

The Folk Dances of Old England

By Mary C. S. Neal

Author of "English Folk Song and Folk Dance"

IN spite of the tradition that England was a merry country, few if any English people realized, at the beginning of this century, that we had as our inheritance many beautiful folk dances only equalled in beauty and interest by our native folk songs and children's singing games. It is true that scattered over the countryside in remote villages, mostly in the North and Midlands, there were a few isolated "Sides," as the sets of dancers are called, of Morris and Sword dances, and that there were quite a number of isolated dancers who remembered the dances scattered here and there. And buried in old books there were many country dances with old-world names, such as "Greenwich Park," "Gathering Peascods," "If All the World were Paper," "Carey's Maggot," and so on. But all traditional dancing was fast disappearing, so old were the dancers who remembered, and so uninterested the younger generation to whom, as in the past, the dances should have been taught by their fathers and grandfathers.

It was only by extreme good fortune that the last of these old dances were discovered and taught to a younger generation by traditional dancers. For many years a certain Girls' Club, of which I was hon. secretary, had made a practice of giving, every Christmas, an entertainment of which singing and dancing were a great part. The late Herbert MacIlwaine, who was the friendly musical director of this club, read of some English folk songs which Cecil Sharp was collecting in Somerset villages, and began to teach these songs to the members of the club. I then went to Mr. Sharp and asked him if he knew of any traditional dances which would not spoil the songs and which could be done at our Christmas party. He told me that seven years before he had seen some Morris dancers dancing down the "High" at Oxford on Whit-Monday, and that he had taken down a few tunes. Then he gave me the address of the leading dancer, and it was this man and his cousin who came up to London on my invitation and taught the first

Morris dances of the revival to the members of the Club. From January 1905 onwards until the War stopped all such festivities we gave concerts of Folk Song and Dance from one end of England to the other. It was not long before I was asked to send the girls who had learnt the dances from traditional dancers into villages, towns, training colleges, factories, in fact, everywhere where the welfare of young people was cared for, to teach these beautiful possessions of our native land. Everywhere we met with success.

In the meantime Cecil Sharp wrote down the music and, with the help of Herbert MacIlwaine and the members of my Club, the steps and figures of the dances. Later other dances were found, and eventually the tunes and steps and figures of probably all dances extant were published in book form and are now available for use in teaching and practising. The collecting of the dances from those who knew them brought delightful experiences. Sometimes we took one of these surviving Morris dancers as a guide to lead us to others of whom he knew. One man always insisted on playing his fiddle as he sat beside the chauffeur who drove our car. When we discovered a dance we believed to be genuine we invited the dancer to London to teach the dance himself. Altogether we had about thirty Morris and Sword dancers up to town.

It is not easy to describe the actual steps and figures of these purely traditional dances. For the most part the men who held the tradition, handed down from father to son through countless generations, were very old, with faltering steps and failing memories, and it was only after seeing many dancers on many occasions that one could get any idea of how the dances should be preserved. For no "side" of dancers danced in precisely the same way, no two men in the "side" danced with absolute unanimity, and no one was quite consistent from one performance to another. If a dancer was asked to repeat a figure he had to go right back to the beginning and one had to



DANCE OF THE DEER MEN

At Abbots Bromley, in Staffordshire, every summer sees some of the villagers at this strange play of legs and antlers performing from place to place round about the countryside.

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watch carefully for the needed step and note it quickly. All this showed that a strict canon cannot be made, and that a certain latitude must always be allowed to modern as well as to traditional dancers.

THE chief characteristic of the processional dances as performed by the dancers discovered twenty years ago is a slow, dignified, rhythmic movement which is very marked in the Bampton (Oxfordshire) dancers, who have an unbroken tradition going back some hundreds of years. The set dances display a much more lively character and are characterised by wild leaps, twirlings round, hand clapping and the waving of handkerchiefs, so that one can easily imagine the present Morris as a descendant of the Solemn Processional up the mountain side to greet the rising sun, and the scenes of wild joy on the summit at the appearance of the source of life and light to his waiting worshippers. A robust, vigorous and joyous liveliness superimposed on a primitive solemnity perhaps sums up the general impression one gets while watching a "side" of traditional dancers. Again, these dancers partook entirely of the spirit of the unlettered peasant, their rhythm was the rhythm of nature, of wind and waves, of the sun and stars, of waving trees and curling waves. They were danced by those who had never seen a machine-driven plough or a mechanical movement or military drill as we know it to-day; it was a rhythm creative and not destructive; solemn, deep and irregular as the curves of nature.

