# THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

Papers from a conference held at Cecil Sharp House, London, 25 - 26 March 2017, organized in partnership by Historical Dance Society with English Folk Dance and Song Society and The Morris Ring, The Morris Federation and Open Morris.

Edited by Michael Heaney

**How to Read *The History of Morris Dancing***

John Forrest

pp. 7-16

**English Folk Dance and Song Society & Historical Dance Society**

**London 2018**

English Folk Dance and Song Society
Cecil Sharp House
2 Regent's Park Road
London NW1 7AY

Historical Dance Society
3 & 5 King Street
Brighouse
West Yorkshire HD6 1NX



ISBN 978-0-85418-218-3 (EFDSS)
ISBN 978-0-9540988-3-4 (HDS)

Website for this book: www.vwml.org/hom

Cover picture: Smith, W.A., ca. 1908. The Ilmington morris dancers [photograph]. Photograph collection, acc. 465. London: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

# Contents

## The Early Revival



## The Later Revival

## Women in Morris



## Material Culture

John Forrest

# How to Read *The History of Morris Dancing*

Scholars are influenced by the scholarship (and worldview) of their time. I am. We all are. Speculations about the origins of morris dancing that were prevalent for most of the twentieth century grew out of nineteenth-century social anthropology. We've moved on in anthropology but certain cherished notions from the nineteenth century won't die even though they have zero support in primary sources. The idea that morris dancing is some ghost of a fertility ritual of some vaguely perceived pagan past is, for whatever reason, attractive and won't go away regardless of the utter lack of evidence. Several points trouble me here. At the outset, there is the bogus notion of the 'origins' of any custom. There are certainly some specific events that spawned annual celebrations: Bonfire Night is an excellent example. We 'Remember, Remember the Fifth of November' for good, clear historical reasons. But so many other customs – like having a sense of dread on Friday the 13th – are very vague to begin with and are unlikely to have a single point of origin. Morris dancing fits in the latter category, not the former. Historical research must look at the dance in different time periods and in different social contexts instead of focusing on one founding moment (or custom) – which does not exist. That was my aim with *The History of Morris Dancing*,[1] but before I could get to that point I needed a solid database of primary sources to work with.

The great flaw of nineteenth- and twentieth-century speculations about the history of morris dancing was that they relied on very limited data *and* that scholars began with a set of preconceived notions and worked back from them to interpret the data available: terrible methodology. The prevailing belief in the nineteenth century, touted by the likes of E.B. Tylor and James George Frazer, was that folk customs were 'survivals' into modern times of ancient, possibly prehis-

[1] John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing (1458-1750)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1999).

toric, ritual.[2] They were working on the belief that all societies evolve according to certain general evolutionary principles and that bits of past epochs survive; just as the appendix survived in human evolution – a useless remnant of something that was once functional (prevailing medical/evolutionary theory at the time). According to one version of this theory, cultures evolve in their basic worldview from magic through religion to science, but traces of magic remain into the modern (scientific) era.[3] Hence, by these lights, morris dancing is the cultural equivalent of the human appendix, a once thriving component of ancient magical rituals that ensured an abundant harvest through sympathetic magic – leaping high to encourage tall growth of crops and shaking handkerchiefs and bells to ward off evil spirits. The magical rituals are gone but the leaping and bells remain. Nice try, no cigar. Historical sources beg to differ. There is zero historical evidence – none – that such rituals ever existed, nor that dances evolved from them over time. Unfortunately, when cherished (but false) beliefs butt up against historical facts, the false beliefs have a bad habit of winning because they feel good. Cecil Sharp held the view that morris was a survival of pagan ritual – following the anthropology of his day – and even as late as the 1970s semi-respectable academic publications touted it, even though scholars had mostly moved on to more productive speculations.[4]

Let's wind the clock back to see how I came to the position I now hold. I began dancing in 1967 with the Datchet Morris Men, at that time a generic Ring side, and then in 1970 I joined the Oxford University Morris Men (OUMM) when I went to Oxford as an undergraduate. From the Datchet men I learned the usual story – morris was the survival of pagan rituals, etc., etc., but I wasn't satisfied. I bought all of Sharp's books available and dug into the history as best I could. But there wasn't much there. Sharp's books are primarily

[2] E.B. Tylor, Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871) 1:70-72; James George Frazer, The Golden Bough, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1906 – 1915).
[3] Margaret T. Hodgen, 'The Doctrine of Survivals: The History of an Idea', *American Anthropologist* 33 (1931), 307–24.
[4] Alan Brody, The English Mummers and their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

dance manuals, not serious historical scholarship. It wasn't until I got to Oxford that things opened up.

