

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

**Merrie England, May Day and More:
Morris Dances in Cumbria in the Early
Twentieth Century**

Sue Allan

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Sue Allan

Merrie England, May Day and More: Morris Dances in Cumbria in the Early Twentieth Century

When I first became involved in playing music for Cotswold morris in the early 1970s, my mother, Margaret Allan, and my grandmother, Maggie Williamson (née Peel), both told me they'd done morris dancing in the local carnival in my home town of Wigton when they were children. My grandmother then gave me two photographs of her dancing the morris in what appeared to be Wigton Carnival in 1911 (she was seven), which I pored over with some fascination, but also with puzzlement as I summarily dismissed the idea that this could be 'real' morris, as there was to my knowledge no form of morris indigenous to Cumberland (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Younger girl morris dancers, Cornmarket, Wigton 1911– one of whom is the author's grandmother.

Through my involvement with Carlisle Morris from 1974, who performed then mainly Cotswold morris, I soon became aware of North-west morris and the women's morris movement, and through a friend in Lancashire, Jenny Potts – who was researching her local dance traditions and went on to found Rivington Morris – I learned that many of the Lan-

cashire and Cheshire dances had in the past been performed by girls. This appeared to give some underpinning of what I then thought of as ‘authenticity’ to the tradition of ‘morris dancing’ I had stumbled across on my own doorstep.

On my quizzing my grandmother more closely, she was able to remember that in her day the bigger girls wore garlands of flowers around their heads, while she and the smaller girls wore ‘clottie bonnets’, one file wearing blue bonnets and the other pink. All the girls, she said, wore white dresses, black stockings and black shoes, had ankle garters with bells sewn on and danced with handkerchiefs with bells sewn on each corner and a loop in the centre so they could be suspended from a finger. Her photographs show some of the older girls danced with beribboned sticks (Figure 2), while photographs which have come to light since then show that boys also danced, but my grandmother did not mention either, and my mother claimed that in her day (in the early 1940s) the dancers were all girls and only used handkerchiefs. Both women, sadly, had only the haziest memory of the figures, remembering clearly only the chorus and right- and left-hand star movements, and the fact that they danced to ‘100 Pipers’, played by the town band.



Figure 2: Older girl morris dancers, High Street, Wigton 1911.

The carnival in Wigton went into abeyance in the early 1960s but was revived around 1970 by a teacher at St Cuthbert's RC Primary School in the town, a nun: the redoubtable Sister Aquinas. In 1977 I approached the Sister in order to find out more, and learned that she had managed to revive the morris dance by tracking down the last person to teach the dance, a Mrs Lily Scholey of Carlisle, then aged around 90, who was then brought in to instruct new dancers. Teams of girls, mostly from St Cuthbert's School, then performed the dance at the head of the carnival for the next twenty years, in a costume which seemed to change yearly, but always dancing to the same tune, 'A Hundred Pipers', played by a brass band. Sister Aquinas was more than happy to gather a cohort of girls to demonstrate the dance for me, and the Wigton Carnival Dance then went on to become central to the repertoire of the women's morris team I formed in 1977, Throstles Nest Morris.¹ Most of our repertoire consisted initially of Lancashire and Cheshire dances, thanks to notation supplied by the Women's Morris Federation (now Morris Federation), along with two from Cumbria, the Keswick Road Dance and Keswick Stage Dance; but the Wigton Carnival Dance was the jewel in our crown, later joined by the Blennerhasset Garland Dance, another local dance I collected in 1978 from a former teacher in the village of Blennerhasset, some eight miles away.

Further research soon revealed a raft of other morris dances performed by children at carnivals and hospital parades in West and South Cumbria in the early twentieth century, along with dances performed at May Day celebrations in the Eden Valley and in Keswick, where May Queen celebrations and maypole dancing had been a popular annual feature of town life from 1885 to 1938. This was a period notable for the great national upsurge of interest in things quaint, rural and 'English', which encompassed morris dancing, carnivals, Rose Queens and May Day celebrations with their May Queens and Maypoles: a 'Merrie Englandism' celebrating 'a world that has never actually existed, a visionary, mythical landscape, where it is difficult to take normal historical bearings.' The definitive

¹ 'The Throstle's Nest of all England' had long been the nickname for the town of Wigton.

study of this phenomenon is Roy Judge's 1991 paper which characterizes 'Merrie England' as an 'abstract literary concept deriving from the antiquarian's study, or an entertaining diversion at the theatre,' based on evidence from early nineteenth century books like Strutt's *Sports and Pastimes* (five editions 1830 – 1841), Hone's *Every-Day, Table and Year Books* (1825-1832), Walter Scott's version of Strutt's incomplete *Queenhoo-Hall* and the writings of Washington Irving.²

Theresa Buckland suggests that Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the 'invention of tradition' informs the Merrie England trope, feeding an agenda of nostalgia and patriotism: 'Events such as festivals, pageants and plays re-produced on the original site profiled the stability and legitimacy of established families, institutions, towns and cities, cementing them as both national and local heritage.'³ As E.P. Thompson notes, 'far from extinguishing local traditions [...] the early years of the Industrial revolution saw a growth in provincial pride and self-consciousness', while Frank Trentmann suggests that activities like rambling and morris dancing 'were cultural as much as physical exercises' and the popular appeal of country dance 'stemmed largely from its conscious attempt to restore a spiritual tie between modern reality and rural past.'⁴

The expansive Knutsford May Day (later Knutsford Royal May Day) celebrations were established in 1864, in the heyday of Merrie Englandism, and spawned many similar May Day celebrations across Cheshire and Lancashire. Johnny Haslett's assiduous work in researching newspaper reports of morris dancers and maypoles on the Lancashire plain from the 1860s through to 1919 gives some idea of the number and scale of such events.⁵ Meanwhile, in the south of

² Roy Judge, 'May Day and Merrie England', *Folklore*, 102.2 (1991), 131-48 (p. 131).

