The Histories of the Morris in Britain


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Morris Dancing at Kirtlington Lamb Ale
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**Morris Dancing at Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Heyday, Decline and Revival**

Morris dancing at Kirtlington Lamb Ale was an established tradition in the late seventeenth century. The earliest written reference to the ‘ancient’ Kirtlington Lamb Ale, by Thomas Blount (1679), cites a Lamb Ale (at ‘Kidlington’ – probably an error) with Lord and Lady of the Lamb accompanied by ‘a moresco of men and another of women’, and describes a contest between maids of the village, with hands tied behind them, to catch a fat lamb. Support by the gentry was essential to its continuation, and changing social values are reflected in the patterns of both decline and revival (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Maids with thumbs tied chase the lamb – 1679, as imagined in 1822 (Engraving from John Platts, *The Book of Curiosities: Or, Wonders of the Great World* (London: Caxton Press, [1822])).

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**Heyday**

Kirtlington Lamb Ale flourished as an annual event lasting a week or more during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. An area of land was allocated to fund Lamb Ale, providing for pies, cakes and ale. The sum of £2 12s contributed by the Dashwood family in 1859 can only represent a small proportion of the total costs.

Several writers describe the Lamb Ale in its heyday of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Key features are the Lord and Lady (Figure 2), processions, dancing and feasting accompanied by attendants with weapons. A decorated bower was created on the village green or using a nearby barn. Lamb Ale also featured drinking, and suggestions of sexual licence and an inverted social order – it was a disorderly boisterous affair, including popular sports and pastimes such as fighting, shin-kicking and backswords.

![Figure 2: Lady of the Lamb and morris dancer (Oxford Times 17 February 1912).](image)
The Lady of the Lamb was treated with reverence. Morris dancers led the processions, stopping to perform three morris dances; hand-clapping, with hankies and with sticks. Festivities generally started on Trinity Monday, on Wednesday the lamb was killed and baked, making several pies. Collections by morris tours at major local houses and towns would have been challenging. In the mid nineteenth century 25 rival teams were based within a ten-mile radius. Probably most of these groups would have danced, and collected money at Whitsun – a week before Kirtlington Lamb Ale.²

Figure 3: Bucknell Morris c.1875: Bucknell Morris were regular visitors at Lamb Ale. Eli Rolfe (left) told Cecil Sharp and George Butterworth about dancing at Kirtlington, including ‘Bonny Green’ (see Figure 10) (Kirtlington Morris Archives).

Morris Dance Competition

A morris dance competition at Lamb Ale attracted up to twenty sides. Visiting sides included Headington, Bampton and Bucknell (Figure 3). Headington's foreman said the competition dance was to a variant of the Saturday Night tune, with sticks or hankies. Headington claimed they always won. 3

Decline

Lamb Ale required the sponsorship of the gentry. The Gentleman's Magazine 1830 found morris dancing worthy of financial support and 'pleasing when executed with precision' but tastes and fashions changed. 4 The exuberant, licentious, drunken excess of Lamb Ale lost favour with the respectable classes, though still popular with the lower orders. Special constables were needed. The Dashwood family helped to establish a club feast – run by friendly societies – replacing the old Lamb Ale between 1858 and 1862. 5

Lamb Ale Club Feast

The club feast had a brass band, procession, children in costume, fairground games and stalls and a game of cricket. Morris dancing seems to have been frozen out – no longer welcome among the organized festivities (Figure 4).

Fifty years after the event Thomas Tindall Wildridge described the effect of the change to a club feast in a lecture in 1912. 6

5 Chandler, Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, Chapter 4.
At about 1850 the new note in the nation affected all the simple pleasures. A holiday and a feast ceased once a year to loom so large and all-important as they had done. Therefore, when the village Friendly Society began to expand under the fostering care of Major Dashwood, the “Lamb Ale” ... was
made a secondary consideration. Finally, its initial date (Trinity Monday) was usurped by the Club, and the Club-day diners complained of the noise outside!

Figure 6: Lamb Ale Club Feast – Shepherd Girls in costume (possibly circa 1905) (Kirtlington Morris Archive).

