

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Sidmouth, Devon (August 1979)

Sunday

The first thing I'm going to talk about is the background to Morris. Those of you who were at the arena yesterday heard the standard spiel about the Cotswold Morris being very English. That's very true of course; because you'll see things that look like Morris teams but don't look anything like our dances at all. People talk about Morris going back to pre-Christian origins. I've been doing Morris for 25 years, and 25 years ago nobody thought of going round saying that it had been 'pre-Christian'. In fact, that had somewhat unpleasant associations with witches and the devil and things like this - the Other Religion. Suddenly it's become fashionable; and I notice that as I keep brochures from sides over the years, it has changed from "it might be" to "perhaps" to "almost certainly" or, as at the arena yesterday: "it has" pre-Christian origins.

It's rather like the story about Bampton. At the turn of the century, the Morris had been revived in London at the Esperence Club. The Bampton Morris men wrote in 1908 in the local paper (well, in a national paper actually), that there had been Morris dancing in Bampton for 200 years. Now that means 1708, which is quite a usual claim and probably an accurate folk memory. But by the time they got to 1940 it had already gone up to 300 years and you may have noticed this year's claim, I can't remember if it's 500 or 700. Whichever it was, it's gone up in 80 years by a factor of 2.5 at least which is almost the rate of inflation.

There's a great tendency to exaggerate the past. We understand why this is. In fact, I wouldn't like any Morris side in its spiel in front of the public to be hindered by the truth at all. The licence of the fool in Morris, as you know, is to say exactly what he likes and get away with it and I think the licence for the Morris is to tell the tale. Like selling the cake to put under your pillow to dream of your lover (which might be embarrassing for a Morris man). All these things are part of the spiel and nobody expects a fair deal; it's the same as the fairground barker.

When you're producing a handout or when you are talking seriously to the press (perhaps not your local press who don't print what they're told) I think you've got to have a little bit of scholarship in what you say. You mustn't just make idle speculation. You must accept that speculation on origins is speculation. There is no evidence to support the very ancient origin for Morris (or for most things really).

Let me give you an example. I don't know if you know Violet Orford's book "Sword Dance and Drama". An excellent book describing that type of ritual. She produces a very comprehensive list of all the various references to the sword dance throughout Europe and shows a structural relationship between it all, how it developed and about how the Morisco came to the states of France and Italy and how it interacted with the sword. She makes an assumption of what she calls the folklorist's gap. She says the earliest reference to the sword dance is 13 something (at the end of the 14th century). Therefore, there must have been 1000 years plus in which the sword dance went on without any reference to it at all.

She does a very interesting correlation between all the known sites of Sword dance and all known sites of prehistoric mines and gets a good match between the two, not perfect of course. She comes up with the theory that the sword dance derives from prehistoric miners (I mean prehistoric in the sense of before records). So, it's a sort of Trade dance that remained unchanged for ten centuries.

Now there's one flaw in this really (for the evidence she's got is the evidence). The German folklorists, the serious ones, I don't mean the dancers who dabble in reading books second-hand (people like me), show that the sword dance started at a time when the German metal industry got going. I don't know if anyone saw James Burke's "Connections" on TV. They were very good in giving the facts of the start of mediaeval industry. There was this very interesting period when they discovered silver in the Alps. I think it was Edward, or one of our Kings anyhow, who reneged on the northern Italian financiers. They all went bankrupt and the German alliance came in and spent lots of money to finance the work. The Germans, at that time, became the mining engineers of the world in the same way in the last century the Cornish were. You know you find the Cornish all over - Lancashire, Shropshire, Canada, New Zealand. This was in the 1200 to 1400s. The Germans took their structure of Trade fraternities with them. If you take Violet Orford's actual data, the earliest reference to sword dance is in Nuremberg and from there it spread out for the next 150 years and reached the rest of Europe. It actually reached England last of all in the 1600s and first appeared in Lancashire.

You mustn't assume that because some things can be traced back a very long way that all things can be traced back a very long way. The professional folklorists of recent years have realised that every custom has its own unique history. It's like a pin ball machine, it rattles between all the influences that could be, but it's all unique. One of the big problems we're suffering from is Fraser and "The Golden Bough", which contains the great generalisation trying to convince everybody that there is an ancient explanation for everything. I'll stop that thought there.

I think the problem is that the average person in the folk world is conditioned to think that today is just a little bit of a relic of the past and if you went farther back more and more customs would emerge; more and more dances; more and more songs. Until you get back to the golden age where everybody (and when I say everybody, I mean a million or so people, not 52 million) spent their entire 24 hours every day eating, sleeping, drinking, dancing and singing. They never really had any time to plough the fields, there were too many fertility customs. They never had time to propagate the species, they were too busy singing about it. Personally, I think it's only a phenomenon of today. It's the folk festivals which have caused the drop in the birth rate.

Has anyone here been to Great Wishford, near Salisbury, on Oak Apple Day? I almost hesitate to recommend people to go to it, because if outsiders go, it almost spoils it as a village custom. It occurs on 29th May, Oak Apple Day. Of course, the customs are absolutely nothing to do with Charles II or oak apples. It just so happens that in the 17th century everyone got terribly patriotic over the Restoration and they moved all the local celebrations, or most of them, to Oak Apple Day rather than Mayday.

You may have noticed that when they changed the calendar, Mayday got 13 days earlier and so May is never out for garlands. It tended to be bloody cold and the mayday gambolling in the woods were not so interesting. You realise why there weren't any fertility customs at Christmas - too cold.

When the Saxons settled in this country, and most of our culture comes from the Saxons not the Celts (the Celts are the Welsh, let's be honest about it). Forests were established for keeping game so that there was fresh meat during the winter (that's deer and things like this).

When the royal forests were set up by William the Conqueror, even he couldn't just get a forest by saying "all this is mine - keep out", you need someone to look after it. 'Looking after it' means rooting out all the bushes and trees that are not very useful for cover or for feeding anything. Anything that produces nuts and berries, you keep, anything that doesn't, you rip up.

Things like the New Forest, for example, are not natural forest; they are looked-after forest. To persuade idiots to do it, you had to give something in return. The Lord of the Manor couldn't say "look after my forest" because if you did, they'd burn it down or something like that. But you did arrange that they could go up in the summer to take their cattle and sheep or pigs (well, not so much sheep as pigs) to have the benefit of the forest tradition. In return they would have the right to collect timber up to a certain quantity and to be given a deer or two (because if they stopped deer poaching they had to give them one). It didn't use to work with swans at Fleet but that's another story.

In Great Wishford, the foresters had to graze the forest. The two parishes on either side who were given the job of looking after the forest had to be given customary rights. The customs of any old manor are the things they had to do for the Lord of the Manor, not what you do on Mayday. These

included the right to go up on Mayday to collect timber. Now, why would they want to collect timber? When the swineherds or goatherds took the animals up, they lived in the woods and this gave them the right to use timber to reconstruct the bowers (the summer accommodation for people looking after the animals). This was the start of the tradition of collecting branches. Of course, as the countryside got more developed, with more infilling, more local ownership, the reason for taking animals up disappeared. People kept the custom up because it was very nice to have the timber. You could use it for other things, like in the garden, rebuilding the house and things like that; so they kept the old custom alive.

It was also very common up at Wishford that each village should be given a deer and this deer was hunted. In the area of Wychwood forest they kept the custom which involved 18 parishes. They could go and collect the deer themselves but they had to catch it. These were the dog-sized deer not reindeer, which I doubt anyone could catch. The whole village would set out to catch its deer and hold it down while someone actually had the pleasure of it, as it were. They would carry the deer back in triumph and this is the origin, in some places, of having an animal carried through a sword; being a convenient way of carrying it in procession.

When the custom dropped, as it did during mediaeval times as the enclosures started and Lords of the Manor became more landlords than people who ran the community, these things tended to die out or be commuted for money but the idea of doing the thing managed to persist.

One of the problems with any custom is when the reason for it is forgotten, people then invent a story (what the folklorists call a "just so story"). It doesn't actually help understanding but just explains things. It's a nice way of explaining it, but there's no historical, archaeological evidence to support it. The custom didn't arise that way.

There are other places where forest law origins occur. Wychwood forest was one of the great royal forests established by Henry the Second and it covered most of what I would call the core of the Morris area from Woodstock all the way across to Stow. It wasn't all forest of course, but it was governed by forest laws and the royal forest at Woodstock was usually part of the dowry of the Queen of England. So, you used to get royal families in that area as frequently as the locality could support. I think you will appreciate that when court used to go round they only stayed for a limited time at each place eating and drinking it dry. They needed the forest to supply deer and the people had to supply food tithes and so on. It was very closely integrated. Now come the Civil War, or perhaps a bit before. Let's talk about how we see the Morris coming into it.

The very first reference to Morris is 11 something in Spain, a year or two after they turfed the Moors out of one of the Spanish cities, they had a morisco which was a performance. The unique element of that is they almost invented two lines of people dancing opposite each other. Two lines, processional, pairs was almost a Roman form of dance but all mediaeval dancing was essentially lines, chains. The idea of having two mimicking lines was new and it caught on like wildfire. It's a bit of a pantomime and in some places it's got more and more realistic. There are survivals in Spain where they still dress up as Moors and Christians and hack away at each other with swords. A custom that's been going 800 or 900 years tends to diverge a bit in different places.

The first idea of this dancing in lines of mimicking movements was invented about this sort of time. All these things have to have an origin, they can't all go back to the mists of time, they can't all have someone in the year 5000 BC who invented Stonehenge and everything else. These things start.

It spread very rapidly through Spain as it was being conquered. If you know the history of Spain you find it wasn't a bloody ejection of the Moors. It all seemed a very friendly sort of affair with half the Moors on the Christian's side and half the Christians on the other side. It was all matter of political manoeuvring for who actually controlled the country and got the money out of it (not really going around killing each other). Also remember that Spain had been the intellectual centre of Europe at that time.

Now, the old Encyclopaedia Britannica talks about the old theory of John O'Gaunt bringing the Morris back to England but it's been laughed at since the turn of the century. But John O'Gaunt did have ambitions in Spain and he did spend a long time with an army there. He tried to establish himself as king. They did have to get rid of him in the end because he looted the country of all things artistic and they gave him a large sum of money as an annual pension to keep out of the country. There was a

strong link at that time, but be that as it may, the first reference to Morris in this country is about 1500 which is about 150 years after John O'Gaunt came back.

I only mention this because there was a direct link. Before it reached England there was an interesting change, because in France they formed these so called 'companies of fools'. These were professional people often working in the Lord's courts. They were trained people who offered a semi-professional service by providing Maying, the Morris, fooling, revels, masquerades, masques and things like this. It's this operating in the masque area that was copied by Henry VII; and as I said, the very first references to Morris in this country are in the courts of Henry VII. Over 50 years it became commoner in towns which the Court went to, and gradually spread into the smaller towns and then into the villages.

While I talk about villages – you know we talk about Cotswold Morris surviving in the Cotswold villages. You only have to talk to someone in Bampton, Chipping Campden, Abingdon or Brackley about them living in a village to find that places with 1000 odd people are thought of as towns - Morris survived as much in towns as in villages. Still, you have this spread out into the country side, reasonably well documented. A characteristic was that nobody blacked their faces. Everybody wore fairly elaborate costumes; they (towns or villages) often hired the costumes. We have the very interesting situation where the Earl of Berkley had a group players (some of the records of whom exist) who were paid to bring in May in Gloucester and places, like professionals do, and they also received money for performing the Morris.

This early Morris was professional or semi-professional. The earliest reference to Morris in Abingdon is 1554 and in 1556, the Earl of Berkeley's players were actually paid for doing the Morris. So, it is likely that the earliest Morris in Abingdon was done by Gloucester men.

What we know as 'Morris' - the Cotswold Morris - can't have any real connection with this Morris of 400 years ago that I'm talking about. This is people mainly dressed in white, although so often when you see foreign teams in their Morris, in fact they not are dressed in white. They're just doing a show, it's an attitude, the way they do it. There are no earlier references to Morris than about 1800, 1780 - that's about the earliest you can trace back. In fact, the heyday of Cotswold Morris is about 1800 and not much earlier.

James I issued a book of games 'A book of sports' I think it's called, to encourage people to revive archery. I'm sure you all learned that at school. It was doing the same thing with Morris dancing. Morris dancing had died out so much it had to be encouraged after the Puritan's time, in which we complain about the suppression of things (in fact very few people complained of being suppressed they had suppressed themselves - it was really justifying the status quo).

In 1660, there was the first revival (we're now in about the third or fourth revival of things 'Folk'). At the first revival they brought out all the old customs with bonfires and Morris dancing, the Mayday customs, the maying (which was a custom which came to us from France, it's not a British one). We had an upsurge in 1660 - 1700 of things which were rather consciously done and what we see in Cotswold Morris is the relic of another 100 years of that conscious revival. Tomorrow, I'll talk about the Cotswold sides that we know of, their early history and what we do know of who started them and how they run themselves.

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Monday

I want to talk today about what we know about traditional Cotswold sides. It's surprisingly little, of course. The collectors, when they started talking to people, it was after 1908, which is effectively 40 or 50 years after many of the sides had stopped dancing. Those sides which were still active all had a rather chequered and rather different sort of career and therefore there are unique histories of the sides.

The earliest references to anything one can believe in as Cotswold Morris are late eighteenth century and they don't tell us anything about the dancing at all. The earliest reference to Bampton, for example, is in a book about 1804. It says that the Morris men were doing their usual round of the villages. Also, that year is the year that Ilmington was founded. Now, Ilmington has a particularly interesting history and, in a way, it illustrates what happened to traditional sides.

A chap called George Arthur (a master mason) came to live in the village in 1804 and started a workshop. He was a pipe and tabor player and a Morris dancer from somewhere or other, I don't know where (though there is someone researching through census papers into where people come from so we might know eventually). He brought the Morris there and raised a side from the stone masons who worked for him. They did a tradition much like the normal Cotswold with galleys, corner dances, and that sort of thing. It went on for a few years. When George Arthur got too old to play, his son Tom took over and Joseph Johnson married his daughter and became foreman.

They stopped when the Dover's Games stopped in the area. After a few years they wanted to dance again, so they got a side together but at that stage already they'd changed the Morris a fair bit. What Sharp published in the Morris book was the reconstruction of how Michael Johnson (who was the son of the old Foreman) said they did it when he was a young man. Because it was several revivals later, it had changed the dance significantly. So, in a sense, it's a reconstruction. Sharp made no pretence about it being a reconstruction and actually wrote to the Morning Post about Ilmington and this recovery of an old tradition and the need to sit down and work out with the man how the figures went and how the dances were put together.

This side ran on for a few years and then the story goes that they did a tour. They went to Shipston-on-Stour flower show and thought they'd do a tour and walk over to Brailes. Which is a fair number of miles if you know the Cotswolds, (but people used to walk 6 or 12 miles between spots). Can you imagine that nowadays? Can you imagine a Ring meeting where you make everybody walk 6 miles between stands? When they got to Brailes, the local Morris side was there and took exception to them dancing. A bit of a fight ensued and the foreman Joseph Johnson got a bit of a bad time of it. Apparently he ran all the way back to Shipston. The people of the village teased him about to such an extent that he emigrated to Birmingham. Of course, Morris stopped at that point.

In 1887, for the Jubilee, they got the side together again. This time with Tom Arthur, grandson of the old Tom Arthur, as pipe and tabor player. Several new people came and they got Joseph Johnson back from Birmingham (by this time he was about 80) to lead the dancing. These dances were the first Ilmington dances that Sharp collected. Already the dances, as they were then performed, were significantly different in the structure of the dance from the way they were reconstructed for the previous revival of the Morris. They had run figures together and so on. They went on for a year or two

and died down. One thing that had happened was that Sam Bennett, as a teenager, had learnt to play the tunes on his fiddle from Tom Arthur. As Tom gradually lost all his teeth and so found it more and more difficult to play the pipe and tabor. I believe it's impossible to play when you're down to one tooth.

In 1897, the next Jubilee, they got together again. This time Sam played with a new influx of people. The people running the side were considered to be poor dancers by the people of the village, and the dances had changed yet again.

Darcy Ferrars had got the side at Bidford going in 1886 and did a tour all round the big towns in this country. The Chipping Campden men had been revived in 1902 by the Guild of Handicrafts. Following this revival of interest in Morris elsewhere, Ilmington got the side together in 1906 with Sam Bennett, now as the fiddler and the hobby horse, doing all the teaching. Again the dances were all changed, reflecting the different ideas of the people doing it.

In many ways, the dances of that period are reflected by the way England's Glory do the dances now. There was a complaint made because Sam, of course, wrote to the national papers advertising his side. I've met some of the old dancers, David Westbury for example, who never admitted it was Sam Bennett's side because Sam Bennett wasn't a villager really. He owned a big house and all the carter's business and all fruit orchards. He ran the village to suit himself. It was always considered the team belonged to the bloke who actually taught them.

Still, Sam wrote to the press and he was invited up to London with the side, to dance. Sharp wrote to the national press saying "don't take any notice of this Ilmington, it's bloody awful, it's not traditional, they've changed everything." This upset Sam Bennett amongst others, as you can well imagine. Sam went back to talk and settle the differences with the other men and really Ilmington then got hold of an agreed way of doing it which he then proceeded to teach in the village. The trouble being it was Sam Bennett, so no one took any notice of him. It was collected from him by Kenworthy Schofield just after the last war and that form of dance is one of the five or six forms you will find in Lionel Bacon's Black Book.

Ilmington is very interesting because it is one of the few places where we can see the stopping and starting that you would expect of something where you have to keep handing the tradition on. Various local things, like lack of interest, or the stopping and starting of huge gatherings, caused the thing to die down for a while. But there was enough interest to keep picking up as soon as some special occasion arises.

There is an Ilmington side at the moment, I hope some of you have seen it. I think it dances very well. It's had the problem of trying to get away from the Sam Bennett connotation in what it does. It's looked very hard at the way the Morris was done about 1887 before Sam Bennett got involved. That is still not so far away that there aren't people in the village, families, who can offer small bits of advice. They have got information on how to do bumpers and things like this from the Handy family who were involved in quite a few village revivals. So, they had a link with the tradition.

Hinton was collected from a man called Stutsbury who had been a Brackley dancer. There really wasn't an independent Hinton tradition. There were quite a few villages that supplied dancers but this is the usual Cotswold business that when you raised a side you got together the six best dancers that you knew. If they came from your village that was good but if they came from outside and they wanted to dance with you. Well, you got them from outside.