First of all, OUMM did many, many more dances than Datchet, and so I got introduced to a vastly broader vision of what morris was. Furthermore, I was able to go around to all the villages which up to that point had just been names – Bledington, Bucknell, Kirtlington, Bampton, Headington. In my final year as an undergraduate I had that sudden flash of insight that comes once in a while. My main library was the Bodleian where I toiled over my weekly essays. One day, perhaps more bored than usual as I paged through some text or other, I realized that the Bodleian was a legal deposit library (that is, a library where publishers are required to send a copy of all printed materials), so, theoretically, everything printed on the history of morris dancing should be there. Actually, it's not as simple as that, but it was a good start. I abandoned my 'studies' and headed for the index room.

Figuring out the indexing system of the Bodleian's holdings in the 1970s was a joy in itself. Books in the closed stacks were listed by author's last name only, pasted on squares of paper into large volumes in the index room. Computer-based indexing was a long way in the future. Even photocopying was difficult and very expensive, so most of my copying I did by hand. It took time, but I collected all kinds of references, and began my own archive which I knew intimately because I had hand copied it. I did that until 1975 when I left Oxford and went to the University of North Carolina (UNC) for postgraduate studies. There I turned my growing archive into my master's thesis which eventually got published as *Morris and Matachin* which had multiple purposes, one of which was to point out that the New World matachines dance is related (in some way or other) to certain types of morris dancing.[5] My thesis director at UNC, Dan Patterson, suggested that I follow the lead of Joann Kealiinohomoku, who worked on the anthropology of dance, and instead of just comparing one dance type to another heuristically, he advised that I

[5] John Forrest, *Morris and Matachin: A Study in Comparative Choreography* (Sheffield: Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1984).

should construct a taxonomic classification system for organizing my sources.[6] So, I ordered each source under such headings as venue, costume, characters, movements, accoutrements, and the like. That system made comparing sources much more precise.

Fast forward to the late 1980s. As I continued my work on my archive, which had grown to include European and worldwide data, I met Keith Chandler, who, at the time, was working on the social history of morris dancing in the South Midlands. He then introduced me to Mike Heaney and the three of us made some decisions about how we should divide our time and resources so as not to duplicate each other's work. Keith was the one who suggested that Mike and I work together on the older materials because our strengths lay there, while Keith would focus on South Midland archives. It was Keith who suggested 1750 as the dividing point.

It took some time for Mike and me to merge our data, especially since we were both still very active in finding new sources. Our idea was to produce a definitive indexed archive of all known sources, which we eventually published jointly as *Annals of Early Morris*.[7] We worked together on both sides of the Atlantic using computer resources that would be laughable nowadays. Starting with my model from *Morris and Matachin* we devised a much more comprehensive database model to use for coding the information. I bow to Mike's expertise in this realm. As a librarian – more like information analyst – he was pivotal in making sure our initial database model was rational and comprehensive. It was broken into categories such as Setting, Dance Type, Dance Elements, Accompaniment, Costume, and so forth, with each category broken into specific sub-categories. I believe there were 128 sub-categories, the maximum allowed by dBase III which is what we were using back then.

There was no such thing as Windows in those days. My software, dBase III, was a DOS-based program that I had to code by hand using a specialized programming language. While I was building the data-

[6] Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, 'Theory and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance' (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1976).
[7] Michael Heaney and John Forrest, *Annals of Early Morris* (Sheffield, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language in association with the Morris Ring, 1991).

base structure, Mike collated the data we had collected into a single file and hand entered it on his computer. When completed, he sent the text file to me which I then entered into the database. I won't be modest here; this was excruciatingly difficult work for both of us. I had to use two computers side by side, with Mike's text on one, and the dBase files on the other. I read the text on one machine, and coded on the other. Switching between applications on the same computer was a thing of the future.

