

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

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).¹

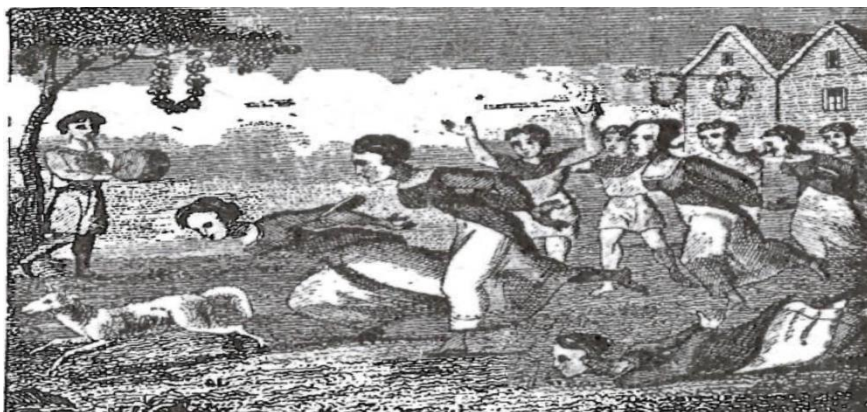


Figure 1: Maids with thumbs tied chase the lamb – 1679, as imagined in 1822 (Engraving from John Platts, *The Book of Curiosities; Or, Wonders of the Great World* (London: Caxton Press, [1822])).

¹ Thomas Blount, *Ancient Tenures of Land and Popular Customs of Manors*, (1679) ed. by W. Carew Hazlitt (London: Reeves and Turner, 1874), p. 181, cited in Keith Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands 1660-1900* (Musical Traditions Records CD Rom MTCD 250, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2002) Chapter 4: Contexts and Performance: 1 Whitsun Ales, A Case Study – Kirtlington Lamb Ale (no page numbering)

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).

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).

² Percy Manning, 'Some Oxfordshire Seasonal Festivals: With Notes on Morris-Dancing in Oxfordshire', *Folk-lore* 8.4 (1897), 307-24; G. A. Rowell, "Notes on Some Old-fashioned English Customs: The Mummers; The Morris-dancers; Whitsun-ales; Lamb-ales", *The Folk-lore Journal* 4.2 (1886): 97-109; Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*, See also for costs of Morris performances Michael Heaney, 'With Scarfes and Garters as you Please', *Folk Music Journal*, 6.4 (1993), 491-505.

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

³ Thomas J. Carter's notes on Headington Quarry, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries MS Top. Oxon d.200, fol. 97; transcribed by Cecil Sharp, Cambridge, Archive of Clare College, Cecil J. Sharp MSS, ACC1987/25, Folk Tunes, no. 2755, <<https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2755B>> [accessed 7 November 2017]; Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*, Chapter 5, Contexts of Performance.

⁴ J.W., 'Scraps from a Notebook', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 100.2 (1830), 23-25 (p. 24).

⁵ Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*, Chapter 4.

⁶ 'Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Report of a Lecture', *Oxford Times* 17 February 1912. I am grateful to Michael Heaney for providing me with a copy of this report.



Figure 4: Lamb Ale Club Feast – Bicester Town Band at the Oxford Arms, 1882. The earliest known photograph of Lamb Ale (Kirtlington Morris Archive).



Figure 5: Lamb Ale Club Feast 1912 – Fairground, Stalls and Brass Band, but no morris dancers (Kirtlington Morris Archive).

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:⁷

...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).

⁷ George James Dew, *Oxfordshire village life : the diaries of George James Dew (1846-1928), relieving officer*, ed. by Pamela Horn (Abingdon: Beacon, 1983), p. 70.



Figure 7: Morris costume (mostly from Kirtlington) sold to Pitt Rivers Museum by Thomas Carter in 1895, PRM 1895.46.1. Reproduced by permission of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

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.⁸ 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.⁹ In 1925 there was morris dancing by the Oxford City Police team and a country dance by the recently formed Kirtlington folk-dance group.¹⁰

The 1928 diary of Francis Tabor of Oxford University Morris Men gives this account of their visit to Kirtlington:¹¹

⁸ 'Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Report of a Lecture'.

⁹ Sharp, *Folk Tunes*, no. 4925, <<https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/4925>> [accessed on 7 November 2017].

¹⁰ Roy Judge, 'The Ancient Men: OUMM and its Background', revised and produced in chronological form by Ian Hall and Gerard Robinson (1993) <<https://oxforduniversitymorris.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/oummhist.pdf>> [accessed 11 October 2017], pp. 5-6; unidentified press cutting 30 July 1925 in Kirtlington Morris Archive.

¹¹ Judge, 'The Ancient Men', p. 25.

10 May. Dem[onstration] 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 Blenheim¹²) 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 ‘Bonnet So Blue’. In 1956 they met scoutmaster Len Berry

¹² *Merrie England Once Again* (British Pathe, 1929), <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/merrie-england-once-again-1>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

who 23 years later became Squire of the revived Kirtlington side (Figure 10).¹³



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 Simmonds, 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

¹⁴ 'Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Report of a Lecture'.

¹⁵ Manning, 'Some Oxfordshire Seasonal Festivals'; Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, A Chronological Gazetteer: Oxfordshire, Kirtlington*

¹⁶ Travelling Morrice, Copies of logbook entries for 1951, and 1956

¹⁷ Mary Neal, 'Miss Neal's Notes and Experiences [on Morris Dancing]'. London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Clive Carey Collection, CC/2/235

<<https://www.vwml.org/record/CC/2/325>> [accessed 13 November 2017]; Sharp, *Folk Tunes*, no. 4926, <<https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/4926>> and no. 4931, <<https://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/4931>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

¹⁸ George Butterworth, 'George Butterworth's Diary of Morris Dance Hunting', ed by Russell Wortley and Michael Dawney, *Folk Music Journal*, 3.3 (1977), 193-207 (pp. 195-96).

Bampton.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

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

¹⁹ Paul Davenport, *Archaeology of a Tradition: The Revival of the Kirtlington Morris* (Morbrough: South Riding Network Publishing, 1998), p. 10.

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

Further Sources not cited in text

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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)

Mary Neal, *The Esperance Morris Book, Part 2* (London: Curwen, 1910) <<http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/esperance-morris-1/esperance-morris-1.html>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

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