

THE DANCING ENGLISH



THE ENGLISH
FOLK DANCE & SONG SOCIETY

IN the 17th century we were known as "The Dancing English" and we still have in this land a larger variety of native traditional dances than is found in any other European country. These folk dances are of great antiquity, handed down from generation to generation, by practice and country custom. Though the townspeople abandoned their native dances for the imported forms, many of the home-grown dances have survived in country places and even in certain industrial areas. In Yorkshire and Northumberland, the miners continue to practise their local sword dances, and in parts of Lancashire and in the Midlands, the Morris dances are still alive. Besides these ritual men's dances, many of the old community processions and social country dances survive. Nearly everyone must have heard of the "Helston Floral Dance", but equally well known in their own locality are the "Cumberland Square Eight", "The Morpeth Rant" and the "Durham Reel".

In this Brochure will be found an account of a few of these living dances and it will tell how in hundreds of towns and villages, people who have long forgotten their local dances, are re-discovering and adopting them to their great delight.



[Photo : W. Fisher Cassie

THE NORTH SKELTON SWORD DANCE PERFORMED AT THE STRATFORD-UPON-AVON FESTIVAL, 1947

THE SWORD DANCES

ENGLISH traditional sword dancing is confined to the North-East. Briefly, there are two distinct types—one in Yorkshire and one in Northumbria (i.e. Northumberland and Durham). The distinction depends on the type of sword used. In Yorkshire it is long and stiff and may be of steel or wood, and in Northumbria it is invariably of steel and, in form, short and flexible. Let us begin in Yorkshire at Flamborough Head with the dance of the fishermen.

For the greater part of the dance the eight men are linked up in a ring by the wooden swords, held left-handed, each man grasping the "point" of his neighbour's sword in his right hand. The figures are named after, and correspond to, the weaving or threading operations used in net or mat-making. Danced at a great pace, in spite of heavy fishermen's boots, the dance ends with the weaving of the swords themselves into a lock or wheel.



THE ROYAL EARSDON SWORD DANCERS

[Photo : W. Fisher Cassie

North of Flamborough are the Plough Stots of Sleights and Goathland. Theirs is a more restrained type of dance performed with steel swords held right handed. The dance is divided into a number of separate figures, each figure ending with a "lock". The team is eight in number, but most of the figures are for six men only—the extra dancers, the "Toms", taking round the money boxes while the dance goes on. Other villages in this area once had their Plough Stots, but the Plough Monday festival has almost died out.

A spontaneous revival of a sword tradition that had died out occurred in North Skelton after the last war. Skelton is in the ironstone mining district of Cleveland, which ran into hard times at the end of the 1914-1918 war. Two men living in the district, but out of touch with each other, Winspear and Featherstone, had many years before been members of the Loftus sword dancers, and each conceived quite independently the idea of teaching a team of unemployed men to dance the sword dance and incidentally raise a little money for their families. Winspear called his team "North Skelton" and Featherstone called his "Lingdale". Both teams are still active, and the present musician of the North Skelton team, George Tremain, who succeeded Winspear, is a well-known accordion player.

Two other living Yorkshire sword dances are located near Sheffield at Handsworth and Grenoside. The Handsworth dance is for eight men and the Grenoside for six. In both dances the costumes bear signs of their ancient origin. The Handsworth men



[Photo : J. Tindale

THE GOATHLAND PLOUGH STOTS, PERFORMING IN THEIR VILLAGE ON PLOUGH MONDAY, 1948

wear lambswool caps, half of the cap dyed blood red, the other half left white. The Grenoside captain wears a hat of hare's skin, the head of the hare over his own forehead and the tail hanging down his back.

The Sword dance was once a part of a dramatic ritual. It is called for convenience the Folk Play or Plough Play and was acted at Christmas or on Plough Monday. Cecil Sharp, whose name is identified with the great work of preservation of the English folk dances and songs, and who recorded these sword dances, secured a fine example of the Folk Play and sword dance at Ampleforth. Versions of this play without the dance are known throughout the British Isles under the generic title of the "Mummer's Play".

One of the illustrations shows the Marshfield Paper Boys, a group of Mummers who still act their play each winter. They disguise themselves with streamers of paper which hang down over their faces. This habit of disguising with masks or by blacking the face also persists in the Sword Dance and the Morris Dance. It is believed that it was the habit of blacking the face which gave the name "Morisco" or "Morrice" to the Morris Dance, the dancers looking like black-a-moors. But on this occasion we must keep off folklore and be content to go on describing the dances themselves.

The short flexible sword of the Northumbrian dancers is known as a "Rapper", possibly a corruption of scraper for the "sword" has more the appearance of a trade tool than of a weapon. This dance is also a linked-up team dance and consists of a number



THE ABBOTS BROMLEY HORN DANCE

[Photo : J. Chettleburgh]



THE JOLLY JACKS OF ANDOVER, HANTS

[Photo : Fox]

of figures each ending in a "lock" of the interwoven sword blades. Much of the dancing involves "stepping", a brisk form of tap dancing. With the continuous tapping, and the close formation (due to the shortness of the swords), the whole performance seems most complex and is very spectacular.