I think the Hinton man was a shopkeeper, at least he was a shopkeeper when he lived in Hinton and he told Sharp, well, sorry.... When Sharp first went to Brackley in 1910, he met the Howards who ran the side at the time. They weren't terribly musical and he had trouble getting tunes and hence getting dances that he'd believe. They referred him to this man in Hinton as someone who was still active who danced with their father. The chap told Sharp that he'd danced with their father in Brackley.

The dances they turned out are completely different from Brackley and this reflects the difference between 1870 when he'd danced in Brackley and 1922 when Sharp finally collected Brackley and published it. Now, you've got 50 years of development. This was at a time when sides didn't meet each other so there was no need to conform, I won't say there were no pressures but people could go their own way without reference to other people. You weren't constantly exposed to other people.

What did keep the old sides going? We know so much about the death of Cotswold Morris, why it stopped, the bad harvests, the decline in support. People started thinking of the Morris as begging and they weren't prepared to sponsor it, weren't prepared to have the Morris dance in their gardens, things like this. It also had a reputation for drunkenness and rowdiness.

Are you aware that nearly every traditional function, particularly dance, has this legend that they stopped because coming home from a Morris tour on one occasion they stopped someone and after a bit of a fight they killed him and it was all hushed up in the village in return for the Morris stopping? It's a very common story, not just in Cotswolds, it occurs with Mummers, it occurs up in the North West and so on, and yet no amount of searching has ever found any evidence for it.

It might have happened once or perhaps it's just a bit of the mythology of the Morris. The Morris stopped and there must be a good explanation for it, other than that people got sick of doing it. So they trot out this standard story in the same way that Oliver Cromwell knocked down all the castles and buildings of England from 1500 to 1900.

There are several things which kept the Morris together. I think the most important things were the Ales which were run in the various villages, not necessarily annually, though some of them were. At Finstock Ale in Wychwood forest, the Duke of Marlborough allowed them to cut down an oak tree each year which was then stuck up on the village green in Finstock and allowed to mature for a year. They financed the Ale with the proceeds of the sale of the timber. Woodstock had a very famous Ale, I think every seven years. Charlbury was every few years.

Some places had an Ale on the spur of the moment when they felt like it, and typically it went like this. You'd decide you were having an Ale and tell all the Town Criers who announced at the various markets there was going to be an Ale. At the same time, you started to build yourself a dancing area; a marquee or with branches to cover an area to dance. You'd elect a King and Queen of the Ale. The King or Lord of the Ale's job was to act as M.C. and the Queen or Lady of the Ale's was just to be pretty. The King was always given a sum of money to cover his expenses to organise it and the Lady usually, besides having some money for a dress, had the concession to sell ribbons and favours. The usual way people made money was not passing the hat around so much as having something they could sell (like Great Western and their book).

On the appointed day, people would turn up in the village that was having the Ale; the Morris team plus friends and supporters. There was the usual arrangement, everybody but the Morris men paid to come in and this covered your food and drink. The Morris men just danced, usually separately, and usually there was a prize for the best side (a cake or ribbons). It's rather funny people don't like competitive Morris and yet competitive Morris did exist in certain circumstances. They didn't see anything wrong when a lot of sides got together and danced, in admitting that one actually danced better than the rest, and that these can actually be given a round of applause and a set of ribbons.

So, having arrived, the Lord and Lady of the Ale would take the people around to have a look at the so-called antiquities which were a series of things, mostly crude, like 'my lord's organ' being a flail, or having a stuffed owl. You had to guess what they were, and if you guessed wrong you paid a forfeit. The problem was, you didn't call them what they obviously were. My lady's parrot was probably what you called the stuffed owl, for example, so the object was to make you pay a forfeit. These were various, money was an obvious one if you were a coward. Jumping over a fifteen foot stream was another good one, the one at Woodstock was unjumpable but they still made them jump it. Another forfeit was being carried around on the hobby horse.

The Cotswold hobby horse has no connection with the hobby horses we have nowadays. It all derives from the Bentley window and the mediaeval tourney horse. The Cotswold hobby horse was just like a gymnasium horse, it had four legs or arms for carrying and was a pole. In the army, it was a instrument of punishment. It had metal ridge along the top and if you were 'punished to the horse', you were carried astride this with your legs weighted with cannon balls and just bounced around the parade ground for a hour or two. You usually didn't do it twice.

In the Cotswold Ales, you'd be carried around on this. Either, the tradition would be a rough ride, they'd bounce you and give you a really rough time of it; or, what apparently was meant to be worse, they'd stick you behind the Lady of the Ale and you'd be forced to publicly kiss her all the way round the Ale. Which for the average ploughboy was the biggest embarrassment of all. This sort of thing

started to fall apart once the students at Oxford got to know about it, they didn't see that sort of behaviour as a forfeit at all.

Another sort of forfeit was having a mock marriage. One of the Lady's attendants was the ugliest or fattest girl they could find, and you'd go through a mock ceremony. This would include being stuck up the backside with a three pronged fork several times and having your face ceremoniously washed with a greasy dish cloth. A lot of rather rustic, crude, vulgar fun was had by all. Of course, one of the reasons that most of these Ales were stopped was the growing influence of the bourgeois middle class, to use the phrase of a friend of mine, who thought this really wasn't good enough - it was the sort of thing for which Morris teams ought to be suspended.

By the time you get to 1850, social conditions were changing, football, cricket, flower shows, activities of that sort which didn't involve drinking and rowdiness on the street were getting more and more popular. The Morris sides, first of all, found it difficult to get people to do it at all; and secondly, to get any sort of support from the community for what they did. The big Ales, which of course were the worst example of all, a sort of Sidmouth gone wild, disappeared in a very short period from 1840 to 1860.

There were one or two special ones. One was Dover's Games back of Chipping Campden. You must have heard of Dover's hill, a huge place about four miles long. It became the centre of things from the Restoration onwards because it was long enough to have steeplechases (horse races) and all the really big functions had their support from the horses.

The gentry would come from miles around. It was not uncommon to have crowds of many thousands, even before the times of railway trains. By the time the railway lines opened from Wolverhampton into Evesham, they were getting crowds of ten thousand plus and running excursions out of Birmingham for people to get to the Dover's Games. The Games included all sorts of sports and activities. It was also noted for being completely lawless and for big gangs of roughs who would just go round the place knocking the tents over and generally roughing people up.

There are several written accounts of Dover's Games. The Morris is mentioned but the Morris was not an important part of it. It wasn't the sort of place all the Morris teams congregated. The Morris teams, in fact, competed at Stow for, I won't say the honour, but the side who was fit to go on the hill. The last year of all, 1854, Longborough won the competition and was the side that danced on the hill. They weren't allowed to collect but they sold yellow rosettes which were known as Dover's favours, Dover's colour being yellow, they sold these as the way of making their profit. The previous year there was no meeting, the year before that it was another village near Stow. The people who collected between the wars there found that most people remembered that there was a year when their team won at Stow and danced on Dover's hill.

Kirtlington is another one which is well known (although it wasn't a particularly great Morris get-together) because of the ceremony of taking the lamb around leading the procession. The Lamb Ale still runs on in a somewhat limited form - it never really stopped in the same way that although Dover's Games were stopped. All it did was transfer the occasion down into the town itself, into Chipping Campden; where the Scuttlebrook Wakes still continues the Saturday after the Spring Bank Holiday. You can still see the Chipping Campden Morris Men dance and the May Queen and all the normal goings on. The Lamb Ale is the Monday after Bank Holiday week, I think. It's Bampton, Chipping Campden and Kirklington I think, in that order.

Some of these things die very hard. Probably the most famous at the time was the forest fair in Wychwood forest itself. Cornbury House(?), rather ancient, mediaeval in foundation, had been bought by one of the roundhead generals and fenced in, then bought by the Duke of Marlborough (I imagine the first one) for his son Lord Churchill and it became the house of heir of the family. Somewhere towards the end of the 18th century they started. It was all started, I understand, by the Methodists from Witney going to have teetotal picnic. Within three or four years, in fact, it was anything but teetotal and anything but a picnic.

It got to the stage as a fair of having four streets of booths, one street entirely of boxing booths. It became traditional, as it were, to settle your differences at the forest fair because at the forest fair you not only had a ring but a time keeper and a referee; you didn't have boxing gloves of course. There was an occasion where Fieldtown fell out with Ramsden and they had a fight. They paired off foreman

to foreman and so on all the way down the side. Fieldtown lost, six-nil, (Fieldtown were funny, they were run by Mr. Steptoe ... and his son).

They had all these boxing booths because boxing was still the thing that stirred people's hearts. It used to when I was young, at least my parent's generation. It seems to have dropped out of interest nowadays, but people used to like a fight. They also had several menageries, they also brought the dance floor from one of the dance areas in London, a platform with 500 coloured lights, for general dancing. There was also a paddle steamer on the lake. I can't imagine it was a very big steamer, it's not a very big lake. This was one of the first occasion we've heard of selling sandwiches which were invented about that time. (Sandwiches cost 30/- at a time when the average wage was 15/- per week)

The whole fair was opened by a procession of carriages led by the Duke of Marlborough and Lord Churchill and all the rest. It went on for something like three days. A lot of local Morris sides went there and danced among the crowds. Again, when the railway line entered the Oxford area, excursions were run from London. I've seen posters for the forest fair at Cornbury House. It's amazing really, because the nearest station itself was about 8 or 9 miles away, so having got there you still had to walk. People just stayed for the fair and slept under the hedges, or in cottages for miles around. All the locals, of course, would turf the family out into the yard and give their bed over to whoever was prepared to pay. It was a great jamboree.

It like all the others was stopped. People got a bit fed up, or at least the Churchills did, and somewhere in the middle of the 19th century they decided to stop it. So they dug big trenches across the roads. All the people did, was come up and chop the woods down to fill the trenches up and proceed to actually have their fair even though there were no booths. They still saw it as a sort of right they thought they had. Although the fair itself only went for 80 or 90 years altogether.

Once these big things, which I suppose were the natural focuses for the Morris, dropped, the Morris itself seemed to die away. There are very few places, funnily enough the competitions at Stow were so popular that they went on for another 20 years after the reason for them had ceased. The last competition was about 1880 even though the last ones to gain anything from it were a long time before.

The competitions - how were they judged? For a long time it was a problem finding any evidence because there weren't many Bledington or Longborough men who attended Morris functions before the war and talked about it. I couldn't find people who could remember much of what they said. It came down to one or two common things. First of all, starting foot was considered very important, it was the recognised way - you started on the left foot and did the second half of things on the right foot. The direction of turn was recognised - you turned out. Everyone knew what that meant, so no matter how you fudged the stepping and so on, they could tell if you turned the wrong way. The other thing was that the judge used to listen to the bells and you could tell if false steps were being made because you got extra chinks in the bells.

Under the Sharp guidance, wherever you got problems of changing step, Sharp always opted for an extra step to change feet. Traditionally, it couldn't have been like that. Traditionally, it was the other way round, you changed the step. If one-two-three-hop left you on the wrong foot you did one-two-three-four or one-hop-two-hop, so that you ended up on the right foot and didn't put the extra step in.

When the Travelling Morrice started going round the Cotswolds, they were very much criticised for the feint step - putting the extra movement in. Dancers didn't like the extra things in just to get right. It was considered bad dancing if a man couldn't sort it out and had to put an extra step in to get himself right at the last minute. (They thought they weren't very good). They also complained about Charlie Marsh for not getting off the ground enough, not sweating enough, all the things that one could well imagine.

However the society's side, and the Cambridge men were by any standards extremely athletic; but athletic in a gymnastic sense rather than in a Morris sense. Their leaps were great but their ability to dance to the music wasn't all that marvellous. For those who like historical precedents, the second Travelling Morrice tour of the Cotswolds did have a lady musician. They had a lady musician because all the other musicians could only play from written music and on occasion they had to cycle back to the previous spot because they forgot the music stand.

Well, for those who want to come tomorrow, I'm going to talk about the revival, where it started and who did what. I want to get away from this thought in one of the Morris brochures I read this year, which said that Mr Sharp discovered the Headington Morris. If you think about it, Mr Sharp was at his Aunt's cottage and Headington Quarry Morris discovered Mr Sharp and he devoted the rest of his life to collecting Morris.

He didn't actually, not for another nine years. That's what I want to go through tomorrow, how the revival started, who was actually involved, and try and get Sharp's contribution in particular, which is probably larger than you appreciate, into perspective. Collecting, if you've ever tried it, is bloody difficult. How you can cycle into a village, find a dancer and collect the tradition and go out again before lunch, I shall never know. The man was an absolute genius at certain things but he also didn't do all the things that people say he did. He was actually a much more normal person than you imagine. I'll talk about that, Mary Neal and Sharp and the early days of the society tomorrow.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Sidmouth, Devon (August 1979)

Tuesday

I don't think you can understand the Morris today without knowing first of all, its roots, where did it start, how did it develop and what kept it going, then why was it was revived yet again.

The first known revival of the modern era was Darcy Ferrars. He'd been born in Yorkshire and he was a professional pageant master. Amongst his triumphs was the Ripon millenary festival, the 1000th anniversary of their charter at which he organised a sword team and a Lancashire Morris side. When he moved down into the area of Bidford-on-Avon and discovered they had the Morris in that part of the world as well, he employed a Mr Trotman who'd been a dancer locally to get together a side of youngsters.

He did this really in the best possible way. He had two local dancers and he paid other Cotswold Morris men like Harris from Bledington and Michael Johnson from Ilmington to come across and dance with the side and teach them dances. When one sees the Bidford dances, you wonder how a Bledington or Ilmington or Longborough man actually copes with the situation. But obviously they did because the bills for paying the people their expenses, their fees, exist.

There were one or two interesting incidents of people writing back and saying how they borrowed his bells and could he have them back. Having mentioned bells, I've heard sets of the old Bidford bells from the 1886 get-together. They were of what they call dutch metal, they were silver, and they tinkled rather than clattered. Modern bells, it isn't a particularly beautiful noise, but they used to make bells (I imagine they'd be expensive if you could get them today) so they had a lovely sound. At Bidford, and there's a set of bells in the Ashmolean museum as well, which, if you can persuade the curator to let you ring them, have this lovely musical quality about them rather than this rough jangle. It's worth thinking about if your side can afford sets of bells at about £30 a pad. That would stop you doing Flowers of Edinburgh!

Darcy Ferrars got a side together and took a great deal of care about the way it was done without any real knowledge of the product. He didn't know anything, nobody knew anything about that. His notes for the dances, he wrote down the tunes and he wrote down the dance notations in a time before there were words to describe it. Most of these papers that exist are in Cecil Sharp House library, so we have a fair degree of knowledge of it.

He raised this side who were late teenagers. He got a pipe and tabor player for them and toured all round the country. They performed in Bath, near Clifton, in the Midlands and in London. For a couple of seasons they became quite well known, appeared in the national press or reports of them did. He would dress as the Lord of Misrule and deliver a lecture. They would also dance at the function. There's a very important point because that did raise a certain amount of interest nationally and a certain awareness that there was Morris dancing in the Cotswolds.

Now, Percy Manning lived in Oxford presumably as a don (he must have been a don) and he was an antiquarian. He suddenly realised that there were things to do and he employed what was euphemistically known as a geologist assistant (the people who knew him said he was cad). He was a man called Carter who was paid to go walking through the Cotswolds looking for Morris relics. He found pipe and tabors, the mace, which was sort of platform of flowers which was sometimes carried in the

Morris, swords, cake tins (I think he bought one of the original Bampton cake tins). He also interviewing dancers, getting lists of names of people who danced, details of the costume, whether people were alive, what happened to them. That's how you discover that at about 1870 quite a few Morris sides emigrated en-bloc to New Zealand. He gathered quite a lot of information.

Percy Manning gave papers to the folklore society (I think two papers) and he arranged in the end that a side be got together at Headington Quarry and this side was then used to illustrate a lecture in the Corn Market (I think it was the Corn Market) in Oxford about 1896/1897, that was a very important thing.

The way Manning did it was very good. He found one of the previous squires, that's Trafford, paid him money to get costumes, (he got a set of cast-off costumes from the local cricket club, caps, whites and so on), paid really for them to hire a hall and get the gear and do regular reconstructions as well, got a bunch of youngsters in with the assistance of some of the older dancers.

Now, this particular revival didn't involve Bill Kimber or his father. There was one good reason why Bill's father wasn't involved. As Bill Kimber told somebody during the First World War, his father got Methodist and he tried converting the team to be teetotal. As a result, he had to live the other side of Oxford but apparently it didn't last very long either, because Harry and Arthur Kimber remember Bill Kimber's father as a man who certainly wasn't a teetotaler in any way at all. That had caused problems with the old Headington side and lead to the break up in 1887. So they got together but Kimber's cousin Dick was involved in that particular revival.

That itself got interest and got things noticed, so that when the Guild of Handicrafts, which was an artistic organisation based on London, decided to move out of London, they chose Chipping Campden and they were already aware of Morris, mummers and things like this. So in 1902, once they had settled in, they got the local side at Chipping Campden together. Again, getting one or two old dancers, a musician (Denis Hathaway, who is the grand-father of the present musician of Chipping Campden) to raise the side, play its music, lead it and so on. This as always had a slight knock-on effect so Headington had been stimulated, Campden had been stimulated, and as I mentioned yesterday this stimulated Ilmington to keep going, so there were these things running on.

Now, we're all aware of the next great incident and that was Sharp visiting his aunt at Sandford cottage in Headington; not Headington Quarry but Headington village, about a mile or so away, at Christmas. The Morris turned out at Christmas, a hard Christmas, and did the area. So Sharp didn't discover Morris, the Morris discovered Sharp, a very important distinction that. Sharp was a bit enthralled so he said, and next day he asked Kimber to come back and he noted down Kimber's tunes. He used Kimber's tunes because he'd already collected a few songs of Somerset and if you look at Sharp's ([blank tape])

Sharp was already getting old by this time, he'd had a long spell in Australia at the Conservatoire, I think in Adelaide, which was something that Clive Carey did later. Sharp, in fact, had rowed for his boat in Oxford. I mention that because living quite close is a woman whose father who also rowed in this boat with Cecil Sharp. So, the one relic of Sharp I have, is a photograph of him rowing for his college in Oxford.

He was getting on, he had been at the Hampstead Conservatoire in London teaching very orthodox music and had discovered, through his friend, songs down in Somerset, had started collecting and had published his first book. That produced enough interest for him to start lecturing on a more or less full time basis.

