

# Francis Shergold

## Veteran Morris dancer, singer, musician ...

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*Francis Shergold resigned as Squire of the Bampton Morris in November 1995, after an astonishing 60 years as dancer with the side - 45 of those as Squire. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the EFDSS in 1996 ([see our report](#)), as had the former Squire, 'Jinky' Wells, some 38 years before. With the rebirth of MT, it seemed an appropriate time to commission an article on Francis, as he assumed the mantle of Honorary President of the side. At 79, he continues to participate in all the side's activities, including the dancing at times, and we have every expectation that he will continue to do so throughout the coming seasons.*

*Keith Chandler's article follows Francis' career through to the 1980s, and he has suggested that I might like to add a post-script to continue the story, from a personal perspective, through to the present day. I hope that this will be added to the piece in the not too distant future.*

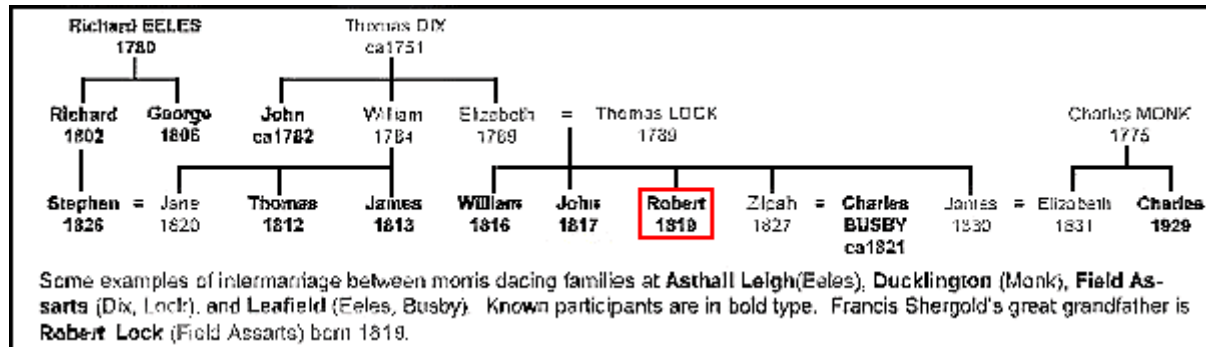
*Rod Stradling*

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Perhaps the best-known Morris dance side of the English South Midlands is that belonging to the small town of Bampton, on the western side of Oxfordshire. While some participants and outsiders have claimed a performance history of up to six hundred years, we can more realistically confirm activity spanning a quarter of that period. \* 11 and \* 15 and \* 17

Among the most prominent handful of performers during the present century is Francis Shergold, born 31st January 1919, who recently retired following a fifty year spell as leader of one of the three currently active Bampton teams. Despite his total integration into the social and cultural life of the town, his father was not a local man. Francis' brother Roy, himself a longtime dancer and, later, fool with the side, thinks that their father, George, was born in Sevenoaks, Kent. \* 2 On the distaff side, however, the family is keyed into an extensive inter-village network of Morris dancers, dating back to the early nineteenth century, at least. Francis' great grandfather (see below) was Robert Lock (1819 - 1907), youngest of three brothers who were dancers in the side at Field Assarts, a hamlet then within the Forest of Wychwood. \* 16





Although I continue to interview and record material on the Bampton Morris tradition, the majority of what follows was collected directly from Francis, his brother Roy, sister Ruth, and mother Lucy in 1980, during a heady period when I effectively lived in Bampton and was recording information on almost a daily basis. In addition to more formal interviews, generally in the homes of informants (\*8 and \*10 are examples here), much of what I collected was gleaned in casual (though often directed and steered) conversation, often in the Shergold side's headquarters of the time, *The Eagle* pub in Church View. In fact, I practically lived in the cottage two doors from that pub for a year. As a result, even where portions of the following paragraphs do not appear in quotes they are generally close paraphrases, written down as soon as possible after they occurred, so that this remains essentially Francis' own story told in his own words (in italics), augmented by those of his immediate family.

When Francis was a young boy the family lived at the toll-bridge at Swinbrook, near Eynsham, on what was then the main Oxford to Cheltenham Road. Later they moved to Standlake, where brother Roy was born in 1925, ending up in Bampton a few weeks before Whitsun in 1932. Shortly afterwards, on leaving school, Francis arranged for a job at Weald Manor, but since he couldn't start until the horses were brought inside during the autumn, he worked for a while at Constables, a bakery, delivering the bread. *'I got fed up with that. Well, I couldn't stand the smell of the dough.'* He then took another job until September, after which he started at the Manor, continuing there for the remainder of his working life. Initially he worked under the head gardener, later becoming head gardener himself. \*10



Whit Monday 1938. Right to left - Jinky Wells (fiddle), Harry Hampton, Bob Whitlock, Francis Shergold (crossing to nearest corner), Bill Brown, Fred Pettifer (Francis' mentor), Reg Whitlock.

