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SONNY
TOWNSEND



Bampton - background notes to Sonny's 80 years

SON TOWNSEND: born 24th May 1914

Whitsun in the 1020's:-

In the twenties the old team practised from the Friday before Easter, six nights a week for half an hour each night. Then had a couple of hours on Whit Saturday in The Elephant pub, which local people could watch if they paid to come in!

On Whit Monday the team met ready to start at 8am. (In 1925 Son Townsend was ready at 6am) They had a pint at The Elephant before setting out, and everyone put a shilling in the collecting hat to 'get it rattling'. They went down the Weald bottom first, and eventually back to The Elephant at 10 or 10.15am for about half an hour off to have something to eat. By now crowds had come up from the station and the team set off into the town. In the afternoon visits were made to all the big house gardens. Eventually at night, the team went back to The Elephant to share out the money collected! Outside in the yard lights were rigged up and there was barn dancing until three or four in the morning.

There was some casual dancing by the team on the following day, everyone taking the time off work. It was accepted practice in the town and no-one ever got reprimanded or sacked.

On the Saturday following Whit, the team went out to Clanfield to dance.

The Saturday after that it was off to Alvescot, then at Stafford-Cripps house at Filkins where they were treated to a fine tea. Then the day was finished off at the Lamb and Flag at Filkins.

1925: Sonny aged 11, first danced out with the team. He watched their practices over several years as a youngster, and had often stepped-in for the odd dance so could do it quite well. This particular year one of the older men was ill at Whit, Frank Tanner probably. Sonny was told by his grandfather that he would have to turn out, but Sonner at first refused! A clip round the ear changed his mind, and he was told to get into the yard and practice every dance! On Whit Monday Sonner was up dressed in his whites and ready to go at 6am! The day followed its usual pattern up until the sharing of the collection.

The musician for 1925 was Jinkey Wells, but it was the last time he played for that group of dancers. They were all in their cups on arrival back at The Elephant and had an argument over money and accusations were made about Jinkey, this resulted in Nipper Dixey breaking Jinkey's fiddle!

1926: Jinkey refused to play for the team that Whit. Throughout the next few years the team relied upon Sam Bennett the fiddler from Ilmington and Bertie Clark from Carterton. The usual programme was followed that year and the leader was Reg Tanner.

1927: Jinkey Wells taught a new team of young men, so in this year there were two Bampton teams out on the streets dancing!

1932: Year of the floods. The old team were carried over the floods by The Elephant on the backs of volunteers so they could get into the town to dance. Jinkey's team didn't dance out that year

1937: Jubilee Year. Among those in the old team were - Sonny Townsend, Arnold and Charlie Buckingham, Bill Brown, Billy Flux, Opey Whitlock, Ted Lay, Sam Bennett on fiddle, 'Brannan' Brook cake man. Brannan had the unfortunate reputation of having had an embarrassing accident by "filling his trousers" a few years before when the team were dancing at Stratford.

1938: Arnold Woodley joined the team.

During the war years Jinkey's team was not out, and the tradition was kept up by the old team dancing in the evening outside The Elephant. Reg and Buller Tanner led the team and Sonny only missed one year when he was on "blackout" duty. The numbers were made up by several old men like Bertie Hunt turning out.

1946: Arnold Woodley, supported by Sonny, persuaded Jinkey Wells to turn out with a team made up a men from both teams. This was the last year with the Morris for Jinkey.

1951: Arnold Woodley broke away for the "joint" team to try and revive the old team way and was encouraged by a few of the survivors of the old team.

1952: Sonny joined Arnold and fooled for his team.

1965: In the middle of the sixties Arnold's team had fallen off due to Arnolds poor health at that time; and between 1965 and 1968 Sonny fooled for Francis Shergold's team. However, in 1968 at the Abingdon Morris Men's Election of the Mayor of Ock Street do, Sonny couldn't get the team out of the pub. He became disillusioned with them, and returned to Arnold Woodleys team to help revive its fortunes.