He had no real interest in dance at this stage, he was a musician very much concerned with the quality of what he discovered. His published lectures were of that sort; how the traditional process honed out all the rubbish and what was left contained a large element of quality tunes and quality works. Of course, this was a novel thought in the Edwardian times, so he did quite well, well reasonably well, and became a national authority.

In 19, well, I'll start another thread to the story, which is Mary Neal, which led up to Neal and Sharp meeting. Mary Neal was the daughter of a Manchester businessman, middle class, at a time when middle class women had absolutely nothing to do in their lives because there were too many servants and it was always considered indecent for them to do anything. She didn't like it, along with friends,

and they came into London to join the East London Methodist Mission, which was a soup kitchen and doss house type affair, which she realised was not going to be very effective for people.

She got involved in political campaigning, she had been on the anti-Boer War demonstrations because there was a group of people who firmly believed the Boer War was initiated by London financiers to get control of the mining industry in South Africa and they had no regard to the Boers and their rights. She certainly had been arrested for activities on that.

She realised that to do something useful for people, the best thing was to give them a job to give them something to do. So, she raised the Esperance Guild which was a organisation of young seamstresses in London where they could have a full days work all through the year.

Something one doesn't realise today was that 'the season' was finite and that all the well-to-do wanted their clothes all at once. So (there was a direct function of demand if you know what I mean) that everybody wanted everything yesterday and then didn't want anything for the rest of the year. So through her friends she arranged for a steady load of work at a reasonable wage.

Of course, that then left her responsible for the social side of it. She had a friend, McIlwain who she asked to be a sort of musical director of this organisation who introduced the girls to singing and things like this, but only German Cantatas which the girls didn't like much.

One day, when Sharp had published a book and given a lecture in London which they were aware of, they tried the folk songs and the girls immediately responded to this. So successfully that she wrote to Sharp to ask if there were any dances to go with these songs. He replied "I don't know but I did meet a Morris side in Oxford six years ago; The name of the man was Kimber, if you go to Oxford or somewhere around there you may find them."

She went with a friend to Oxford, found out where Kimber lived and invited Kimber up to London. In about July 1905, he and his cousin came up to London and were asked to teach the dances. There's a problem here because Kimber himself had never been a member of the old traditional side. Although he'd gone around with them as a boy and danced with the side as a boy, as quite a lot of people do today, it didn't mean that he'd received terribly formal instruction. Well, he taught the dances within his knowledge and was invited twice more before Christmas.

Now, Kimber being a good honest sport, when he discovered what he was to be involved in, went back and asked the dancers in the village how the dances went. He went to the old men, so, of course, a story grew up. Every old dancer in the village claimed to have taught Bill Kimber how to dance.

Because of this estrangement between with Kimber's father and the other people he adopted the policy of when he talked to somebody and learned a tune or a dance he then went back to his father to check it. His father, of course, being a bit bloody minded, wouldn't actually teach William anything but he couldn't resist telling William if he was wrong. So Kimber had to go through this tortuous business of checking with his father to make sure that he wasn't doing anything wrong. Consequently, in his first four visits to London he actually taught the dances with distinctly different styles, different ways of doing movements as he got more and more accurate.

Now, that was important because in later years, when Sharp decided to break with Mary Neal's organisation; the question of Kimber's authenticity, on which Sharp was placing a lot, became very important.

Mary Neal, of course, had all this evidence in the notes they had taken on Kimber's various visits, on how, in fact, he had really changed the dances. They didn't mind him doing it because they were much more aware of all this background. Sharp didn't come into the Mary Neal affair till a year or so after this had started, late in 1906.

Mary Neal ran a public performance of song and dance in the Kensington Town Hall in December 1905 which got rave notices in the London press and quickly found there was a demand for this sort of material in the rest of the country. Within eighteen months, she found that she had to set up an almost national organisation where she used her girls who had learnt the dances direct from traditional

dancers to go out and teach the dances elsewhere. Within only a few months she'd claim that they had engagements in every county in England. It caught on, it was the thing of the moment.

This sounds all nice and idyllic and Merrie England, but let me remind you of the Pankhurst family who moved to London in 1906 and founded the London committee of the WSPU of which Mary Neal was a member. I don't know if people remember they had a TV series two or three years ago about the votes for women - "Shoulder to Shoulder". There was in fact a reconstruction of the first committee meeting in London and they actually gave a name in the cast list, a name and a character, for everybody except one woman and that woman was supposed to be Mary Neal. She and Mrs Pethick-Laurence were involved in the Esperance club at that time, also Mrs Teuke(?) who had lived in S. Africa and met Mrs Pethick-Laurence on the boat coming back from South Africa after her husband had died. She asked what she could do and she became, I think it was, the secretary. It's Mrs Teuke who collected and published the Abingdon Morris in the Esperance Morris book, if you ever have access to that.

So, we have these two things. We have something starting out as, I won't say a do-gooding exercise, but trying to give practical help to people in poor conditions. In trying to respond to this, they got involved in things `Folk'. Also, you may remember, they were also involved in things like the Society against the adulteration of food (putting chalk into flour). They did a lot of work in things of that sort, and earliest days of the revival was involved with sufferagettes.

The Esperance Guild actually danced to collect money for the sufferagette organisation at one stage, but of course the militant side of the movement thought folk side of the organisation was somewhat daft and they off-loaded them as soon as they could. By 1908, Mary Neal was off the committee, joining one of the non militant suffrage organisations.

This had other effects. If you read the Morris books you find that McIlwain declined to do any work to support Sharp on, I think, the third book - book three and later ones although his name's on it. Because he got fed up with the way Votes for Women Movement was going and because he had ill health he ducked out officially on the grounds of ill health. He didn't want to be associated with it.

By 1910, the whole votes for women business was so odious, that Sharp, in trying to make the folk movement song and dance in schools festivals respectable, had little choice but to cut himself free from it. Unfortunately, those people who remember those days, like Miss Jean Smith, feel the break was somewhat artificially arranged; there was not that difference in the objectives of the organisations. In other words, Mary Neal was trying to do something for people but also trying to revive the dances. She set up a national organisation for collecting, publishing and teaching traditional dance and music with very prominent people like Sharp involved, to make sure that the thing was disseminated in its pure form, with regard to the society from which it was drawn. Not just thought of as `this is a rather pretty thing for middle class people to do'. It was done with care, but they did make mistakes, they did bring in dancers who slavishly believed what the traditional dancers said and unfortunately, in Abingdon's case, the two old men set out to deliberately mislead. We know that because these two of the men who went up, Tom and his brother James, even in their eighties were rather pleased with what they'd managed to achieve. They got well paid for not teaching the Morris to everybody, but I'm jumping on in my story a bit.

Sharp's collecting started seriously in 1908, August 1908. That's nine years, almost, after the Headington Quarry Morris had discovered him. He was holidaying in Stow-on-the-Wold and he asked Billy Wells who had written to a national paper saying that the Bampton Morris had been going for 200 years, unbroken tradition on the Whit Monday, and invited him across. They got up a side of Sharp, his wife and kids and the people they were staying with and Billy Wells taught the Bampton Morris to Sharp for five pounds, at least he was given five pounds at the end. That was the start of a long running wrangle in Bampton because Billy Wells considered that was his money. For many years, he'd been doing one man tours of clubs, playing and dancing simultaneously and doing it very well. He had a very high reputation in the Cotswolds. I've met people who remembered the tales of Billy Well's performances - a one man band, one man show, he was used to earning money like this. The trouble was they thought he'd sold the Morris, so by 1926, they got fed up with Jinky and kicked him out of the Morris side.

Jinky wouldn't be put down and got up a side of his own. So, from 1926 on, there were two sides known as the old'uns and the young'uns. What happened, of course, was to learn the dances, the men ignored the two leaders and learnt it off each other, and they used to swap around the sides as

necessary to keep the sides alive. After a few years, the old'uns were the young'uns; typical British sort of behaviour.

Sharp got Jinky Wells to go across, he'd already come across Winster and Eynsham. He produced a Morris Book Three first edition. Now, if you read the first edition, it's a pretty rough book, the dances are a bit scrappy. Perhaps you don't appreciate that the first two Morris books weren't actually written around the dancing of a traditional dancer at all. Florrie Warren, who was the chief dancer and teacher at the Esperance club; one of the girls there wrote down what she did. There was no question of having Kimber dance over and over again till it was sorted out, they had her dance. The dedication of the first two volumes shows this, it says `this is the way the dances are done in the Esperance club', not by traditional dancers.

Book three, when first published, was a bit rough because it was the first one based on direct description of traditional dancing at a time when the jargon hadn't really been sorted out. Patterns and so on weren't clearly understood.

Sharp didn't do much more collecting in 1908. He was still finding singers, finding musicians but all of a sudden there was a flood. He got into the Stow area and first of all found the Longborough man, Harry Taylor then came Fieldtown, he then found Sherbourne, found Ilmington, and a whole flood of dances. Not that he found many of them, quite a few of them he was told about. His field notebooks that I've seen have names and addresses `try so-and-so', beginning to signal that people existed.

There are quite a few references in the notebooks to the names of people that he never managed to follow up, there are several dancers who lived south of the Thames that he didn't follow up at all. Obviously, more leads were offered than he could do. He had the period where he worked Longborough, Fieldtown, Sherbourne, many visits, and he did it the following way. He'd get the man to sing the tune or play the tune until Sharp knew it and could whistle it. He'd then stand opposite the man either as no 1 or no 2 depending on what the man had done and mimic him - the man dancing, until the man himself was satisfied with what Sharp did.

So, those three traditions are recorded extremely well and also include touches on how they are done, which have come to us through Sharp's direct teaching to the members of the EFDSS. There are things there which Sharp taught which we can have high confidence in the path of the tradition. Now, I say this because in Sherbourne all the jumps end with the hands straight out in front. There's no sign of this in Sharp's papers and yet it's something we know Sharp taught right from the moment he first collected Sherbourne and started teaching it to people. We have very high confidence that at that period Sharp collected and taught precisely what the people did. Also, of course, these are areas over which Travelling Morrice worked later and found traditional dances and found that the quality of Sharp's collecting was extremely high.

After 1912, well by 1910, Sharp had discovered Longsword and Rapper and his interest had got diverted very strongly that way. Other people like Butterworth and Clive Carey, who was working for Mary Neal, started collecting in the Cotswolds, so other people started providing us with information from 1912 onwards.

Then we have the war, we know Sharp visited the States rather than doing field-work and by this time, 1919, he was old and in ill health. Also probably because he'd done a lot of lecturing and teaching, he started forming very definite ideas about the Morris. When he collected Adderbury in 1919, the impression one gets of the Morris is one which strictly fits the pattern of all Morris which had been published before. Mary Neal and Janet Blunt and her three friends who collected from Walton(?) during the period 1914-1918 had got a much better picture of Adderbury and the things it didn't have, things that it did and the variety that was in it. In fact, it was a much more flexible tradition than Cecil Sharp put over. Also, when Sharp went out in 1922, almost his last tour to Abingdon, he met people who were present during this. Sharp got a little short tempered with Abingdon and was driving the old men to say things, almost putting words in their mouths. Although they didn't mislead him in any way. Things like the Princess Royal dance that Sharp finally published is, in fact, two dances run together. People answered questions in the way that Sharp was prompting them to answer.

When he got to Brackley we have another situation. The men danced for him, several men danced, as it was a active side, they never did the same thing twice. They did a dance and Sharp said "do it again", so they thought there was something wrong with the way they did it, so they strung it together

a different way, then they strung it together another way. Now, we've talked to Maud Karpeles about that, a person who was present with Sharp and noted down the dance order. She said at that time Sharp had trouble with his eyes and was having real difficulty coping with the situation, and he looked at this and imposed on it the pattern which he was used to. In other words, there was a standard set of figures which you did in a standard sort of way. Sharp being the authority at that time, people were not really prepared to challenge him. I'm trying not to run Sharp down, we must remember he was human, it was a tremendous achievement and what he did was more than adequate for the folk revival for twenty or thirty years.

Have I given you an image? Mary Neal starting it with the folk dance aspect of what she was doing, Sharp coming in and all of a sudden finding a big flood of material over a small period. Then, in a sense, having become the great authority, fossilising it in a sort of way, so at Sharp's death we get a potentially poor situation. During the war, Mary Neal's people, she'd moved her organisation into the Ministry of Pensions, she became an Under-secretary in the Ministry and at the end of the war she refused to revive the arguments that were going on there. She wrote to all her staff saying "join the EFDSS" and she washed her hands of the whole thing and went off into a different sort of activity for the rest of her life. The EFDSS, of course, had lost an awful lot of its men. I think you will appreciate that an organisation based on Chelsea polytechnic, the women who learned physical training there, was already biased toward the women's organisation. So, during the twenties, after they'd lost a lot of men, there was a real struggle to get together a men's side.

At Cambridge, there was a basically a revolt against this domination and the Morris men under the influence of Heffer and Rolf Gardner decided they'd organise a tour. Now, this tour was supposed to be to North Germany because they were very idealistic and thought that one way of cementing relationships between these two countries was, in fact, for us to show friendship and go and share our culture with them. Well, unfortunately, they didn't get any support from the powers-that-be for this. So, the Germans said what about doing a tour of the Cotswolds. In 1924, they sort of posterized the Cotswolds and set out on a bicycling tour and, much to their surprise, discovered that there were traditional dancers living.

Now, the Travelling Morrice, or Cambridge Morris at that time, were the most active side. You can't imagine that Morris then were lucky if they had six at practice, often borrowed someone from another side to do a show. Tours were unheard of, the Travelling Morrice tours were a sort of unique thing that went on. One or two other sides formed, and it was the Cambridge Morris Men's idea that the way to keep them all together was to bring two of them each year to an annual feast as honorary members of Cambridge Morris. You can imagine the rate of growth of the revival from the fact that this was possible, for short periods. You could actually get all the Morris dancers in the country as members of the Cambridge Morris men. Of course, it didn't last forever and about 1934, it was realised in the six or seven clubs that were active that they had to have some other way of doing it. After a meeting in Gerry Newnam's rooms at the University of Cambridge, they decided some other organisation should be formed.

Why is it called 'The Ring'? It harps back to Rolf Gardner again, his connection with North Germany. He had this idealistic view of people working on the land. He thought, well, his father and Uncle, Balfour Gardner the composer, who also farmed at Fontmell Magna, south of Shaftesbury, they organised sort of work camps so that their professional friends, doctors, musicians and so on could attend at spring and at harvest time to - sort of get to the land, a sort of attitude of mind, people discovering that there was a real world out there somewhere. He set up something called The Springhead Ring, this way of linking people together, which included these professional friends in this country and in Northern Europe. They ran a magazine called 'North Sea and Baltic' which illustrated areas of interest.

This rather romantic view of things was why they chose the Ring as being a sort of Germanic symbol. The Ring adopted the purely Cambridge idea of the squire and bagman. The traditional phrases for the leader was the captain or master, the courtesy title Master Thomas Wright or Master William Gibbs as Foreman and they talked about the Captain of the Morris side. The squire was really the fool, there were all sorts of names for him, of course. It just seemed to suit at the time, the traditional side didn't have a bagman of course, they had a ragman, someone who carried the coats and the collecting box, more often the fool was given the job of collecting. This is the way traditions develop, of course.

Let me just round this off. The Ring formed, it didn't flourish very quickly. The 1938 Ring meeting still only had 80 men, the really big meetings didn't start until the mid 1950s, I think 1960 was the first time we reached 200 men at a ring meeting. Also the revival just rediscovered the tradition about 1936, for 12 years the inheritance of Sharp had been adequate. People suddenly realised Bampton didn't dance Bampton like they were doing, they realised that Kimber didn't do Headington the way they were doing it, because nobody asked Kimber for years how it was done. They suddenly realised there were dancers in Brackley and Bledington who were alive and could be talked to, and who had more dances, more tunes and more things. From there onwards, we have this acceleration away of information on the Morris. Real research was done listing origins, getting together materials culminating in the Black Book. We can trace all that from about 1936, when things got away and people suddenly realised that the past is very interesting but it shouldn't be a brake on the future. Tomorrow, I'll talk about something completely different - the traditions outside the Cotswolds.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Sidmouth, Devon (August 1979)

Wednesday

There's a need to remind you that the breadth of the British tradition, or English tradition anyhow, is wider than just the Cotswold Morris. Just to remind you, the Cotswold Morris is not all over the Cotswolds. There's no tradition of Morris in Bath or there wasn't, although there is one reference in a newspaper to a side visiting Bath in the 19th century. It only just overflowed into Gloucestershire and it only just got into Northants. It isn't all over Oxfordshire, it's a very small part of the country. Now, one asks what happened in the rest of the country? First thing is, that when you're looking elsewhere you're not necessarily looking for a dance tradition. All the country was covered by begging or good luck visiting (the two things are synonymous) customs.

(End Of Tape)

.....sometimes associated with animals, sometimes with dancing, sometimes with straight forward visiting and singing. It's quite usual in any part of the country that it had a tradition of good luck visiting of it's own, it didn't necessarily overlap with others. The one exception is the Mummers, which seem almost universal in various types of play occurring at Christmas.

Now, let's go round the country, starting in East Anglia, about as far away as we can get. The main tradition of dancing is the Molly dance and we have seen an exponent of it, the Seven Champions who probably don't dance Molly dancing like Molly dancing was done. Though I could say that about anybody else who's tried to do Molly dancing, because we don't really know how the old sides danced. Anybody who is doing Molly dances that were collected is on their own. The only surviving sides, or sides who have survived into living memory were so, I won't use the word degenerate about any custom, but they had simplified what they did so much that they were doing couple dances, tangos and things like this, with a man and a man dressed as a woman, very simple material.

It's a common characteristic of any tradition of good luck visiting, it's about as complicated as the society wishes or needs. So, people get away with as simple a dance, as simple a costume, as simple music, as they can. You usually find a reasonable show has got to be done and, of course, when you have a reasonable show, it then tends to get called Morris. Morris is a generic word for a big show, if you get up and dress up and do country dances people call you Morris, not because of the dances you do but because of the show you're making. Molly dancers had reasonable music, reasonable costume but very simple dances so the occasion had to compensate for it. They used to do, well typically, the villagers used to do farms but really spent the day heading towards the big town, Cambridge or Ely, places like that. The teams would congregate on the right day in the season, usually Mayday and dance together. At this point, they would bring in wives and sweethearts, so the dancing was basically mixed, but doing the same dances in a mixed situation. I think there's something like 90 known villages which had teams at one time or another in East Anglia, so it was a very common tradition, again in a small area. It flourished in the 19th century then died out all of a sudden. Nobody has any real idea why, one can postulate as one can all over the country generalised reasons, emigration, bad harvests, pauperisation of the proletariat; all these phrases.

