

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

Morris Dancers in the Political and Civic Process

Michael Heaney

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Michael Heaney

Morris Dancers in the Political and Civic Process

As my starting off point I want to refer you to two excellent books, Ronald Hutton's *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*¹ and David Underdown's *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*.² These show how morris and maypoles became focal points for defining loyalties in the decades leading up to the Civil War and Commonwealth.

The low point came perhaps in 1654, during the Commonwealth, with the *Ordinance for ejecting scandalous, ignorant & insufficient schoolmasters*, passed on 28 August. This provided that:³

such Ministers and Schoolmasters shall be deemed and accounted scandalous in their Lives and Conversations, as shall be proved guilty of ... or do incourage and countenance by word or practice any Whitson-Ales, Wakes, Morris-dances, May-poles, Stage-plays, or suchlike Licentious practices, by which men are encouraged in a loose and prophane Conversation...

With the Restoration there was a deliberate policy to encourage the revival of such customs. As King Charles II made his triumphant progress to reclaim his kingdom, on 29 May 1660:⁴

he set forth from Rochester in his coach; but afterwards took horse on the farther side of Blackheath: on which spacious plain he found divers great and eminent troops of horse, in a most splendid and glorious equipage; and a kind of rural triumph, expressed by the country swains,

¹ Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

² David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

³ 'An Ordinance for Ejecting Scandalous, Ignorant and Insufficient Ministers and Schoolmasters,' in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. By C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait, 3 vols, (London: H.M.S.O., 1911), II, 968-90 (p.977).

⁴ 'England's Joy, or, A Relation of the Most Remarkable Passages, from His Majesty's arrival at Dover, to his entrance at Whitehall,' in *An English Garner: Stuart tracts 1603-1693*, with an introduction by C.H. Firth (Westminster: Constable, 1903), pp.425-30 (p.428)

in a morrice dance with the old music of taber and pipe; which was performed with all agility and cheerfulness imaginable.

But something rather odd happened. I'll adduce two pieces of evidence in support of that. The first is the Maypole in the Strand, erected the following year in celebration of the Restoration. One exuberant report described it thus:⁵

The Maypole then being joynted together, and hoopt about with bands of Iron, the Crown and Vane with the Kings Armes richly gilded, was placed on the head of it, a large top like a Belcony was about the middle of it. This being done, the Trumpets did sound, and in four hours space it was advanced upright, after which being established in the ground, six Drums did beat, and the Trumpets did sound again, great shouts and acclamations the people gave, that it did ring throughout all the whole Strand, after that came a Morice Dance finely deckt, with purple Scarfs, in their half-shirts, with a Taber and Pipe the antient Musick, and Danced round about the Maypole, after that Danced the rounds of their Liberty.

On the other hand, a diarist – Thomas Rugg – who does not seem to have an axe to grind described it rather differently:⁶

Ap. 1661. A May pole in the Strond set up. ... Under the new May pole in the Strand, 41 yards high, in the balconie that was made about on storie high, were wine, musick, and under it a knot of morris dancers, the worst that ever were.

Rugg is not anti-morris, he is just disparaging about the quality of the dancing and so he is unenthusiastic about it. Morris dancing is to be scorned rather than railed against.

⁵ *The Citie's Loyalty Display'd* (London, 1661), p.4.

⁶ Thomas Rugg, *The Diurnal of Thomas Rugg 1659-1661*, edited by William L. Sachse (London: Royal Historical Society, 1961), p.175.

The second piece of evidence comes from the Oxford chronicler Anthony Wood. In his entry for 1660 – so again, at the Restoration – he writes:⁷

This Holy Thursday [this dates it to 31 May, two days after the dancers in King Charles's procession] the people of Oxon were soe violent for Maypoles in opposition to the Puritans that there was numbred 12 Maypoles besides 3 or 4 morrises, etc. But no opposition appearing afterwards, the rabble flagged in their zeal; and seldom after above 1 or 2 in a year.

The rabble and everyone else flagged in their zeal and morris dancing ceased being a badge of political allegiance. It engendered indifference instead of passion, and sank into rural obscurity before emerging in the nineteenth century in the memories of old dancers collected by antiquaries at the end of that century.