Morris dancing at Kirtlington declined. George James Dew was a Relieving Officer for the Guardians of the Poor who visited Kirtlington regularly in the later nineteenth century. In 1877 his visit coincided with Kirtlington Lamb Ale where he:

...saw ... a morris dance (now almost extinct in these parts) - a number of men dancing to the tune of a whistle and tambourine. Formerly they were dressed in light or white trousers or rather breeches, spotlessly white shirts nicely made for the occasion, a tall box hat on and jingling bells on the legs and wrists, but these at Kirtlington today lacked all such insignia.

The costume described by Dew may be compared with that at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (Figure 7).

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Revival

Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal’s revival brought respectability to morris dancing, but opportunities to record the Kirtlington tradition were missed. They sought to establish a standardized national folk-dance culture. When Tindall Wildridge lectured on Kirtlington Lamb Ale in 1912 he was aware of older people in the village who knew the Kirtlington dances, but he voiced justified concerns that an external teacher would teach only this standard repertoire. In 1922, when William Pearman danced the Kirtlington jig ‘Jockey to the Fair’ for Cecil Sharp he noted the tune, but there is no surviving description of the dance. In 1925 there was morris dancing by the Oxford City Police team and a country dance by the recently formed Kirtlington folk-dance group.

The 1928 diary of Francis Tabor of Oxford University Morris Men gives this account of their visit to Kirtlington:

9 Sharp, Folk Tunes, no. 4925, <https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/4925> [accessed on 7 November 2017].
10 May. Demonstration at Kirtlington of Flamborough, to encourage the local team for the Blenheim festival. We stopped on the way and walked it through in a field, quite well. But the actual dem. was less good; in fact the Kirtlington men who did theirs afterwards were very little worse.

Photographs (and film of massed dancing by 1,500 dancers at Blenheim\textsuperscript{12}) suggest the Kirtlington group around 1930 performed dances from Adderbury and Headington (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Kirtlington revival morris group circa 1930 – possibly dancing an Adderbury hey (Kirtlington Morris Archive).

Oxford University Morris men continued to dance at Kirtlington Lamb Ale into the 1970s (Figure 9). I have not found records of the Kirtlington group after the 1930s.

The Travelling Morrice visited Kirtlington in 1951 and 1956, and several times in the 1960s, though these visits did not coincide with Lamb Ale. They danced Kirtlington ‘Trunkles’ in the village in 1951, and a former Kirtlington dancer demonstrated handclapping and steps for ‘Bonnets So Blue’. In 1956 they met scoutmaster Len Berry

who 23 years later became Squire of the revived Kirtlington side (Figure 10).  

Figure 9: Oxford University Morris Men were regular visitors to Lamb Ale – performing Bledington ‘Glorishears’ 1974 (With thanks to Sam Doolin of OUMM).

Figure 10: Kirtlington Morris dance ‘Bonny Green’ around Bella Timms, Lady of the Lamb 2016 (Kirtlington Morris, with permission of Bella Timms and family).

13 Travelling Morrice, Copies of logbook entries for 1951, and 1956. I am grateful to John Jenner for providing this information.
Appendix: Kirtlington Dances and their Sources

Tindall Wildridge said that the Kirtlington dance sets had fourteen forms. In 1912 he refers to older dancers who knew and could recognise the old Kirtlington dance steps, and was aware of the difference between these and the standard repertoire taught by the Espérance Guild.14

Percy Manning said that the Lamb Ale procession stopped to perform three dances, one hanky, one stick and one handclapping. Living dance informants in the first twenty years of the twentieth century include James Hawtin, Alfred Cato and several members of the Pearman family.15

As late as the 1950s the Travelling Morrice met Bob Rolfe, Bob Simmons, and Mr Nicholson, all of whom had some information on Kirtlington dances. Their log in 1951 suggests that local people would recognise their own tradition.16

There are no surviving details of the dances that William Pearman and James Hawtin taught to Neal and Carey for the Espérance club. Sharp made notes on ‘Trunkles’, with a brief summary of ‘Old Woman Tossed Up’. He describes characteristics of the tradition, steps and figures.17

George Butterworth was sceptical about information from Alfred Cato, as he gave the ‘Shepherds Hey’ tune for the dance ‘Princess Royal’.18

Further reconstructions use the fact that Kirtlington and Bucknell shared dancers and musicians and may have had some common repertoire, and the report that the list of dances was similar to that from

16 Travelling Morrice, Copies of logbook entries for 1951, and 1956
Bampton.\textsuperscript{19} Table 1 lists named dances which have been suggested as performed by the Kirtlington side in the nineteenth century. It lists the provenance of dances with, where available, the names of sources, and of those recording them, a brief description and other dance information.