The fact is, no one explanation fits everywhere, but usually one explanation fits one place and you've got to have another explanation for the next place. In Kent, we're not aware really of surviving dance customs, certainly things called Morris cropped up all over the country in the 16th and 17th century

but we don't know what it was. All that we know about this, is verbal descriptions of costumes and numbers of people, but no good indication of the form of the dance. Whether it was a dance, or whether it was a play or things like this, so you can't really talk about that period of time in Kent. But, of course, there's the Hooden Horse that you're aware of.

Now, animal customs are extremely varied, it's very easy to lump them all together and say it's a disguise like Cawle(?) has done in his book. But the difference between an animal you wear, or an animal on a pole, or an animal that's part of a play, or an animal that's meant to terrify, is quite enormous. Usually these things occur in very small areas. There's the Hooden Horse in Kent. There's an animal on the Gloucester-Worcester border which was a bull's head carried on a stick and the party went round with a doggerel song which they'd do in each place and they'd hammer away at the door until you answered, they wouldn't take no lights as an answer - the usual business - and they had the usual nice little tricks like dropping a dead skunk down the well if you didn't provide them with food and drink. Well, probably not a skunk in this country, but something that had gone nice and rotten. In the same way as the plough stots up North, if you didn't treat them right, they thought they had the right to plough up your drive or your path or your front garden. People didn't normally upset them of course, it was generally the newcomers to the village who didn't understand the custom who had this sort of treatment.

Well, there's no dance custom in that part of the country I've just mentioned, the Wilts/Gloucs border, but there was this animal went round. A very similar sort of custom, but they made hullabaloo and they used to do it in the small hours of the morning as much as the rest of the day. In the South in general, the references I've come across to Morris imply there was something called Morris but it was more solo dancing. Lucy Broadwood who you know of, folk song collector of Horsham, when she was very young can remember a man coming up dressed in ribbons and bells, solo, and doing a solo performance at the house jigging and capering around. She realised years afterwards that she'd probably seen the last of the Sussex Morris dancers.

At Putnam near Guildford, in the early 19th century, there was a tradition of Morris dancing and there are quite a few stories surviving of various dancers going up to London (they used to take cartloads of carrots) and entering competitions in London pubs which were common. Again, all in terms of individuals. Incidentally, the Morris died out at Putnam because the last dancer insisted on being buried in his bells, and that was the last set of bells from the village, so nobody else could take it up, so they used to say. There are Morris dancers at Arlesford, the other side of Orton, the stories seem exactly the same, it's all in terms of individuals who used to dance, no suggestion of a team.

The first team we meet is at Salisbury. Now, Salisbury, as you probably know, I think it's Salisbury and Chester are the last survivors of mediaeval guild, Animals and Giants. It has a giant called St. Christopher nowadays, it used to have a black face but it's been painted pink this century due to racial prejudice. It's 14 foot high, weighs 2 cwt. and is carried by one man around the processions. It didn't have an annual perambulation time not since 1485. It came out on the major celebrations in the country, like thanking for the recovery of George who used to go periodically mad, marriages of members of the royal family, the Prince of Wales and so on. On the whole, it came out about once every five years. This meant very little continuity in the dance as far as one can gather. They seemed to have any dance they got together each time they came out, based on contemporary social dance. The fascinating thing about it was the balance between the complexity and the need to make a show. They had a fife and drum for music in all the known photographs from 1880 onward, so the music was very simple but the costumes were incredible. It was six men in the dying years anyhow, and they'd have three men dressed in breeches, all flowery material, and the other three men were wearing crinolines. So, you can guess the sort of Morris they did. In the last year in 1911, which was the coronation of George V, the side consisted of two men dressed as men, two men dressed as women and two men dressed as Red Indians complete with feathered head-dress.

The tradition is full of surprises. In fact, to me, one of the laughs about people in the revival who say you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that, it wouldn't be traditional. Yet the tradition itself doesn't give a damn about that, and introduces the oddest things, like coconut halves for hand clapping, which the average Morris man would draw the line at, I think.

The Salisbury thing was, as I said, irregular, rather elaborate in gear. It had a giant, the giant had a knob on a pole, a sword and other bits of regalia, so that it made a huge impression in the procession

and they had the simple dance, presumably social dance. The tune, the last few times they turned out, was a version of Oyster Girl, very simple.

Very close to Salisbury is Great Wishford and I've mentioned the Wishford custom earlier. At Wishford, they had this charter because they had an argument with Lord Pembroke about their rights to get wood and have access to the forest. So, when the Charter was put down, one of the obligations on the villagers was to go to the Cathedral to have the charter read and then to do their customary dance. From 1604, at least, they were required to do a dance at the Cathedral. Also, for many years, they used to have a procession all the way from the village to Salisbury, about six and a half miles. They were accompanied by a band and there was a reasonable amount of dancing on the way, besides stopping at the hostelrys, of course, all the way along.

If you go to Wishford today, well, not exactly today, but on 29th May each year, you will see a tremendous village celebration which starts early in the morning, about 3 o'clock, by them going round making rough music about the village until each house shows a light indoors, then they go on to the next house. Then they go up to the woods to collect boughs, there's a competition for the largest hand-carried bough. They then bring the wood back and decorate the cottages. Then at nine o'clock they catch a bus into Salisbury. Bus, you notice, there's no longer walking, and a few minutes before 10 o'clock, they dance, normally outside the Cathedral, the four women, and they read the charter inside. They shout "grovelly, grovelly, strength and unity" at the top of their voices and leave the Cathedral. What's delightful is, that this whole thing is not mentioned in the order of activities in the Cathedral and the Cathedral staff do their best to ignore it. They go back to the village and at 12 noon a brass band sets off from town end, which is a big tree, and they do what I would call beating the bounds. They go round the lanes around the edge of the village and stop at the four corners and blow their hearts out on the trumpets and they are accompanied by the Oak Apple Club.

This is a lovely thing, the custom has nothing to do with Oak Apple day. In the sense that it's not celebrating Charles II at all. But they've transferred the custom like a lot of other people did, to Oak Apple day. Over the years they formed a society to keep it going, they called themselves the Oak Apple Club because it was on Oak Apple day, rather than it having anything to do with Charles II.

Well, they have this procession, all the club have banners and the rest of the village have fancy dress, so when you go there you see a typical carnival procession, except there's nobody watching it because all the village is actually in the procession, and it occurs in the middle of whatever day the May 29th is. Which is, as you know, mostly a midweek day, and the local villages don't bother to come for the Great Wishford shindig. They dance again in the middle of the village and they have races, a beer tent, a marquee in which the Oak Apple Club have their dinner. They then have a maypole, they've had a maypole with kids dancing round it since 1880 something or other, it's one of the longest surviving maypoles in the country for ribbon dancing.

At about half past six, they exhaust all they things you can possibly do in the village celebration, so it stops and they go for a quiet drink in a pub. Again that's another delightful thing about it, it all happens when the pubs are shut.

Shaftesbury, moving round a bit, it had a delightful custom, do you know Shaftesbury at all? Which arose out of the fact that it's on this plateau with all the springs at the bottom of the hill and unfortunately the bottom of the hill is owned by the Lord of the next manor. So they had to pay a rent each year. This rent was a sum of money, a pair of gloves and a purse, this sort of thing. In fact, a fairly standard sort of rent for things in the past, gloves being expensive.

So what they used to do, was to kill an animal, a pig or calf, mount its head raw on a platter, shove the gloves and money in its mouth, they also had a thing called a besom(?) which nearly defies description. It's that tall, it looks like a pineapple gone mad, sort of pineapple shape with spikes and lots of flowery bits, all trailing, so you get a sort of thing, this huge size. Then they decorated it with everything shiny, money in particular, little bits of glass, jewellery and watches and things like this. They used to reckon that in its last few years at the end of the 19th century that there was about £2000 worth of stuff, jewellery and money attached to this besom. Now, that's £2000 in early Victorian currency terms, so it was rather valuable.

They used to march down, the whole procession, led by the Mayor and the Aldermen and a band followed by the people of the town, used to dance down the hill as a celebration, then arrived at the

stewards of the next door manor and say "Which do you want? This bloody head and the gloves and five guineas or this?" and traditionally he always took the first thing. They then, with a sigh of relief, danced all the way back up the hill, which was much more of a feat. Then they had a banquet on the rates. The reason it stopped was that the cost of the feast and the dance afterwards exceeded the rateable value of the town. The Marquis of Winchester just had to put a stop to it by saying "I don't need the rent". Funnily enough, when they stopped, it didn't stop the dancing and for several years they went down. Then they converted this to what we would call a carnival procession.

I don't know if you've seen the Padstow notices which have all the funny names on them, all the characters involved in dancing are given comic names. Well, they had these long strips, had their 100th celebration 2 years ago did Shaftesbury, for their procession, and they had a set of these posters right from the beginning. All the comic names for all the floats and so on, and they claim, and probably quite rightly, to be the oldest procession with floats in the country. It arose straight out of stopping the old dance custom in the same way that Chipping Campden, when Dover's games were stopped, they transferred the celebration 'The Scuttlebrook Wake' into Chipping Campden itself. The locals were not going to be denied having their fun even though the reason was taken away from it, and it got to a different level of cost, I suppose.

Across the South and one or two places in the Midlands there are these isolated customs. I've mentioned Shaftesbury, you all know about Padstow, you all know about Helston, one knows about Lichfield, everyone unique in its character and origin, in the reason it started, why it kept going, the reasons it stopped or reached the form it was, and being the shindig or whatever phrase you like for the area. The catchment area being at least the distance you could walk, which would be about 12 miles. I think it was one of the Henrys who said market towns had got to be at least 8 miles apart. Wherever you lived, you had to have at least one market within walking distance. It was all to do with maximising his intake, although I don't think he'd have used those phrases, but they worked out, without the advantage of linear mathematics, that there was a certain distance apart that market towns had to be to maximise the amount of tolls and rents that you could get from people. (Chrystaller's central place theorem)

We are all beginning to be aware of Border Morris. It's a term concocted a few years ago, really, by Dr. Corfe, who wrote an article for EFDSS journal. He used it to cover from Flint all the way down to Gloucester and, in fact, odd dances done at places like Headington which is in Oxford, and Steeple Claydon which is in Buckinghamshire. It's a generic word to cover Christmas Morris, I think, as distinct from the Cotswold or Spring Morris. It does come in quite distinct elements, there always was an underlay of Christmas dancing in the Midlands and even through the Cotswold area. The simple stepping and reel type dance, is a really old form of English dancing both ritual (I can't use that word, I'll say ceremonial then) and social dancing. Well, there was always that and where one hears of men dancing in the South in terms of 'the dancing of the reels' is the phrase used down at Old Woking and Old Farnborough down on the Hampshire/Surrey border. There's that underlay and then there's what I would call Worcestershire Morris. Where each village tends to have the classic one stick dance and one handkerchief dance and, as we heard yesterday, that, in fact, meant one dance which you either did as a stick dance or as a handkerchief dance literally.

The characteristic of it was that the side goes round each year as was necessary, usually done by a trade, stonemasons, bricklayers, or people who worked in gravel pits. Therefore, it was only initiated each year if they were already frozen out. If the weather was good then they didn't bother to go out, but if it was an early winter they did. In the Birmingham area, that end of Worcestershire, teams were of bricklayers who actually used trowels to dance with rather than sticks.

So, the characteristic, as I was saying, is it was something worked up at the last minute; therefore, you had one or two rather simple dances, very simple traditional costumes, the ultimate simplicity. Turn your clothes inside out and stitch bits of rag all over, so you have a rag coat which is stitched into the lining of your ordinary jacket. But compensated by large numbers; ten, twelve, fourteen was more typical than four or six, although they arranged dances so that four or even three could do them, if that was all you could get. But normally large numbers and normally a large band with a large percussion element, so you made a tremendous noise and a tremendous sense of occasion out of that sort of thing.

That was the characteristic of the what I call Worcester Morris. Further north, in Shropshire, you got into the more wild type of performance, where the dances were a lot simpler but the whole thing was more terrifying than enjoyable, shouting, coming in late at night, things like this.

Having drifted up the Welsh border, there are references to Morris in Wales, it is of two sorts. The North Wales Morris is much related to the processional dance, the early form of North West Morris and into Wales itself, there are many accounts of good luck visiting involving dancing but unfortunately with no real indication of what they did. The Welsh Morris, like the southern Morris, died out too early for collectors to actually get the dances. One gets the impression it was not Cotswold-like, white clothes, ribbons, carrying a may-bush garland or having a tree, a birch tree to dance with, I don't think one can say very much about it. One of the troubles is that Welsh customs tend to look like English ones. But they are far enough away from the corresponding English ones to possibly have a different origin and purpose and we just see the superficial similarity.

Some of the things in Wales, like Maying – going out on Mayday as a party to sing, carrying a big garland - that is known to have spread into Wales from England, as it is known to have spread into England from France. The whole concept of Maying - and varying local historians in the South are most bitter about this introduction, this alien custom which, what was it, "will enervate the British people - men", a phrase like that, "British men from manly things like archery and Morris dancing". Of course, the trouble with Maying, you see, is that, if you've got mixed sex it got everybody worked up. Why they got upset at Aylsford is that the dance, the late night extra of the time, slowly disappeared as everybody grabbed themselves a girl and went off for a so called walk in the woods. At Hurstbourne Tarrant on the other side of Hampshire at St Mary Bourne, it got particularly bad there, they even detect a correlation of births with Mayday celebration.

Let's come up to the Northwest, which is the last area I want to talk about. The origin of Northwest Morris is not simple, it comes from a variety of sources. There's more than one type of dance in the area as well. Rush-bearing was an important element but the rush-bearing ceremonies were not on the Cheshire plain. They were up in middle Lancashire, north of Manchester. This was a time when churches, I think, didn't have pews and just every so often put new rushes over the old ones to keep the place smelling fresh and people just stood around for services. They made a great deal of this and had a large cart for the rushes and made a decorative thing of it. It was then very heavy so it needed a lot of people to pull it and this used to be a special day. It would attract the village band and then the dancers. In one or two places, the Morris dancers themselves actually pulled the rushcart but in many others they didn't so one assumes that it was just local circumstances.

The Morris was something very simple, basically the dressing up and the huge show to do a simple processional dance with no set figures and no set pattern. It wasn't until the rushcart stopped, as it were, that the dancers didn't want to and with the growth of holidays, Wakes, which were the formal thing, and beginning to get to the seaside. Once people started to get around a bit, we then had period where the Northwest teams converted from what we now call the rogue dance, the processional thing, to having set pieces, stage dances, they were called for while. This sort of thing happened in the rushcart area.

At the same time, we had a sort of spring custom on the Cheshire plain stretching down into Staffordshire and this seemed to attract the same sort of thing. The procession of church or club is much stronger concept up North than it now is in the South. Although at one time, every village had its one or two friendly societies which would have a procession around. Up north, there seemed to be a much stronger tradition, I often think they still are, that easily attracted dancers. So, besides the rushcart which tended to be later in the year, they had a spring village walk which would attract the dancers.

On the vexed question of "Did women do the Northwest Morris?" The earliest reference I came across was at Buxton Well dressing. The whole idea of well dressing is a celebration, you might think it was terribly ancient, which might be true if it weren't for the fact that the wells being dressed aren't very old. Buxton is one of the oldest, 1840 and the first celebration, there's a poster illustrating this, they had a team of young women doing the Morris. After a few years, it was thought unseemly that "young women should disport themselves in public or display" was the phrase used, and they got in a team of young men from a neighbouring town to replace them. I've seen a collection of photographs of Northwest Morris, particularly thinking of pre-First World War, and going through these, there's marginally more photographs of women's sides than there are of men. So, although it's conventionally

said that Northwest Morris is a male tradition, which after the First World War, men took women's sides and men's sides that it could get together. So that it changed sex, as it were, I don't think the available evidence supports that too well, there were a lot of women's sides as well as men's sides.

Certainly, there's no doubt about the evidence that women's sides were formed by men after the First World War and there are some very good photographs of women's sides wearing clogs and jockey caps. In fact, looking at the pictures of Royton(?), they actually dressed up in male-like costumes. These were sides that had been raised by old men's sides in the image of the Morris as they knew it.

Other things which developed over a period of time, early references to the Morris, suggest that the implement which was an integral part of the dance was probably small branches of greenery rather than the waver. The waver seems to be a development from sticks, to a few ribbons, to lots of ribbons, then ribbons at both ends, then masses of bells, until it grew into the common carnival waver you find in the Carnival Morris troupe, which are a thick bundle of tissue paper. Funnily enough, that sort of thing, the pom-poms, as they are called in the States, you see, it's got onto the US scene as well, they have ([Blank Tape])

...early sides did dances which are recognisably Northwest Morris.

Now, what do I mean by recognisable Northwest Morris? You can't say this because it's got a one-two-three-hop type step because the Carnival Morris still have that. They still have the high knee raising step of the Cheshire Plain Morris. The Morris in Lancashire had a characteristic structure, it had a stepping up-and-back or back-and-forward type movement and a step-and-turn type movement with figures in between. That's the characteristic structure. Many dances collected from women's sides between the wars had that sort of structure and we say if they are not old dances, at least they are derived directly from it. My understanding is that Carnival Morris dances that you see today are very slow moving because there are no points for the dance. In the competition, you get nothing for content, it's all for appearance. About a quarter of the marks are for coming on, how well you come on. You also get a lot of marks for the exit as well. They judge you on the quality of the costume. I remember talking to a judge at the Bellevue finals and saying: "how do you judge between one side and another?" They said "well we see how well the bells are polished" and things like this. They are all so perfect.

The other thing is, the typical show lasts almost a quarter of a hour. Nowadays, they tend to do it to records, the record is turned over two or three times during a performance. By the end of it, the girls are beginning to wilt, a lot of mistakes are made in the exit because the girls are physically exhausted. The step is this high knee step, which is very tiring. In practices, they have a very simple sort of step.

(Pause for demonstration)

They practice the routines, getting the patterns right, having a very simple, as it were, analogue of the step. It's something you ought to remember, particularly where you are trying to get patterns. Get people to do things in slow motion to get the pattern habit right, trying to get the pattern in your mind before worrying about the steps. There's no doubt if something's physically exhausting, you will be concentrating on how you are going to get through it, rather than on what you are supposed to do.

