

## THE BAMPTON MORRIS

1967

The Morris dancers of Bampton-in-the-Bush, Oxfordshire, are one of the four surviving TRADITIONAL Cotswold Morris teams, the others being Abingdon, Chipping Camden and Headington Quarry. They are, however, unique in that they are the only one of the four to have had an apparently continuous existence, uninterrupted by periods of inactivity and subsequent revival. They remain, too, an integral part of the normal life of the village and membership of the team is usually restricted to men resident in the village. There are several local families who traditionally claim that they have been associated with the Morris for 200 years or more, and local tradition has it that the team is at least 600 years old. Their late fiddler, William "Jinky" Wells, was taught the dances by his grandfather, who had been taught by his grandfather, who in turn was carrying on a family connection with the Morris extending, so he claimed, over many generations. Another local family, the Tanners, also have a family tradition of membership of the team covering three or more centuries, and there seems little reason to doubt this as tanning was one of the oldest industries of the village in bygone times.

Although the great folk-music collector, Cecil Sharp, made notations of the dances and music many years ago, the steps and tunes are still handed down by ear and example from one generation of dancers to the next. Despite this process the dances and tunes have remained relatively unaltered over at least the past 50 years. This does not mean, though, that the dancers have an antiquarian attitude towards their tradition. In fact the reverse is very much the case, and they do not hesitate to alter dances or adapt other tunes, or even to drop a dance or revive an old one if they feel that circumstances warrant it. Some of the tunes used are undoubtedly of great age, others are of relatively much more recent origin.

Normally the team only appear on the special traditional date - Whit Monday (now altered to the Spring Bank Holiday) - when they make a complete tour of the village, starting at 9 o'clock in the morning and generally finishing about midnight, visiting most of the big houses - and the pubs, of course - in the course of the day and dancing in the streets and anywhere else where they are invited. It is considered to bring good luck if the Morris dance in your garden. Lately, however, they have followed the example of the non-traditional teams and taken their dancing further afield. Early this year they appeared at the Folk Festival at the Royal Albert Hall, and also at special festivals at Swindon and Oxford, besides undertaking several tours of the towns and villages in their immediate vicinity and appearances at local garden fetes, etc. This occasion is the first time they have been quite so far away from their home ground.

Although to a village like Bampton, which has always had a Morris team, Morris is an every day affair, outsiders are usually puzzled by it and ask innumerable questions, some of which not even the dancers can answer: Briefly, Morris dancing is said to originally descend from the dancing associated with pre-Christian (and post-Christian) fertility

/rites

rites when chosen young men of the village, blacked their faces, covered themselves with gaudy ornaments and fluttering "ribbons" and thumped the earth to ensure that the crops grew. The sword still carried by the Abingdon and Bampton teams is probably a reminder of the sacrifices which used to accompany these rites. The blackened faces - which probably gave rise to the word Morris (Morisco = Moorish) - have long since disappeared, but the dances live on as part of the entertainment of the village. Their continued existence was helped by the annual competitions which were part of the famous Cotswold Games at Chipping Camden, and when these Games were discontinued by Act of Parliament in the middle of last century the village Morris teams gradually disbanded until only a handful were left.

This type of dancing is not, as some people think, confined to England but could be found within living memory over many parts of Europe, especially the Balkans. Apart from the Basque country, where the tradition has been almost "balleticised" out of existence, England now remains, however, its last stronghold; and the Bampton team is one of the finest examples.

Appearing at the Royal Festival Hall, London on Saturday 17 July 1971.