³ Theresa J. Buckland, 'Dance and Cultural Memory: Interpreting Fin de Siècle Performances of "Olde England"', *Dance Research*, 31.1 (2013), 29-66 (pp. 29, 44); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1966), p.407; Frank Trentmann, 'Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth Century Culture', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29.4 (1994), 583-625 (pp. 593, 598).

⁵ J. Haslett, *Morris Dancers and Rose Queens: An Anthology of Reported Carnivals and Galas in West Lancashire to 1900* (Leyland: Fairhaven, 2005) ['Volume 1']; J. Haslett, *Morris Dancers and*

England from 1885 onwards professional pageant master D'Arcy Ferris was busy organizing similar events in villages and cities, and some twenty years later a Merrie England Society was formed to encourage May festivals and local pageants, fostering a nostalgia for an England that never was.⁶

Earlier maypole traditions in villages would no doubt involved dancing, but folklorists agree that the plaited ribbon dance which most people today associate with maypoles has a history of only around 180 years, having been introduced to England 'by professional choreographers in numerous theatrical pieces, organized fetes, and revived or created May Day customs from about the 1830s' and was then in classic Merrie England style immediately declared to be 'an old English custom', despite its lack of historical roots.⁷ By the later nineteenth century, it was being enthusiastically disseminated through the English school system by teachers. In a similar fashion, the morris dances which became popular features of such events throughout the nineteenth century probably had their roots in theatrical performances, although the precise nature of these is often difficult to gauge. Such dances became less fashionable in the theatre later in the century, but were then taken up by dancing masters and schools and organizers of town and village celebrations. Roy Judge notes that: 'The apparent relation of morris to the 'olden times' in fact gave ballet masters greater freedom to explore the possibilities of its various images', although it was 'clearly seen as a fresh revival of an antique and patriotic custom...'⁸ The widespread enthusiasm in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century for 'patriotic'

Rose Queens, Volume 2: An Anthology of Reported Carnivals and Galas in West Lancashire 1900-1909 (Leyland: Fairhaven, 2013); J. Haslett, *Morris Dancers and Rose Queens, Volume 3: An Anthology of Reported Carnivals and Galas in West Lancashire 1910-1919* (Leyland: Fairhaven, 2017).

⁶ Roy Judge, 'D'Arcy Ferris and the Bidford Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, 4.5 (1984), 443-80; Judge, 'May Day and Merrie England', pp. 132-141.

⁷ Steve Roud, *The English Year: A Month-by-month Guide to The Nation's Customs and Festivals, from May Day to Mischief Night* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 219; see also Roy Judge, 'Tradition and the Plaited Maypole Dance', *Traditional Dance*, 2 (1983), 1-21; Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 296-297.

⁸ Roy Judge, "'The Old English Morris Dance': Theatrical Morris 1801-1880', *Folk Music Journal*, 7 (1997), 311-30 (pp. 334, 336).

May Day and carnival dance performances was reflected in the initiation of similar performances not only in Wigton, but also at Keswick, Cockermouth, Blennerhasset, Aspatria, Cockermouth, Workington, Whitehaven in Cumberland, Temple Sowerby in Westmorland and Ulverston, Barrow and Dalton in the Furness district of Lancashire (i.e., the modern county of Cumbria) (Figure 3). A discussion of these follows, beginning with the earliest – May Day celebrations in the Lake District town of Keswick – and concluding with the Wigton dance, which continued to be performed for the longest period.