The Carnival Morris troop is the surviving folk dance in this country. There are four Carnival associations in the Northwest. The Carnival association is something which, if you want a carnival, it can provide everything from hot dogs stalls to wavers to sell along the street. It organises your Morris Dance competition by telling people to turn up. All the details can be organised through a Carnival association. The sides register with one or other of them and because they got fed up with the good sides going round the little carnivals and mopping up the prizes. They've done what the brass band world has had to do. That is, give people fixtures. A balanced set of fixtures, so if you were a good side, you had to meet some good sides occasionally as well. By writing to them, most of these Carnival association have over 100 clubs registered with them. Three or four hundred teams exist and some of these clubs have more than one troop because there are various age groups; and therefore there could be three or of these troupes in a club. So, the number of teenage girls doing it runs into the many thousands. They are usually organised with a sort of chaperone, a mum that looks after the gear and collects the wavers after performances and during practices. As far as I can gather from the ones I've met, the dances get composed by themselves. They are organised and disciplined by themselves, or at least one of the older dancers acts as a conductor with them. It meets all the criteria I can think of for

a living folk tradition, it's a tradition locally, like children's games are a tradition, nobody can deny that, they teach it on from child to child, how do you do it, what to do, they're innovative (perhaps that doesn't come into children's games). This shows they're on the way to growing up but it is a living folk art. You may not like it, if you go along to see it, although I did. It's actually a marvellous way of wasting the day watching the girls dance. It depends what you're interested in.

I like taking films, I advise people when taking films, you take a film of a women's side like any other Morris, if they're not very good, you home in on the pretty ones, if you can't find any pretty ones, you look for well endowed ones, if there aren't any, well, the dance is over anyhow.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Sidmouth, Devon (August 1979)

Thursday

(missing)..the Traditional day is June 19th, which was the Horse Fair day in Abingdon. This used to have a fairly elaborate custom. The day before, they used to dance around Ock Street. If you don't know Abingdon, there are really only two roads, Ock Street, O-C-K named after the river which runs east-west, the road does as well as the river; and the Vineyard which runs north-south around the edge of the old Abbey grounds. In the days of the Abbey, Vineyard was in Abbey and Ock Street wasn't, so it was a continual battle between the people. Well, not a battle, needle, between those who lived in Vineyard and those who lived in Ock street. Well, the custom was to go round on the day before, the eve, which fits with the old idea that the day started at sunset, so the eve was rather an important part of the custom. On the day itself, they would have an election for Mayor of Ock Street. Who, despite what newspapers say nowadays, in fact, he was elected as Mayor of Ock Street for the year to represent the views of the place. They would chair the elected Mayor up and down the street, drinking at each hostelry as they went. The custom itself ran on until about 1885 on an annual basis, but the Horse Fair itself started to die down and therefore the reason for the custom was disappearing.

Thomas Hemmings was the last Mayor who was elected every year for something like twenty-five years. I think that when interviewed, he claimed that he'd been arrested on most of these occasions for being drunk and disorderly. He also had another endearing habit, which was that he couldn't wait for the Morris, so the night before the night before, as it were, he put on his kit and walked up and down and round and round, waiting for it all to start. It was rather funny, it's a story that many people living in Ock Street remembered, despite the fact that he died in 1885. Another thing about folk memory, if you go to Bampton and show old photographs to people, they'll name everybody on it, although you know bloody well they had all died before these people were born.

The Mayor Making died down, the last true Mayor Making was 1902 and a rather strange affair actually. They didn't all have kit, only one man of the whole set had full kit, they were just wearing what they could. It stopped at that time. Tom Hemmings was a young boy of about 14 or 15 at this time and one or two others who participated in the later revival of Abingdon were boys at that time and could well remember the Morris. The Abingdon Morris was discovered by the revival because an antiquarian mentioned this funny habit of having the horns and other regalia. Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp went together on April 1st 1910 to see the Morris. April 1st was not a very good choice of a day, because they wrote to the Morris to say they were coming to see them, and quite honestly, the Morris didn't believe it.

They collected the Morris. They then invited some of the Abingdon men up to London and they danced in London the evening before Edward VII died. Now, this made a tremendous impact on the Abingdon men, another thing which made an impact was that the Lord Mayor of London attended this display and had a drink out of the chalice they had. Over the years, this has escalated from the Lord Mayor to Edward VII, and all the older men I've talked to firmly remember that it was King Teddy who actually saw them dance the night before he died. He'd been in coma for ten days however, that's how a folk memory goes.

There was enough interest in the revival in 1910/11 for the Mayor Making and all the ceremony to go on. It ran on to the war. The war, of course, killed a fair number of dancers, as it did in most places. In Abingdon, the ceremony was not reconvened in the twenties, but in 1930, as it turned out, with the

support of the local paper to get an interest in Morris, they got together a set and dressed them up and danced in the yard of a pub to have photographs taken. Although it got a splash in the two local newspapers there was no interest in it at all. 1935 for the Silver Jubilee, the Town council asked the Hemmings family to participate in the procession. Unfortunately, a few weeks before the Silver Jubilee, James Hemmings, who was one of the two old men that Sharp had met, had died. So his younger brother, Henry, was carried in a chair through the procession. They didn't actually dance on the day although there were several dancers in the village. The next year the King died and so on until we get ourselves to 1936.

There was a Ring meeting in 1936 at Wargrave at which William Kimber and Jinky Wells attended and 36 Ring dancers. They were all able to camp on somebody's lawn. Though the thought of a Ring meeting like that is quite incredible nowadays. They had these two there to teach them on the Saturday morning and on the Saturday afternoon tour they went into Abingdon. As they were dancing, an old man and coal cart turned up and got very excited and dashed off to get his old friend Jinky Wells and they proceeded to do a double jig. They did the double jig 'Flowers of Edinburgh', which was rather amusing because Jinky Wells danced it like a Morris dancer and Henry Hemmings, who was the old coalman was a Step dancer, so he did clogging steps while the other did Morris steps. It didn't seem to worry them very much. As a result of this ????????? discovered that there were a fair number of Morris dancers still alive. At that time, people outside Abingdon were not aware that there were traditional dancers around.

If you read Sharp's Morris book describing Abingdon, he talks about two old dancers and you get the strong impression that there were just two old dancers that were left there and that when they died that was it, the Abingdon Morris was dead and gone. If you read it carefully it doesn't say that, it says "thanks to all the dancers", because they had seen the complete side in 1910 and again in 1921.

They arranged to collect tunes and some of the dances from people and it all fell apart. In the 1937 Coronation celebrations, the Morris team, or at least the Hemmings family, decided they would have a Morris team turn out and Kenworthy Stoker actually saw them advertised. That was the first they knew that the side was together. So they invited Abingdon across to the EFDSS staff conference at Wargrave Hall early in 1937 and they danced on the lawn there and formally became the Abingdon Traditional Morris dancers. At that time, they called themselves THE Traditional Ring Morris dancers. They joined the Morris Ring and asked Major Fryer to become their president. They were all old men at the time, I think the youngest was about forty. The youngest one was Charlie Hemmings, who is the present Mayor and Charlie's 79 this year, so in '36/'37, he'd have been 37, he was the youngest by a few years. It's a well known fact that Jack Hyde, who was bagman from 1948 for about twenty years or so, he had been invited to join the side in 1910 to dance with Tom. But his family was a little bit superior to the rest and it was thought not quite appropriate for somebody with his background to dance, so he didn't actually become involved in Morris until well into its revival. The revival is extremely well documented because Major Fryer attended most practices and wrote letters to Kenworthy Stoker, of which copies have survived, describing how they conducted the practices and how the dances were recovered. The most interesting thing about it is that they were run like a business meeting with a minute book and at each practice they discussed the dances and remembered bits and then the next week they would start off by formally reading the minutes of the previous practice. Can you imagine that in modern clubs?

Because of their age, none of them were called up in the last war and they were one of the few sides to dance right through the war. They did a lot of fund raising, Wings for Victory and things like this. They finally disintegrated in 1944 when their musician Harry Thomas died.

Harry Thomas had married into a remote branch of the Hemmings family and he learned all the tunes on a one row melodeon which as you know has its limitations and he played all the tunes in C. In Abingdon, they were great sticklers for getting things right but they never persuaded Harry Thomas to play the tunes they sang to him. The most classic example was Jockey, the Abingdon Jockey is twelve bars long B music, but Harry Thomas only played ten bars, so they just had to trim the dance a bit to suit. Also, because certain notes are missing on a one row melodeon, he had to twist a lot of the tunes around, so things like Brighton Camp came out in a weird sort of variant to suit his box. I think they've kept the tunes fairly constant ever since. I think it's rather delightful, Major Fryer learned from Harry Thomas, Len Barber learned from Major Fryer, John White learned from Barber. Every time it was passed on, don't change the notes, don't change the rhythm, don't .. Of course, they always played the

tunes quite differently from each other, about the only thing you can say about them is that they are all the same length tunes. But otherwise, the speed and so on have changed, as you would expect.

The side disintegrated in '44 because they lost the musician. Then the Mayor, Henry Hemmings died and so they were a bit leaderless. Major Fryer was demobbed in '46/'47 and a deputation came over to see him. There had been some rather interesting fuss within the club because all the money that they had had been given to Major Fryer to put in his bank account. The bagman had been calling on this throughout the war for small amounts off Major Fryer and at the end of the war he demanded all the original sum back. So one began to think there was something a bit suspicious going on. Still, they got rid of the old bagman and started an interesting phase in 1949. They elected a new Mayor and started all over again, but there was a running battle between one branch of the Hemmings family and the rest of the Morris. This is how it happened.

The ex-bagman was secretary to the Pig Club. The Pig Club was a relic of the old allotment society, allotments were given to people when the Enclosure Act occurred, in which to keep a pig and have half an acre. The idea of keeping the pigs together meant it was worthwhile clubbing together on sties and looking after them. In Abingdon, the only thing that survived was the club, no-one kept any pigs. It consisted of an annual outing to the seaside. They set out toward the sea but they didn't necessarily get there. I don't know whether works outings actually go on any more. Where you all pile on a coach with beer and you make it to first pub then the second pub. About two o'clock, you decide it's time to turn round and perhaps you'll get to Weymouth next year.

So, in the Pig Club, was every Morris man who wanted to go on the annual outing. They would wait till Mayor Making was announced which, strictly speaking was the Saturday nearest 19th June although it would vary a bit from year to year to suit their convenience. As soon as they announced the date of mayor-making... that was the day of the Pig Club outing so they then moved mayor-making to the other Saturday but for some mysterious reason the coach wasn't available. The worst one was the Saturday nearest 19th June turned out to be 22nd August. This is the sort of thing that was absolutely delightful.

There was the time also, when Charlie Brett first stood for Mayor, when he had a chance, that was when all the Hemmings had either died (the old ones) or had given up. He was a postman at this stage and took on the round including Ock Street and knocked on everyone's door for a fortnight and handed over letters personally to remind them to vote. When on the Friday he went round distributing voting papers, he already had a list of who was on his side and who wasn't. There was a little rule that if they were on his side they got two voting papers, one for the man and one for the wife, and if they weren't they got one voting slip for the house. The trouble was, of course, when they came to count the votes there were about five or six for other chap, so they surreptitiously filled in some blank forms, so that the other chap wouldn't feel too bad about it. A very democratic election, where all the people who stand are Morris men, they all had the same policy whatever it's meant to be, but it has become part of the life of the town.

For years, Alderman Stimpson (who died a year or two ago) was returning officer and general organiser and had the big grocery shop in the middle of Ock Street so he had a centre of interest. He got the Mayors of Abingdon to come along and make the presentation. So, every year we were subjected to the same speech about the town having two mayors, a joke which got a bit thin. But what we do find, is that the mayor of Ock Street was a very useful stand-in for the real mayor, for social things like presenting long service awards and things like this, and in Charlie Brett's time he did many jobs of that sort for the Mayor of Abingdon. Once they got twinned, with I think, three different towns on the continent and Mayor of Ock Street had an interesting role in representing the town. A strange situation when the original concept had been one of opposition to the town.

Abingdon went through a terrible patch in the early sixties, when they couldn't get enough men to practice, if they could get three men they were happy, and each time they went out over a period of years, they thought it would be the last time they would be seen. Then the local Rover Scouts at Longworth(?) wanted to go to one of these world jamborees and wanted to learn the local dances and were taught the Morris. They liked it so much that five joined the club, just like that, and that then made them viable. They could then dance on Saturdays during the rest of the season and, of course, the townspeople then got interested as well and they built up a club which at its peak had some thirty odd people.

The older men Tom, Charlie, Jack Jones wanted the Abingdon men to be recognised throughout the Morris world and danced by the rest of the world. They had set up that at one of the Cecil Sharp House instructional that Abingdon would be done and it only fell down when they wanted a side to go to the instructional and some of the younger men weren't prepared to travel up. So they didn't have a side, so Jack had to cancel it. That's been used ever since as a excuse for saying that Abingdon doesn't really want their dances done by other people. The present side certainly don't want to, as club policy, but they've also got rid of a couple of the Hemmings family, not that they were called Hemmings. A lot of descent is through the female side but there have been several members of the Hemmings family involved and they wouldn't have two of them in there. So, this year a second side has formed, called Mr Hemming's Morris dancers, which consists of five old dancers, all of whom are distantly related and they do the Abingdon dances in the old style. The Abingdon side threatened to sue them except that you can't sue someone for doing dances that have a tradition of 200 years.

This business of splits is another great characteristic of traditional things. Although it is to be regretted, if it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing twice. There is always more than one way of thinking about Morris. There are those who do it because it is a local custom done for local people and those who do because it's fun and ought to be spread around and those who do it for the money. You usually find with any sort of active clubs there are two factions and this often leads to splits. It happened at Adderbury in the most recent revival, it certainly happened at places like Padstow and so on.

At Bampton, the earliest known reference is 1804, written about in a history by a man, William Giles, who wrote a few years after that event. Jinky Wells was brought up by his grandfather and he says his grandfather's grandfather danced in the Morris which also takes us back to about 1800. But really very little is known about the Morris as it was done, other than what Jinky said; that they had a pipe and tabor player until 1868 and then pipe and tabor players became extinct in that part of the world. Everyone had used Bob Potter of Stanton Harcourt for the last 10 years or so of Morris in that part of the world.

After trying all sorts of fiddlers, mostly from the Wychwood Forest area, they settled down to a man called Butler and followed it by his son Dick Butler. These, I think, were violinists rather than fiddlers because they played for social dancing all over the place. There are memories of Dick Butler playing as far away as Bidford upon Avon. He and his father are both known to have played at Hunt Balls in big houses so they were obviously proficient musicians. The nicest story about Dick Butler is in the 1897'ish period. In that period, Bampton was much more to the west than it is now, half the people lived in the manor of Weald which no longer exists. All the cottages have fallen down and everybody lives in council estates. The Morris used to start at the farm at the far end early in the morning and work their way through all the home-made wine in all the cottages. The Morris dancers could survive this sort of diet because they were dancing but the fiddler had a bit more of a problem. Apparently by the time they got up to the end of the lane turning to The Eagle, the fiddler was in a bit of a state (in this particular year) and as he went round the corner he caught the top end of his fiddle under a drainpipe and there was a crack and he was reputed to have said "Good God" - and walked home and never had any more to do with the Morris.

Jinky Wells dashed home saying "it's alright lads" and brought out his home-made fiddle which was made out of a cigar box or something similar and played for the rest of the day. He got hold of a proper fiddle and started his career of playing for Bampton. One of the problems with Jinky was that although he played very well he didn't know all the tunes so he had a bit of a problem for a few years adapting the dances around to fit the tunes he did play. One of the tunes he didn't know Trunkles. After they had tried a variety of things, they settled down to doing the dance to Shepherds Hey. Of course, the trouble with Shepherds Hey is that it's a different length tune.

(blank tape)

He (Jinky) didn't have a regular job with anybody, he was self employed. He had a half-acre field on which he grew beans each year, which supplied fairly for his needs and he did jobbing, he had a hand cart. Most of the people in the village remember him as that funny little man who never did a days work in his life. It isn't quite true but that's the sort of image he had at the time. I mentioned earlier in the week, he met Sharp. I think it was through Jinky advertising locally, as far as Oxford, that built up the numbers of people from other villages coming to Bampton on Whit Monday to see the Morris and bring trade and money into the town. Unfortunately, he was also asked to teach a boys side at Anscott(?), which he did, that produced a crop of dancers, some of which were later invited to join the

Morris. One of these influx was a very good organiser and very quickly became Secretary of the club and from then onwards there was a continual battle about who the Morris actually belonged to.

Jinky Wells considered, that as his grandfather and great grandfather had been in the Morris and had been Foreman in their time, that it was really a family possession. The Tanner family had provided the Captain of the side for many years and they were firmly convinced it was a Tanner family affair. In the end, it came to a head in the 1920s when they started getting double bookings. They always went to the Tanner bookings and not to Jinky's, so in the end they decided to get rid of Jinky. They told Jinky "we don't want you this year, You've done well for the Morris but we don't want you." Jinky was very upset and said "I'll show you", so he went off and raised his own side, got together all the kit and things like this. The trouble was he wasn't really a teacher of Morris, so all the youngsters who got in, really had to go and find other old dancers as well to help them learn the dancers.

It produced a nice interesting bit of needle in the village, it started in 1926 when the old'uns, as they were called, had Bertie Clark, who played in a sort of Palm Court Orchestra type band before and never played folk songs or dances. They had to get Sam Bennett over, as well, to actually tell Bertie how to play rough, he always toured with a music stand. Bertie played for the old'uns for many years, up to 1939, when he could, and when Jinky Wells died, they went over and asked Bertie to play for the other side as well. The two sides got going in 1926 and if you ever get to Cecil Sharp House to read some of the old copies of 'English Dance and Song', the magazine, there are fascinating accounts of the two sides. A very derogatory account of the young'uns who couldn't really dance the first year, saying many went to see the other side and they weren't much better, the ways of doing heys were astronomical. They couldn't discover any rhyme or reason behind the way they did it. In the old days, when the sides didn't practise much anyway, just one or two get together before Whitsun, as in fact happened during the fifties. Still, the two sides kept going, calling on musicians, swapping dancers from one to the other quite cheerfully, everybody being very friendly, except for the two leaders of the clubs who either didn't like each other or who kept public animosity alive anyhow.

