

Where Does The Morris Go From Here?

The Morris was rescued from almost certain extinction in the early years of the twentieth century due to re-aroused interest that was largely brought about by Sharp's discovery of the dance and subsequent publications of collected material. His realization that the dance had special qualities and that the remaining examples were valuable relics, part of our rich cultural heritage is an often overlooked but vitally important insight. The resulting dancing revival initially took two divergent paths, the formal re-creation of collected material through Sharp's workshops and lectures, and also the pleasure driven dancing class activities of Mary Neal in the Esperance Clubs.

It is salutary to read the disputes that arose between Sharp and Neal in those early years of revival with Mary Neal denigrating Sharp's collecting work as something anyone could do, and Sharp decrying her teaching style of the dance as something in the style of a high stepping horse. Sharp was determined to record the remaining vestiges of the dance and also to return the Morris back to its full blooded male performance and original artistry. Neal was mainly interested in extending the repertoire of her clubs to include the enjoyment of Morris dancing as a bit of knees-up fun. Of course they were going to disagree. It is interesting, however, that in later life Mary Neal came round to reconsider her views to concur with Sharp.

We are all aware that through the work of the Morris Ring teams over half a century the important concept was established of "each individual team in its own locality", with dancing substantially based upon collected and observed traditional material, but each team dancing in their own style to a high standard and presenting the Morris as our English heritage. As an all male grouping we have suffered from the cultural changes wrought in our society in the last 25 years which have seriously eroded The Morris Ring's situation. It is clear that as an organization we have been damaged by the 'politically correct' motivations that have come to dominate our way of life, daily thinking, and responses. It is a process still at work and our reactions to the new conventions have, to say the least, been poorly thought out and there is a desperate need for clarity of reasoning and responses on our part.

Our responses so far have actually been confused and unfocused and I believe remain so right up to the present time. The formation of The Women's Morris Federation, later to be The Federation, and also of The Open Morris, was never sufficiently dealt with at that time. We turned away and pretended we could carry on as before, as if they might just go away. But they have flourished and we stumbled on; finding ourselves in a maelstrom of criticism, denigration and ridicule. Despite our attempts in recent years to develop closer ties through the JMO and officer contacts, it is still possible to see the anti-Ring attitude still persists with occasional derogatory remarks in their publications and is common amongst many of their members as indicated by postings on e-lists such as the MDDL.

Our mistake made was a failure to robustly defend the traditional performance in its traditional form. We failed to win the simple argument that Morris is an art form, distinctive in its character and performance because it is danced by men.

We quit the field of reasoned argument because of cleverly contrived references to the short lived Esperance experience, the evidence of girls' teams in the competition scene of north-west "Morris", and isolated examples of ladies in Cotswold dancing.

The overwhelming evidence of the maleness of the Morris seemed too weak a case in the face of Women's liberation and its associated appeal of fairness and equal opportunity.

The Football Association had no such qualms about the maleness of top quality football and despite the tremendous changes in attitude on gender issues, the football league remains all male in its traditional way. No one said women can't or shouldn't play football (and they do), but it is accepted that football at its best, is a male game because of the strength and skills required. We have totally failed to convey the same simple message, and worse we are propitiatory about it!

Today there are two threats to the Morris and its survival as a proper cultural art form.

The first of these is the trend towards world-wide standardization of entertainment, particularly through TV, electronic communication and games. As this change progresses in cultural activity the practices of “old arts” of all kinds are always threatened particularly as the young move to embrace the modern and often exciting gadgetry and trendy new ways.

Therefore as some in The Ring have already identified, we need to engage the young in the Morris and bring the pleasure inherent in its performance to their experience. The million dollar question is how this can be done....and it will have to be a multi-responsive answer. Ideas will need to be tried, re-tried, honed and constantly reviewed if successful over a long period of time, something we have been failing at for some time! This should be an on-going search for answers by all our member teams, also the Advisory Council, and we must take care to choose our officers carefully to provide the necessary leadership to progress solutions and state our case eloquently and fearlessly.

The second threat is already manifest and part of it I have already circled around. I am certain it will not be agreed to by all, but that doesn't mean some deep thinking shouldn't be applied to the situation!