As *Annals* was in its finishing stages, I went back to my dBase files for more of the analysis which Mike and I had done a little of. Jointly we produced 'Charting Early Morris (1450-1750)' which appeared in *Folk Music Journal* in 1991.[8] We discussed our general findings from the archive and I made a series of maps at 30-year intervals showing the distribution of morris events. After we had finished our joint work I applied many more analytic tools from my bag of tricks as an anthropologist. What I want to emphasise most ardently is that if you want to come up with conclusions that are remotely plausible you have to be both comprehensive and rigorous.

You have to consult *The History of Morris Dancing* for the full story of what I tried to achieve. Here I'll just point in the direction of three obvious analytic tools: mapping, seriation, and graphing. My first step, which I never publicized and which is now lost because of all my moves plus the changes in computer technology, was to program an animated map using compiled BASIC that plotted the appearance of morris events year by year from 1466 to 1750. It's very helpful to have a visual display of where and when morris appeared over a long period. You do *not* see the familiar clustering of North-west morris in Lancashire and Cheshire, Border morris in Herefordshire, Worcestershire, and Shropshire, and South Midland morris (or Cotswold morris) in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. That regional grouping did not emerge until the eighteenth century. Before that time the picture was much more fluid.

[8] John Forrest and Michael Heaney, 'Charting Early Morris (1450-1750)', *Folk Music Journal,* 6.2 (1991), 169-16.

What you do find is a general spreading outward across the country (with no special focal points) from around 1500 until around 1630, followed by a sharp period of decline to about 1690, and then a new burst of enthusiasm in the early eighteenth century centred mostly on the South Midlands (Figure 1).

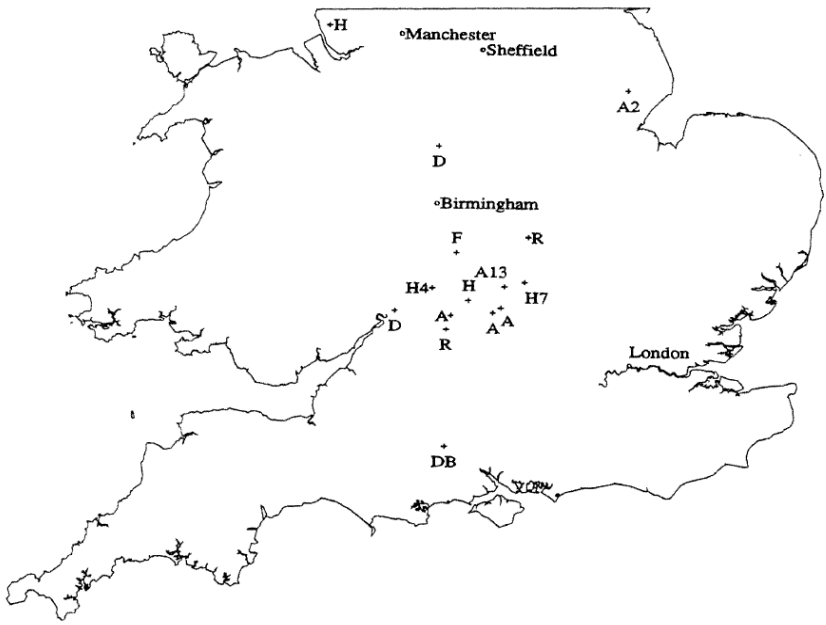


Figure 1: Morris events 1721-1750 (A=domestic records; B=guild records D= non-fiction narrative F=local records; H=personal records; R=non-theatrical advertisements; with number where >1).

Simple plotting of location is not the only part of the story, however. It helps to know other things about these events: Who sponsored them? What kinds of venue did they take place in? and so forth. Here seriation is very helpful.