Came the war, many joined up, Jinky ran the Morris during the war, calling on dancers that were available, sometimes in uniform, certainly dancers from both sides. At the end of the war, they decided to have one Morris club and they elected themselves Francis Sheargold as president and Arnold Woodly as Bagman or Secretary, as they called it. For a few years everything went well, with Arnold teaching everybody and Francis organising the Whit Monday. Then they had the usual row, one did it for the money and wanted to minimise the number of dancers, and maximise the shareout of the bag. The other one was more concerned about where they danced and who they danced for, what I would call the social climbing aspect of it all, and these weren't reconcilable in the end, so they went their own way. In the early fifties, we had the two sides back again which one could fairly describe as a Men's and a Boy's sides at that stage. Arnold's side, although he had a few boys in it, the men he had as well were the same height as the boys. They had a little team and a big team.

The two sides went on till 1959. Arnold had liver trouble and the back trouble, kidney problems, and he was in hospital more than he was out and there was no way he could look after this other side so it collapsed. All the people who supported Arnold refused to dance with Francis, so when Arnold's health recovered about 1970, there was a strong group prepared to come and support Arnold, so he had no trouble getting a dozen men together to dance. Then Francis had a very low spot, I think about 1960, when he had four dancers. that's when Bertie Clark had died. They got the fiddler over from Whitchurch, Russell Wortley for fool, and everyone was rather convinced they would give it up. It was suggested to Francis by Frank Purslow that Reg Hall would make a good permanent musician. Reg was asked to come and play for them, along with another musician, who turned up on the day, saying "I don't know many Bampton tunes and I've got to go at 3.00." Reg was very successful and there was enough outside interest to keep enthusiasm going through the sixties. Arnold's side turned out in 1971 and, of course, has been going since. Arnold had done a awful lot of the teaching in the village and most of Francis's dancers had started by being taught by Arnold Woodly so there was a fair consistency of style. The Society did its best for Bampton Morris, it invited both teams to the Albert Hall, so it was fair. They both worked very hard, they danced together and for some reason or other on the Sunday, you know it's, most English sides invited to London, if they stay over Saturday night, are expected to dance at Sunday afternoon fair at Cecil Sharp house. It's not unusual considering what you get out of it. The Bampton boys, Arnold's boys, weren't prepared to go along in kit and dance. They'd dance in ordinary clothes but they thought it was not worth putting on kit just to dance at Cecil Sharp house. So Arnold said "if you don't do it, that's the last time you dance for me." So that was the last time they danced for him.

He already had a younger side he'd taken to the Albert Hall, it was effectively his older men who weren't necessarily that active. So what happened, the next year, was that we had three sides at Bampton, Francis's side, who considered themselves the original dancers. Arnold who considered his side the traditional dancers, because his uncles - the Buckingham, had kept the dance alive, and their uncles had been the Tanners. So the Woodlys considered this family owned the Morris. The third lot, who were unjustifiably, at least to start with, called the Swindon mob, because one man happened to live in Swindon. The fact is, when you examine where the people came from, you find that this third team had more Bampton people in than either of the others. But it didn't stop them thinking of them as the other lot.

So even that sorted itself out rather nicely, Francis tended to look after the third side and when they danced out of the village he called on the best dancers from both sides. There was a fair bit of interchange, as before between Arnold and the Francis area. Those who've been to Bampton the last year or two, Francis's side, who've stopped trying to be competitive with Arnold and just got on with the dancing, are by far the better dancing side. There's always a problem with two sides, one thinks it's got a position to maintain or got to be superior, and they try too hard and they overdo it and it all looks strained and rather phoney. So you've got these sides and fifty odd dancers each year turning out which at least bodes well for the future of it.

The third Cotswold side, Chipping Campden, had danced up until the stopping of Dover's Games in 1854 and then stopped. The Guild of Handcrafts moved out of London in 1902 and revived it by employing Dennis Hathaway to raise a side using the services of, I think it was his father-in-law who was an ex-Morris dancer, and one other. Dennis Hathaway was brought up just outside Longborough and although he had never danced for Longborough, he was very familiar with the Morris and brought into the Chipping Campden dances many elements of Longborough, the hands, the shaking of the hand. They danced for quite a few years, Sharp went to see them. There was a problem over that. They met Sharp at a flower show, there was already a story about how Sharp had borrowed a set of bells and didn't return them quickly enough. Then Sharp didn't buy them any beer so they weren't prepared to dance for him. That's another unlikely tale because Sharp was very meticulous about things borrowed and meticulous about providing people refreshment and giving them money for things done, even though he was in a rather taut financial state himself during this period, he was extremely generous to people he worked with. Still, for some reason or other, the men and Sharp didn't hit it off at all. Any number of situations, I think anybody who collects, no matter how nice you are, you just can't reconcile yourself to all. Dennis Hathaway had a Boys side so Sharp watched the Boys side dance. Dennis had also got the dances how he liked and updated them to suit himself, so what Sharp collected wasn't what the men's side had done.

By 1912, the old men's side started bringing in the boys and people like Don Ellis, who for many years ran the Chipping Campden Morris, had started off as a boy at that sort of period. They stopped during the Great War. They started again in 1922, when they had become a bit of a road show with a jazz band, a real jazz band, not a kazoo one, and jazz band and Morris did the local villages. They turned out most years in the twenties and thirties.

Now the Travelling Morrice, the Cambridge people had arranged a tour in 1931 in Germany which fell through because of the difficult conditions touring Germany. So they arranged a Cotswold tour and went into Chipping Campden postering and people locally said we've got a Morris team already. They went to see this side and afterwards arranged to give a joint show. Which, in fact, was very good from Chipping Campden's point of view, because then the Travelling Morrice went to see them every other year and ended their tour there. So at least every other year the Chipping Campden Morris got together and danced. There was a period certainly after the last war when Chipping Campden didn't turn out at all in the years in between they only turned out for this tour. So, I think, we can thank the Travelling Morrice very much for having kept them alive.

About 1960, the Chipping Campden Men came over to Bampton on the Whit Monday at a time when Bampton got the idea they ought to invite other sides in. They first of all thought of inviting the traditional sides. Campden came over and it was rather a special occasion. They'd heard so much about it already and it was one of the most incredible experiences of my life and of many others to see this side dance. They got enormous size sets, enormous distance off the ground in the stepping. To people who've seen the typical Campden side which is a bit slack, it's difficult to get across, but that's how they danced. Well, that sparked them off and they became like a normal side dancing many times a year, even visited Sidmouth. They had a boys side on and off to try and pass on the tradition, but

the boys side at Chipping Campden have not been very successful. Well, I better stop now and let you get on with the dancing.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Sidmouth, Devon (August 1979)

Friday

Many Morris sides will say "after a drink or two we are all right." Now I wonder, I've spoken to individuals about what this means, it usually means that you're so tight when you start the dancing that you need something to loosen you up so that you can dance a bit better.

It's an established scientific fact, believe it or not, that any alcohol degrades performance, so the fact that you get better after a drink or two, means that you start off doing something wrong. I think that what you do is that because the Morris doesn't warm up, doesn't do anything to stretch its muscles, people start tense and tight in what they're doing. Now, the effect of tension is to tighten all the muscles up and to try to minimise movement by balancing one tension off against another. This, of course, puts you in the position of maximum chance of injury or strain and it's inhibitory. What happens is, if you do nothing about it once you have warmed up, got the blood flowing, the things stretched and so on, you still remain in this tensed up situation and until you've had a drink or two and start to be expansive and extrovert again, you don't sort of open up.

The answer to that is not to have your drink before you start, because I think there's another catch, if you drink before you dance, alcohol has the normal effect it has on human beings, in other words, it just degrades your mental processes. If you actually dance and then drink, for some reason or other, the alcohol just goes straight through. You very seldom see drunken Morris men who danced and then drank, but you often see drunken Morris men who have drunk and then tried to dance.

This business of how you start, very simple stretching. When you realise what the problem is, it's tension, so you've got to relax, you've got to stretch the main muscles in the arms and legs and the back. You've all seen the foreign teams here doing simple exercises out of sight. They're not out for injury, they're out to enjoy themselves and to give a good performance from the first jump.

Funnily enough, in this country, when you suggest to people that they do exercises for warming up, other than athletes, you get laughed at. An American friend of mine, Tony Barron, who's been going around taking films, when he's danced he's automatically done it, mind you he did have a Ph.D. in this sort of field. But when he does it, he gets a lot of derisory remarks and yet he never has injuries and his side never has those sort of problems. What's more, they don't end up stiff at the end of an hours practice either, because they work themselves up properly, whereas Tubby and I are as stiff as hell. We don't practise what we preach well enough, I'm afraid, and for that I do apologise to myself, but I must offer you the advice.

What is the Morris? The Morris is an occasion. I think I've said to you before that when you go round talking to the public, anything that's dressed up performing publicly with organised music and in costume is thought of as Morris, even if you're doing country dances mixed and things like this. The general impression is Morris in the public's mind. Nobody ever tells them what Morris is, so they think of it as an occasion, an event.

So, it behoves on you to think of the show as a totality, which means coming on to dance and leaving at the end of a dance is important. It also means you don't have your post-mortem on what went wrong in front of the public, not unless you're going to choreograph it anyhow.

There are sides, the one that I've met this year that impressed me, Coventry. Their philosophy, as told to me by my second son anyhow, is that you do in practice what you expect to do in public, or vice versa, I'm not quite sure which way. But you do in practice, walk on, walk off, so the habit's there, it doesn't occur to people to have a chat in front of the audience. At the side, yes, but not in front of the public. You have a tidy walk on, people try and avoid the business of five men saying "where are you?" and having to go into the pub and drag somebody out and things like this. It does have an adverse impression on the public, occasionally you can get away with it if you put it over in the right way. In terms of standard, in terms of overall effect and so on I think you need to pay attention to that sort of detail. Being professional, in these days the public is conditioned by professional entertainment, being professional is attention to detail. I know that the definition of amateur by Vaughn Williams was "if it's worth doing at all it's worth doing badly", think about that, he was talking about folk dancers you see, it was so worth doing that they were prepared to do it badly, I don't think we are today. The Morris is worth doing and we ought to do it well and we do it to the limit of our ability.

The next thing I want to say is that a lot of ill feeling gets caused between sides because you dance better than they do. You tend to think "why on earth can't they do as well as we do, why don't they try?" So often, you know, this criticism is made by the person who, the person in the side who hasn't actually pulled the side together. You won't often find the leader or foreman of a good club going up to another club and telling them "you're bloody awful, you ought to do it my way." Usually, you find it's the chap who's been in there two or three years, who goes up and says "you ought to do it my way", meaning the way he's been drilled and taught by the foreman.

Another thing, clubs do have different objectives, some women's sides exist for a Thursday night get together of people who want express themselves in dancing rather than knitting or sewing or whatever other sort of things women do. You've got to accept there are clubs which exist for social reasons and not particularly for the standard of dancing. You can't criticise them for their objectives but you can give them helpful advice if their dancing is not good.

There are many tricks of the trade you know that people miss. Let me show you. One of the - Cotswold Morris in particular - its beauty are the jumps and capers - getting off the ground, springing around. The other thing that's nice about it, is it's got punch, drive in the movements, it's not something which is danced in a sloppy sort of way. Now the way to get drive in the figures, is in fact to make a good strong movement on the first strong beat of movement. If you're standing still and have to rotate the body, then lift the foot, then push off, you go very slowly to start with and there's no drive apparent to the public. If you go into something from a jump, it's very easy if you jump like this - jump and take your feet back about half a foot length, so you're falling forward ready to go into something very easily. The difference between the two makes for drive and no drive. I call it tricks of the trade, it's a simple little point which in itself has only a small effect on the total performance but when applied to all the detail, you tighten up the dance and improve the quality no end. You can often, when you see bad dancing or poor dancing from another side, make a point or two of this sort. You don't have to be critical, we are all trying to get good Morris, and I'm sure there are very few sides in the country who don't like advice or who won't accept advice. This is an unfair question. Is there anybody here from a side who wouldn't accept advice? I'm afraid only two hands have gone up, from members of sides who are perfect, Adderbury and Stow.

I have been asked about the general question of repertoire. Many sides have large repertoires, thirty or forty dances, drawn from a large number of traditions. Now, I beg people to think themselves of the traditional repertoire. A traditional side, and we have information from some over two dozen sides, lists of dances that they did, traditional sides had about twenty dances in practice at any one time, including several jigs, fifteen to seventeen dances would represent a traditional repertoire. Where we have knowledge, for Headington and Bampton, for example, or Ascot-under-Wychwood, of dances that had been in the repertoire, there were as many in, as there were dances they didn't do, so at any one time for Bampton, forty odd dances would be known but only half would be in practice. The lesson is that the number you can carry is limited.

Another little trick I learnt from musicians, is that optimum repertoire size is about three times what you can use in any one event. If you're a country dance band and you have as many tunes as you need to run three dances, if you're a Morris team, you need as many dances as you use in three shows. This is a rule of thumb I should say but worth thinking about. The traditional repertoire included jigs as a way of sublimating the enthusiast who otherwise would have had them dancing some obscure dance from some obscure tradition just because he wants to do something special. Also the

mixture of dances is limited, in other words there are many more simple dances and a number of corner dances.

One of the problems of picking out from various traditions is that you can use everybody's show dance - Laudanum Bunches, Queen's Delight, Dearest Dicky, Jockey to the Fair. I remember a show in Windsor where it was just like that, even the crowd noticed it was getting rather similar from dance to dance. Make sure you have a balanced show. It's not a bad idea to think of your dances in terms of tunes, shaping etc. and put it together as if you were a bit more professional.

Talking about the size of repertoire, I think 17 to 20 dances - you'd be hard put to go through that at an evening's practice. It's possible, as each dance takes less than three minutes. I know that, I've been filming Morris for a long time. The normal length of a Cotswold Morris dance is 2 minutes. 17 dances done continuously is 34 minutes.

You now want to know why I said you normally take 6-8 minutes per dance to do a show. This leaves you to think how much time you waste in going on and off and talking and drinking and things like this. The average Morris show is funereal in pace really, there's no climax, no excitement about it. You do a dance and pause then, by the grace of God, you show them another dance. A bit more organisation and you could put more into it.

Now the question of different traditions. I remember, many years ago, White Horse decided that doing 35 dances from 13 traditions was a bit unreasonable so they cut their repertoire down to 12 dances from 10 traditions. They did that very well for a few years, then they had a problem when they brought beginners in. While they danced well that was good.

My experience is that the isolated dance from a particular tradition is the most difficult one to keep in practice. People in practice do need a bit of variety going on all the time and if you learn several dances from one tradition you have a chance to practice the fundamentals, the stepping, the figures and things like this without getting bored. My experience is that about 4 is the minimum number to have of any tradition. If you have less than 4 of that style, it isn't what I call a viable tradition as a dance, it's just an isolated dance which you are therefore bound to dance in the club style.

There is a general mish-mash way of doing things in any one club. I know it differs from club to club but all back-to-backs tend to look like every other back to back in a club. So, if you do an isolated dance - your one Ilmington dance, it's surprising how un-Ilmington it becomes. Given a reasonable number of dances, personally I think 4 is a minimum, you can get character into what you do.

(end of tape)

Is anyone from Pilgrim here? Pilgrim, I believe have a rule of changing tradition every two years. Their own experience is that they want to keep the degree of novelty going. Other sides believe that you should have one tradition only. There are positive advantages in dancing one tradition. The first and obvious one is that you need less practice, once you've learned it, that's it. It's easier to get the feel of it if you are doing the same style all the time. I know it's easy to appeal to the tradition and say that the traditional sides only had one sort of dance. It's not so you know. Headington had the funny stepping version, Abingdon had a dance which was completely different - out of style with the others. You can't say the traditional sides only have one style, they may have two.

I said one advantage was to minimise practice, to get a better feel for it, on the whole a higher standard of dancing, up to a point. The point is usually about 3-4 years after you've started into your tradition. One of the things that people don't perhaps appreciate because they're not teachers or professionals in the educational field, is that you learn so much and then there is a learning platform that you get to. Your club sets a standard for beginners and everybody is worked up to that sort of level and then you dance away at that. There's probably about 85 or 90% of what you can extract out of that and you'll feel rather contented. You usually have the crisis point in the club at the 3-4 year point where they say "Ah, well I know it all, why do we practice, why do we bother" etc. Either the leader gets up and goes because he's a bit fed up with it or the side becomes a bit more social and it starts to decline in standard (and I can think of sides of that sort) or they have a flaming row inside the club. This either leads to a split because they don't really understand what the problem is or in the good ones they say "Hey we've got to a certain standard. Now we realise we can do better now we actually have control of our hands and feet and our mind" - that's important as well - so they can get

on and work. At the 3-4 year period, when you are what I would call an experienced dancer, that is you know your dances, you can dance in a set with other people and while dancing you can listen to the music and dance to the music.

A beginner is really someone who has trouble all the time. Advanced Morris is what I call it when you have spatial awareness, you can dance with other people. An experienced dancer is someone who can dance not only with others(?) but can dance to the music as well and listen and express himself and has got to the stage of being able to express himself within the framework of what you're trying to do. That's the crisis point where you realise you have to go back to fundamental principles and sometimes re-learn or re-work all you do. How you do the step, how you jump, how you do the hand movements, your attitude to presentation and things like this. The end result may just be a bit of polishing up which converts you from a good run-of-the-mill side (notice I say run-of-the-mill, all the rubbishy sides don't come to my workshops - at least I hope not) to one of the excellent sides. You then get hooked I hope on excellence.

The only reason for having hobbies, and Morris is a hobby - spare time activity. (Your joking, my work is a spare time activity. I have a job that travels the world so that I can see the Morris.) That's all the points I want to make.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Selling, Kent (October 1979)

Talk 1

...whole school of thought in the revival, I use the word revival which I dislike using because to me the revival happened some time ago. We exist now, Morris exists, it doesn't have to be revived it exists everywhere throughout the British Isles, even in Ireland there are Morris sides, so it exists. It even exists in Holland, in Australia in the USA and Canada, it's world-wide, even Dubai, and Hong Kong, and on the way to the Antarctic. This is a strange side based on the fact that the people going down to Antarctica have nothing to do going out so the bloke in charge runs a Morris side on the helicopter flight deck on the way down, and they've actually danced in the Falklands, in S. Africa and the Argentine but they are so busy coming back, writing up and so on that it doesn't dance coming back, it doesn't exist. So it's a way of moving Morris dancers down to the Antarctic... you all thought they were penguins.

A lot of rubbish is talked about 'the tradition' and how the tradition goes on, how people learn. What I've got to say is that if you've got an established tradition, if your side has been going so long that you have a nice age structure up to say fifty year olds or so who've danced for a long time and there are clubs now who started in the twenties or thirties who have this long continuity, you can learn very easily because there's a lot of experienced, proficient dancers around to copy.

