

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

‘Destruction not Inscription’: How a Pioneering Revival Side Developed

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Roy Fenton

‘Destruction not Inscription’: How a Pioneering Revival Side Developed

This paper considers the theory and practice behind the formation in 1926 of Greensleeves Morris Men, one of the earliest revival sides and the oldest surviving morris club in London (Figure 1). It explores how this club, now in its 91st year, has built on these foundations, and how it has adapted as attitudes to the morris have changed.



Figure 1: One of the earliest photos of Greensleeves, dancing 'Brighton Camp' during a competition at Lilford Hall, Northhamptonshire in July 1927. Greensleeves' kit has changed in the succeeding 90 years, but not the clubs dislike of dancing on grass (Greensleeves Archives).

‘Unpretentious Individuals’

Greensleeves Morris Men was formed in 1926 by men who had attended the classes started by Cecil Sharp at the English Folk Dance Society. To quote its first squire, the idea was that ‘a really good team can be built up of unpretentious individuals if they practise constant-

ly and regularly together'.¹ The spoonerized motto 'Destruction not Inscription' reflected Greensleeves' approach to tuition. There was no foreman originally, although a 'sergeant major' was appointed, presumably to maintain order.²



Figure 2: 'Green sleeves' evident as young members dance North Skelton (Photo: Dave Hayes).

¹ Extract from a letter of 8 June 1926 from Greensleeves' founder to a prospective member, Greensleeves' Log, vol. 1.

² Greensleeves Log, vol. 1.

Greensleeves' ethos is still to dance as well as possible, and – especially – as a side. Most newcomers to the club have no previous experience of the morris, although there has been a small, regular influx of men from other sides. All recruits serve an apprenticeship and, when the club as a whole agrees that they are ready, they 'dance in' with a jig. They then become full members with voting rights and are awarded their 'green sleeves', or armbands in recognition (Figure 2).

Accomplishment and Entertainment

Alongside dancing to a good standard is the important issue of offering entertainment, especially when the typical 'lay' audience can be expected to distinguish only between the stick and the handkerchief dance. This problem has exercised successive squires, and arguably the trend here may run contrary to the aim of a polished display of morris. Greensleeves' repertoire once majored on just two Cotswold traditions, Fieldtown and Sherborne, with the aim of excelling at both.

However, today a show may well include dances from half a dozen traditions. Some of the more 'interesting' dances from other villages have joined the repertoire, including Lichfield stick dances, 'Brighton Camp' from Eynsham, 'Shooting' and 'Jockey to the Fair' from Brackley. By giving a change of pace, North Skelton longsword also proves very effective at reviving an audience's interest. And the dance that generates most positive comment from the audience started out a long way back as a border dance, Greensleeves claiming that it is now so different from the Upton-on-Severn Stick Dance as collected that it deserves a new name, and call it 'Twin Sisters' after its tune (Figure 3).



Figure 3: 'Twin Sisters' on Boxing Day. Stepping and figures from the Upton tradition (Photo: Dave Hayes).

In this expansion of repertoire, Greensleeves are being true to their roots. Early logs record at least ten Cotswold and as many longsword and rapper traditions being performed, whilst North-west has also been danced out. There is even a precedent for the mumming play which is updated and performed with gusto at each year's end (Figure 4).

Gender: The Last Bastion?

Early practices were sometimes adjourned for country dancing with an associated women's side, Lumps of Plum Pudding, and the two teams often performed together. And Greensleeves' earliest musician was a Mrs Matthews, who sometimes joined the practice set to make up numbers. Contrast this with what members joining in the 1970s encountered: reluctance and even refusal to dance when a female side was part of the same show. It has to be said that this ethos was at the time characteristic of a number of clubs belonging to the Morris Ring, of which Greensleeves were founder members.



Figure 4: 'Although he lies there in a stupor, it's all OK, 'cos he's in BUPA'. Greensleeves' updating of the traditional mummers' play (Photo: Dave Hayes).

Greensleeves remains a men's side. However, there is no longer any question about not dancing with female or mixed sides; indeed any team as long as they respect the morris. Several men also dance in mixed teams, and the club has supported days of dance organized jointly by the Morris Ring, the Morris Federation and Open Morris.

From Albert Hall to Albert Arms

Early logs suggest that Greensleeves' performances were essentially exhibitions, often at festivals including the annual EFDS(S) event in the Albert Hall and – something unknown in Cotswold circles today – competitions (Figures 5 and 6).

GREENSLEEVES.

Miss Karpeles' criticisms on competition dances, December 2nd,
1926.

"ROOM FOR THE CUCKOO".

"That was a really fine sturdy performance. I particularly liked the quiet hand movements - they gave one a real sense of the ceremonial underlying the dance."

"JOCKIE TO THE FAIR" (Brackley).

"That was a really thrilling performance. I felt it was a great moment. That dance was a living thing, not just something which had been taught. I got from that dance something of the feeling that one gets from seeing traditional morris. In fact I felt those six men might have been the sons of the two old men I saw dance this dance."

Figure 5: Maud Karpeles's enthusiastic comments on Greensleeves' dances in a competition to select sides for the EFDS's All England Festival at the Albert Hall on 31 December 1926. Music was provided by Mrs Matthews and Miss Avril, the former an honorary member of Greensleeves (Greensleeves' Log, vol. 1).

Performances only gradually took on the pattern they have now with dancing in public places and especially outside pubs. Although Greensleeves continue to perform with other clubs, the objective is to attract, retain and entertain an audience, and this is best achieved with a tight, considered show, starting at the advertised time and not being unduly prolonged. 'Leave 'em wanting more' is the aim.



Figure 6: 'Brighton Camp' at the EFDSS event at the Albert Hall in 1965 (Greensleeves Archives).

Where is the Club Now?

Like most clubs, Greensleeves face challenges about recruiting and retaining dancers, especially younger ones. Experienced has suggested that the answer is the same as it has been for the past nine decades: dance well, be welcoming to newcomers, but above all be seen to enjoy ourselves. Modesty forbids the author to make claims for Greensleeves, but most of its peers in the morris world would probably agree that Greensleeves has been true to its founders' precepts (Figure 7).



Figure 7: With the late Sir Terry Wogan after performing together for Comic Relief 2015 (Photo: Roy Fenton).

Sources and Acknowledgements

Dr Roy Fenton has been a full member of Greensleeves for over 35 years, has served a term as its squire, has organized its annual week-ends of dance and kept its logs for a number of years. Greensleeves' almost continuous set of logs and scrapbooks is the major source for

the history of the club, and the author would like to thank other keepers of logs and scrapbooks for their efforts, particularly former squire Alan Jeffries and current incumbent David Legg for their help. Needless to say, the opinions expressed herein are entirely those of the author.