

A personal view of the Abingdon Morris Dancing Tradition

Perhaps because morris dancers would rather be “dancing out”, arguing the toss, and drinking beer, the morris tradition itself seems to have been starved of accurate documentary recording. In truth, having spent some time as a morris “fool” in Abingdon, I can tell you that the invention of stories is an art-form in its own right, and that often these stories told in half-jest become integral to the tradition. One such relies on the fact that we often have to leave glasses of beer half finished while we do a dance and come back to them when it's finished. The legendary Charlie Brett used to leave his false teeth at the bottom of his glass, and unsurprisingly it was always there when he'd finished the dance. This explains why morris dancers often carry their beer around with them in pewter mugs.

The verifiable historical record mentions morris dancing as far back as 1448. Here in Abingdon, records at St Helen's Church contain a ledger entry for the purchase of morris bells in 1560. One cannot help but wonder at the proximity of this date to the 1556 granting of Abingdon's Charter. Was this anything to do with the parish reaction to the charter's insistence on a civic mayor? Did St Helen's somehow fund the establishment of morris dancing in Abingdon? To my knowledge there's absolutely no evidence of this, but the “squire” (leader) of Abingdon Morris is the “Mayor of Ock Street” - a peoples' representative and title whose actual origin is unclear. Ock Street's residents are still entitled each year to cast a ballot to elect their own “mock” mayor, who is one of the dancers.

Beyond the St Helen's 1560 record, there's no specific evidence of morris activity until 1700, when, following an ox-roast on the market place, a fracas over who should have the ox's horns developed between the men from Ock Street and the men from the Vineyard. Two lines were drawn, one somewhere in the Vineyard and the other outside the Cock and Tree tavern in Ock Street. whichever faction could get the horns over their line could have them. Ock Street won, and the horns have ever since been part of the Abingdon tradition. Unless they are present, the Abingdon Dancers will not dance. The horns are borne aloft in a lifelike effigy of an ox's head, and are usually decorated with fresh greenery and flowers. Part of the Mayor of Ock Street's regalia is a rosewood chalice, reputedly carved from a club used in the 1700 fight.

A further 150 years slip by with no recorded activity, until the late 19th century, when the Reading Mercury seems to have started to report on the annual horse fair, held around midsummer's day. Comment was usually made on the quantity and quality of the horse trading, but also on the morris dancers, who would usually appear and dance until they'd collected enough money to buy ale, whereupon they'd disappear to do exactly that. The dancers suffered a very poor press and seem to have been regarded as a bad lot. Indeed one year they were unable to dance because they'd pawned the horns. This was regarded as a slur on the town by the civic mayor, who intervened to instruct the superintendent of police to redeem the pledge

The Abingdon dancers really came to national fame at the start of the twentieth century. Before the great war, Cecil Sharp, musician and composer, concerned that much of England's folk music and tradition was dying out, set about recording the folk songs and dances of the time. He picked upon the best-known morris dancing sides and recorded their tunes and dances. Abingdon was one of these, at the time being sustained by the Hemmings family and their friends, whose focus was the Happy Dick pub in Ock Street. It's the building next to Domino's Pizza and boasts a plaque recording its history. Its landlady at the time was a Mrs Hudson. Sharp's visit to Abingdon was regarded by the side with a degree of suspicion. One suspects that considerable inducement was required to loosen their tongues. He researched other sides including Bampton, Headington Quarry, Winster and Chipping Campden, and along with Abingdon, these have long been regarded

as the crème de la crème of Cotswold morris dancing. In the morris world it is considered a great honour to be invited to dance in Abingdon. One condition imposed by the Hemmings' in describing their dances was that no-one should copy either the dance movements or the characteristic unique Abingdon "step". Compliance with this request is widely observed, even today. Sharp also explored non-Cotswold forms of morris styles, specifically sword and rapper dancing and northwest clog dancing.

Sharp founded the English folk dance and song society, which, with the Vaughan Williams library occupies Cecil Sharp House in London. At about this time Mary Neal, an acquaintance of Sharp's, established the Esperance girls' club in Kings Cross. Her aim was to lighten the lives of factory girls there by teaching them to dance. Sharp told her about the Abingdon dancers and she persuaded the Hemmings brothers to dance at events in London and to help teach the Esperance dancers. Mary had a talent for publicity and her work (and Abingdon's fame) attracted lots of attention and support nationally. A letter she wrote to Mrs Hudson at the Happy Dick survives. She asks that the Hemmings brothers come to dance in London on a specific train, where they will be met at Paddington. She encloses their return train fare. She also asks that Mrs Hudson try to prevent them from drinking beer before they set off, as there will be some for them when they arrive! Nothing changes. The side still has a concertina donated by Mary Neal at that time. Heaven knows what sob story prompted this generosity. Perhaps a few wrong notes had been blamed on the age and decrepitude of the one they already had.

Only a few years later the great war put an end to all that. No evidence exists to indicate which of the 250 names on Abingdon's war memorial were morris dancers, but suffice it to say that it became impossible to raise a side after 1918. This situation continued until 1935, when the Hemmings' were able to resurrect the tradition and Abingdon danced once more. They were helped and supported by a Major Fryer, who was a quite well-off resident of Wargrave, and who owned a "shooting brake" in which he transported the dancers to their venues. At least once the half-dozen dancers with their top hats in a long black car were mistaken for part of a funeral cortege.

Folk dancing became very popular in the 1970's, and the side's membership grew to more than 30. Obviously with so many men, and so relatively few dancing opportunities, discontent and frustration grew within the side. With some acrimony a group broke away and started up a new side whose relationship with the traditional side has sometimes been fraught. However, as time passes, dancers retire, and those who take their place have no knowledge of the strong words and emotions involved at the time, and my expectation is that a single Abingdon side will one day re-emerge. In the meantime we continue to guard our heritage, and in some ways to add to it. During autumn and winter we practice. In spring and summer we "dance out" at all manner of local events. We visit other sides such as Moulton, Winster and Bampton and they visit Abingdon to dance with us. We've added two or three dances to our repertoire in the last thirty years. We still chair the Mayor along Ock Street after his election in June. Sad to say, though, that there are now only two pubs at which we can rest, where there used to be ten.

And the morris world changes around us. Border morris (black faces, shrieking, long feathers in hats) abounds, and sword dancing sides are once again becoming quite rare. Bladders (the instrument of correction for errant dancers) are very difficult to get hold of. Still, we nurture our tradition. My hope is that one aspect of it that survives is that the ability to grow facial hair will be regarded as an essential skill amongst those who would dance with Abingdon. I have some very good friends who lack this talent and although they dance superbly well, it's not with Abingdon.

Tony Legge 28/3/2015