

MORRIS DANCING of BAMPTON in the BUSH

THERE are still some odd corners of this scarred and rail-ridden old England of ours where all the world and love are young. Such an one is the hamlet of Weald, which is by Bampton-in-the-Bush, and lies in the Thames Valley some few miles from the Oxfordshire and Gloucester border.

Till not so long ago there were no roads to Bampton-in-the-Bush, but just a huge common, stretching for miles round. People who wanted to get from Bampton to the great world just struck out across the common, and thanked heaven if they found themselves at Whitney, or Burford, or Oxford itself as the case might be. Things are not so very different even now, though the roads are there.

Yet somehow or other, Bampton is happy enough, and still more so is Weald, the wonderful little hamlet that nestles under its wing. Weald is a sort of village-Venice, a little land of heart's desire beyond the beyond. There is no road through it, only a maze of flower-bordered streams, and footpaths, and nosegay gardens, and clusters of old cottages that stand at all angles to one another—each round its own corner. Weald-by-Bampton-in-the-Bush is a world to itself. Its people are its own. It would be a shame even to betray the fact that there are idyllic little cottages there for 1s. 6d. a week, with gardens that would keep you in vegetables the year round.

his knees. Uncle Harry avers that, though they are now teaching girls the morris-dance, there was "only one woman as ever he knew" that could do the morris-dance, and that was "Billy's" mother! Most of his dancing, however, "Billy" learnt from his Uncle Charley, who was blind, and is now dead and gone.

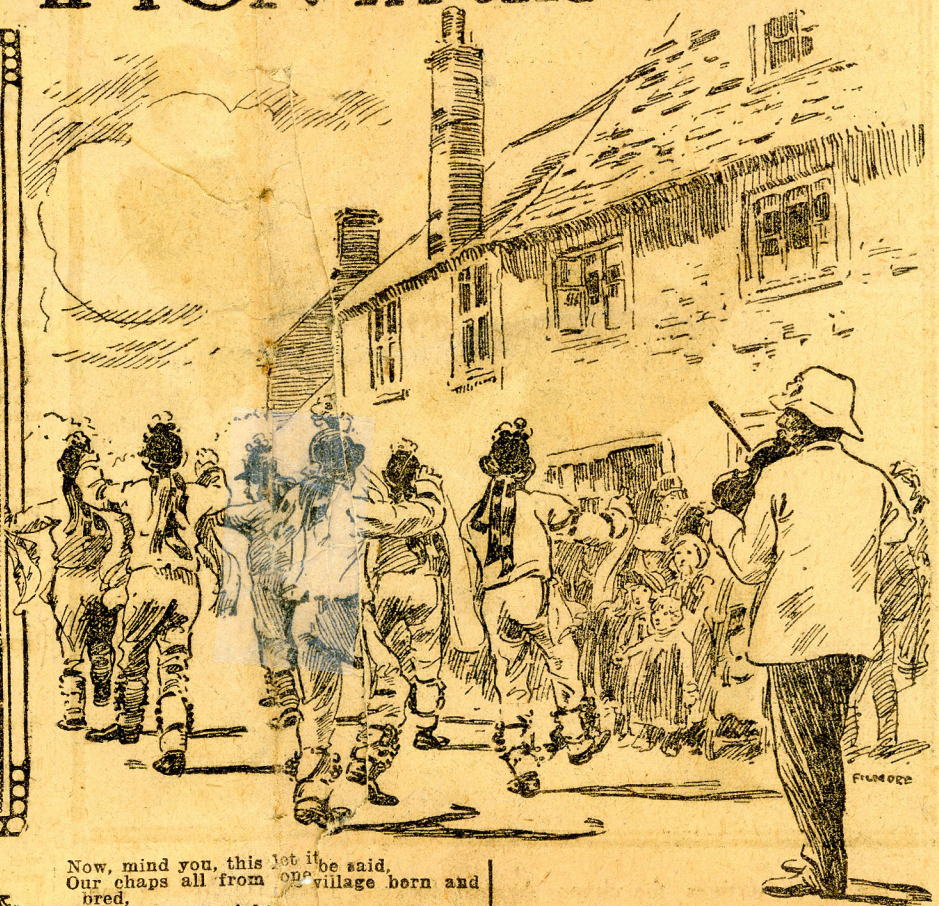
It is at Whitsuntide that "Billy" Wells is in his glory, for it is then that the six chosen "Bampton dancers," with "fool," "squire," "ragman," fiddler and all, turn out with their ribbons and bells and handkerchiefs, and garlanded hats, and white suits, and trip it to the delight of the countryside. "Billy" has been everything in his time, and for years he was the "fool" of the troupe; but after a while, as no one else could remember the old tunes, he himself got hold of an old fiddle, and without a single lesson taught himself to play. Like his Uncle Charley, he, too, was threatened with total blindness at one time, but recovered his sight almost by a miracle.

While his help is naturally sought on every hand, "Billy" Wells is a keen critic of modern morris-dancing. "The music," he says, "is most of it too quick, and the old graceful movements are slurred to keep pace with it. You see very little of the old back-stepping now, which was as pretty a thing as ever you could wish.

"The fiddlers and piano-players of today say they want to put more life into it,



"BILLY" WELLS THE FIDDLER.