By the date of Francis' first involvement with the Morris dancers, the recent problems caused by personality conflicts - which resulted in two distinct Morris dance sides appearing for a number of years from 1927 on - had been resolved. \*12 and \*13 During the 1930s there certainly were Whit Mondays when a second team made an appearance, but it was that led by fiddler William Nathan 'Jinky' Wells (1868-1953) who annually kept the tradition going without fail.

Francis remembers watching the Morris team practise prior to Whitsun outside the Malt Shovel pub (now a garage), flanking the town square. Many of the local kids used to watch the dancers and some would be invited to have a dance in the set, perhaps while a dancer went inside for a pint \*10 (other men, including Ted Lay and Arnold Woodley, have told me this also). The Shergolds knew the Wells family and it was 'Jinky' who asked him to join. Francis' grandfather, 'a very strict man', was well aware of the problems caused by the amount of

alcohol they were given while out dancing, and commented to Francis' mother Louise, "You're not going to let him join the Morris." \* 8

But she did anyway, and Wells taught Francis to dance. By this date, however, *'he was a bit blind and he couldn't always see if you were going wrong. He would show you certain movements, but mostly you had to pick it up by watching the other dancers ... Jinky used to say, "I don't mind being blind so much, but I don't like being deaf - it affects my playing. I can't hear the fiddle."* He was a grand old boy.' There were effectively two cliques within the team when he first danced. The older dancers didn't always talk or socialise with the younger ones. One veteran, Reg Whitlock, *'was so quiet you thought he was miserable ... The one I always got on best with was Fred Pettifer. He had a good sense of humour and was friendly. I based myself (i.e. dancing style) on him. I never told him that ... The older ones used to do the jigs - Bill Brown, Reg Whitlock ... I learned the jigs very early on. But it wasn't like today. [Nowadays] the older ones will let the young ones have a jig.'* \* 10



His first Whit Monday was 1935. He began in the morning by carrying the coats on a strap slung over the shoulder. *'We don't do it now. I was glad to go round with the Morris.'* He was already dressed in dancing whites, so during the afternoon Jinky said to him, "Well boy, I think it's about time you had a dance now." \* 1 *'I danced through the afternoon. Well, as many as I could get into.'* \* 7 ; After the day's dancing had ended all those involved returned to Wells' house to divide the money among the adult members. Jinky put nine bowls on the table - one each for musician, six dancers, fool and cake carrier - and the takings were split into equal portions. Afterwards, there were a few coppers left over on the table and Wells told them to give them to Francis. In addition, *'They all gave me some of their share. Two bob (i.e. ten pence) each or something. Might have been only five pence (i.e. half the previously mentioned amount). I got twelve bob that first year ... Probably gave it to my mother to buy a new pair of boots.'* The kit he first danced in was 'scrounged'. *'My mother scrounged it. She helped the Morris a lot. Went round the big houses - Bliss's, Colville's. You couldn't buy white trousers that time of day. Well, cricket whites, but they weren't no good. People would say, "I've got a pair of white trousers, do you want them?" Bowler hats ... You never refused.'* \* 10 His mother told me, "You'd try and find someone who had played tennis or something." Another possible venue was jumble sales. Reg 'Scudgel' Tanner, who had danced in the immediate post First War period but had since retired, gave Francis his old bell pads. \* 8

As to pre-Whitsuntide practices, *'About a month before they'd start - perhaps once a week. They never used to bother much in them days. They all knew it ... We never used to practise much until we went to the Albert Hall the first time (i.e. in 1967) ... You could always tell me - I was always on the wrong foot. Well, Jinky couldn't see to correct you.'* \* 10 Then, as now, the tradition was well able to accommodate stylistic divergences.

He never remembers any aggravation between the two teams during the 1930s. *'I think we just used to pass each other in the street, like we do today.'* The crowds weren't so big as they are nowadays, but *'they always came. There always seemed to be plenty of people around, anyway.'* Unlike today, they never used to arrange specific times to dance at the big houses. *'You used to meet at eight thirty or whatever time it was to start dancing and you wouldn't know which house you were going to at what time. People stayed at home at Whitsun then. Well, the transport wasn't what it is now; and they were a part of the village. Jinky just used to play a bit of a tune as we walked up to the house and they would be waiting ... The vicar would find you about four or five o'clock and say, "Would you like to have tea at the Vicarage?" Of course, you had to give them time to get the table ready.'* \* 10



Whit Monday 1948. Right to left - Jinky Wells, Francis Shergold, Roy Shergold, Reg Whitlock, Arnold Woodley, Bob Whitlock, George Dafter (fool), Ted Dixey.