The traditional process of he dances and you mimic until you get it right can work. Now unfortunately for this lovely image all the traditional sides we know of, the four that are alive now and those that died this century, that's Eynsham, Illmington, Bideford, they all had a foreman who taught, who taught beginners and everyone who collected that we've ever talked to found that the foreman was very fussy about fundamentals. They were very aware of the basic movements that you had to learn and they drilled people until they got what they wanted.

Arnold Woodley at Bampton, he gets the youngsters together and he makes them hop and then when they can do that to the music and only then does he let them kick their foot forward. He builds it up on fundamentals, when they can do that he'll start putting hand movements in. Before he lets them make a set they work hard on the basics, and are prepared at practices to go back time and time again until they're satisfied that everybody has got the right idea. Though of course traditional sides when you see them may have tried to make up six, they may have somebody who hasn't really got it and is struggling, we all have that problem, we all know it's undesirable and that the tradition is no better than we are.

I want to emphasise that the traditional process only worked in the revival because there were a lot of good dancers around to copy and the traditional sides themselves where they had instruction which was usual, they spent a lot of time teaching people basics, you didn't pick it up as you went along. They did, although they wouldn't fuss in public, they did at the next practice take people apart who didn't dance well. Now I've known Bampton men since 1956 or so and we do know they are very fussy and we do know that they've had some extremely stupid people... Morris stupid not mentally stupid, people who've had great difficulty in grasping movement.

Now, the normal Morris club and I assume that you lot here today are normal Morris clubs... you've got people here... all of you I trust because you want to dance. You've not come into it because there's nothing else to do of an evening... or... you are dancers, you still have basic skills to learn. Now, the

problem with the enormous growth in the number of sides in recent years is that they are being taught by people with only three or four years experience, now quite honestly it takes ten years for somebody to learn to dance, then having learned to dance to relearn it all again to dance well, to learn about people, about managing a club and people and doing training and as I say the average person running a club has not got that background.

So you have the problem of actually discovering what the basics are, and this is why instead of as it were having a good dancer who breaks it down in an elementary way and teaches it bit by bit you've got to start learning the tricks of the trade. You've either got to have people who are going to be analytical about it which I try to be or have people who can write it down and say these are the things which really matter.

This is why I say to you things like some of the secrets of the step... first of all posture... your weight is forward on the balls of the feet, not on the heels. This is because historically the Morris comes from the period 1600-1700 in terms of the social style of the dance, they danced forward, they didn't have heels on their shoes to speak of like people here today so there was nothing odd about it. They didn't go round in heels which in a sense throw the weight back putting you at a disadvantage when you start to dance. Even men's heels are high compared with... they've grown high over the years and give you a nice posture in the static sense but are not good for dancing. It started in a period when people turned their feet out, heavens knows why people turned their feet out but the cavaliers exploited it because when you turn your feet out your knees go out as well and hence you can have big boots with flowery bits. If you've ever seen the Sealed Knot have a battle, half of them wear big boots. Where we live the Sealed Knot started coming to all the barn dances in kit. We had one a fortnight ago with a chap who would insist on wearing spurs, it's all very well swinging and so on but.... aaaaaaarhhg.

It appeared when feet were turned out and dancing with feet turned out has only dropped since English ballroom dancing started in the twenties but it does give a good point of balance for moving in all directions. From a Morris point of view, some of the basic movements like 'rear-up' in Brackley or shuffles in various traditions you require to have the balls of the feet far enough apart to be able to do the movement, so if you're doing shuffles you turn.....(demo)..... so there's a good practical reason for this old fashioned way of doing it. I hope people will remember, if I tell them why, they remember.

That's the other reason, as I say, good posture, good balance, really comes from.....(demo)....., nothing's worse than seeing wobbly people... or wobbly bits of people... there's nothing worse than a fat Morris dancer... these are the things as I said about the jumps... the pushing off, the landing very lightly is the way, it gives you good balance and it looks good.

In fact, good movement has nothing to do with ????? weather, it's Morris or anything else... you can pick up good tips by watching Come Dancing on the Tele in fact I collected a Bacup dance from watching Come Dancing one night... Bacup for years have only done half the dance but for Come Dancing they worked up the other half which they didn't normally do... and as I sat watching I thought I haven't seen that bit before.

So, I think you can learn from anybody - particularly about dance fitness, even such things as exercises or stretching, something I keep trying to say to people... a typical Morris side in this country thinks there's something a little bit odd about warming up for Morris so they turn up in their kit and line up in front of the public and do their first dance. They are a bit stiff so they dance a bit restrained, so they get into this weak way of dancing. By the time they're warmed up after a dance or two they've actually got into the habit of dancing a bit tight for the rest of the show or for the rest of the day for that matter. Now if they're conscious that when you start you're a bit tender, a bit careful that you're not going to sprain or strain you can probably get away with it if you say the first few dances are a write-off, then you say perhaps we should meet somewhere else. Or you get into exercises like some of these foreign teams, make sure you stretch the muscles just so that once you get onto dance area and the music starts you can go straight in without breaking or twisting your ankle. Now that's a serious risk in other sports and activities, if you were a top class tennis player you wouldn't dream of doing any physical activity without being prepared for it. Ballet dancers warm first and cool down afterwards, we all know how stiff and tired you can become because you haven't done anything to cool down and relax consciously.

To me, all these things are common sense particularly now that you're not a parochial bunch doing something in your village for people who know you and everybody thinks it's funny when you're all stiff at the end of it but you're an entertainment in a world that sees and expects professional standards of dancing.

The Morris's advantage is that it's there, it's not in a little box, it's real and it's live... it's street theatre... you're a show that the crowd participates in, that's the only thing that you've got over other entertainments. They're not just dummies being amused, you can talk to them, you can make them smile and they react to what you do.

Standards is what I'm talking about, how do you dance well? Never be afraid to seek advice, if you see a side dancing well, ask them why. It's great of course because they don't usually know and that puts you one up to start with. Don't be afraid to talk to a sports coach particularly one who's had training in movement. At practices in the end, you must practice what you're going to do outside, you can't go outside and do a performance that you didn't actually rehearse. You think you can pull all the bits together, the dance, the characters, the fooling, the announcements and do it spontaneously. You do the announcement spontaneously because you want it to be unique every time.

The worst side I ever saw was Albion who rehearsed the jokes. At every ring meeting with them every dance had its gimmick. It was bloody good the first time but the third time we all said 'I don't want to watch that again'... they over organised the show, so you have to be careful. The worst thing that sides do is marching on and off... well they don't, most people... four of you stand up and say 'hey Bill' and having got Bill say 'we had thirteen when we started', that sort of thing makes a terrible impression on the audience, terrible impression on yourself for that matter, there's nothing like going out feeling reasonably organised, feeling everybody's with you and you put on a performance that people say 'I not only enjoyed that' but 'will you come back again'. I do like to emphasise that.

To come back to practice, if you practice sloppily, if you practice in a small room you're going to dance in small space when you're feeling tired. When you are thinking about what you're doing the first dance, no doubt is perfect, but after you've done a bit, you relax and you fall back into the habits of the practice room. If you dance weakly then that's how it goes, little jumps here little stick tappings there. If you watch Bampton they always dance energetically because they haven't learnt any other way of doing it. If you practice sloppily you've learnt another one... an easier one to do, so in practice you've got to get on, dance, get off, leave gaps for announcing, you've got to give the clown a chance while you dance as well.

The other thing is when you practice if when you stop someone says 'YOU BLOODY FOOL I....' you'll do it outside, we've seen so many sides have their post-mortem in front of everybody. Or people loose their temper... can you imagine some thing so minor as Morris getting so serious that people actually loose their temper over it.....

Morris is good enough that professional people like myself can commit themselves to talking, teaching and so on every second that's available, completely dedicated to Morris and yet it is not a serious activity.

If you take it seriously you end up like they did at Abingdon. In Abingdon there are two sides, there was the Hemmings family who for years and years were The Morris, the Hemmings family were dancers, they got a side going, they were the Mayors of Ock street right up to 1965, 1966. Then someone else was elected mayor and they drifted away from the Hemmings family. Last year the current side said 'we're going to give the regalia to a museum'. The Hemmings family said 'Oh, no you're not...it's ours'. Both groups started getting uptight with each other so the official dancers kicked out all the Hemmings family members out of their club and they had no choice but to go and form a side of their own. So, this lot said 'you can't do our traditional dances' we can do our family dances... and off they went although they both had exactly the same objective and that is to do the Morris, to preserve the custom, the purity, to look after the regalia and to present the Abingdon Ock street Morris to the world at large as something worth doing. Yet they got themselves terribly screwed up over something which nowadays is a relaxation, an entertainment. The last thing I heard was that they'd served an injunction on the Mayor of Abingdon to stop him receiving stolen property. You can't take the Morris that seriously no matter how old your traditional custom is and theirs goes back to 1540. You can't take it seriously but you can dedicate yourself to the pursuit of excellence.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Selling, Kent (October 1979)

Talk 2

I want to ask you what it's all about. Now that's a serious problem because you can fob almost anybody off but when they come up to you you're usually on your own so you're stuck with trying to answer it. The problem is what do you tell them quickly and easily so that they go away satisfied. The usual trouble is that whoever comes up already knows an answer and is inclined to doubt your knowledge and will argue with it. So, the question is what are the facts that you ought to be saying to people, if they're are convinced that you are doing fertility rites with Pre-Christian origins don't argue with them it isn't worth it. You say yes... and perhaps they'll go away.

There is no evidence of Morris having a ritual origin. There is ample evidence of other customs having such origins but there's a problem in the folk world, there's a problem really with anthropologists not just folklorists, that when they see a lot of customs of similar character i.e. something which occurs at a similar time of year and has people going around collecting money they assume that all these customs are of similar age and have the same distant past, this just isn't so. It isn't so in any other aspect of life so why in folklore? All these customs didn't suddenly appear at the same time in prehistory.

In fact you can say in 6000 BC there wasn't any prehistory because there was an icesheet everywhere. The forty or fifty families running round didn't have enough people to form a Morris team anyhow. It wasn't until the Celts were here that the place was settled enough to even have a society where you can imagine people got together fairly regularly. Now any one society is limited in what it does by the things it's got experience of and you can't imagine farm workers, serfs as they were, doing a sophisticated Mummers play when they'd never seen theatre of any sort. You can't imagine people doing sophisticated dances when they hadn't seen dancing of any sort. So a lot of customs, all the customs we are aware of, originated some time in the past when society, I mean upper classes, had evolved something that the lower people could take away and start to use for their own purpose. So, you had to have dancing as social activity before you could have Morris and you had to have theatre as church activity before you could have mummers and you had to have...

Well the oldest thing I can think of is that you had to have people wearing disguises, that is probably very old because if you kill something you end up with a skin and a head. If it was bear or a wolf or a horse you end up with something you can wear so the earliest references to customs are disguises in skins. What they were familiar with, acting out the hunt, the chase or the behaviour of the animals themselves and one can say certainly that's Pre-Christian because that's something that could be very old.

The Morris as we know it... that's two people dance... sets sorry, of two lines, had to wait until the idea of dancing against each other in a sort of mirror image, with a partner opposite as it were didn't occur as an idea until the eleventh or twelfth century. Dancing in two lines in a processional is classical Roman but dancing opposite each other is middle ages and you had to have something like that before you could have the Morris. The Morris as far as one knows, the view that used to be taken at the end of the nineteenth century, it's probably right, because seventy to eighty years of dance folklore in trying to prove that Cotswold Morris has ancient origins have found no facts to support other than the original theory that it started in Spain and spread across France and Italy, underwent several transformations and finally arrived in England about 1500.

The literary references to this and one says Oh, the literary references are just the top layer, the folk could have been doing something else, there are a lot of church references, like the bishop said " you mustn't dress up in skins... you know, you mustn't do your pagan things in the woods". He didn't mean Morris dancing of course, he meant the sort of thing you did on Mayday, you had a bar and danced yourself silly and disappeared with somebody into the woods, although that's a very interesting thing, there was research into mediaeval population figures because one thing they wanted to establish was what was the structure of society, what was the average age of people, how long did families live and things like this. They found out the average length of a family name would run was four generations because if you don't live very long, like 30 to 40 and the number of children you can have in that time there's a good chance that after three or four generations you won't have any boys so the family name goes. They examined records of when people were born through the year, if this Mayday business meant anything there'd be a peak somewhere, say February, but there isn't. The peak actually is about Whitsun, and one thinks about it people were being very sensible and actually choosing the time of year between ploughing and harvesting, the slack bit of the year. In fact, spring time customs are a result of this. The time of year when you don't have to work so hard. The winter is a slack period because there isn't much you can do. But once you have the Spring, it's very busy, planting, calving, the sheep. Then a slack period in May, particularly when the Calendar was 13 days different, then you start the haymaking and it was unremitting work round to harvest supper at the end of October. So really, customs were in the spring because they had to be.

We always have the problem in anthropology of chicken and egg.... now I'm rather pragmatic and I always go for what I consider rational explanations. Now, if you can find a good ordinary reason why people did it then that's probably true rather than a nice romantic view. It's not true to say all customs had such an origin, so were ritual. Some had //////////// because there were idiots in the past who persuaded other idiots to go out and dance around these stone circles on the top of some hill on May morning, things like this, there are always people like that, still.

The first recorded Morris somewhere in the twelfth century, I can't remember the date, in Spain the year after they pushed the Moors out of a town, they got these two lines up Christians and Moors and they did a ritual battle and this proved so popular that not only did every town that got liberated in the next two or three centuries start it's own Morris but it spread back into France and into Italy.

Now in Italy after a hundred years or so, they invented something called the matachin which is a stick or sword dancing which started off as fencing with a few figures in between. This spread back as well and into France and to Paris and into what were then being formed and I'm talking about the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the societies of fools. These were quite common in those latitudes, and by that I mean Germany through France and Luxembourg. Society would have it's entertainment through these companies of fools which would be semi-professional people, people who had had a little bit of training, clerks and so on, that sort of people who could read and write. They would organise masques, entries.... how do you organise and entry?... just walk in... o, no, no, these were the grand thing with lots of people and lots of noise and things that opened up, they'd come in with a float that slowly opened up into something gorgeous. They organised dances and the dances were Morris.

A friend of mine Forest who was at North Carolina University... he's somewhere else now... an Englishman naturally... analysed all the available early references to Morris up to 1600 in what he considered a scientific way that is to take a model of all the things you'd expect to go with a custom - costume, did they black their faces, when did they appear, how many were there, were there supernumerary characters, all this sort of thing and every reference you'd tick off and start looking for common elements because unfortunately people (and Sharp was as bad as the others) would shove all the references into one bag and say the custom consisted of this, this and this. 'This' unfortunately came from that place and 'this' from the other and if you read the introduction to Book I of the Morris books, you'll find he's run a lot of things together which on mature reflection just don't fit.

Forest went through all these and he discovered three things; one, they weren't seasonal, they always happened during local celebrations but they didn't happen at particular times of year. The second thing, they all wore uniforms, and usually very expensive ones, long jackets in those days, wasn't the baldric which has grown up really based on the militia regimental costume but it was so costly that people would leave it as an expensive item in their will. In East Anglia there are quite a few wills where somebody left his Morris coat to someone in his will. Places, villages, towns like Marlow on the Thames couldn't afford costumes of their own and used to hire them from the next town down the river. The earliest reference to Abingdon is of church wardens buying costumes for the Morris, there's a very

interesting sidelight on that because looking at records at Berkeley castle over in Gloucestershire, Lord Berkeley had a troupe of players who toured the country. This particular lot besides doing plays, and their accounts still exist, used to do the Morris, used to bring in the May, and they were paid in 1542 for doing the Morris in Abingdon, the same year that the church records paying X pence for bells for the Morrismen. So, one imagines that the first Morris troop to ever appear in Abingdon was a paid troupe from Gloucestershire.

So there are the elements, they didn't black their faces, they didn't come out at a particular season, they had expensive costumes and there was an element of professionalism about it. There was a Morris side paid f25 about 1530 to do the Morris. That was three or four pounds a head when a pound was something incredible. The earliest records are in towns where the royal family had palaces, like Woodstock, Kingston and Richmond and was often associated with a major do where the novelty was to bring in the Morris. A little later the stick dance side of it, all these early references are to kerchiefs, no mention of sticks, the bedlam Morris the matachin came some eighty years later as another fad.

There had been fads in society before, the Robin Hood, dressing up as a party and doing what we would call children's games, much more the element of the farmer in his dell type of thing, simple choosing games but remember in those days people were relatively unsophisticated, if you hadn't met anything sophisticated you were quite happy to run around kissing the girls. One must remember that many of today's children's games are direct descendants of adult pastimes certainly of Tudor times and a bit earlier.

Well before I said //////////////// so called May games which were pantomime type behaviour and before that there was a phase when the round table was all the thing and people used to go round being sets of knights. As far as I can gather the Mummers, the Seven Champions of Christendom, not the present lot, the originals all come from this period, the twelfth and thirteenth century.

But all these customs have different origins. Now, how you explain that to somebody who comes up and asks? All you can say is: 'the Morris as we do it is very English'. If you see continental sides who dress up vaguely like Morris, the dance itself has no connection, the fact that they have sticks is the only thing in common, in terms of formation, step and things like this there is no cultural connection, so you can say what we do is terribly English.

In fact, it's grown as far as I can tell out of the social dance of about 1600 with a big revival in interest at the restoration in 1660. So, if you like you can say the Cotswold Morris became popular or was revived after the restoration of 1660. 29th was Charles's birthday and the date of the restoration. A lot of the tunes, Princess Royal, Jockey to the Fair can be traced to that time. Now, if he says "where did it really come from?" Well alright, late mediaeval times have the first references to Morris in England and it had been brought back by people like John O'Gaunt who had angled for many years to be King of Spain, failed of course but he was bought off with an enormous pension and numerous works of art and he brought a team of dancing girls back with him, you can't really blame that on the Morris, you could make up a lovely story that he brought back a women's Morris team.....

That Morris only has the occasion, the show. There were two forms of dance, one where you have a ring of people who dance around a character in the middle, usually a man dressed as a woman or sometimes a girl bride and often had this pantomime element in it, or with two lines of people moving forward and back, passing through, and having a serpentine movement but very little to do with the form of dance we do at the moment. Now, the other dance tradition we have, the Longsword, that had an ancient origin but not pre-historic.