BAMPTON IN THE BUSH MORRIS DANCERS

Anyhow, Weald is achieving fame in certain appreciative quarters as the home of the morris-dance. There is a craze for morris-dancing just now, as everyone knows, and school children and factory girls, and even "society" people are learning to keep straight or bent knee as the case may be to the jingle of the bells in suburban town halls. But in Weald-by-Bampton-in-the-Bush they have been morris-dancing of their own free will for 300 years, and as long before that as anyone wishes to claim. It is to this tiny little Oxfordshire hamlet—left out, as it were, in the plan of modern life—that Mr. Cecil Sharp and other enthusiasts have already gone to learn the old tunes and the old steps and the old songs, so that they can bring back into this born-tired century at least some echo of old English merriment and charm.

For others who would know the real spirit of the thing, one can only advise that they should pay a visit to Weald in person, and seek out Mr. William Wells, the present fiddler to the Bampton morris-dancers, who, as a matter of fact, nearly all come from Weald. "Billy" Wells, as the old vicar of Bampton put it, is "the back and belly of the Bampton dancing." The morris-dance is in his blood. Its traditions have been handed down to him from generation to generation—indeed, he himself can remember his great-grandfather, who was a great morris-dancer in his day.

His Uncle Harry, who is 72, but as hale and fit as many a townsman half his age, has danced for 57 years, and is still "squire" to the Bampton troupe. Uncle Harry learnt dancing in the old rigorous days, when the neophyte had to hang to a beam to stretch

but they have lost the old graceful time. When I was a little lad I used to play the old 'whittle,' which was a pipe with three stops to it, and the 'dub,' a sort of tambourine that one held with a string from the little finger and tapped with the free hand when one was playing.

"I would love to have the old instruments, and I believe I could play them still. They used to play much slower on the whittle and dub, but it was very beautiful and you could grasp every movement. I am afraid there are no whittles or dubs to be found hereabouts now. We used to break them up as toys when we were children."

But it is not only as fiddler and clown that "Billy" Wells deserves honour from all who love the old village revel. He is the native laureate of the movement. The poem that he has written on the morris in his own simple language deserves to be treasured as a really classic description of the thing as it should be. It is too long to quote in full, but is a mine of picturesque knowledge such as no book can give.

Here, for instance, is his description of the "morris fool":

The Fool a merryman is he, with ever-ready wit,
With his elastic limbs, as nimble every bit.
He wears a rare head-dress, with sashes broad and ribbons bright.
The village people all make fun and shout,
"Oh my! What a fright!"
With a fat calf's tail and horse's bladder strung
To his short stout staff with a leather thong,
Bells on his shoulders, around his knees,
Lor', to see him, one and all agrees,
In gally-baldy gossoon dressed,
If but a knave they give him best.

Every dancer, the law of the morris demands, must be native-born:

The dancers six all trained, tried men must be,
Picked from the village best you see.

Now, mind you, this let it be said,
Our chaps all from our village born and bred,
With legs as straight as a poplar tree,
They clap all together or bend the knee.

The "Squire's" duty is to cut with his sword a cake, which is distributed to all patrons:

Our oldest hand we call "The Squire," his duty 'tis to do
To carry the sword that's worth a lot, and cuts the cake in two.

The "Ragman" has to collect village offerings:

The "Ragman," too, I will admit, his duty 'tis a hard 'un,
He's got to please the blessed lot, and help them in the bargain.

An interesting point is that every dancer has a special morris-dancing nickname, by which he is known in the troupe:

Our lads a lively lot are they, for nicknames they're not lacking,
For every jolly one of us for that will take some whacking.
There's "Auld Sarah" and "Ood Cokey"—they're the oldest too,
"Buskut," "Granky," "Jokey," "Dickey," "Jacky," "Jingle," too.

"Filly," "Artful"—now count them all well through
And find a number lot I'm sure you that can't do.

It should be mentioned that "Auld Sarah" is really none other than Uncle Harry, while "Granky" and "Artful" are two stalwart brothers of the village.

Very lovingly "Billy" Wells has brought into his rhyme the old tunes that he has known since his childhood:

Our oldest tunes we love so well to you a few I'll tell.
There's "Trunkels," "Bobbing Around," "The Island," "Mary's Dell," "Lumps of Plum-pudding" for "Old Molly," "Oxford," and "The Maid of the Mill," "The Nutting Girl," "Jogging to the Fair" to see our "Constant Bill," "Shepherd's Hey," "Princess Royal," for they are just my stamp,
"Johnny's So Long at the Fair" to see "The Bride in Camp,"
Whilst "Glory's Shears" is picking "The Flowers of Edinburgh" round the corners,
"The Girl I Left Behind" "The Rose Tree," tying up her "Bonny Green Garters."

MORRIS DANCING of Bampton in the BUSH

The members of the Bampton Morris Dance Club, who are to take part in the Bampton Morris Dancing in the Bush, will be seen in the picture on the right. The club was formed in 1902 and has since that time been active in the Bampton Morris Dancing in the Bush. The club has a large number of members and is one of the best in the district. The club has a large number of members and is one of the best in the district. The club has a large number of members and is one of the best in the district.

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