Table 1: Dances of the Kirtlington morris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dance</th>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Recorded by</th>
<th>Dance description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trunkles</td>
<td>Danced by William Pearman</td>
<td>Cecil Sharp</td>
<td>Corner dance with notes on steps and figures</td>
<td>Reconstructed by George Felton, Lionel Bacon (Travelling Morrice) and Roy Dommett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Woman Tossed up</td>
<td>Possibly James Hawtin, or William Pearman</td>
<td>Cecil Sharp, Mary Neal</td>
<td>Sidestep and half hey</td>
<td>Reconstructed by Paul Davenport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maid of the Mill</td>
<td>Percy Manning</td>
<td>Linked handkerchief dance</td>
<td>Not named by Manning, reconstructed by Paul Davenport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonny Green</td>
<td>Eli Rolfe of Bucknell</td>
<td>Cecil Sharp</td>
<td>Dance around Lady of the Lamb</td>
<td>Reconstructed by Paul Davenport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glorishears</td>
<td>James Hawtin 1910</td>
<td>Mary Neal &amp; Clive Carey</td>
<td>Handclapping dance (like Bampton)</td>
<td>Reconstructed by Paul Davenport using Bucknell tune Room for the Cuckolds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glorishears</td>
<td>James Hawtin 1910</td>
<td>Neal and Carey, Manning</td>
<td>Stick Dance</td>
<td>Reconstructed by Paul Davenport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuckoo's Nest</td>
<td>Roy Dommett Morris notes 1978</td>
<td>Sidestep and half-hay column dance</td>
<td>From Green Oak Morris Men (Paul Davenport)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glorishears</td>
<td>Roy Dommett Morris notes 1978</td>
<td>Leapfrog dance</td>
<td>Described by Dommett - similar to Field Town</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dance</th>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Recorded by</th>
<th>Dance description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lumps of Plum Pudding</td>
<td>Neal and Carey</td>
<td>Double sidestep in column then half hey</td>
<td>Reconstructed by Paul Davenport, drawing on Bucknell Willow Tree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jockey to the Fair</td>
<td>Neal and Carey, George Butterworth, Cecil Sharp</td>
<td>Solo jig – may also have been a set dance</td>
<td>No dance description Tune notated by Sharp danced and played by William Pearman 1922</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess Royal</td>
<td>Alfred Cato, George Butterworth</td>
<td>Handclapping jig possible set dance</td>
<td>No dance description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepherds Hey</td>
<td>Alfred Cato, George Butterworth</td>
<td>Handclapping</td>
<td>Tune given by Cato to Butterworth for Princess Royal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday Night</td>
<td>Noted by Carter for Percy Manning</td>
<td>Competition dance by all sides at Kirtlington with sticks and hankies</td>
<td>Tune variant of Saturday night. No dance description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greensleeves</td>
<td>Thomas Tindall, Wildridge</td>
<td>No dance – old morris tune</td>
<td>Old Morris tune recognised by “old survivors 1912”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnets So Blue</td>
<td>Travelling Morrice logbook 1951 (Rollo Woods)</td>
<td>Handclapping dance – jig/possible set dance</td>
<td>No dance description, different tune to Bucknell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Further Sources not cited in text


Roy Dommett, pages from *Morris Dance Notes 1978* copy in Kirtlington Morris Archive


Kirtlington Morris Archive (a private collection of documents, photographs, and objects started by Len Berry (circa 1978-1990), collated and copied into digital format by Michael Wright (circa 2008-2012), kept at Kirtlington Village Hall, Kirtlington, Oxfordshire)


**Acknowledgements**

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