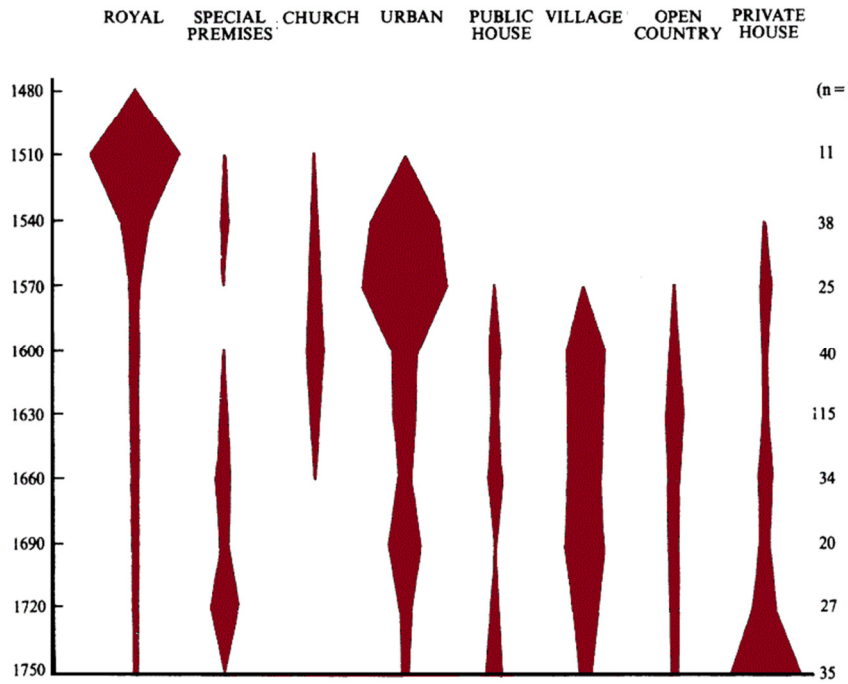


Figure 2: Seriation of venue.

I don't have space to explain the details of seriation as a technique.[9] It is a method that originates in archaeology which I adapted for my own data. Figure 2 shows a seriation graph of morris dance venues over time.

What should be evident is that over time morris events shifted from royal courts at the outset to urban streets to church property and finally to various rural locations. Seriation of financial support confirms this progression (Figure3).

The sources in the database also confirm that the dances performed in these different venues and different time periods were radically different: they bore virtually no resemblance to one another. Bells are about the only common denominator. What we know now as morris would be completely unrecognisable to a sixteenth-century audience. This fact alone puts paid to the idea that nineteenth- and

[9] See James Deetz, *Invitation to Archeology* (New York: Natural History Press, 1967).

twentieth-century morris is a survival of ancient practices. It has been a constantly evolving affair.