There certainly was nothing like the extensive social scene that nowadays exists at Whitsun. Sometimes Jinky Wells, Headington Quarry concertina player William Kimber, and Ken Loveless, a revivalist dancer and concertina pupil of Kimber's, *'would sit in the Talbot Whit Saturday night and play for themselves, and people used to love to hear them play.'* \*10 On a similar tack, other than Whit Monday, Francis only remembers dancing at one fete in Stokenchurch during his first five years of involvement. \*4 This seemed like a far distant place at the time, and he recalls how the *'older men went into the pub for the drink and brought us out a lemonade or something - we weren't old enough to drink - while we sat on the wall and chatted up the girls. We thought it was great, wearing Morris dancing clothes.'* \*9



Whit Monday 1961. Right to left - Colin Knight, Alec Wixey, John Knight, Peter Alum, Frank Purslow (fool), Francis Shergold, Reg Hall (fiddle).

One incidental anecdote told to me by Ruth Wheeler, Francis's sister, reveals something of village politics. During the 1930s the Shergold family lived next door to the Buckinghams and were good friends with one another. On Whit Monday the kids from both families would go out collecting with their floral garlands in the morning, then, because Francis danced for Jinky, and the Buckinghams for the rival team, "we didn't talk to each other for the rest of the day." \*6

When the war started Francis enlisted in the army but, even so, almost always managed to get home for Whitsun. *'Well, our company commander was Early of Witney, one of the blanket people, so he knew what Whitsun meant to me. Even when we went to France I managed to get back. I think I only missed one year during the war.'* He fought in Europe: *'Only France and Germany. I was wounded twice, but I never brought it back to Blighty.'* Wells kept the team going by using men who either worked on the land or were too young to join up. \*10 Local children continued to watch the practices outside the Malt Shovel. Roy Shergold told me, "You knew the dances before you started." One year, probably 1940, Roy stood in for one of the dancers at the Whit Sunday practice, and Jinky told him that he would have to dance in the team the following day. "I thought that was great." \*3

Some time after the war it was agreed that Francis would be the leader (Squire) and Arnold Woodley would teach the dances. In 1950 George Hunt and another newcomer (whose name is no longer recalled) joined the team. At the practice behind the *Lamb* on Whit Sunday Arnold said to Francis that these two were not good enough to go out the following day. Arnold said, "What if someone should ask who had taught them?" Francis replied, "What's the problem, Arnold? Tell them I did." Arnold felt so strongly over the quality of the newcomers' dancing that he wouldn't turn out on the Monday. \*5 By the following year he had raised his own team, consisting mainly of young boys, so that throughout the 1950s there were again two sides touring the town at Whitsun.

During that decade of post-war prosperity there was a great deal of apathy in Bampton concerning the morris. But although they sometimes did bookings at fetes and similar venues with only five dancers, Francis could always raise a full set of men for Whit Monday. That is, until 1959. \*4 Regular dancer Peter Alum came to see him some time before Whitsun to say that Arnold Woodley would, as usual, be taking a team out. Francis commented that as long as someone was going out he wasn't worried. Then, just before the day, Peter came round to say that Arnold was not going out after all. Francis,



Whit Monday 1970. Francis Shergold (in mid air) dancing a double jig with his brother Roy (in fool's kit). Reg Hall in whites at right. Rod Stradling playing melodeon.

determined not to allow the dancing to lapse, quickly organised a scratch team consisting of himself and Roy, Peter Alum and John Knight. Revivalist dancer Russell Wortley from Cambridge acted as fool, and Jack Newton from Aylesbury played fiddle. Newton couldn't always remember how the tunes went, so had to consult a notebook he carried in which they were written down. *'It was the best dancing we've done. You can't go wrong with only four. I don't know if it was apathy or what. I went round and people said, "I'll see you," but never did.'*\*<sub>1</sub>

In 1980 Francis was able to comment that during the recent past - even as recently as five or six years previously - *'I used to feel embarrassed to walk down the street in Bampton dressed in whites. I don't know if there was a lot of new people came into the village and they didn't know what the morris was all about or what. If there were three or four of you that was all right, but if I was on my own I felt really embarrassed. Nowadays people will stop you and say, "Where are you going today?" There seems to be a lot more interest in the village.'* Eighteen years on and that comment still holds true.



29 May 1983. Whit Sunday practise at the rear of The Eagle. Francis Shergold centre, Jamie Wheeler (Francis' nephew) playing melodeon.

