



The Prancing Pony

The Official Newsletter of White Horse Morris

Issue #15

2nd July 2020

Morris dancing is fun - apparently

The bulk of this issue, our fifteenth, is devoted to an article from 2011, reprinted with kind permission of "Wiltshire Life". The pictures reflect our ever changing personnel, some contemporary faces and others who have moved on. Pete Hewitt can be seen with a grey beard! Reuben also writes interestingly about his encounters with Deathwatch beetles. This week WHM did *not* dance in Chitterne and we will *not* be stunning the crowds at Gold Hill Fair on Sunday – instead we do plan to perform at Bishopstrow at noon in a field.



Morris dancing *is* fun

So say White Horse Morris. Pull the other one, it's got bells on it! Rose Eva tries to join in.

YOU SHOULD make a point of trying every experience once, excepting incest and folk dancing," wrote the composer Sir Arnold Bax.

Many people feel the same about folk dancing in this country, but why? Every Barcelona schoolchild knows the Catalan folk dance, the Sardana, and is thrilled to perform it, and Scottish country dancing has an enthusiastic following across the British Isles, with punters vigorously Stripping the Willow in town halls from St Andrews to St Mawes. But morris dancing? Some of the public seem to say: "No, thank you!"

A posting on the internet declares that it is: "Sad to see the state of English culture and heritage reduced to a number of old folkies doing these dances" and the *Daily Telegraph* has predicted the demise of morris within the next 20 years. *The Daily Telegraph* might have got it wrong though, as it seems to be in a pretty healthy state at the moment, with events like the 5,000 Morris Dancers Weekend at the

Southbank in London last year attracting lots of attention. Morris is breaking out all over the world, as far afield as Hong Kong and Helsinki and, of course, we have it in Wiltshire.

‘Morris is not just for ageing, sandal-wearers’

I decided to find out more. When a man strolled past, jingling slightly, wearing a top hat stuffed with pheasant feathers and a jerkin covered with odd strips of material, I knew I was in the right place: the White Horse Morris was performing outside the Royal Oak pub in Great Wishford.

This morris side (as a team, or troupe, is known) was formed in 1951, and thrived during the hippy folk revival of the 1960s.

Ten years ago, however, the side was in slight decline, and by three years ago it was struggling. The decision was made to admit women and from January this year, the White Horse Morris became a mixed side. In morris circles this is not a decision to be taken lightly: a mixed side is anathema to many in the morris world but, as Mike Dixon of the White Horse side asserts, the men-only ethos is a Victorian attitude that doesn't sit comfortably in the 21st century.

Advertisements were placed, articles were penned and, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the White Horse of Westbury Morris side was reborn. From struggling with about 10 members, the side now boasts three times that number, with 34 people performing when the side first danced out earlier this year.

They are an odd-looking bunch, with most of the men wearing white under their ragged coats but other men, and all the women,

Above: Coats of rags, lacy tights and boots? White Horse Morris newcomers show they are not fussy

PHOTO BY OLIVIER WAINES WWW.DONKEYS.COM

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

wearing black, with blue scarves around their toppers – or, in one case, a plastic sunflower – instead of feathers. The women were sporting short skirts, lacy stockings and chunky boots: not what one might expect.

There is a melding of two traditions here: the white outfits and waving handkerchiefs of the Cotswold tribe, and the black garb, rag coats and top hats of the Border. Border sides, originally from the borders of England and Wales, sometimes black their faces, the tradition apparently arising from poor labourers disguising themselves as they tried to supplement their income with a spot of dancing and begging. The hazel sticks are vigorously toted by both sexes and traditions in the White Horse side: it sounds much more fun to whack at your dance partner than wave a hankie at him.

Many of the White Horse side have been dancing for years. Mike Dixon was looking for a hobby in 1982 and, while most of us last barely a few months with a new enthusiasm, he is clearly still entranced. Mike Perry, the squire (one of the three officers of a morris side, the others being the bagman and the treasurer) has been dancing for more than 30 years.

