



The Prancing Pony

The Official Newsletter of White Horse Morris

Issue #17

<http://www.whitehorsemorris.org.uk/home/4594741622>

16 July 2020



No Prancing for White Horse this week

This week White Horse Morris did not dance at The Benett Arms in Semley. BUT the cricket season did start at last. In this, the seventeenth edition of The Prancing Pony, John Wippell gives as clear an answer to the question of “What is Morris Dancing” as anyone could hope for, but came to no serious conclusion. Graham Lever asks a “Was it him?” question about another member of the side who was unavailable for comment as the PP went to press. Depending on circumstances we may be doing some more dancing, possibly in a field or outside a cricket pavilion. It could be our new normal – everyone else has got one!” We won’t be in Shrewton on 22nd either unless we dance on the field illegally.

On this day

- 1439 Henry VI bans kissing in England in an attempt to stop the spread of The Black Death
 - 1661 The first banknotes in Europe were issued by the Bank of Stockholm
 - 1965 The Mont Blanc Road Tunnel between Italy and France opened
 - 1969 Apollo 11 was launched from Cape Kennedy, Florida bound for the Moon
 - 1981 Shukuni Sasaki spun 72 plates simultaneously
- Today is also (as if you didn’t know) World Snake Day.

John Wippell asks : How about something on the history of Morris Dancing following Bob’s semi-accurate speech at Bishopstrow? This is from Open Morris:

A Short History of Morris Dancing

Morris dance is a form of English folk dance usually accompanied by music. It is based on rhythmic stepping and the execution of choreographed figures by a group of dancers, usually wearing bell pads on their shins. Implements such as sticks, swords and handkerchiefs may also be wielded by the dancers.

The earliest known and surviving English written mention of Morris dance is dated to 1448, and records the payment of seven shillings to Morris dancers by the Goldsmiths’ Company in London. Further mentions of Morris dancing occur in the late 15th century, and there are also early records such as visiting Bishops’ “Visitation Articles” mention sword dancing, guising and other dancing activities, as well as mumming plays.

While the earliest records invariably mention “Morys” in a court setting, and a little later in the Lord Mayors’ Processions in London, it had adopted the nature of a folk dance performed in the parishes by the mid 17th century.

Name and origins

The name is first recorded in the mid-15th century as Morisk dance, moreys daunce, morisse daunce, i.e.

“Moorish dance”. The term entered English via Flemish mooriske danse. Comparable terms in other languages are German Moriskentanz (also from the 15th century), French morisques, Croatian moreška, and moresco, moresca or morisca in Italy and Spain. The modern spelling Morris-dance first appears in the 17th century.

It is unclear why the dance was so named, “unless in reference to fantastic dancing or costumes”, i.e. the deliberately “exotic” flavour of the performance. The English dance thus apparently arose as part of a wider 15th-century European fashion for supposedly “Moorish” spectacle, which also left traces in Spanish and Italian folk dance. The means and chronology of the transmission of this fashion is now difficult to trace; the Great London Chronicle records “spangled Spanish dancers” performing an energetic dance before Henry VII at Christmas of 1494, but Heron’s accounts also mention “pleying of the mourice dance” four days earlier, and the attestation of the English term from the mid-15th century establishes that there was a “Moorish dance” performed in England decades prior to 1494.

It is suggested that the tradition of rural English dancers blackening their faces may be a reference to the Moors, miners, or a disguise worn by dancing beggars.

History in England

While the earliest (15th-century) references place the Morris dance in a courtly setting, it appears that the dance became part of

performances for the lower classes by the later 16th century; in 1600, the Shakespearean actor William Kempe, Morris-danced from London to Norwich, an event chronicled in his *Nine Daies Wonder* (1600).



Almost nothing is known about the folk dances of England prior to the mid-17th century. While it is possible to speculate on the transition of “Morris dancing” from the courtly to a rural setting, it may have acquired elements of pre-Elizabethan (medieval) folk dance, such proposals will always be based on an argument from silence as there is no direct record of what such elements would have looked like. In the Elizabethan period, there was significant cultural contact between Italy and England, and it has been suggested that much of what is now considered traditional English folk dance, and especially English country dance, is descended from Italian dances imported in the 16th century.

By the mid-17th century, the working peasantry took part in Morris dances, especially at Whitsun. The Puritan government of Oliver Cromwell, however, suppressed Whitsun Ales and other such festivities. When the Crown was restored by Charles II, the springtime festivals were restored. In particular, Whitsun Ales came to be celebrated on Whitsunday (Pentecost), as the date coincided with the birthday of Charles II.

Morris dancing continued in popularity until the industrial revolution and its accompanying social changes. Four teams claim a continuous lineage of tradition within their village or town: Abingdon (their Morris team was kept going by the Hemmings family), Bampton, Headington Quarry, and Chipping Campden. Other villages have revived their own traditions, and hundreds of other teams across the globe have adopted (and adapted) these traditions, or have created their own styles from the basic building blocks of Morris stepping and figures.



Chipping Campden Morris (one arm up, the other down)

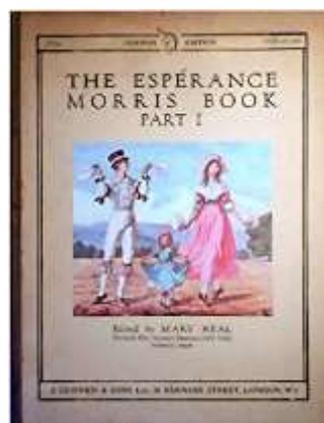
However by the late 19th century, and in the West Country at least, Morris dancing was fast becoming more a local memory than an activity. D’Arcy Ferris (or de Ferrars), a Cheltenham based singer, music teacher and organiser of pageants, became intrigued by the tradition and sought to revive it. He firstly encountered Morris in Bidford and organised its revival. Over the following years he took the side to several places in the West Country, from Malvern to Bicester and from Redditch to Moreton in Marsh. By 1910, he and Cecil Sharp were in correspondence on the subject.