SOME of the dances are danced with short staves, some with handkerchiefs either waving from each hand or bunched up as in "Country Gardens." The names of the dances are interesting—such as "Constant Billy," "The Blue-Eyed Stranger," "Haste to the Wedding," "Laudnum Bunches," "Bean Setting," "Rigs o' Marlow," etc., etc.

Both the origin and history of the Morris and Sword dances are religious, dancing being part of a priest's ritual and so performed by men only, in connexion with a religion of nature worship older far than Christianity. In the ceremonial originally associated with the Morris dance there are traces of many ancient rites. That of human sacrifice is indicated at Kirtlington, where it was customary for a young maiden, who must be of spotless reputation, to be taken from her father's house early in the morning. She remained with the dancers all day, being treated with great reverence and ceremony. If anyone even so much as touched her he had to pay a fine. In the evening she was returned to her father's house, though in ancient days she was probably sacrificed on the altar of the gods.

At Kidlington a more humane custom was followed, and a new-born lamb accompanied the dancers, decked in flowers and ribbons, and again at Bampton the dancers carried a ceremonial cake impaled on a sword, emphasising its sacrificial nature. Each onlooker was invited to taste the cake, and then the collecting box was handed round. The cake had to

have special ingredients and was made by a special lady, generally the daughter of the Squire. There are also traces of phallic worship in the ceremonial, one old dancer expressing indignation because a "side" of men of a younger generation than his had started out to dance without saluting that ancient symbol, the maypole.

At Abingdon-on-Thames I discovered a Morris dance, of which only two surviving dancers still lived, which was danced round a pole surmounted by a bull's head with gold-tipped horns—showing its sacrificial sacred properties, and garnished with flaming red nostrils.

This is clearly associated with the Greek bull dances in honour of the god Dionysus. There are many traces of sun worship. The Abingdon dance took place on St. John the Baptist's Eve, which celebrates the Summer Solstice.

MANY of the Morris dances are danced in a circle and to and from the centre, a characteristic of sun worship ceremonial. The staves used were once swords, and such dances were in honour of the god Mars, who was the god of agriculture as well as of war. Another reason for associating the Morris dances with an early religious ceremonial is the appearance in different forms of the King and Queen, the Lord and Lady, the Mayor and Squire; the figures link up the dances with those ceremonies attending the crowning of the King of the Wood, who, representing the life of the Earth's vegetation, was yearly slain lest his vigour might wane and all the green life of the earth perish with it.

The slaying of the king, with the revels which preceded it and the crowning of the new and younger monarch, are all still dimly to be traced in many revels and dances in English villages. There is a very beautiful carol taken down in Cornwall, some sixty years ago, from a peasant, called "To-morrow Shall Be My Dancing Day," and it contains the life of our Lord in terms of a dance. Three verses run:

To-morrow shall be my dancing day,
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play
To call my true love to my dance.

CHORUS:

Sing, oh, my love!
Oh, my love, my love, my love, my love
This have I done for my true love.

In a manger laid and wrapp'd I was,
So very poor, this was my chance,
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass,
To call my true love to my dance.

Sing, oh, etc.

Then up to Heaven I did ascend,
Where now I dwell in sure substance,
On the right hand of God, that man
May come into the general dance.

Sing, oh, etc.

The tune to which this carol is sung is played as a Morris dance tune in the North of England.

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AN OLD MEASURE RETRODDEN

Often it is neither easy nor convenient to find the costume necessary to make old dances really live again, and suitable places for the dances are not always to hand. But here an attempt is made to make both dancers and setting as true to the old life as possible. Early eighteenth century costume was particularly charming.