Others are of an age where clubbing would normally refer to what one does of an evening, rather than what one does with a hazel stick. Rosie joined when she was 16, and has been dancing since she was 10, declaring that morris is the reason her parents were married, while Rowan, 17, was so enthusiastic he persuaded his mother to take up the habit.

So why on earth do they do it? Why are they so keen to tie bells on their knees and hop about

to the general ridicule of other Englishmen? And they do all seem to love it. Part of the attraction must be the camaraderie of the side. Donna Cook, Mandy Alexander and Nicky Docking agree that after a hard day's work, bashing a man with a stout stick is excellent therapy: what more could you want?

The music is jolly, with squeezeboxes, fiddles and drums to accompany the dancers. Tim, the drummer, has a background in jazz and world music, an environment in which morris music fits rather snugly.

Morris dancers tend to attract an appreciative audience, rather giving the lie to the idea that most of us would rather watch paint dry: we might find it odd, or quaint, but it is entertaining. The punters at the Royal Oak came out to watch, and clearly enjoyed the display. One local enthused that it was "Absolutely fantastic – you can't make it up!"

We English are keen on eccentricity, and like to celebrate rather than ridicule it, and morris dancing is nothing if not English, and eccentric.

The criticism that morris is only for sad, ageing, sandal-wearing traditionalists doesn't wash with the White Horse side. There seems nothing sad or old about these cheerful men and women, with not a sandal in sight. In their top hats and rag coats, and other less traditional attire, they are clearly having a blast: those fishnets and biker boots make for a marvellously eccentric, very English tradition. DL

Top right: Willow Lamont Jiggins, four, with squire Mike Perry; Fiddler Alison Dike; Below: The men of the White Horse Morris side get down to business



This could be the last *Prancing Pony* for a while. BUT please do send items for the next *Prancing Pony* to Mike Perry by Monday 6 July just in case we continue to run the presses.

A lone Morris Dancer's lockdown struggle with Deathwatch Beetle.

Inspired by those I have found while working on my own in a run-down cottage, I thought it would be an easy socially isolated job during lockdown. Oh how I would love to be at home learning the euphonium, or sewing scrubs.

It seems that many people who are on lockdown at the moment have had their circadian rhythms upset and so cannot sleep. There are methods to help solve this problem such as counting sheep in your head, or getting up and making a nice hot drink and going back to bed a while later. I find rehearsing Morris dance figures in my mind works a treat. However if these methods don't work for you, it may be that as you lie there in the dark, you become aware of a 'tappety tappety tap' something like a very small woodpecker.

If you do hear this, you now really do have an excuse to lose sleep for it is the noise of the fearsome Deathwatch beetle calling to announce his presence. He's not actually calling, he's banging his tough little forehead on the roof of his 3-4mm diameter tunnel that his former self has made. During his larval stage. He has spent the best part of ten years munching away at the very beams that your house is made of. He will like to start at the end where the beam is set in the masonry and has often become damp and a little soft, and will chomp away at the heart wood. When they have had their fill, he will pupate near the surface and his adult beetle form will emerge, head banging his desire for a mate.

You may think that a little hole like that will hardly weaken the lovely big strong beams of your roof, and you would be correct. However your new found companion will have friends and relations - lots of them. Together they may make short work of that lovely oak beam set in your ceiling. A few gentle taps may reveal little trails of dust from the holes; this is called 'frass', otherwise known as beetle poo. Don't knock too hard: there may not be a lot of beam left!

Here's a beam I knocked on earlier!

Oops!



Here is a Deathwatch beetle, only about 7mm long but quite cute actually. They don't last long after emerging as an adult, just long enough for Mrs. Xestobium rufillosum to lay some eggs in a crack or crevice and start a new generation. In some properties there must have been twenty generations gnawing away!

There are a very few activities that have translated themselves into the Morris so these must have been very important at some time in history, and we can see why beetle crushing was so very important. So now in



your attempts to sleep you can contemplate 'the beetle crusher' and perfect it for when we do get out dancing again.

Reuben Chappell



No WHM in Chitterne in 2020 but our ancestors *were* there in 1951 !