In Northumbria there were several active sword dance teams up to the outbreak of the Second World War. A strong local stimulus to the local survival was given by the annual Tournament held at Newcastle in connection with the Music Festival. The competition to win the "trophy" was a great incentive to the teams that took part. The names of these dance-teams have been famous in the North for many years—Winlaton, Earsdon, Walbottle, Beadnell, Swalwell, etc., all mining villages.

Although, with just a few exceptions, both types of dance have lost the dramatic setting of the "Folk Play" they still have relics of the ceremony and the "Characters" themselves appear on the scene. There is invariably a Clown or Captain who sings a "calling on" song to introduce the "actors so bold"—the dancers. Often there is "Betty"—a man-woman who dances round the outside of the set flouncing her skirts. These characters may seem just shadows to-day, but they also occur in the Midland Morris Dances along with the Hobby Horse.

In earlier days, the characters were of as much importance to the annual festival as the dancers, for the play they acted within the dancing set, was the drama of the dying world of winter—the contest between death and resurgent life. The local dancers are still regarded by the villagers as harbingers of spring and life. In the ceremony about to be described the annual visit of the performers to the local farmers is looked upon as necessary to the continuance of fertility.

THE HORN DANCE

IN Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire, we have an ancient folk ceremony which, although it has been called a Morris Dance and was described by Cecil Sharp among the English Sword Dances, seems at first glance to bear no resemblance to either. A procession led by six dancers, each bearing a set of stag antlers, and consisting of ten in all, winds, serpentine fashion, along the lanes and through the streets. The tail of this procession consists of a diminutive hunter, armed with cross-bow, and three characters already familiar to us—the Hobby Horse, the Fool or Clown, and the "Maid Marion" or Betty. These characters



[Photo : W. Fisher Cassie

WILLIAM KIMBER

Traditional musician and dancer of Headington, Oxfordshire

give us the clue to the connection with our other English folk rituals. They are the "Medicine Men" of the old forest life and pagan times. The animal dancers are themselves "medicine fools" who have their own specific ritual. Three of the six sets of antlers are painted black and three are white. As the procession winds and twists, the two sets of three seem continually to be courting and avoiding battle. But the single file trail is not always followed. At regular intervals, the line of ten breaks up into two lines of five, each confronting the other. Then the white stags and black stags are brought face to face for the contest. They surge forward, recoil and surge again, the antagonists passing through each other's ranks to occupy the other's position. Again they attack one another and again pass through the opposite rank. Then the opposing forces melt into Indian file and wind off to their next appointed place.

This ancient fertility rite might have died out had not the Church taken it under its wing as a local pagan custom which might cause trouble if it were not regulated. The Horns, Hobby Horse, costumes and



THE BAMPTON MORRIS MEN PERFORMING IN A GARDEN OF THEIR VILLAGE ON WHIT MONDAY

[Photo : Topical Press

other regalia hang in the Church throughout the year until the September Wakes Week, when they are brought out by the vicar and handed to the performers. The first "run" of the dancers is made outside the vicarage. The last "run" of the day is reserved for the main street in Abbots Bromley, before the dancers sit down to a feast in one of the ancient inns. After that the Horns and regalia go back to the Church for another twelve months. The money collected by the Horn dancers goes to the upkeep of the Church, when enough has been set aside for repairs and renewals of the regalia and costumes. One local craftsman who played a notable part in the recent history of the Horn Dance was the wheelwright, Mr. Robinson, senior, from whom Mr. J. Buckley, the music critic of the *Birmingham Post*, received the old melodies that had been lost by the dancers themselves, and passed them on to Cecil Sharp after Sharp had published his description of the dances. Mr. Robinson's son constructed a complete set in replica of the old regalia of the Horn Dance. These are preserved at Cecil Sharp House.

Standing in front of the dancers are Billy Wells, with his fiddle; on the extreme right, the Fool; and in the centre the Cake Bearer, with the cake impaled on a sword, the blade of which is encircled by a bunch of flowers.



THE PADSTOW HOBBY HORSE WITH HIS CLUBMAN

[Photo : *Western Morning News*]

THE HOBBY HORSE FESTIVALS

THE "Horse" which is just one of several characters in the Horn Dance, Morris Dances, and in the Folk Play, is the sole figure in the Minehead May Day custom. At Padstow on May Day the Horse has a single attendant, the Clubman.

There were at one time many such examples of Magic "Horses". The Hooden Horse in Kent ; the Mari Llwd in Wales ; the Hobby of Ormskirk ; the Pony of Dorset. In Derbyshire and Yorkshire the central figure is not a horse, but a Ram or "Old Tup". The "Tup" was introduced into the kitchens at Christmas to "smell" out imaginary culprits such as the man who had not given to the church collection, the women who gossiped, and the girl who kicked off the bedclothes when she dreamed of her sweetheart. The Minehead Horse, starting his day by the magic pond, perambulates the parish, occasionally lowering his head before the entrance to certain houses.