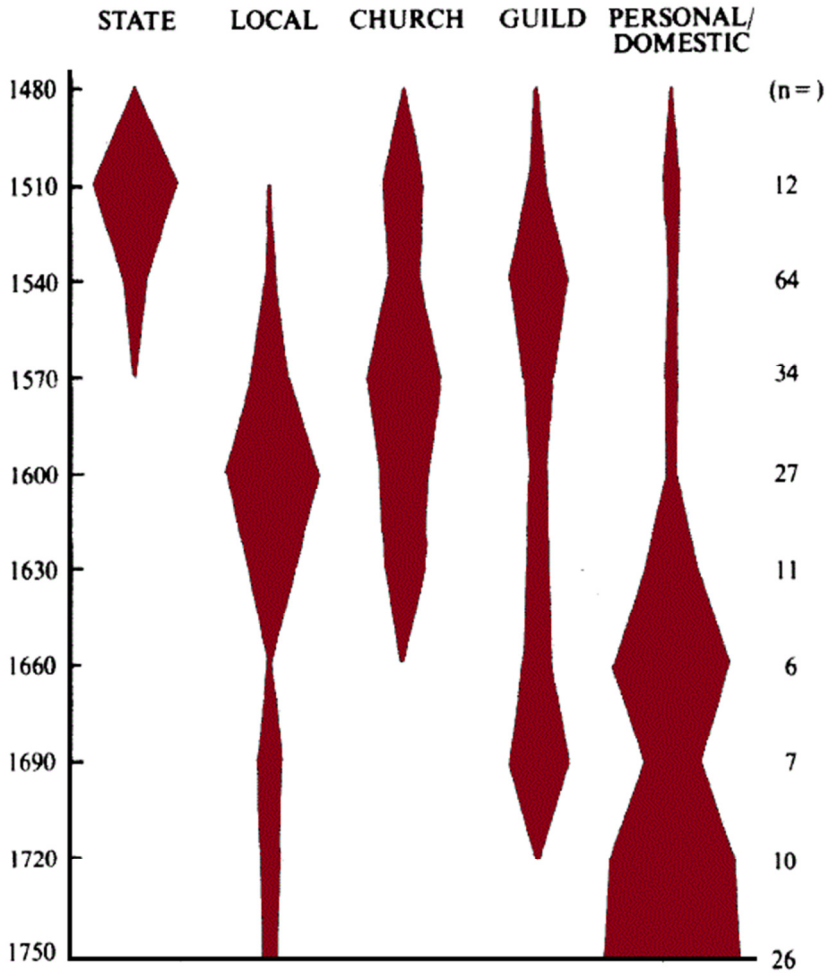


Figure 3: Seriation of financial support.

To finish I'll draw a few simple conclusions for you in terms of current practice. The idea that morris is the survival of ancient ritual, has no historical support yet it clings on and has pushed the practice and evolution of the dance in certain directions in the twentieth century. I'll begin by saying that I don't care what contemporary dancers believe or what they do. It's not my intent to influence current practices. But the endless dissemination of false history does irk me.

Nowadays hundreds of sides worldwide get up before dawn on May 1st and 'dance the sun up' as it is usually described. Many (perhaps most) believe that this is an ancient tradition. It is not. I'm sorry to say that I had a small hand in the spread of this modern custom. In the 1950s, Oxford University Morris Men reconstituted after the war years. OUMM were actually founder members of the Morris Ring, but the new dancers were such novices that they had no idea of the history of the morris in Oxford including that of OUMM. In fact they applied to be members of the Ring and were surprised to discover that they already were.

Roy Judge, one of the members of the 1950s OUMM, eventually wrote the definitive history of the morris revival in Oxford, which started in the early years of the twentieth century. Judge published some of his extensive findings[10] but a good many of his notes are still in manuscript form within OUMM. On May Morning in those days the Magdalen College choir used to sing a hymn to the dawn from the top of the college tower, as they had done for hundreds of years, and the event was well attended by college students. In 1923, OUMM began a custom of processing up the High Street after the choir had finished singing, along with dancers from the Oxford branch of EFDS. When OUMM reconstituted in the 1950s they expanded the May Morning festivities by including a Jack-in-the-Green which had been a town custom of local chimney sweeps until the 1920s, and danced at numerous sites around town before breakfast.

The event steadily grew in popularity and pretty soon OUMM was inviting other sides to join in – including Oxford City, Headington, Abingdon, and Bampton. From there it snowballed but was still just an Oxford event. As the morris revival gained steam in the 1960s more and more sides angled for an invitation. In 1972 when I was leading a tour of Buckinghamshire with the Ancient Men (OUMM's touring side), I added in Roger Cartwright from the Pinewoods Men in Massachusetts, who was over for a visit, because we were short of men and he had a car. Next year when I was squire I invited Roger to

[10] Roy Judge, 'A Branch of May', *Folk Music Journal* 2.2 (1971) 91-95; 'May Morning and Magdalen College, Oxford', *Folklore*, 97.1 (1986), 15-40 (pp. 33-34).

May Morning to dance with OUMM, and he took the idea back to the United States. He encouraged sides in the Boston area to do the same and the custom took off. Now it is pretty nigh universal. There is some historical precedent for dancing on May 1st but none for dancing at dawn. Yet the practice is here to stay because it fits in with the false conception that morris is an ancient fertility ritual (and that somehow May Day is a holdover from pagan times).

The same can be said for the rigidity with which some branches of the morris revival insist that dancing be performed by men only. Certainly men dominated in the past (although there have always been women participants), but this is not because of some ancient ritual tradition but because for many centuries it was not considered appropriate for women to perform in public. We all know, for example, that in Shakespeare's day all parts, male and female, were acted on stage by men or boys. Women were forbidden. Modern recreations of the old theatre aside, I don't hear any great hue and cry for restricting acting on stage to men only – not even for classic Shakespeare – just because that's how it always was.

This raises my final question. What is it that dancers think they are doing nowadays when they perform in public? Having fun, no doubt – but what else? Do they think they are upholding traditions that are centuries old? Are they trying to link the performances to other traditions that they believe are equally old? How does this perspective affect how they interpret dances as they dance (and invent new ones)?