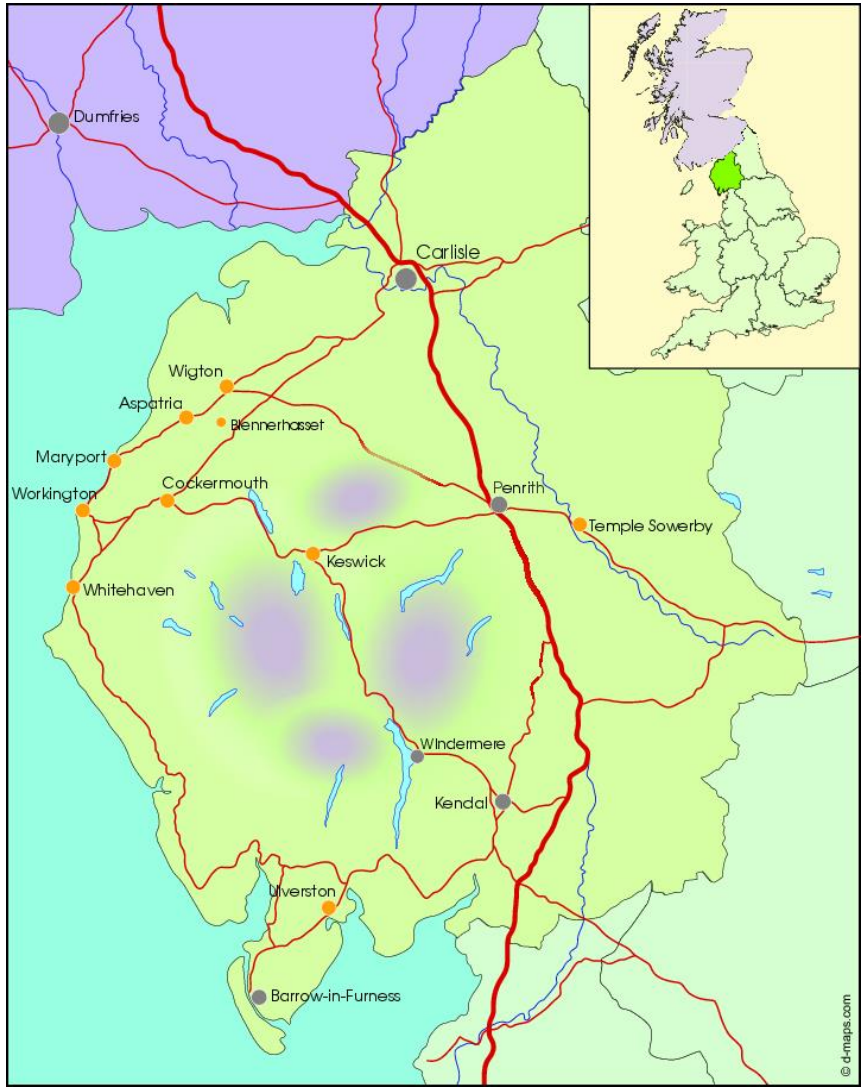


Figure 3: Map of Cumbria showing locations of dances referred to (orange circles).

Keswick May Day 1885 – 1938

May Day celebrations in Keswick were first proposed as an additional attraction for visitors by tradesmen in the town, to be held on the first Wednesday of May, which in 1885 was half-day closing. Muriel Spedding of Greta Bank was the first May Queen, elected by a Ladies' Committee who supervised the dress making and flowers, and with an entourage of twelve maids of honour, or sometimes page boys; she led a grand procession from the Market Place, around the town and on to Fitz Park. In the park, the May Queen was crowned and there was a host of activities for children including maypole dancing, morris dancing, a choral singing competition, Cumberland Three Reel dancing, an essay competition, skipping competitions, races and high jump (Figure 4). The day was rounded off with an evening concert at the Queen of Lakes Pavilion just across the River Greta from the park.⁹ From 1896 to 1938 the organization of the celebrations was taken on by local Band of Hope groups rather than the tradesmen. There were twelve such groups in the Keswick area, associated with different churches, and each took it in turn to present a May Queen, elected by the children, with Maids of Honour named after spring flowers, for example in 1912 Nora Green chosen by Under-skiddaw Band of Hope.¹⁰

Canon Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley (1851 -1920), vicar of Cros-thwaite Church, Keswick from 1883-1917, was involved from the beginning and enthusiastically took on the organization of the event and was undoubtedly instrumental in shaping the May Day celebrations (Figure 5).

⁹ Information on Keswick May Day from archives of Keswick Museum & Art Gallery, following their exhibition 'May Day in Keswick', 1 May–11 June 2016, which included over 70 photographs, most from the museum's Joe Brownrigg Archive, along with some costumes, documents and cuttings researched and curated by local historian Brian Wilkinson. Additional information from *Preston Guardian*, 27 April 1885, quoted by Haslett, *Morris Dancers and Rose Queens*, [Volume 1], p. 165.

¹⁰ The Band of Hope Union, founded in 1855, was a Christian temperance organization for children up to age 16, which encouraged children to live healthy lives without alcohol and also organized activities for them. There were 65 Band of Hope groups within the Carlisle Diocese in 1880, see Lyn Murfin, *Popular Leisure in the Lake Counties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 142-43.



Figure 4: Keswick May Day 1892 - maypole dancers at Fitz Park, Canon Rawnsley with back to the camera giving instructions to the dancers (Photo: Brian Wilkinson).



Figure 5: Keswick May Day 1907: May Queen Isobel Gardiner and her attendants, with Canon Rawnsley (Photo: Joe Brownrigg Collection, Keswick Museum & Art Gallery).

His friend and mentor, art critic, artist, geologist, writer and social thinker John Ruskin (1819-1900), who had moved to Brantwood on Coniston Water in 1871, had in 1881 been influential in setting up the extravagant annual May Queen Festivals at Whitelands College, a

London training college for female teachers. The festivals managed to combine Ruskin's romantic ideas of old English customs and rituals with the High Anglican tradition of the College, fanning the flames of enthusiasm for May Day festivities nationally as Whitelands-trained teachers spread the ideas around the country.¹¹ Rawnsley led the Keswick May Queen's carriage and wrote her proclamation virtually every year until his death in 1920. The proclamation asked the people of Keswick, particularly the children, to show love and gentleness to all around them – both people and animals – 'a sort of early countryside code'.¹²

A keen conservationist and supporter of the arts and crafts movement, Rawnsley was described by one of his parishioners as 'the most active volcano in Europe': one of the founders of the National Trust, he was also a keen supporter of the arts and crafts movement – setting up the Keswick School of Industrial Art and Ruskin Linen School and helping to found Keswick Museum and Art Gallery, Keswick Cottage Hospital and Keswick School. Additionally he was involved with local colleges, nature clubs and the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association. In his free time, he wrote sonnets and campaigned against alcohol and saucy postcards. He describes a May Day in Keswick in one of his books – over-romantically, in florid prose and with disingenuous descriptions (writing as if he had just come upon the event rather than actually organizing it!)