The Padstow Horse first ushers in the May and carries the spirit of it through the town and throughout the day. At the bidding of the "Clubman" the Horse "dies" and springs into life again, sweeping his newly-tarred skirt against the bystanders. Each tar-stain on face or clothes is a token of good luck. Every now and then the Horse catches a young girl and tucks her under his skirt, from which she emerges blessed with the May spirit.

THE MORRIS DANCE

IN the Derbyshire village of Winster the Morris is a Maytime or Whitsuntide procession danced by two long lines of men dressed in white. One line has plain hats and one line has garnished hats. Two "sides" dancing opposite one another and dressed in contrast are fairly common in the European Morris. They represent the "uglies" and the "beautifuls", the blacks and the whites, the Winters and the Summers. The white handkerchiefs, flowers and ribbons add to the general impression of gaiety and vitality.

The Cotswold Morris team is limited to three men in each file; there is no distinction made between the files except that one is "odd" and one "even". The dances include processionals and set pieces and the dancers have pads of bells fastened to their legs, which ring as they move.

Whit Monday at Bampton is the only living Cotswold Morris festival that has survived this war. That is due entirely to the persistence and the genius of "Jingle" Wells, the fiddler and the team's "Squire" for the last thirty years. Although practically blind and over eighty, Jingle can dance and sing and fiddle and talk with the gusto he showed thirty years ago when Cecil Sharp first noted the dances and their tunes.



[Photo : Western Morning News]

THE INVITATION DANCE AT THE HELSTON FURRY



THE BACUP COCONUT DANCERS, PERFORMING IN THEIR VILLAGE ON EASTER MONDAY [Photo : Associated Newspapers Ltd]

But there were other traditions alive before the war that one day may be seen again—Chipping Camden, Eynsham and Abingdon.

William Kimber of Headington, who first started Cecil Sharp reviving the folk dance, produced several Headington sides during the period between the two wars, but country people move about much more than they used to do, and the loss of one experienced Morris dancer is enough to wreck the side. Now Kimber is starting once again with a new side.

Two traditional Morris teams still dancing in Lancashire are the Royton Morris and the Bacup Coconut dancers. Both have been encouraged to revive their teams by the growing public interest in folk dancing, and by the Society providing opportunities for the teams to appear at its Festivals and performances. The Royton Morris owes much to Maud Karpeles, who noted, and later published the details of the dance. It is essentially a procession like the Derbyshire Morris, but short lengths of cotton rope, the “slings”, take the place of handkerchiefs. Bells are worn but are hardly noticeable, for they are fastened to the clogs, which make a rhythmic clatter calling for a constant fortissimo from the concertina and drum band. The team consists of ten dancers, two sides of four men, with “centres” at either end, and a “manager” who calls the changes of figure and blows a whistle when he wants to indicate some major change of formation. This procession was formerly associated with the rush-cart, which inaugurated the annual spring clean of barns and houses and the strewing of fresh green rushes.



[Photo : John Gay]

MORRIS DANCERS AT THAXTED, ESSEX

The Bacup dance is in many ways the most extraordinary survival in England. Performed by eight men completely disguised like black-a-moors and dressed in white barrel skirts over black breeches, the dance varies from an "Indian file" procession to rings and squares. On the hands and knees are fastened small discs of wood—the "nuts"—with a large disc at the waist. With the nuts they beat a tattoo in chorus and in question and answer. They have another dance performed with garlands, in quadrille formation.

The tunes that are used for the dances have an interest of their own. Some are derived from folk songs of the remote past. Others from the popular songs of last century. The English Folk Dance and Song Society is concerned with the songs and tunes just as much as the dances.

This brief account of some of the living dance traditions, will serve to show that the Society is not just trying to put back something that died long ago, but rather to link up the people of this country with their own traditions and their music and dance inheritance. The Ministry of Education and many Local Education Authorities are helping the Society to restore to the English people the songs and dances of their country.

The object of the Society is to help every person, or group of people, who want to sing their own songs and dance their own dances. In the past two years nearly three hundred towns and villages have formed social Groups affiliated to the Society. The Society bases its appeal to the general public upon the simple form of folk dance evolved for community



THE
ROYTON
MORRIS MEN

celebration. These community dances are presented for immediate enjoyment without the need either for preliminary instruction or practice. For instruction in the more complex forms of folk dance, teachers are supplied to colleges, schools, youth clubs, young farmers' clubs, and every conceivable institution, or organization.

At Cecil Sharp House, the National Centre of the Society, built in memory of its founder, is a Library, devoted to the study of folk dances and songs, and a bureau providing information of every kind. Text-books, records, pamphlets and other publications can be purchased directly, or by post.



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