

The Ancient English Morris Dance

Michael Heaney

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Back cover: Top: Chipping Campden Morris Dancers, 15 January 2007, photo © Keith Chandler
Bottom: Hag Fold Morris Dancers, 3 September 2022, photo © Duncan Broomhead

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For Francesca

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Preface

This book had its genesis in the early 1980s, after I had done a few years' research into the history of the morris dance and realized how little was known. I was aware that gathering the evidence would be a long-term project, so I set a target date for myself of 1999, to celebrate the centenary of Cecil Sharp's meeting with the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers. Looking back, I realize what a meagre book that would have been, not just because I was ignorant of so much of the history but because in the interim the sources available to the would-be historian have multiplied many times over.

The first boost came when I found that John Forrest of the State University of New York was engaged on a similar exercise in researching early records of the dance, and we joined forces to assemble a corpus of primary source material for the period to 1750, several times larger than any previous research resource. The result of that was our chronological classified listing *Annals of Early Morris*, published by the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language in association with the Morris Ring in 1991; and an accompanying article, 'Charting Early Morris', in the 1991 issue of *Folk Music Journal*. These listed all the references to morris dancing that we could find up to the year 1750 and drew some preliminary conclusions. John Forrest published a book based on the research, *The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750*, in 1999. Since our joint work I have continued to accumulate references and that research corpus has increased from 851 listings in *Annals* to 1,444 for the same time period today.

A second boost came from the indefatigable researchers of the Records of Early English Drama team based in Toronto, aiming to gather all the primary source material up to 1642 relating not just to drama, but to performance and entertainment in general and including morris dancing. Forrest and I wrote in *Annals* (p. vii) of their extreme generosity both collectively and individually in sharing not just their published but many of their unpublished resources with us. That kindness has continued and contributed to the present work.

The third boost has been the explosion in the digitization of early texts. I have been able to make use of these primarily through the digital collections made available by and through my lifetime employer until retirement, the Bodleian Libraries. To have such a repository of physical resources literally surrounding me in my work has been an enormous privilege, but the digital dimension has transformed the ways in which we can access and research such material not just in one repository but worldwide. The response by publishers to the coronavirus pandemic had the unanticipated but welcome effect that significantly more resources were made available online to counter the difficulties in visiting libraries physically.

The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society is the nation's primary repository for folk music and dance, and I must pay especial tribute to successive generations of its staff. The library's initiative in digitizing not just a significant proportion of its own archival holdings but working with others across the globe to produce an unparalleled digital resource for folk-music scholarship has saved me a lifetime of travel.

My thanks go to all those mentioned above, but there are many other colleagues and friends who have been generous in their help over the years, and institutions visited whose custodians have invariably been helpful. The help has been provided over so many years that sadly some

of them are no longer with us to receive my thanks personally. I thank the late Gordon Ashman, David Atkinson, Julia Bishop, Pruw Boswell, Elaine Bradtke, Duncan Broomhead, Theresa Buckland, the late Christopher Cawte, Bernie Cherry, the late Roy Dommett, Dave Evans, Vic Gammon, the late Bob Grant, John Jenner, Alison Jewitt, Alice Little, Chloe Middleton-Metcalf, Chris Rose, Steve Roud, Steve Rowley, Ian Russell, Derek Schofield, Ron Shuttleworth, Paul Smith, Roy Smith, Garry Stringfellow, Barbara Tearle, Jennifer Thorp, Jameson Wooders and Lucy Wright; Chris Wildridge and Pete de Courcy for access to the Morris Ring's archives, and Roger Bryant and Velson Horie, in particular for access to the Manchester Morris Men's archives. (In so far as it resides with them, copyright in Manchester Morris Men's archives is retained by the Manchester Morris Men but free and unlimited access is allowed under a Creative Commons 4.0 BY-SA licence.) Taro Kobayashi kindly transcribed lute, guitar and viol tablatures into stave notation for me.