Keswick Dances

The reference to Keswick May Day in 1895 mentioned above also alludes to morris dancing being part of the event, as well as maypole dancing, and in fact two of the first dances Throstles Nest performed in 1978 were the Keswick Stage Dance (intended for display on a stage) and Keswick Road Dance (a simpler, processional form). The dance notation came from the Women's Morris Federation, and was headed: 'As danced by the girls of St John's School, Keswick, c.1910-

¹¹ Dave Walker, 'The May Queens of Whitelands College: The Early Years', <<https://rbkclocalstudies.wordpress.com/2015/04/30/the-may-queens-of-whitelands-college-the-early-years/>> [accessed 14 November 2017].

¹² Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in John Ruskin's Lake District* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 97.

12 and led by Miss Hayes. Seen by Mary Neal and Clive Carey, who commented on the stepping', given to them by dancer and researcher Roy Dommett. The notes allegedly came from the Carey collection.¹³ However, no evidence of the Keswick dances has been found in the Carey collection, although it certainly appears in the manuscript collection of Cecil Sharp, where in his notes on 'Mandesley Morris' (this is an error: it should read 'Mawdesley') Sharp writes that the dance 'was taught to Keswick children by a Mandesley man [*sic*], J.T. Southworth (32). He met me at Keswick by appointment, March 4th, 1911'.¹⁴ Sharp goes on to say that the dance was learned by the 'Mandesley' men from a dancer who came from Leyland, going on to give notation for both a processional 'Road Dance' and a stationary 'Stage-dance'. The history of the Mawdesley dance is most clearly outlined by Roy Smith in 2010, who notes that John Thomas Southworth moved to the Keswick area and taught the dance to the girls of St John's School, presumably for the May Celebrations.¹⁵

Ulverston, Furness

The morris dance performed in the annual Hospital Parade in Ulverston also appears to have been a direct import from Lancashire. Tom and Joan Flett include a note about it in their 1979 book on Cumbrian step-dances, saying that that the morris in Ulverston died out around 1910 but 'girls' dancing troupes such as the Dalton Merry-makers, from the neighbouring town of Dalton-in-Furness, developed from it.¹⁶ Reports in the *Lancashire Daily Post* from 1901, 1906 and 1908 all mention the morris dance, in 1906 '... under the direc-

¹³ Roy Dommett, 'Keswick Stage Dance', *Roy Dommett's Morris Notes*, edited by Anthony G. Barand, 2nd ed., 5 vols (n.pl.: CDSS, 1986), II, 57-58.

¹⁴ The Women's Morris Federation became the Morris Federation in 1980. For further information see Morris Federation, 'Our History' <<http://www.morrisfed.org.uk/about/our-history/>> [accessed 14 November 2017]; 'Mandersley Morris', Cambridge, Archive of Clare College, Cecil J. Sharp MSS, ACC1987/25, CJS2/11/2/17 <<https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/2/17>> [accessed 14 November 2017].

¹⁵ Mawdesley is a village in Lancashire, some eight miles from Leyland. Roy Smith, 'Mawdesley Morris Dancers Remembered', *The Morris Dancer*, 4.2 (2010), 21-33. <<http://themorrisring.org/sites/default/files/docs/mdancer/volume-4-number-2.pdf>> [accessed 14 November 2017]. Although Smith says Southworth moved to St John's in the Vale, it seems more likely that the dancers of 'St John's School' are actually girls from St John's School in Keswick itself, rather than the tiny school in the hamlet of St John's in the Vale.

¹⁶ J.F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland* (London: EFDSS, 1979).

tion of Miss Edith Malone, and flower queens and maidens under Miss E. Lawrence...’, while a report of a very rainy Barrow Hospital Saturday in 1907 records ‘troupes of young dancing girls from Ulverston, who had come down to assist’.¹⁷ In 1981 I corresponded with three morris men who I believed had some information about the Ulverston dance: Julian Pilling of Colne Royal Morris Men replied, ‘I have no knowledge that I am prepared to pass on to instigators of women’s morris’, but Dan Howison, formerly of Manchester Morris Men, and Stuart Lawrence of Furness Morris were much more helpful. Dan said that the morris dancing in Ulverston flourished for only a few years around 1900, organized by the daughter of a local chemist, while Stuart’s further researches had revealed that this was Mrs Hayes, who wanted to liven up the local Hospital Parade so visited Bolton to see the dancers there, noting figures and adapting them for the Ulverston team, originally made up of boys but very soon also including girls. Stuart quotes from Mrs Gabbatt of Ulverston, the daughter of Mrs Hayes, that ‘The Bolton dance was a stationary dance and the Ulverston parade marshal did not want to the procession to stop, so mother had to devise a dance at the speed of the procession’. Mrs Gabbatt thought the dance was performed from 1902 to around 1910.¹⁸

