Morris Dancing

The origins of the tradition are lost in ancient time, but we know the dance is quite old, possibly derived from pre-Christian rites, passed down from generation to generation. In the English village of Bampton in Oxfordshire, the Morris has been performed at Whitsuntide every year (except in time of war) for well over 500 years.

No one really seems to know why it's called Morris, how old the tradition is, where it originated, whether Druids were ever involved, or if it really promotes fertility. But we do know that it's old enough to have been banned by Cromwell, and that Shakespeare mentioned the dance in several of his works; one of his star actors, Will Kemp, was a known to be a "Morrice Dauncer".

Traditionally, Morris dance was performed exclusively by men. Nowadays, it is done by groups ("Teams" or "Sides") of men and/or women, all over the English-speaking world. It's a living tradition that evolves and grows over time, with new dances being added and styles developed. Enthusiasts are attracted to the dance by the challenge of athletic performance, and to honor its roots as a community celebration.

Bampton Morris

Claims have often been made that the performance of Morris dancing in Bampton at anything up to six hundred years. While this may actually be true, there is simply no evidence to support such a claim. The first written reference discovered (so far, at least) occurs as late as 1847, although that source clearly indicates that the performances by the dancers were a regular annual feature of Bampton life at that date. Further evidence, less precise but none the less convincing, can be teased from the names of men known to be dancers. Two of these were born in the 1770s, and given that men typically joined the dance set when aged about eighteen or twenty, it seems logical to assume that there had been Morris performances in Bampton during the 1790s.

Perhaps the best-known member of the dance side was William Nathan Wells (1868 - 1953), better known as 'Jingy' or 'Jinky' (different people have different pronunciations). By the time he first joined the set in 1887 members of his family had been involved for at least three generations. His activity included the roles of dancer, fool and musician, and spanned more than six decades. Unusually, in 1914 he complied a manuscript detailing the history of Morris dancing in Bampton as far back as memories of his oldest relatives could reach, to about 1840.

In addition to the annual Whit Monday performances in Bampton itself, there were visits to other fairs at nearby locations, such as Aston, Buckland, Leafield, and even as far as Kirtlington, where they competed against other Morris sets at the famous Lamb Ale, last held about 1862. But this was a time when old customs were in decay, and Morris dancing was being abandoned at numerous locations throughout the south Midlands. Between 1660 and 1900 more than one hundred and fifty villages and towns sustained a morris set; by the end of that period only a handful were left. Bampton continued, spurred on by the enthusiasm of William Wells and the fact that a number of musicians who knew the morris tunes lived in the town. Even so, the impression is of a lean couple of decades, highlighted by a decline in local support and a struggle to induct new dancers.

All this was to change, however, with the explosion of interest both generated and sustained by the first folk revival, spearheaded by Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal, from about 1906 onwards. The Bampton Morris, as one of the few old sets still active, began to receive a considerable amount of attention and patronage from both outsiders and locals. In 1907 they managed to get replacement costumes; from 1909 to 1914 the technical advice of William Wells, Arthur Dixey, James Portlock, and other old dancers was sought as the dances and tunes were noted down, probably for the first time; and the team was invited to celebrations in places such as Reading and London. The war took away many of the young men, and for the first time in recorded history the Whit Monday performances were suspended during 1917 and 1918. However, Wells had recently taught the dances to a group of men at Alvescot, and on the Whit Monday 1919 two of these stepped into the reformed Bampton set. One stayed only that year, but the older, William Flux, had married a daughter of long-time lead dancer Thomas Tanner, and became the organiser of the team. This brought him into conflict with Wells - Flux wanted them to dance more at Pubs, Wells at the private houses - and this reached crisis point in 1925. The following year Wells refused to play for them, so both Bertie Clark from Alvescot and Sam Bennett from Ilmington were drafted in to provide music. In 1927, for the first time in recorded history, two teams appeared on the streets: the old side under Tanner and Flux, and a young side recently raised by Wells. They continued in relatively peaceful co-existence for some years, but by the mid 1930s performances by the Tanner side were more sporadic, with only Wells fielding a team most Whit Mondays. The final appearance by the Tanner team was in 1941, and it was left to Wells to keep it going during the war, and beyond. For some time, Wells had suffered failing eyesight, and this, coupled with his advanced age, forced him to retire as regular musician after 1948. Bertie Clark

was again contracted and played through until 1958. Before this, however, a further split in the camp prompted the formation in 1950 of a second team, led by Arnold Woodley, and consisting mainly of young boys. As these boys got older, some migrated into the grown-up set, by then led by Francis Shergold. In 1959 the Woodley set appeared with a full complement, but the Shergold side could only manage to field four dancers, plus an imported musician and fool. The following year again saw a single team, as Arnold Woodley temporarily retired. During the 1950s and 60s the second folk revival once again benefited the Bampton Morris, as crowds of outsiders poured into the town on Whit Monday. So, a single team was again active during the 1960s, and once more the performance opportunities broadened in scope, with the side being invited to dance at prestigious venues such as the Albert Hall. Woodley revived his side in 1970, and this ultimately split in two several years later, and in 1974 Bampton fielded three distinct sets. That situation continues to the present day, and on that one holiday in late spring (the actual timing was changed from Whit Monday to Spring Bank Holiday Monday during this period) each side follows its own course around the town, courteously avoiding one another.

The history of Morris performance in Bampton needs to be viewed within the context of changing social and economic trends. From its earliest days the dancing tradition was jealously guarded within specific families, and it was policy to keep the number of men involved to a bare minimum, so as to maximise the share out of any money collected. (To this day certain dances are still only known and performed by a couple of dancers, eg Bacca Pipes). In these more prosperous days, the social base has broadened, and each team now has a dozen, or even two dozen, members. Each man absorbs whatever he needs to perform within the set, and the tradition is flexible enough to accommodate minor variations in style.

Keith Chandler, June 2002