There are two people in particular to whom I owe a special debt, and in acknowledging this I do not in any way intend to diminish my appreciation of the help and friendship of others. The first is Keith Chandler, who has been a constant friend and inspiration for over 40 years. His ground-breaking research into the morris of the south midlands showed me what could be done to investigate and shed light on what I had previously thought to be intractable and unknowable. His unfailing geniality and generosity have been unbounded. The other is the late Roy Judge. Roy was the very model of the meticulous researcher, and I was fortunate enough to work closely with him on many an occasion. He had the additional gift of a strong sense of narrative, being able to weave a convincing and coherent account from refractory sources. More than once I had the benefit of his wise advice and he taught me much about research and writing. This was coupled with an irenic disposition which brought out the best in everybody who encountered him in his researches. I am hugely indebted to both of these gentlemen.

My son Ben has provided very practical help in bringing this book to market.

Last, but not least, my wife Francesca has not only put up with this invasion of our lives, particularly over the last five years, but has responded constructively to my ramblings and musings as I mulled over how to get all this down on paper. She has had the patience to read through the entire work four times and give me insight into what was good and what was bad, what was interesting and what dull; what else an intelligent lay reader might reasonably want to read about but I had failed to provide; where I had not expressed myself clearly; what could profitably be cut from a book which I knew to be far too long. Thanks don't begin to express it.

Needless to say, all errors are my responsibility alone.

Michael Heaney
October 2022

Textual note

I have on the whole transcribed texts exactly as I found them, with three exceptions. I have substituted Arabic numerals for Roman numerals except in regnal numbers. I have followed spelling except in the use of i/j and u/v/vv, where I have followed modern usage for ease of legibility. I have wherever possible avoided the reproduction in original sources of words which are nowadays seen to be grossly offensive.

Introduction

On 10 May 1589 a group of morris dancers from Herne in Kent was brought before the mayor at Canterbury. In the course of their interrogation the musician, one Henry Parkes, averred that 'he hath heard others say that it was never a merry England since men were to go with license being charged that he could not go [about] without license'. This is the first recorded time that anyone makes the equation of morris dancing and 'merry England', but it is an equation that echoes through the centuries and remains prevalent today. What is more, the concept comes not from a writer or thinker, but from a practitioner.

A few years before the Herne dancers' escapade, Robert Langham had described the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Kenilworth and the entertainments provided for her. These included 'a lyvely morisdauns, according too the auncient manner, six daunserz, Mawdmarion, and the fool'. Leaving aside for the moment the interpretation of the word 'auncient', this too is a first: the first time that a sense of history is attached to the dance.

I shall discuss both these accounts more fully later on, but it is worth a moment's reflection that the idea that morris dancing captures the essence of ancient Englishness, inherently carefree and merry, has been present for over four hundred years, and arose just one hundred and fifty years after the first evidence for the dance in England. This does not mean that the dance itself is either ancient (certainly not in the 16th century) or English, but it has served as a beacon of such ever since these first indications.

In *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* David Underdown showed how in the 17th century attitudes to the dance became one of the touchstones by which people displayed their allegiance to Royalist or Roundhead. The Royalist side (forgive this simplistic shorthand) used it as a symbol of traditional values – in other words, of ancient Englishness. The Roundheads, on the other hand, proclaimed it to be antithetical to Englishness: as heathen or Popish (take your pick). It was also associated with disorder, another thread that would return in later years.

The 18th century was the era of the dictionary definitions, which looked abroad to exotic origins among the Moors; but also of theatrical displays which continued to hark back to an English pastoralism. The theatre led indirectly to the interest taken in the morris dance by the early antiquaries, many of whom were interested in Shakespearean scholarship and in understanding the references to and performance of morris dances on the Tudor and early Stuart stage. The culmination of this was the first significant scholarly study of the dance by Francis Douce in 1807 in his essay 'On the Ancient English Morris Dance' published as an appendix to his *Illustrations of Shakspeare*, and from which this present work derives its own title. The pursuit of 'Merry Englishness' continued to form the focus of nineteenth-century interest, and at the same time the fear of unruly disorder continued as a subcurrent in what Alun Howkins called 'the taming of Whitsun',¹ whereby if the continuing practice of morris dancing among the lower social classes could not be brought within a middle-class framework of control, it was discouraged.