Temple Sowerby, Westmorland

Information on the dancing performed by girls at Temple Sowerby May Day came about because of a chance meeting whilst performing with Throstles Nest Morris at a garden fête in the village in June 1979. I had spotted some lovely black-and-white photographs in a local history display and ascertained these were from local resident Mrs Kate Hindle, then aged 82½ years. At around eight years old, Kate was the youngest of the dancers in the photos, which feature the girls who performed a ‘tambourine dance’ and a ‘hoop dance’ - both dances typical of the ‘fancy dances’ taught by dancing teachers at the time (Figure 6). She could not, sadly, remember anything of

¹⁷ Haslett, *Morris Dancers and Rose Queens, Volume 2*, pp. 15, 201, 258 and 238.

¹⁸ Sue Allan, private correspondence with Dan Howison c. 1981 (original letter mislaid), and with Stuart Lawrence, 12 October 1981.

the actual dance figures but did recall that they also did a maypole dance, and performed in neighbouring villages as well as Temple Sowerby.¹⁹ Haslett includes a report headed 'Queen of Villages: Westmorland May-Day Festival Revived' from the *Lancashire Daily Post*, 15 May 1908, saying that after a lapse of a quarter of a century 'the famous May Day festival was yesterday revived at Temple Sowerby, near Penrith, which claims to be "the queen" of Westmorland villages'. The report goes on to detail the costumes of the May Queen and her attendants, as well as the tableaux in the procession, and the performance of 'old English dances'.²⁰

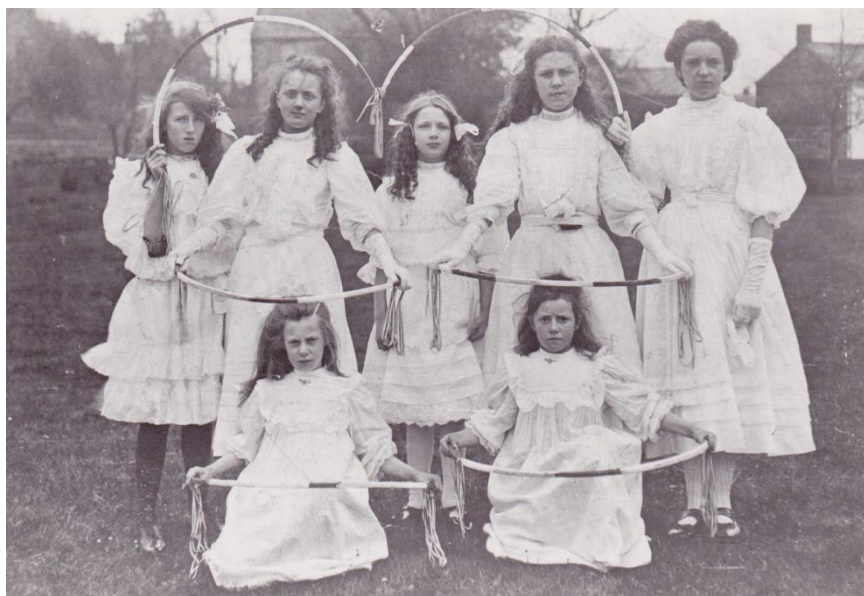


Figure 6: Temple Sowerby hoop or garland dancers, 1909.

Cockermouth, Cumberland

Another instance of a fruitful chance meeting whilst performing with Throstles Nest Morris occurred in summer 1979 at a fête in Cockermouth. Here I met two former girl morris dancers from the town: Mrs Skilbeck and Mrs Benson. They informed me that they had danced in carnival processions in the 1920s, to the tune '100 Pipers',

¹⁹ For more on 'fancy dances' see Flett, *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland*, pp. 8-9.

²⁰ Haslett, *Morris Dancers and Rose Queens*, Volume 2, p. 249.

along with their female classmates from two different primary schools, Fairfield and All Saints. At that period, I was informed, the schools competed with each other and would perform different dances. A further visit to Mrs Benson, who had attended Fairfield School, yielded little in the way of information about the dance itself, but she did have some photographs from around 1925, when she had been around eleven years old, showing girls in classically styled tunics and cross-gartered Greek sandals, dancing with handkerchiefs, which Mrs Benson said were emerald green and red (Figure 7). A photograph of 1928, however, shows dancers wearing dark skirts and waistcoats.



Figure 7: Cockermouth carnival c.1925: morris dancers from Fairfield School.

