

CARE FOR FURTHER DEBATE ?

A further response to Barry Care's thoughts for the future from Colin Andrews.

Following my initial response to Barry Care's thoughts on the future of Morris, I have done as he suggested, and studied his document again. I still feel the general tone comes across, unintentionally perhaps, as a retrospective longing for what might have come to pass. I did find, however, some important issues which are relevant to the way in which Morris is perceived both by its practitioners and the general public.

(For those who wish to skip the long discourse below, and move to the summary, use your scroll down facility now !)

Barry highlights the divergent paths adopted by Sharp and Neal in re-introducing an almost extinct tradition, namely re-creation of collected material or recreational activity for pleasure. It begs the question, why do we dance? Is it because, in the words of the jingle that is often sung with Room For The Cuckold, "We do it all day, we do it all night, because it is our fertility rite", i.e. to preserve a tradition, or is it because we get pleasure from dancing. Why engage in a pastime if you do not get pleasure from doing so? While we may well be aware of the enormous contribution of Sharp – and others such as Roy Dommett and Lionel Bacon – in researching and documenting our traditional dance, how many of us consciously don our bells and baldricks with the expressed intention of preserving that tradition. I suspect it is incidental to the pleasure we get from dancing. That pleasure should be enhanced, one would hope, by striving for a high standard of performance. I get great pleasure from witnessing a foot perfect display of Cotswold Morris by Westminster Morris Men, but equally from watching a well-turned out and energetic Border side (of either or both sexes) interacting with their audience.

If someone gets pleasure from seeing a performance, then that spectator is being entertained. I firmly believe that as Morris dancers, we should seek to entertain our audience, since if they are totally unmoved by the spectacle, it deserves to be relegated to a museum exhibit. The quality and nature of the entertainment are nevertheless paramount and the quality factor should not be sacrificed at the altar of popular appeal. Many of us may be entertained nowadays by laughing at the inept poetry of William McGonagall; I would not like Morris to be remembered by future generations in a similar way.

I find a degree of difficulty in accepting Barry's comments on innovation and evolution in Morris, particularly in his posted reply to my original response. I'm well aware, from personal experience as Foreman of a side for the twenty years since its formation, that evolutionary changes can occur almost unconsciously, and this would apply in any side, traditional or otherwise. I would strongly question his conviction that in traditional teams, innovations were never deliberate. Barry would readily admit that his own team perform made up dances in their own tradition, a practice certainly followed by a number of other Ring sides. 'New' dances in the style of existing traditions are also widely used. What, then of the 'tradition'? How are these 'new traditions' any different, in essence, to the fabricated Border and Molly dances? They, too, are based – far more loosely, admittedly – on a tradition. Where does one draw the line between what is an acceptable innovation and a step too far? I don't believe in creating a dance or dance form just for sake of being different, but, as Barry agrees (I think) each generation inevitably makes its own contribution to the tradition. If a team is successful in maintaining a continuity over the span of more than one generation, then changes will get passed on and absorbed into that team's tradition.

I do wonder, however, how many of the existing Ring sides with ageing membership and little young blood will still be around in twenty years to continue the tradition. (Do I recall the Ring Bagman hitting the headlines with a similar thought not so long ago?). Likewise I wonder how many of the current avant garde manifestations of the Morris will survive the test of time. I would not dissent from the view that there are an awful lot - or lot of awful - displays being perpetrated in the name of Morris at present. How to harness their enthusiasm and energy as potential trustees of long established traditional forms of dance is certainly a challenge that needs to be taken up.

Undoubtedly the Morris Ring has faced challenges over the past decades to its former position as sole authority on Morris matters. It has remained strong and resolute, despite in vogue political correctness. It's highly probable, too, that there was a great deal of indecision as how to deal with the perceived sacrilege of women's sides and mixed Morris. Fortunately, the Ring adopted the pragmatic approach that, if you can't actually stop them, at least join with them in pursuing matters of common interest, while retaining one's principles of membership. How, I wonder, would Barry have seen the Ring robustly defend the traditional performance in its traditional form (even if the precise meaning of these words could be agreed) ? Publicly snub any appearance by women in bells? Ostracise any side that dared even to accept a female musician in their ranks? And as to losing the argument that Morris is an art form because it is danced by men, what argument? The proposition itself is as ridiculous as claiming that football is an art form because it has traditionally been played by men ! That is not the same as claiming that Morris, like football, is a more exhilarating experience at the top level with only men participating. If the Ring were to follow Barry's thinking, it would be climbing on to a high horse rather than high ground.

So what of the future for Morris, the real reason for this whole debate? It can be summed up in three words: **Engage Encourage Educate**

Engage in meaningful dialogue between the three Morris organisations as equals, rather than the Ring regarding the Federation and Open Morris as Johnny-come-lately and itself as the fountain of all knowledge. (I exaggerate – but I have come across this attitude). Engage in two-way dialogue with members of different sides – particularly those whose performance gives cause for concern. Find out what their attitudes and aspirations are, what 'turns them on' about Morris. There may well be some surprises, and, moreover, opportunity to encourage and educate - in a supportive, non-judgemental way . (Biggest turn off – this is the way it's always been done, this is the way you should be doing it !)

Encourage dancers and sides to think about their performance, how they could improve their dancing, presentation, music etc - again in a supportive, non-judgemental way. Encourage them to look at how they relate to other forms of the Morris, try other forms perhaps. Give support in raising awareness of source of further information on history, notation, other local 'expertise'.

Educate those whose knowledge of the Morris is limited, narrowly-focussed or non-existent. The previous two areas will already provide some foundation. . Ring instructionals, though valuable, probably are largely preaching to the converted, whereas it's on potential new recruits to the tradition that we should be focussing. Leaflets, flyers, posters etc if used need to be crystal clear about the message one wishes to convey, though as a means of providing all schools, youth groups, and other organisations in the broad field of education with a source of information and local point of contact for Morris they could play a part. Videos (sorry, DVDs!), booklets etc can be useful for instruction, but the expense of a professionally designed package for schools would probably be prohibitive, and the take-up unpredictable. We do indeed have a body of dancers who have the necessary experience and aptitude to pass on their knowledge to another generation. The Ring could compile and promote a list of persons from its member clubs willing to participate (caveat: ISA/CRB!). Activity centres for youth groups may be prepared to offer Morris in their programme. (I already participate in once such centre on Exmoor. With young people I try to ensure that their first active contact with Morris is FUN - the rest can come later if their interest is aroused. A question and answer session gives the ideal opportunity to introduce something of the traditional Morris legacy). While schools may be an obvious target, there's also potential for quality promotion amongst adult groups - social, sports, business, W.I. (sorry Barry !), in talking about, demonstrating, & teaching the Morris . It would only need one or two people per season to catch the Morris bug to revitalise many an ailing side. And why not lobby for our traditional dance to be included in appropriate further and higher education courses?

2009 was a year in which the Media treated to Morris far more seriously than in its previously trivial manner. Perhaps 2010 is the time to seize the initiative and keep Morris firmly in the public eye as part of our national heritage. Or we could just continue to gaze contemplatively into our tankards.

Colin Andrews, January 2010