While concentrating on his substantial achievements in the Morris dance field, we must not overlook Francis' many other talents. Like many Bampton children before and since, he, brother Roy and sister Ruth perambulated the town on Whit Monday with their floral garlands.\*<sub>4</sub> For half a century, beginning at age fourteen, he was one of the bellringers in the church tower. Until recent years he acted on occasion as a caller for barn dances. I recall being at several back in the early 1980s, and how his instructions were always clear and concise, and the choice of dances perfect for the competence level of his audiences. He is also a good singer in the southern English country style, and currently appears at various venues in a quartet with his nephew Jamie Wheeler (one of the regular musicians for the Morris) on melodeon, and dancers John Grout on fiddle and cello and Martin Landray on banjo. Francis also plays both mouth organ and melodeon, again in the no-nonsense, straight-ahead traditional southern style, and over the years he has played for the Morris on those occasions when their regular musicians were unavailable.\*<sub>7</sub> and \*<sub>14</sub>

In fact, 'no-nonsense' and 'straight-ahead' are perfect terms with which to describe Francis Shergold, a man whose life has been intimately bound up in multiple aspects of the folk tradition. Although he dances very little these days, he is still often to be seen out in whites with his dancers, as he has been for over six decades.

Keith Chandler





**Shergold, left, dancing in 1972 with the Bampton Traditional Morris Men Brian Shuel/Collections**



# Francis Shergold

*The Guardian*  
January 13<sup>th</sup> 2009

## His dedication helped preserve morris dancing in Oxfordshire

**F**rancis 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.

**Derek Schofield**

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





## Francis Shergold 1919 - 2008

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Francis Shergold died on November 27th, just two months shy of his 90th birthday. He was widely known in the folk world as long-time leader of the morris dance side at Bampton in Oxfordshire, a position honoured some years ago by the EFDSS when awarding him their Gold Badge.

When he first started dancing, in 1935, there was only one active morris team, that led by William 'Jingy' Wells. During his active career he saw the brief reactivation and subsequent demise (after Whitsun 1941) of the second team, led by the Tanner family; the breaking away by Arnold Woodley in 1950 to form a second side composed mostly of young boys, which continued until the end of that decade; the regrouping of that set (now with grown men) in 1970, so that, once again, two sides were competing for dance spots on Whit Monday; and, finally (to bring the situation up to the present), the breakaway group from the Woodleys in 1974, to form another set, which led to the situation of three distinct teams out and about on the dancing Monday.

I rehearse all this to highlight a kind of ironic paradox. When he first joined there were half a dozen active dancers. By 1959 there was so little interest in the custom that he was forced to take out a set with only four men, using outsiders from the folk revival as musician and fool. On Spring Bank Holiday Monday this year there were more than fifty dancers spread between the three teams.



And it was Francis who kept it going, firstly by being there when needed as a teenager, then assuming the responsibility of leadership upon the death of 'Jingy' Wells, and even appearing in whites long after formally passing on the leadership to Tony Daniels. In fact, famously, he told the story of how Wells, on his deathbed, had said to him, "Don't let the morris go." Through lean times and prosperous he never did; now the morris has been forced to let him go.

The accompanying images date from 26 May 2008, and feature what was surely his final appearance with his dancers. Several images show him, walking-frame in hand, joining in the final dance-off movement of *Bonny Green Garters*. Over the course of seven decades he must have performed that many hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. Registered medically blind for a good number of years (though retaining some degree of vision), he was able nevertheless to recognise people he knew either by their voice, or (in my case) by my bulk! And he remained cheery throughout.





Two months ago he suffered a stroke, and was taken into the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford. His health deteriorated steadily, and he finally succumbed on the 27th. Some of us outsiders will have the honour of attending the annual morris dancers' party in Bampton tomorrow evening. I would expect the mood to be a little less boisterous than usual, but nevertheless celebratory, honouring a man with a life-spanning career as dancer. In an obituary for Arnold Woodley, written thirteen years ago, I said that the morris would never seem the same again. Those sentiments are certainly echoed here. It will carry on now but, without the presence of Francis, that sense of history, extending back to into the dim and distant past before many of us aficionados were born, will be missing, and the whole thing seem ever more rooted in the 21st century.

Our sympathies are extended to his brother Roy and sister Ruth, and their children. Rest in peace.

Keith Chandler - 28.11.08

The funeral will be at St Mary's Church, Bampton, on Monday 8th December, at 2:00. His family have requested that people do not take flowers or wreaths but if you want to give something, a donation to the Bush Club (Bampton) would be appreciated. Also would any Morris men please refrain from wearing whites. Thank you.

Tony Daniels - 30.11.08

You may also wish to re-read Keith Chandler's excellent [article](#) on Francis, which has been on this site since 1998. And you may also be interested in the Ellen Ettlinger webpage, which contains some early (1940s/50s) Bampton photos: <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness-Dance-images-from-Ettlinger.html> - Ed.