Aspatia, Cumberland

The mining town of Aspatia was another with a flourishing carnival tradition throughout the first half of the twentieth century, with girls doing morris dancing in the carnival in the 1920s. Dressed in white dresses with coloured sashes and handkerchiefs, they danced four

abreast to 'Cock o' the North' played by Aspatria Colliery Band, with hand movements similar to those of the Wigton dance.²¹

Whitehaven and Workington, Cumberland

In 1981 Marion Cowper, of the Cowper Dancing School in Whitehaven, but originally Workington, was able to provide information on the morris dances. The school had been founded by her grandfather Oliver Cowper in 1871, who taught many styles of dance to both adults and children both at his premises and also in the towns and village round about. As well as ballroom dancing for adults and 'fancy dances' for children, he and his sons taught clog and trained teams of girls to do morris dancing in the Workington and Whitehaven carnivals, to the tune '100 Pipers' played by brass band. The popularity of carnival dancing seems to have been widespread throughout West Cumberland in the earlier years of the twentieth century, and the Fletts also note that Will Wright of Seaton, near Workington, who often helped out at Oliver Cowper's classes, went on to train troupes of carnival dancers – distinct, it seems, from morris dancers – from the 1920s to 1960.²² According to his grand-daughter Marion, for the morris dances, which were performed with hankies or sticks and sometimes tambourines, Oliver always insisted on white dresses for the girls, who were accompanied in the procession by a 'jester' in a red and white costume with bells sewn on who did 'acrobatic dancing'. Unfortunately, Marion could not remember any of the dance steps or figures.²³

Blennerhasset, Cumberland

Much more information was forthcoming from the two informants I interviewed in the village Blennerhasset near Aspatria about its two carnival morris dances: a former dancer, Mrs Sally Rowlinson, and Miss Hilda Lawson, who had danced and then gone on to teach the

²¹ Information from Mrs Sally Rowlinson of Blennerhasset in 1978 communicated to Sue Allan; information communicated to Mike Jensen of Carlisle Morris by Mrs Dixon of Aspatria, 17 February 1996.

²² Flett, *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland*, pp. 12-13, 18.

²³ Information from Marion Cowper, interviewed by Sue Allan, 17 September 1981.

dances to girls in the village. As far as can be ascertained, the dances - a morris dance and a garland dance - seem to have been performed to the accompaniment of a brass band and date back to at least 1918. In the 'morris' dance hankies with bells sewn on each corner were used, and both the garland dance and morris used a country-dance-style double step appearing similar to that of the Wigton dance. The girls wore white knee-length dresses with bells around wrists, a ribbon sash tied at the waist, garters with bells on the ankles, and ribbons or bows in the hair. The garlands used were cane hoops or half hoops covered with flowers and/or ribbons, and all dances were performed to '100 Pipers' played by a brass band. Hilda Lawson, who was able to provide many figures for both dances, said that in earlier days some dancers used tambourines instead of garlands and in later days, in the 1920s, they would sometimes dance four abreast instead of two. Teachers of the dance had included Mr Jack Martin of Blennerhasset School, and possibly also Mrs Ginnie Lightfoot of Harriston and Mrs Tinnion of Aspatria, with Mrs Bessie Dalton playing melodeon.²⁴

Wigton, Cumberland

Back now to where I began, my home town of Wigton and its morris dance (which we in Throstles Nest Morris called the Wigton Carnival Dance). My researches have continued over the years and many more photographs have come to light. Some of these, like those of my grandmother, date back to 1911 (Figure 8) and reveal that both boys and girls were dancing at that time, and that there were a lot of them - one photograph shows 16 boys, two of them dressed as jesters, and 30 girls posing for the camera. There are also extant a few photographs from later years from the 1920s through to the 1970s (Figure 9).

²⁴ Information from Sue Allan interviews with Mrs Sally Rowlinson and Miss Hilda Lawson of Blennerhasset, winter 1978.



Figure 8: Morris dancers leading the procession for the George V coronation celebrations, 1911, Market Place, Wigton.



Figure 9: Girls from St Cuthbert's School perform the Wigton dance in the 1975 carnival procession, with teacher Sister Aquinas walking alongside.

My mother danced in annual carnival in the 1930s, a period for which I have not found any photographic records, nor any of the period in the 1940s when the dance was taught by Ethel Bragg, the

mother of broadcaster and writer Melvyn Bragg (Lord Bragg of Wigton), who wrote about this in a lightly fictionalized account in his autobiographical novel *A Place in England*, with the fictional 'Betty' representing his mother:²⁵

Betty was in charge of the dancers. There were about thirty girls, dressed in white, with four bells on a white handkerchief, bells on their wrists and bells around their ankles, small, on grey elastic, shining like little bubbles of silver. The girls walked in pairs directly behind the band, jangling in the wind, and danced every four hundred yards when the band stopped. The dancing was called Morris Dancing but had long lost any relationship it might have had with the Maypole and yip-haw, the dialect and sticks of those revived original dances which are a mixture of pedantry and Swedish drill set to slender melodies that often shudder at the impact. No, the girls danced a very formal, very simple, skipping and chain-making dance nearer to a Scottish reel than to the pure source of Morris. The band accompanied them with Scottish tunes, 'A Hundred Pipers' [...]

Some weeks before, he says, a hand-written notice in the newsagent's window had advertised for dancers: 'Will all girls between the ages of 7 and 15 who would like to be in the Morris dancing please meet at the West Cumberland Farmers Building at 5.15 next Monday.' And what he says about 'Betty' in the novel rings true as a description of his mother Ethel, whom I knew quite well:

Everything about it appealed to Betty. The girls took their places in accordance with age, the younger ones leading – and so it was fair. The dance was so easily learnt that there was little nervousness. The business of getting them all to move at the same time was difficult enough to make it exacting work, but not so difficult as to make it hard work. Most of the girls had white dresses and, if not, they could easily be

²⁵ Melvyn Bragg, *A Place in England* (London: Sceptre, 1970), pp. 112-13.

made – while J & J Airds sold the bells for a penny each – so few could feel barred through poverty...

