

“COLIN KNIGHT 1943 - 2017

With the passing of Colin Knight earlier in the year we have lost practically all links with the Morris dancers active during the 1950s. This was a decade of change for the old custom, as Arnold Woodley left the adult team (in 1949) and decided to train a set of youngsters. These appeared on Whit Monday 1950 as a junior version of the adult set led by Francis Shergold. Both sides co-existed in seamless harmony, with new boys being trained all the time, while others (like the twins Rex and Peter Wheeler - the latter has also sadly died within the past few months) passed into the grown-up team.

Colin was born in Deal, Kent, in 1943, his father working as Bandmaster for the Royal Marine Band. The family relocated to Bampton in 1947, and a handful of years later both he and his brother John joined the Woodley youngsters. That side continued to dance throughout the decade until, for reasons of ill-health, Arnold was obliged to disband his team, making a final appearance in 1960. John had already moved over to the Shergold set and danced as one of four men only on Whit Monday 1959, a year generally considered a low point for Bampton Morris. By the following year Colin too had become a member of the one remaining dance set and continued in that role for some years.

It was in 1970 that Arnold was encouraged to raise a new team, and Colin was involved with that first public performance. The Shergolds and Woodleys continued, again in apparent harmony, for the next three Whitsuns, but a significant event occurred in London early in 1974. Both sides were invited to dance at the annual festival organised by the English Folk Dance and Song Society at the Royal Albert Hall. For a multitude of reasons, on this occasion Arnold and his dancers had a falling-out. This led to the unique situation of three sets performing in the streets on the annual day of dance that year: the Shergolds, the Woodley youngsters, and the ex-Woodley adults. Since that date all three have gone from strength to strength, and the situation looks certain to continue into the foreseeable future.

With unflagging enthusiasm Colin continued to dance year-by-year, and his deceptively laconic but precise style was always a joy to watch. For many years he specialised in performing the solo broom dance - first introduced into Bampton by fiddler Sam Bennett from Ilmington during the 1920s - in the street outside the house of Roy Barrett in Glebelands. Failing knees and other minor ailments finally got the better of him, and he decided to retire gracefully after Whitsun 2010. But he never failed in after years to turn out and support his team, which still contains a number of his relatives by both blood and marriage. I first had the pleasure of seeing him dance in 1973. He was certainly among the friendliest men I ever met, always greeting me with a welcoming smile and gracious manner, and patiently answering all the questions I threw at him over the years concerning his involvement with the Morris dancers. I shall sorely miss his good company and laid back dance style, which he moulded over more than half a century into one uniquely his own.” By Keith Chandler