He remains as their premier fool and was actively out with the team well into his eighties. It is always a pleasure on his visits during present day Whit Mondays, even if his contribution is now confined to telling everyone to get higher off the ground!

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS IN THE MORRIS

Eleven-years-old Son Townsend wasn't keen to get all dressed up in his white clothes, bells and beribboned bowler hat and join the Morris dancers in their traditional Whitsun Monday festivities in Bampton. But they were one short, needed him, and as it's a tradition that has been going for hundreds of years, he got a traditional persuasion – a clip across the ear from his grandfather. Mindful that Granddad had been a Morris dancer in his time, young Son forgot his shyness and went off on his first Whit Monday outing with the traditional Bampton Morris Dancers. That all happened sixty-five years ago, and today Son – who doesn't know why he got that nickname but never answers to his proper name of Albert – is still going strong. Almost certainly he has been in the Morris longer than anyone else, and his family connections with the Bampton Morris go back over two hundred years.

Son is now the senior Morris Clown with the team, The Traditional Bampton Morris Dancers, led by Arnold Woodley the traditional fiddler of Bampton. Nowadays Son is the one to administer the smacks, as he swings his bladder onto the bottom of any Morrisman who puts a foot wrong.

One small error, even if he can't see their footwork, as he chats to the crowd, he knows by the sound of their bells – and Son swings his bladder with relish to keep them on their toes.

The watchers love it. The Fool, in Bampton called The Clown, is always in the public eye; but Son was especially so this Spring Bank Holiday, as celebrations of his special anniversary livened up the day. Mike Garland, Squire of The Morris Ring, came along to Bampton to make a presentation of an inscribed tankard to Son to congratulate him on his achievement which must make him the 'Grand Old Man of the Morris'. Son is a living link with Bampton Morris past and has a fascinating pedigree. His grandfather already mentioned, was Thomas Portlock, one of three brothers who danced in the last half of the 19th Century. Thomas Portlock was married to Elizabeth, sister of Harry Radband, one time leader of the team, and she was aunt to William 'Jinky' Wells, fiddler to the team and later founder of Francis Shergold's team. Her grandfather was Thomas 'Jingle' Radband, born in 1776 and went on to become leader of the Bampton Morris and its musician.

Son's father, Albert, though not a dancer himself, was the landlord of The Elephant & Castle pub which was formerly the headquarters of the Bampton dancers. So Son grew up with the Morris. He recalls when he was very young travelling to Illmington, another 'Morris' village, where he met up with the traditional fiddler Sam Bennett. He went there with his grandfather to pick plums in Sam's orchard. From the time he learned to walk Son began to pick up the steps of the Morris and then at eleven got his chance to join the team.



Son Townsend - Photo by Barry Care

"One of the lads dropped out at the last minute and I was told I had to take his place. I didn't want to but grandfather soon settled that and in those days you did as you were told!"

Son is glad that he went out on that day and he remembers it well even now. "The dancing began about 8 am but the fun started earlier than that. Everyone came into Dad's pub and had a drink or two before we started off. "We danced all round the village up until mid morning when it was back to the pub for bread, cheese and pickles and a drop more beer." "Then it were off round the big houses in the village, dancing on the front lawns, and we were given refreshments – sometimes lemonade, beer or even whisky. We rounded off the day by touring round and dancing outside all the pubs." Then at about 8 pm we packed it in and went back to our headquarters at The Elephant for the rest of the night and all the wives and girlfriends joined us for a bit of a barn dance."

This pattern of Whit festivals, now Spring Bank holiday, has continued over the years with small variations and changes of faces under the bowler hats, but Son is still there and serves to link us with all the dancers who have kept up the day and Morris over the years. Long may the tradition thrive and God bless old Son! Bampton Morris is something we should all be very proud of!



Helier MM dancing in - Thaxted 1990



Swaledale MM dancing in - Thaxted 1990

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