Several English folklorists were responsible for recording and reviving the tradition in the early 20th century, often from a bare handful of surviving members of mid-19th-

century village sides. Among these, the most notable are Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, and Mary Neal.



Boxing Day 1899 is widely regarded as the starting point for the Morris revival. Cecil Sharp (pictured left) was visiting at a friend’s house in Headington, near Oxford, when the Headington Quarry Morris side arrived to perform. Sharp was intrigued by the music and collected several tunes from the side’s musician, William Kimber (pictured right); not until about a decade later, however, did he begin collecting the dances, spurred and at first assisted by



Mary Neal, (pictured above) a founder of the Espérance Club (a dressmaking co-operative and club for young working women in London), and Herbert MacIlwaine, musical director of the Espérance Club. Neal was looking for dances for her girls to perform, and so the first revival performance was by young women in London.

In the first few decades of the 20th century, several men’s sides were formed, and in 1934 the Morris Ring was founded by six revival sides. In the 1950s and especially the 1960s, there was an explosion of new dance teams, some of them women’s or mixed sides. At the time, there was often heated debate over the propriety and even legitimacy of women dancing the Morris, even though there is evidence as far back as the 16th century that there were female Morris dancers. There are now male, female and mixed sides to be found.

Partly because women’s and mixed sides were not eligible for full membership of the Morris Ring, two other national (and international) bodies were formed, the Morris Federation and Open Morris. All three bodies provide communication, advice, insurance, instructionals (teaching sessions) and social and dancing opportunities to their members. The three bodies co-operate on some issues, while maintaining their distinct identities.

[Ed: All of which is very interesting but has little to say about the possibly contradictory theories about roots in

pagan or Christian times. Nor does it have much to say about the distinctive styles of the twentieth-century Cotswold, Border or North-West traditions.]

Since John sent in the Open Morris article, further correspondence has been received, including this, in response to the question of what the hankies signify:

I've never been given an explanation for hankie-waving other than it accentuates the hand movements. BUT . . .

Whacky theory 1:

When I was teaching, I remember watching a video of folk dancers in Gujarat dancing in a 'morris set', clashing sticks and also waving hankies. Watch the video https://youtu.be/xT-Hwodb_ho

Did morris dancing originate from the Indian sub-continent?

Whacky theory 2

I read somewhere that old time morris dancers called their hankies whifflers. But 'whifflers' can also refer to the men who had the job of clearing the way for a giant e.g. the Salisbury Giant or other ceremonial figures. Perhaps they waved hankies?

Whacky theory 3

When I was learning German at school the word Wipfel came up. Obviously, I was interested in this word. Wipfel translates as 'treetop' or a spray of branches. Did the old-time whifflers at some point in the past wave sprays of leaves? Teutonic tree worship?

John

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xT-Hwodb_ho&feature=youtu.be



[Ed: I think the photo here of WHM performing in Horningsham in 1951 provides clear evidence of the side's cultural affinity with Punjabi Bhangra traditions. Though it has to be said that grainy black and white film does not do justice to the dazzling display of colourful costumes.]

The Mayor of Casterbridge?

Graham Lever writes:

I re-watched my dvd of 2003 film *The Mayor of Casterbridge* this week. (For me, Ciaran Hinds gave a far better interpretation of Michael Henchard than Alan Bates some years earlier).

But as I live and breathe, I'm sure I saw Cliff Skey among the dancers. Was it he? I think we should be told.

Can I expect to find Mr. Skey, (or any other readers), in any other of my Hardy DVDs that were filmed in Dorset, I ask myself.

Graham Lever, (White Horse Retired)

[Ed: Core members of the White Horse Band (Colin Dipper, Bob Burgess and Mark Mikurenda) played the music for the barn dance scene in the 2008 BBC television adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Mark's hand appears for 0.5 seconds and Colin's serpent can also be (un)clearly seen. Unmissable.]

Mari Booker replies,

When I saw the title 'Mayor of Casterbridge' it reminded me that my dad, Ioan Jenkins, played for the BBC radio version of the play in 1968.

He was allowed to look through Thomas Hardy's grandfather's book of tunes in Dorchester Museum to choose which tunes to play.

No, I can't remember which tunes he played, I was living in Denmark at the time.

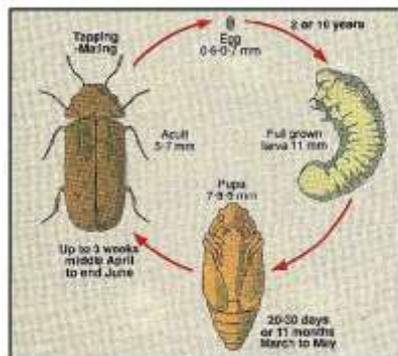
Mari



Hob Nob at Horningsham 1951

Next week

Without wanting to get you too excited, there may possibly be an update on the deathwatch beetle situation to look forward to next week.



If you would prefer to read about things other than deathwatch beetles, please send items for the next *Prancing Pony* to Mike Perry by Monday 20 July.