If you read Violet Orford's book 'Sword Dance and Drama', she talks about the folklorists gap. The earliest references are in the fourteenth century and then there's an enormous gap back in to pre-history. But no references to anything you could call sword dancing. She doesn't make the obvious conclusion that any scientist would make, it wasn't there, and she also doesn't do what German authors have done and that's plot on the map of Europe references to sword dancing, where they occur and when.

The earliest references are Nuremberg, southern Germany and over 150 years it spread through Europe and the first occurrence in England is in Lancashire I'm pleased to say, not Yorkshire. There are early references to sword dancing in Winchester and other places. So again it was wide spread before settling down into a local tradition.

As I've said before about Morris, it was all over the country from East Anglia to Edinburgh in Tudor times. But it coalesced into a fairly local custom and that's what one sees about many of these old customs, they are made fairly universal but they coalesce into an area. Well, sword dances...

The correlation that the Germans identified (which I have a great deal of faith in) is that following the collapse of the Italian banks and the discovery of silver in the Northern Alps; Southern Germany dominated Europe financially and technically. There was a period when Germany supplied engineers for mining everywhere, from Portugal through to Romania and up into Scotland. More recently, it was Cornish miners in the 19th century, there are many English records of bringing Germans over to set up mining in the areas where sword dancing is done, and also in the rest of Europe. The southern banks had factors where sword dancing later appeared sooner or later. The Germans believe, and I support it, that the dance was invented probably about 1300 in Southern Germany and was spread by the Germans, a terrible admission isn't it?

Like a lot of things folk, some of the earliest understanding of what was done was from people bringing together evidence and it's been impossible to shake this evidence. It would be nice to imagine that some of these things date back to the dim and distant past but there is no evidence, except for the animal disguises.

Now the Rapper sword, you see, at the turn of the century there were people who remembered it being invented. The Longsword was always for eight, then people discovered you could do it with six and then the Northerners discovered you could do it with Five with flexible rappers. Dr Court has a scrapbook of stories of who was the first side, where was the first area, who were the first half dozen teams, where was the first competition and how it spread out from that area.

North-western Morris hasn't got a long origin either, the rushcart business is probably two or three hundred years old and the dressing of the rushcart, as a ceremony, to be towed by Morris dancers was probably late 18th, early 19th century. The Morris as a show dance didn't really get going until rushcarts stopped and the Morris found itself without a purpose, about 1880. Then the Morris took off and started pinching ideas and almost every pub had its own side and so on so you got masses and masses of teams. The interesting thing about the Northwest is that some people like Julian Pilling who we all know for his anti-women's Morris letters has a collection of photographs which we looked at a few years ago, of sides dancing before the First World War. It has a slight preponderance of women's sides over men's sides, pre 1914. How he can say in print, as he has done, that before 1914 women didn't do it, when he had some 80 photographs of women's sides, I find incredible.

One can understand the Victorians being fussy about it. There's a lovely story about Buxton which describes how they got a team of girls to do the Morris. After a few years they thought it unseemly for a team of developing girls to dance in public so they brought in a team of youths from somewhere else. That's not uncommon in Victorian times for women or mixed activities to be thought unsuitable for the women to be doing it and they were pushed out of it.

Morris Dancing & Folk Customs

A series of talks by Roy Dommett

Selling, Kent (October 1979)

Talk 3

Women in the Morris. There are reference to women dancing, I won't say Morris, but women dancing in the 18th century. The reason why they didn't dance much in the 19th century was the Victorian attitude to what was right and proper. We have a problem therefore, which is: what is Women's Morris, is it a separate entity and how is it to be used in this day and age.

My feeling about women doing Morris. One hesitates to recommend that women do caper dances, not because there's anything against women moving around but because they don't seem to have the strength in the ankles and thighs to do it. Those people who train are quite able to do it, there are women athletes who once they've trained are quite able to caper round as well, if often not better than the men. I don't think there's any inherent reason against it but the average woman for some reason or other, and I don't know why, doesn't caper very well. You can get a bunch of men up and usually they can get off the ground quite well with no problem at all but with women it doesn't seem right, you've got a problem, it's quite solvable but it needs training, recognising that ankles do need building up. The thing that Windsor discovered, just to pass on, that their boots didn't fit, thin elegant ankles tend to disappear.

Having said that there is no reason why the dances should be restricted to either sex, there's nothing sexual about them as with some of the continental dances but the essence of Cotswold Morris is leaping around, it's not a fast dance, it's speed is relatively slow, it's not a complex stepping dance style at all. It relies on the fact that compared to other styles like clogging and so on you get very high off the ground and you bounce in the step and have leaps and jumps and that's really what makes the Cotswold Morris have it's characteristics.

You have to practice of course to get up to this standard. One of the problems is that often the foreman hasn't a clear enough image himself of what they are trying to do and very often practice is ad lib. I'm a great advocate of a structured program during the winter, so you set off by saying by next spring we will have so and so, and you have a reasonable idea of what the objective is each night. You won't achieve it, but everyone in the side will know what you are trying to do, you can say at such and such a time we are going to practise stepping, we are going to have a go at slow capers. You can have a program of work from which everybody understands what you are trying to do rather than 'we were awful on Saturday we must have a go at Dearest Dickie', what I call pinballing through your problems.

These clubs which don't plan the practices, basically you must have a plan, an objective of what you're trying to achieve. Once you have a plan, you have something which you as individuals can contribute to, as a club you're not a reflection of what the squire thinks..... or perhaps you are.... some clubs are like that..... I won't say.

Morris is democratic but there is a consensus usually, I don't think any club runs as a dictatorship, someone has to have authority but that's not the same as dictatorship because you can always re-elect, you can have an extraordinary annual general meeting and get rid of him tomorrow. I've already said in practices, practice what you preach as it were, whatever you are going to do outside, do it inside too, because any slackness at practice leads to slackness outside, as I've said, not perhaps the first dance you do but as you get tired you lapse into habits of mind.

If you watch someone who's danced two or three years late in the afternoon you can always tell what tradition he did first because it's what he lapses back into, no matter what you're doing it's what he does with his hands and so on. It's the first things that you learn that you fall back into and therefore you must expect high standards of yourself in practice.

The other thing is it's soul destroying if you do a dance and flog away at it. I'm an advocate myself of clubs having quite a few dances from any one tradition. So that if, for example, you're working on Ilmington, you do Old Woman Tossed Up and Old Woman Tossed Up and Old Woman Tossed Up until you get it right, you do it and your problem is perhaps in the stepping or the body movements or so on so you have a go at Constant Billy or some other dance in the same tradition so that in an evening you do four or five different dances so that you still have the chance to get to grips with it but still have the novelty of changing from dance to dance. People must have novelty in what they do.

We've talked a fair bit about shows this weekend on and off, like these Border dances that provide a contrast, most people... if you do one tradition... it is a little difficult to capture people's interest unless you do it very well, people will admire excellence even if it's the same what?..... Great Western is like going to the zoo, you look at the giraffe and you say 'good god, there's no such animal'.....they'll turn up with a giraffe dance now.....

Pursuit of excellence..... well you can't expect more of people than is in them, it takes years to train, it's two or three years before a dancer knows what he s doing, at that stage he goes up a grade as it were and starts re-learning basics, re-thinking his attitude to get the next standard of excellence. It also means in the club that having learnt the basics you then do dances and people tend to say we did all the basics at the start of the winter practice season but as you get more skill and people get more skill week by week you have to go back because you get a fresh approach to your basics and you do them better. You keep coming back and I think turning over new ground all the time, even though the topic's basically the same.

Dammit all, in other fields of life you'd have one conversation about the weather and that would be the only one in your life, in fact you can talk about the weather every time you meet, about the wife and kids, so as you get more experienced there's something more to have a go at.

Do you actually tour together? Right, have you made sure that your repertoires are complimentary to give this contrast in the show in any way?.....(discussion).....Have you any feeling about doing non-Cotswold, border Morris?.....(discussion).....

I got the feeling that the Seven Champions are ostracised by the whole world, or at least they think they are.....(discussion).....

Usually the oldest traditions are those which are frowned on most. When kids tie straw round their shins and shuffle along the gutter with a collecting tin because they've forgotten the dance that goes with it but are preserving the folk memory of something people get the Police to stop them. Yet these are often preserving things three or four hundred years old. So many customs are basically dangerous or rough, we have a bonfire society near us at Hartley Witney. The main thing is a kapok ball in chicken wire on a lavatory chain which you have to keep swinging or it burns your hand. They do this every year on the four corners of the green, the procession winds though the Trafalgar Oaks so they're a menace to the vegetation let alone themselves, when they get to the bonfire they whirl them and sparks go everywhere. There have been many attempts to stop it but it's been going for so long that it's tolerated as a tradition.

When I was a boy at Botany Bay up at /Shoaling/ it was a great thing to put a cracker on the crown of trilby hats to make somebody jump, it seemed terribly funny except to the chap who suffered it. The Morris can't sail against society we are all on the street on sufferance. The Morris was always disrespectful, welcomed but not highly thought of, but not disreputable, that's important. You can't foul your own nest because you spoil it for everybody else. You have a responsibility to the rest of the Morris no matter how much you dislike them, let's say you have a responsibility to the Morris that follows you.

The one thing that we've cured by the use of words like 'museum Morris' and 'fossilised Morris' is the need to get over to older sides that the tradition is what people do now. We've no idea what people did a hundred years ago, you can look at manuscripts till you're blue in the face.

The only thing we know about the old traditions is what Sharp taught his pupils, and what his notes say. Our general experience of Morris is looking back at these notes, saying what Sharp teaches may not be what we as Morris men today would see. We would interpret it a bit differently now. Sharp made mistakes in transcription, he made mistakes when he saw people. He'd cycle into a village, find the local foreman, collect a dozen dances and be gone before lunch. First of all, it says a great deal for the man's ability, no one has ever been able to collect in the way Sharp could, he was a superb musician and had feel for people but at the same time he only looked at foremen and he never went back to his sources, he never went back and checked. One of the problems with the Travelling Morris years later was that they went back and danced and the old dancers would laugh at them. After a titter or two they were kind enough to tell them what they were doing wrong.....

(discussion).....

The tradition involves the way of life of the people who did it. In Abingdon, it's the Hemmings family, the best you can do is to produce a cardboard replica of the real Morris. The tradition is the rest of it as well, it's the characters, it's the performance. I keep saying if you go out with a display team that dresses up people say 'Morris' even in parts of the country where there is no knowledge of Morris but somehow or other people associate a dressed up show with Morris even if it's Country Dancing or Scottish or Mummers, Morris is a sort of folk word for all traditional displays..... (discussion)..

One has to remember certain things about the revival. The revival of Morris dancing started in 1905 by people who were committed to doing things for others. Mary Neal had been a pro-Boer and had been involved in demonstrations against the Boer war. She was involved in doing practical things for people in the East End of London. Then she set up the Esperence group to even out dressmaking activities and give these young women a steady job, she was involved in the society against the adulteration of food and she was a founder member of the London branch of the WSPU along with Mrs Tueke who became treasurer and also collected the Abingdon Morris, with Mrs Pethick-Laurence, she and her husband published the magazine 'Votes for Women'.

Sharp was a sort of fabian type socialist but he was very much committed to all this in the beginning and it was only when he tried to get folk song and dance into the board of education for schools that he found the political side embarrassing. He was finally forced to break away about 1910. By 1910, the suffragettes were militant, breaking windows, setting fire to hayricks, chaining themselves to railings and so on. Women discovered the Morris not the men, one year we upset everybody by sending a thing "please can we have our Morris back" signed the Women's Morris. If it hadn't been for them there wouldn't have been a revival, OK?

It was for social reason but they gave the occasional display to raise money for the suffragettes. In the end, Mary Neal and her friends were thrown out of the movement because they were considered too nice, they weren't militant enough. When the War started, Mary Neal turned the whole Esperence club (which by then was national) over to the Ministry of Pensions. She became a Civil Service secretary and her organisation was just absorbed in the Ministry. At the end of the war, she got a bit fed up with all the argument.

A paper like the Morning Post which is now incorporated in the Daily Telegraph, at least if you buy the Telegraph there's a little bit called The Court Circular and you must wonder why the Telegraph bothers. The Morning Post was the Society paper which listed all the guests at all the big house parties and so on. In the Morning Post they had a public argument about the Morris step "how far did you kick the foot?", "Was it so many inches or was it so many lengths of foot?", "how far off the ground should you go?"

It's inconceivable that today you should have such an argument but the people who were arguing, like Sharp, had tremendous standing in society at that time. Sharp had started lecturing about folk song and had become a very well known authority, he had discovered English folk song and besides was a great musicologist anyhow, had become a national figure. Mary Neal also was a national figure, partly for the revival of Morris and the fact that school children everywhere seemed to be doing the Morris and partly because of the public activity in the votes for women.

At the end of the First World War, Mary Neal said no, no way can we have this bitter quarrel going on and she sent a circular to all her helpers saying join the EFDSS. People like Clive Carey and so on joined and integrated in the twenties and she went off to live somewhere in Sussex and settled down

and bought a cottage, I can't remember where exactly. She belonged to some organisation, kibocift, or kibocraft something like that, they had this..... there was a romantic thing that started in the twenties.... the great blue dome..... this great //dolls house// in the countrythey started hiking.... people became rangers..... I did know the chap who was chief.....shanty man, she had a cottage with an ever open door, that sort of thing. The trouble was the chap who then took it over became para-political and they adopted a green shirt..... and green jodhpurs, and they were known as the Greenshirts along with the Blackshirts and they became a neo-fascist organisation. So she dropped out of that one too. She was the first folk person to get an honour from the crown, she got an MBE for services to folk dance and song, the first one in 1937.

The Travelling Morrice, which has had a tremendous influence on the way we do things, the Cambridge Morris invented the idea of Squire and Bagman, the traditional phrases are Secretary and Captain. Squire was the word for the clown, you called the Clown "Squire" as a sort of in joke, it didn't mean he was the leader. The Cambridge men invented the annual feast, the ale, they invented the idea of ring meetings and the way they are structured, they contributed a tremendous amount. The people who started it, Heffer of Cambridge and Rolf Gardner who died a few years ago, a great man he managed to do //gan//on// all the way through his sixtieth birthday. When I knew him he lived about ten years waiting for this, looking forward to it.

He belonged to group at Cambridge after the First World War who first of all recognised they said the thing that was wrong with the EFDSS was that it was aimed at women and also aimed at excellence by examination. The whole thing was geared to getting certificates and medals to, in the end, learn all the Morris, all the sword and all the Playford. By the time you had acquired your gold medal in everything you were too old to do any more. It was a complete life schedule of folk dance and was very sterile.

In 1922 Rolf Gardner wrote an article which got a lot of comment saying the EFDSS should convert itself into the English folk festival society, and could concentrate entirely on having workshops and running big festivals all over the country where the best performers of dance and song should be got together to display to the public. Of course, Sharp excommunicated him for this, he was due to perform in Cambridge in a show that Sharp had written called 'Old King Cole' and he was asked to leave, they said "we don't want people like you in the EFDSS". It's funny that fifty years later the EFDSS consists almost entirely of exactly the sort of person that Rolf Gardner and his friends were. Festivals.... this is the life of the folk world at moment.

The other thing is that he and his friends had links with Germany and the countries round the Baltic and they struggled very hard in the twenties to establish a relationship with the peoples of Northern Germany. They thought that the future of the world depended on it. One of the ways he worked on it was his other passion, work camps in the country. Fifty years ago professional people were completely divorced from the country, so he arranged with his uncle Balfour Gardner and they bought a farm near Shaftesbury and they started getting work gangs together to work in the spring and harvest and they got people over from Northern Germany as well. They called this organisation after a year or two The Springhead Ring. The Ring is a sort of Germanic concept and The Springhead Ring fitted this idea of getting people together. the Morris Ring picked up the same concept. Rolf Gardner invented Plough Sunday as distinct from Plough Monday where we take the plough into church to have it blessed, got country people to raise sides to dance rather than professional people and he ran a campaign, rather lost, with the society where he said it should not be concentrating on the sort of person it did but should get farmers, country people to establish their links with the seasons in terms of ways of expressing themselves, stop having mechanical farming and get people to recognise the seasonal round and celebrate it. Not in any ritual way but in spring when you feel good you have your barn dance and party and things like this.

I say this about Rolf, he had three farms in the end when I knew him and he'd get his friends to do 'Dido and Aeneas' with them all playing in the orchestra or singing. He and his friends entertained themselves by having an opera in his garden. These were people with a different social background to us but they had a very idealistic view of things, romantic but also a forward looking view. Rolf for example organised the flax growing in this country during the last war, got it all going and made us self sufficient, he was a tremendous organiser, tremendous ideas, he was almost considered a nutcase because he was always propounding views which twenty or thirty years later people consider common sense.

It's people like that who motivated the travelling Morris in the early days. People today are not aware of any of it, not aware of how prominent some of these people were in motivating the revival now people do things the way they are today because of the way these people set it up, the attitudes they promulgated that have come to be accepted. The converse, of course, is what we do today will set the pattern for the future, particularly in period when we won't be able to travel in the same way, folk will have to be parochial. I don't see us being able to nip down to Exeter in quite the same way. I'm not talking about the next three or four year but the next ten to twenty which is the time that people in this room will be influencing the Morris.

Society will have changed in many ways. I think the fact that we've got the Cotswold Morris into the four corners of Britain says a lot for the future of folk. I'm very keen to see the Morris alive, not preserved. People kept it alive by inventing dances, improving dances, we are preserving the heritage by trying to do it well, by entertaining the crowd. That's what I think is our heritage, and I like the word heritage because a heritage is something to be used not preserved. The heritage of the country side is not to lock it up but to make it available to be enjoyed on today's terms. The heritage of mediaeval buildings is that you preserve what you can of them but you actually make them usable. It's the same with the Morris you preserve it by preserving the characteristic things about it.

Within that framework there's a awful lot of things you can do for self expression and to bring life into it. It's the enthusiasm that you bring to Morris that will keep it going. If you have the attitude "I'm going to do Bucknell on the appointed day" and nothing else you are sterilising it not reserving it. The need nowadays is not to get out once or twice a year but to meet on a weekly basis as a hobby.

The final thing I want to say to advise you is about overdancing. We are all aware of the argument that too many sides dance at the best spots. What I want to put to you is that too many sides dance too much. We receive many programs for our friends in Morris every year and if you look at them you will find that many sides dance out on a weekly basis over a period from May to September. When you go to see these sides they have worn the edge off their enthusiasm, they lack excitement, sparkle, it's still good but you can well imagine that if they had a shorter season or..... (*end of tape*)