

Francis Shergold

His dedication helped preserve morris dancing in Oxfordshire

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Francis Shergold, who has died aged 89, was the former squire and president of Bampton Traditional Morris Men, whose single-minded dedication helped to preserve morris dancing in Oxfordshire villages, and bring it to a wide and appreciative audience through concerts and folk festivals all over Britain.

When the folklorist Cecil Sharp visited the south Midlands in the early 20th century to note and publish the morris dances of the region, the most vibrant group that he witnessed was in Bampton, Oxfordshire, where the dancing dates back to at least the 18th century. Sharp's main source for the dances and tunes was the fiddle-player William "Jinky" Wells. When Wells retired as leader of the dancers in 1949, he was succeeded by Shergold.

Shergold had first appeared with the dancers on the traditional Whit Monday dancing tour in 1935, when he was the dancers' coat-carrier; in the afternoon "Jinky" Wells invited him to dance.

The dancing continued after the second world war, but the 1950s were lean times: Shergold had difficulties finding the right musicians and interesting young men in joining. Village rivalries that led to a breakaway group did not help, and, by 1959, his team had four, instead of six, dancers.

But he was determined to continue the village tradition - on his death bed, "Jinky" Wells had entreated: "Don't let the morris go" - and Shergold slowly built up the team. By the time he retired as squire, or leader, in 1995, there were a couple of dozen dancers, as well as two other teams in Bampton. The strength of his team was confirmed by numerous invitations to dance at gatherings of morris dancers, and at concerts and folk festivals all over Britain and Ireland. Shergold led his dancers at the Royal Albert Hall, the Purcell Rooms and the Royal Festival Hall, in London; at morris dance weekends from Lancashire to Suffolk; and at festivals from Cornwall to Ireland, including those at Sidmouth, Loughborough and Dartmoor.

Shergold was born at Swinbrook, near Eynsham, Oxfordshire; the family moved to Bampton in 1932. His great-grandfather had danced with the morris dancers in the nearby village of Field Assarts during the 1830s. Shergold left school at 13 and worked in a bakery before becoming a groom, then a gardener and finally head gardener at Weald Manor, Bampton. Apart from war service, he stayed at Weald Manor for his entire working life; even as a sergeant in the army, he served

alongside his employer, Major RA Colville. Upon his retirement, Shergold was awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's long service medal.

For Shergold, the main focus of the year was always the Whit Monday tour - now held on Spring bank holiday Monday - when the dancers perform from morning till night in the streets, outside the pubs and in the larger gardens of the residents. Visitors were made very welcome by Shergold and were encouraged to take part in the attendant festivities - the music and singing in the pubs, the barn dance in the car park and the Aunt Sally competition in the pub garden. In addition to his role as squire, Shergold was secretary, musician, dance teacher and master of ceremonies. He was a natural leader, keen to develop everybody's potential, and to maintain the interest of the young dancers once they became teenagers and found other distractions. He did this by treating everyone equally, and encouraging the youngest dancers to dance the showcase two-man jigs. He remarked: "A good dancer must be able to show off just a little bit and enjoy the crowd - he's dancing for the public."

Shergold was also a good singer of folk songs, which he recorded on the Veteran label. He was a bell-ringer in the parish church, one of the most beautiful in Oxfordshire, and a barn dance caller. In 1996, he was awarded the gold badge of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

He was not the only member of his family to become involved in morris dancing. His brother, Roy, joined him as a dancer - their two-man jigs were much admired - and his nephew, Jamie Wheeler, has become the side's principal musician, on melodeon and fiddle. In 1951, after the death of his first wife, he married Ann; she died in 2005. He had no children.

Upon his retirement as squire, he became the honorary president, and a source of good advice to the new squire, Tony Daniels. Every Spring bank holiday Monday, Francis continued to wear his morris kit and, even though his eyesight was failing and he needed a walking frame to get about, he accompanied the dancers all day long.

Francis George Shergold, morris dancer, born 31 January 1919; died 27 November 2008