The distortion of traditional presentation is a threat worldwide to many of the customs, and cultural practices of many countries. Modern thinking is spreading worldwide even to the remote areas of our global village. It is easy to overlook our Morris as in danger from the sort of changes that remote isolated communities face to their customs by introduced and alien practices. Many examples can be cited where tourism has been responsible for moving old established folk performances out of traditional settings and into commercial venues, replacing the element of custom by mere entertainment. The Morris is facing just such a distortion, and the loss of elements important to the tradition. Dancing by women is an obvious if contentious example and whilst we can do nothing to stop it even if this was desired, it certainly is absolutely desirable to ensure a pure and easily identified traditional form of Morris survives in our culture where the dance is done by men. The argument should never have been about women dancing Morris but rather about the artistic importance of a male dance form retaining its traditional characteristics and quintessence. The Ring has to take on this mantle of responsibility and climb up onto the moral high ground, and be proud and unashamed to do so.

Also we face considerable distortion by the dumbing down of performance, particularly relating to the recent popularity of Border among many mixed and women's' sides. I see the trend already extending to some Molly dance teams, and predominantly in the so called new phenomenon of 'Goth Morris'. The reality in these cases is that their dance content has virtually no traditional basis whatsoever, and even their costumes and ethos cannot be justified by any traditional precedent whatsoever. Indeed the reliance upon often intricate or outrageous costumes, or both and the use of extensive theatrical face painting are clearly devices to gain attention and attract curious audiences. They have achieved that cross-over from 'traditional dance' to 'entertainment group'. Their numerous gimmicks, large bands of musicians, and behavioural choreography are very far removed from any of the traditional Morris genres that are our real heritage.

I have heard views expressed within the Ring that think we should go down that road, but I sincerely hope we remain wedded to the view that we remain as true guardians of the tradition. Entertaining we can be, without becoming 'merely entertainment', and over the years it is to our credit that most teams have resisted becoming stuck in time as a kind of dry and dusty historical re-enactment spectacle. We have always embraced progression and even welcomed new dances, but the general ethos of Ring teams has ensured such changes remained within the limits of traditional acceptability which has produced new ways of performance that remain clearly Morris. Unfortunately we are not proud of our position though! We have yet to embrace the actuality of the Ring as the living conduit ensuring accurate transmission of traditional practice through the vast knowledge of our teams and its members. Over our seventy-five years we have successfully transferred the Morris and its traditions over several generations, and the knowledge and dancing skill possessed amongst our ranks can be traced right back into the traditional teams, and I am sure you will be as aware as I am of particular dancers where that is the case. We must "up our game" over public relations matters to ensure our expertise is recognized and respected.

We have neglected to highlight our special relationship with traditional Morris practice going back right to the teams Sharp collected from all those years ago. We are undoubtedly the custodians of the purest traditional form of this country's Morris yet languish behind the other organizations in terms of recognition and respect from the folk world. This matter needs our urgent attention. We also need to strengthen the lines of transmission between "master" and "apprentice" in the Morris. Some of our talented teachers are getting older and we should be using them extensively whilst they can still pass on their knowledge with authority. Our neglect of the programme of instructionals over recent years is unforgivable and more needs to be done to correct this gap in our activities.

We also need to move into areas of education, if possible by curriculum involvement. Provision of teachers' resources and other attractive materials need planning and production and in such a way that will mark us out as the leading organisation of Morris and associated customs expertise. We could do with high quality recruiting leaflets and more display materials. We need all Ring clubs to be active in their local areas and get involved in local events and life to 'raise the flag' for quality traditional performance and seek ways of ensuring Morris is at the heart of their local community. They must also look to the Ring raising its game, not only its officers, also the advisory Council, and most importantly to the functioning of the Annual Meeting of Club Representatives to get all these identified "we musts" and "we need to" put into action! This will mean a strong commitment by member clubs to attend and be prepared to speak out. Our officers are there to serve the needs of member clubs but they can only do so when they are made aware of their views. Make sure you send along a member to pressure for a Morris Ring that is going forward, proud of its achievements and unashamed to proclaim the artistic merit of men's Morris dancing.

I hope these thoughts can inspire some productive thinking about our way forward.

Barry Care
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