adderbury, a long line of stonemasons; several of the Dore family at Finstock who were carpenters; and the weaver Edwin Clay at Bralies. Such men would normally have greater job security for, with a trade, it was possible to travel elsewhere during a localised depression in the knowledge that work might be easier to obtain than for an unskilled labourer.⁴²

In both the arable and the woodland areas the slack period which followed the spring sowing and flaxing forced many men and women who had been thrown out of work to migrate in search of employment. Some of these journeyed eastwards to assist with the earlier-ripening hay or to work in the market gardens around London and the Home Counties and would then work their way homewards in time for the local hay harvest which, given normal weather conditions, occurred most often during June. In order to raise extra cash on these jaunts some of the dancers and musicians would busk in the streets and, from the frequency with which antiquarian writers record the sighting of whole teams of dancers from the rural areas in the vicinity of London during the early summer, it might be argued that from as early as the latter half of the eighteenth century the morris was viewed by the performers as a possession to be exploited.⁴³ By implication this commercialisation of the morris might be cited to argue against the theories of dancing for the sake of tradition and continuity with the past, fertility magic and luck-bringing so beloved of the early collectors and still rife today. So, within the varied and variable occupational structure of any given community, the evidence points to periods of unemployment and inactivity for many of the labouring groups to which the dancers belonged. I have shown how the official sources may be deceptive when considering work patterns and, despite the limited recording of grass-roots history, the odd piece of oral evidence may shed some light. I interviewed Martha Druce, the grand-daughter of Ducklington dancer Joseph Druce, on 29 August 1981 and, when showing her the entries concerning her grandfather from the census, she smiled and commented:

"My grandfather didn't work much ... He might have put down that he was a farm labourer but he didn't do much ... I suppose he got by without ..."

The provision of sufficient food with which to feed himself and his family must have been a difficult task for the majority of the labouring classes during the nineteenth century. In 1884 the social commentator Richard Heath had this to say about the diet of the average agricultural labourer:

"... it is manifest that the wages which have been given to the Agricultural Labourer during the greater part of this century - 7s., 8s. or the utmost 9s. or 10s. have meant starvation during the lifetime of at least one generation and a portion of two others. For be it remembered that on these miserable sums not one person, but very frequently four or five have had to live. It was only done by reducing the quantity of bread, bacon and beer, and taking in their place gruel, potatoes, suet and rice puddings, with decoctions of washed-out tea leaves ..." 44

If a man was un- or underemployed for any length of time then other means of providing sustenance would have to be found. Of course, in a rural area there are many natural foods to be had free for the taking but, in addition, there is much which is illegal and this includes the majority of meat which would have been found in a labourer's diet. There is much evidence to suggest that poaching was not only common but, in many cases, absolutely necessary for survival. In a rare, though no doubt biased, description of one of our morris villages, the Reverend J. C. Young wrote of the parish of Ilmington in 1857 that it was one of the most disreputable in the county of Warwickshire:

"... Conviction in the graver offences against the law, such as burglary, sheep stealing and agrarian outrages have not been infrequent: while cases of poaching, brawling, drunkenness, adultery and fornication have been rather the rule than the exception ..." 45

George "Brewer" Pratley of Finstock, in an interview with Michael Heaney on 26 August 1981, told how:

"... Men would get gamekeepers drunk at the Waterloo Arms so they could go off and poach. This was necessary as they had no money to buy food ..." 46

This latter statement is confirmed by oral testimony recorded by Samuel at Headington Quarry; and many instances are in evidence amongst the reports of local petty sessions. Those unlucky enough to have been caught in the act of attempted poaching include the dancers Henry Smith of Shipton-under-Wychwood, charged in 1865 with "trespassing on certain lands in the occupation of Thomas Brookes, in search of game - Fined 9s 6d and costs"; Edward Heydon of Stoke Lyne in 1880 for "using a gun for killing hares" and fined f5 and costs 10s 9d or six weeks; and William Search of Rissington in 1882, again with "trespassing in search of game - fined 5s and costs 5s." 47 Obviously this is something which by its very illicit nature is impossible to quantify, yet despite often considerable penalties if convicted the evidence suggests that poaching in its many forms was rife.

The physical performance of the dancing is dependent upon certain basic human factors. To expend vast quantities of energy over sustained periods the body needs to be in reasonable health and well-nourished. Even allowing that much of the morris was performed under the influence of alcohol and, as William Kimber of Headington Quarry once remarked, "You were never a morris dancer unless you had plenty of beer, there was no time for food," 48 the body must be adequately fed beforehand. Most teams consisted of a bare minimum of six dancers, although there was sometimes a spare man who was able to step into the set to spell a dancer when he needed a rest, and again this implies a degree of economic determinism on the part of the organisers. What this meant

in practice was that a man would have been obliged to perform almost every dance, perhaps for twelve hours a day overall, sometimes for five or more days in succession, in addition to walking to the dancing venue when performing outside of their home parish. It is apparent that the physical condition of the dancers, especially when in their prime, must have been good. The Reverend James Fraser, one of the assistant Commissioners involved with the Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, conducted in 1867, wrote of the typical cottage of the rural labourer:

"... It is impossible to exaggerate the ill effects of such a state of things in every aspect, physical, social, economical, moral, intellectual. Physically, a ruinous, ill-drained cottage, cribbed, cabin'd, confined, and overcrowded, generates any amount of disease, fevers of every type, catarrh, rheumatism, as well as intensifies to the utmost that tendency to scrofula and phthisis which, from their frequent intermarriages and their low diet, abound so largely among the poor ..." 49

Yet despite this and similar evidence I have suggested that the men who were dancers must have been relatively healthy. The nature of the work would of course have developed the physique during the formative years, although both occupational and social conditions appear to have often taken their toll on the body in later life. 50 It might be acceptable to suggest that a man would have been at peak physical condition between the ages of perhaps fifteen and thirty-five. Joseph Druce said that at Ducklington the men did not join the morris team until they were aged about twenty⁵¹ and given that the right to dance often passed from father to son, this would seem to be an age conducive to the supplanting of one generation by the next. It is however impossible to offer any generalisations, for there were obviously many variations on the mode of organisation within different dance teams. In addition to that of ongoing

generational continuity there are examples of a side composed of "Little Boys", seen at Sherborne Manor in 1785⁵² and others consisting of father and six sons, as at Salperton.⁵³ Given these latter variations it is difficult to reconcile the obvious economic advantages for the mentor of tractable young dancers with the often ascribed motivation of continuity for the sake of tradition. Here again, generalisations must be eschewed for there were undoubtedly a number of perhaps complex motivations involved and these are likely to have undergone transformation over time.

The fact that as a rule each community in which there was a history of dancing⁵⁴ possessed only one morris side at any given time suggests that there were factors in operation of a delimiting nature. From the parish registers it is possible to indicate a trend within many teams towards a close-knit kin structure and it is my contention that this was the single most important qualification for admission into the culturally-diverting and potentially-lucrative morris fraternity. In any examination of patterns of intermarriage there has to be an initial awareness of the basic chicken and egg question: did a man marry into one of the main dancing families and then get invited to participate in the tangible benefits associated with the morris, or was he already a dancer and by socialising with others in the side forge a liaison with the daughter or sister of one of his fellow dancers? No doubt there were examples of both forms, although the limited evidence on extant dates of both dance sides and the specific involvement of individual dancers prevents any definitive statement. Within a socially delimited community such as a village or town segment like Ock Street in Abingdon there would have been a great familiarity with other local families and any number of potential marriage