The rehearsals at that time took place at the West Cumberland Farmers' building on Monday evenings, and during a conversation with Melvyn Bragg in early 2017, when I mentioned I was writing about his mother teaching the dance, he volunteered the information that he had clear memories of when he was ten or eleven years old being taken along with his mother to West Cumberland Farmers to help at the rehearsals, his mother saying: 'Come on Melvyn, there's a lot of girls tonight so I need you to come along and help'. In the novel his character, Douglas, 'soon picked up the dance and so further established himself by being able to teach it to some of the more tardy girls.'²⁶ He did not, however, give any indication that he could still remember the figures of the dance, although almost all informants seem to have remembered the distinctive processional chorus figure with the lines of dancers doing dipping and diving movements with the right hand, holding hankies or sticks.²⁷ The remaining five simple country dance style figures are: lines cross over, partners passing right and then left hands; right- and left-hand stars; cross over with partner shaking sticks or hankies; right-hand file dance forward with right hand/stick/hankie down then up to shoulder, left-hand file go down first and then up on shoulder; chain in fours, starting by facing partner and giving right hands across the set.

It is natural to assume that the dance from Wigton, and similar dances performed in the carnivals at Workington, Whitehaven, Aspatria, Cockermouth and Blennerhasset, all have their roots in the processional morris of the North-west of England, an assumption reinforced for me as I have a copy of Cumbrian musician John Graham's 1911 book on Lancashire and Cheshire morris dances inscribed on its cover with the name of Wigton National School teacher George Scott.²⁸ Although Scott was indeed a pupil teacher at the school in

²⁶ Bragg, *A Place in England*, p. 113.

²⁷ Throstles Nest Morris only ever performed the dance with sticks, and adapted the processional figure to do four steps forward and four back if required as a stationary dance.

²⁸ John Graham, *Lancashire and Cheshire Morris Dances* (London: Curwen, 1911). Graham was born in Carlisle.

1911, and in the 1920s became its headmaster, the assumption that the dances came from Graham's book has been proved wrong. The headmaster in 1911 was Alexander Macfarlane, an enthusiastic organizer of patriotic musical performances and celebrations, including large-scale town celebrations to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 as well as the celebrations at which the morris dances were performed in 1911. This, it emerges from contemporary local newspaper reports, was not actually a carnival but Wigton's celebration of the coronation of George V on Thursday 22 June.²⁹ According to *The Wigton Advertiser* the previous Saturday, this was to comprise a large number of dancers, bands and floats processing through Wigton's two main streets up to Highmoor Park on the southern edge of the town – the home of businessman and philanthropist Edwin Banks, who made the park grounds freely available for local people to enjoy. The procession was to start at 5 p.m., ending up at Highmoor at 6 p.m., and at 7 p.m. there would be children's sports, maypole dancing and a 'children's display of morris dancing on the platform'.³⁰

The following week's *Wigton Advertiser* described the procession: '... following the band come the "Morris Dancers" – 50 CE School children, prettily attired lads and lasses, who danced their gay and picturesque "promenade" through the streets. Some of the girls wore pink and blue bonnets, and others wreaths of flowers, whilst the boys were in white with red, white and blue sashes, and ribbons and bells. They were undoubtedly the feature of the procession.'³¹

Then, at the entertainment at Highmoor: 'Considerable interest was taken in the attractive dances, on a raised platform, of a number of C.E. Day School children, who had been specially trained under the supervision of Mr I.O. Cowper, Workington, and the Headmaster Mr McFarlane – the morris dancers by Miss K. Thompson. "Rainbow Dances" and "Coronation Cotillion" were the work of Mr Cowper.

²⁹ T.W. Carrick, *History of Wigton, Cumberland, from its Origin to the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Carlisle: Thurnam, 1949), pp. 249-53.

³⁰ 'Wigton and the Coronation: Outline of the Arrangements', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 17 June 1911, p. 5.

³¹ 'The Coronation: The Grand Procession', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 24 June 1911, p. 4.

Miss Gertie McFarlane (Head's daughter) made her debut as accompanist.' The dances listed are: 'Rainbow Dance', 'Morris On', 'Bean Setting', 'Country Gardens', 'Shepherd's Hey', 'Blue-Eyed Stranger', 'Morris Off' and 'Coronation Cotillion', all of which, apart from the 'Rainbow Dance' and 'Coronation Cotillion' had recently been published in Cecil Sharp and Herbert MacIlwaine's *The Morris Book* in 1907. The article then quotes *The Carlisle Journal's* 'Borderer' (Henry Penfold of Brampton) stating that one of the prettiest sights of the whole day had been the Wigton children's display of morris dancing, 'for which they had been specially trained.'³²

On 8 July *The Wigton Advertiser* announced there would be a reprise of 'The Entertainment by the Morris Dancers', at which the morris dancers 'who attracted so much attention on the Coronation Day [...] in the procession and on the ground are to give two of their delightful entertainments at the Market Hall (on an elevated stage) in the afternoon and evening (today)', the use of the stage apparently because they couldn't be seen well on the day because of the crowds but here 'they will be able to do justice to themselves'. The report of the following week detailed two performances, afternoon and evening, prior to which the morris dancers had marched down the main street doing their 'promenade dance', accompanied by the Wigton Territorial Band.³³