¹ Howkins.

The Victorian currents reached a watershed at the end of the 19th century with attempts to find and understand ‘real’ morris dances, culminating in the encounter between Cecil Sharp and the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers on Boxing Day 1899 and the start of the morris ‘revival’. The moment remains iconic, even if its significance is sometimes overplayed. One of the drivers leading to the revival was a quest for ‘authenticity’, another the social Darwinian concept of seeking evolutionary origins and primitive forms. A consequence of the latter was an emphasis on the ‘ancientness’, and the re-assertion of the old Puritan idea that the dance represented something heathen and pre-Christian – except that now the concept was viewed with approbation rather than disfavour.

As ever, morris dancing continued to take on the flavour of the times. Social Darwinism led to an emphasis on the dances as exclusively for male dancers and a rejection of female dancers, and into some associations with race and ethnicity which in retrospect take on a more sombre aspect. The revived dances were now predominantly performed by the middle classes. The taming of morris was essentially complete. In the second half of the 20th century the exclusive maleness disappeared both on historical grounds and as part of the wider movement promoting the equality of the sexes. As we move further into the 21st century there are developments in its theatricality and in its links with other dance forms.

‘Revival’ is sometimes used pejoratively to deprecate the lack of either ancientness or authenticity, but it is undoubtedly the case that morris dancing is now practised more widely than ever before, in a wider variety of forms, and so is both revived and revived. And so it continues. Among the practitioners and spectators of morris dancing it can evoke a sense of ancientness, of Englishness, and more broadly of connecting with the past and with the community. People also do it to keep fit, to socialize with friends, to find a partner, and to entertain and impress by artistry and skill in performance.

‘Tradition’ is a word invoking the sense of both the past and the community, and most morris dancing is certainly seen as a ‘traditional’ activity. But tradition is much more than the static re-enactment of something as it happened in the past. The tradition can be ancient but the form it takes inevitably renews itself in each generation. In an art form as fluid as the dance, where the sole method of transmission until the last century has been by direct demonstration and copying, each performance is necessarily a re-interpretation and re-invention. In a literate and technological society that can record its history in a variety of media, it is easier to know who creates and/or develops a work, be it a tale, or a song, or a morris dance. All ‘traditional’ works were of necessity created by someone, we just don’t know by whom. Finding out how something ‘traditional’ was created or developed does not make it somehow suddenly non-traditional.

When people speak or write of ‘morris dancing’ they – and we as audience – have an idea, shared to a greater or lesser extent, of what it means. This book explores how that understanding has changed over the centuries. However, given the inherent fluidity, it can be difficult to know whether, when someone in the past writes of ‘morris dancing’, they are referring to something we would recognise as morris dancing today. At the same time, if people describe something that we now recognise as morris dancing, but do not name it as such, how can we know that they would share our understanding? This is a particular problem for artistic representations. As a general principle I start from the position that if it is called morris dancing, then it is morris dancing. If descriptions of activities do not identify themselves as

morris dancing, then the evidence must be weighed in each case, and caution exercised in drawing conclusions. In some cases the designation is explicit but refers to something that appears to be known better today under other names (for example, sword dancing). Such instances are considered but not used to trigger a detailed examination of these other forms.

Throughout its history morris dancing has acted as a mirror to society, reflecting the concerns and mores of the times. My aim in this book is to use that mirror in reverse to illuminate the role and the significance of the dance itself. It is primarily a narrative history without an overarching framework of socio-cultural theory. I have also chosen to concentrate on the dance itself and have resisted the temptation to explore many of the wider societal factors such as rural economy, urbanization, or the ebb and flow of the Civil War, beyond what is necessary for the narrative. The book is already long enough, and the complexities of the development of morris dancing are, I hope, sufficiently engaging to hold one's attention on their own terms.

The story begins on 19 May 1448.