By Elizabethan times the dances had lost almost all their religious significance and become merely part of ordinary country pastimes, and were danced at fairs, lamb-ales and harvest homes. But still vaguely reminiscent of earlier days was the dancing on Whit-Monday, and the fact that in several Churchwardens' accounts are entered the items paid for the Morris dancers' clothes, decorations and regalia. One at Kingston-on-Thames reads thus:

1508	For payneing of the Mores garments and for sarten gret leveres	£0	2	4
„	For plyts and $\frac{1}{2}$ of laun for the Mores garments	0	2	11
„	For Orsden for the same	0	0	10
„	For bellys for the daunsars	0	0	12
1509-10.	For silver paper for the Mores daunsars the frere, and Mayde Maryan at id. a peyne	0	5	4
1521-22.	Eight yards of fustyan for the Mores daunsars coats	0	16	0
„	„ A dozyn of gold skynnes for the Mores	0	0	10
1536-37.	Five hats and 4 porses for the daunsars	0	0	4 $\frac{1}{2}$

The music of the dances is not, of course, as old as the dances themselves. In the oldest tradition we have the music is played by the "whittle and dub"—a whistle and small drum. The latter was hung on the little finger of the hand holding the whistle. Later a fiddle was used, and still later the concertina. The first folk dance tune I heard was played on a concertina, but I think wherever possible it is much more in keeping for the music to be played on a fiddle with a drum to emphasise the rhythm. The dress of the Morris dancers was probably in more recent days the ordinary festive dress of the peasant with a few extra decorations, such as ribbons, artificial flowers, and a set of bells fastened on the legs which helped to beat out the rhythm. The effect

of a "side" of Morris dancers with bells and staves, handkerchiefs and ribbons, is very impressive and very delightful, and one would like to see them dancing every Whit-Monday, as in olden days, on the village green and down the village street.

In addition to the Morris and Sword dances there are the country dances, which were almost entirely unknown until they were unearthed from "Playford's Dancing Master," and the rather difficult instructions for dancing them deciphered and put into plain modern English. These country dances are of an entirely different nature from the Morris and Sword dances. They are social in character—both sexes take part—and they are very simple and charming and eminently suited for country feasts.

To complete a picture of the olden days in English villages and hamlets where folk dancing was part of the life of the villagers, we must visualise the dancers themselves in the persons of those who survived until the beginning of the twentieth century. These have now passed away, and never again can the dances be performed as they were by these traditional dancers. Modern life, set to so different a rhythm, makes it impossible. The old dancers were musically, and in every other way, quite uneducated. Yet with a limited vocabulary, with tottering limbs and feeble voices, I have seen them interpret a dance with a verve and vigour which astonished the on-lookers. Something of ancient memory, something of the spirit of their ancestors, stirred in them and overcame all their difficulties.

ONE old man who came up to London to teach his dances had only one adjective, and that an unusual one. It was "perpendicular." You must dance "perpendicular to one another," he instructed, you must dance "perpendicular to the music"—and when the dance was learned he turned to me with smiling face and said, "They have got that dance just perpendicular." The pupils were dancing well, with spirit as well as steps correct, and who shall say that any other adjective was needed!

The spirit of the English peasant, sturdy, self-respecting, weather-wise, nature-wise, reverent and happy, is in all the ancient dances. It will be well if those who dance them to-day, college graduates, city-bred and city-born men and women, factory hands and machine workers, can recapture, even for an hour, the rhythm of the earth and sea and sky which was the inspiration of these old, old dances of England.



MORRIS DANCES THAT STILL LIVE AT BAMPTON

In the heart of Oxfordshire, one of the few counties that still seems to retain very thoroughly the peace and merriment of older England, Bampton lies on a road that is not over busy with traffic, and keeps some of the past in its old streets. And here it is that Morris Dancing has survived, the pattern for a revival of that excellent and most English custom. Both dances seen above hail from Bampton, that in the upper view being

"The Flowers of Edinburgh." Below is a team of dancers in Bampton itself.