There seems to have been an attempt to replicate the success of the 1911 event the following year, with an advertisement placed by Wigton C.E. Schools in the local press in June that a 'Grand Children's Fête in Highmoor Park' would be held on Saturday 6 July. It would commence with a 'Street Promenade' with morris dancers accompanied by the town band 'leaving Market Hill at 4.15 pm prompt', followed by 'Maypole Braiding, Set Morris, National and Display Dances, and Sports'.³⁴ In the remaining years before the First World War, *The Wigton Advertiser* yields no further information on morris dancing. However, it is interesting to note that the first edition of *The*

³² 'Children's Dances', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 24 June 1911, p. 4.

³³ 'The Entertainment by the Morris Dancers', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 8 July 1911, p. 4; 'Report on the Entertainment by the Morris Dancers', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 15 July 1911, p. 4.

³⁴ 'Grand Children's Fête', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 29 June 1912, p. 1.

Wigton Advertiser in January 1912 includes a front page advertisement by Oliver Cowper, evidently attempting to capitalize on his 1911 successes in Wigton by advertising dancing lessons:³⁵

Dancing and Music: Mr Oliver Cowper will resume his elementary and advanced classes for the above Arts in the Assembly Room of the King's Arms Hotel, Wigton on Friday January 12th 1912. The latest Ball Room Novelties at Merit (??) including the various Bostons, One Step, Five Step, Raglan, Minuets, Gavottes, Jigs, Reels, Flings, Hornpipes, Tarantellas etc will be taught in the classes. Fees 10s6d for Class Courses, Juveniles at 5.30; Adults at 7.30 (address given as 11 Christian Street, Workington) ... but not morris dances.

Furthermore, it should be remembered that Oliver Cowper was also teaching dance classes in towns and villages over a wide area of west Cumberland, including Workington, Whitehaven, Cockermouth, Aspatria and Blennerhasset, so it is quite possible that their processional carnival morris dances were choreographed by Cowper. Further research into reports in local newspapers covering these areas may well prove fruitful.



³⁵ 'Dancing and Music', *The Wigton Advertiser*, 6 January 1912, p. 1.

Figure 9: Throstles Nest Morris perform the Wigton Carnival Dance at Milburn in Cumbria, 1979 (Photo: Sue Allan).

Some conclusions

We can characterize morris dancing as a trope of 'Merrie Englandism', a form of national dancing adapted from the stage, adopted by D'Arcy Ferris and absorbed into May Day festivities since the early nineteenth century and popular in patriotic celebratory events of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Whether there exists much civic desire to continue such events, in the form of community carnival processions, is open to debate. In Wigton today, for example, a carnival is still held each June but it is a poor shadow of its former self, with fewer, less elaborate, floats and many fewer people taking part and lining the streets to watch the procession. The carnival has not featured its distinctive morris dancers since at least 1990, although if dance were to be revived then at least the notation for the dance exists: there is video of Throstles Nest Morris performing it, and there are still former Throstles Nest dancers around capable of teaching it. This offers some hope for the morris dance to continue to be performed by the town's children in the future, but only if there is the will to do so, which is by no means certain.

Further research needs to be done, particularly in local newspaper archives, in order to build up a more complete picture of these under-researched Cumbrian dances and the contexts in which they were created, borrowed, performed and sustained. In addition, there is scope for a lot more research nationally into the lives, work and repertoires of the many local dancing masters who plied their trade from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. My own research into folk song in Cumbria highlighted how the involvement of a small number of 'activists' seem to have ignited local interest and taken songs from one place to another – in just such a way, in the field of dance, we have seen in the case of J.T. Southworth and the Mawdesley/Keswick dance and Oliver Cowper and the carnival dances he taught and, most importantly, choreographed.³⁶ As George

³⁶ Susan Margaret Allan, 'Folk Music in Cumbria: A Distinctive Regional Repertoire?' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Lancaster University, 2017).

Revill argues, singers and dancers are not artless carriers of tradition but rather creative musicians moulding repertoire, in what Michael Pickering calls a 'process of localization'.³⁷ As for me, I am, it seems, neither an artless carrier of tradition nor an impartial academic researcher, having adapted children's morris dances for adult dancers and with my own heritage of, and personal involvement in, the Wigton dance no doubt colouring my views and interpretation of the research. Theresa Buckland refers to this as the 'collapsing of boundaries between self and other', and whilst welcoming 'the voice of the native researcher' cautions against automatically supposing that the native researcher necessarily guarantees an authenticity of knowledge in and of itself, and so, dear reader, beware ...³⁸

³⁷ George Revill, 'Vernacular culture and the place of folk music', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6 (2005), 693-706 (p. 700). Michael Pickering and Tony Green, *Everyday Culture: Popular Song and the Vernacular Milieu* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987). p.12.

³⁸ Theresa Buckland, 'Being Traditional: Authentic Selves and Others in Researching Late-Twentieth Century Northwest English Morris Dancing', *Dancing from Past to Present*, ed. by Theresa Buckland (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 199-237 (p.222).