Except, of course, it didn't.

There are two arenas in which morris dancers continued to be used, and to appear, in public events. The first was in civic celebrations; and the second, parliamentary elections. In 1685 a new city charter was granted to the city of Bath by James II. A total of £15 5s. was paid for the celebration including trumpets, ringing and morris dancers; and for their meat, drink, wine, beer, &c.; 'when the charter was brought home'. Of this the dancers themselves received 5s.⁸

A generation later, in 1727, the city of Bath celebrated the King's birthday, described thus:⁹

At four a Clock in the Morning the Bells struck out, a Bonfire was lighted, and a whole Ox set a roasting, with a Quantity of Liquor, and Huzza's to his Majesty's Health: At six the Drums beat the young Gentlemen Voluntiers to Arms; by eight an hundred and sixty assembled themselves together at the Colonel's House; by ten they were ready to march, but first

⁷ Anthony Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, 1632-1695*, described by himself, collected from his diaries and other papers by Andrew Clark, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891-1900), I, 317.

⁸ 'Municipal Feasting', *The Bath Chronicle* 8 November 1866, p.7.

⁹ 'London, November 11', *The Country Journal, or, The Craftsman* 11 November 1727, p.2

*every Man drank a Glass of Brandy to his Majesty's Health,,,
By twelve they marched thro' the best part of the Town, with
two Sword Bearers, a set of Morris Dancers, and Martial Mu-
sick before them; then came to the Market Place, where they
drew up in order for Fire...*

Between these two events we have an account of proposals to celebrate, on 11 April 1698, King William III's safe return at the conclusion of the Nine Years' War. This was 'A letter to the loyal apprentices in and about London and Westminster, for their making of a noble, extraordinary, rejoycing possession', and promised a band of music over 400 strong, distinctive liveries for each company of apprentices, champions in armour and a personification of Britannia in a procession of chariots. Moreover, 'There is to be Morris-Dancers and Anticks, with other strange Rarities'.¹⁰

At the other end of our period under review we get to 1802 and Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. This was again a celebration of peace after war:¹¹

On Friday last peace was formally proclaimed in this town, by the Corporation walking in procession fro the Guildhall to the Market Cross, where the Town Clerk read his Majesty's Proclamation, and repeated the same in the Butter Market, and on Angel Hill. – They were preceded by the Volunteer Corps, and a band of music playing the favourite airs of God save the King and Rule Britannia, amidst the shouts of a joyful people. – A female was carried round the town, personating the Goddess of Peace, and several emblematical representations of the woollen manufactory, with a Jack of the Green, and morris-dancers, accompanied the procession.

¹⁰ Anthony Stampe, *A Letter to the Loyal Apprentices in and about London and Westminster, for their Making of a Noble, Extraordinary, Rejoycing Possession on Monday the Eleventh of April, 1698: Being His Majesties Coronation Day, in Congratulation of His Majestys Safe Return Home; and for the Honourable, Firm, and Lasting Peace*. London: E. Whitlock, 31 December 1697.

¹¹ 'Bury, May 12, 1802', *The Bury and Norwich Post: Or, Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, and Cambridge Advertiser*, 12 May 12 1802, p.2.

Though we have comparatively few records, it is not surprising that these should be within urban settings, as that is where the civic structure is in place to support such events. Where livery companies survived, as with the Tailors' Guild at Salisbury, it was natural for them to participate in civic events, so in 1746 in celebration of the defeat of the Jacobite rising at Culloden,¹²

It is agreed that the Giant, Hobnob and Morris Dancers be made use of, on the next general thanksgiving day, and that a new banner and two new scarves be bought, to be worn as occasion shall offer, and this Corporation may direct; and that the same be bought by direction of the Wardens and the Chamberlain.

As the Salisbury and Winchester Journal reported:¹³

To divert the populace, the "Giant" (a colossal figure, near 25 feet high) with Hobnob, his renowned 'squire, encircled with morris dancers, went up and down the town.

In 1784 at the celebration of the peace after the American War of Independence morris dancers again accompanied the Salisbury Giant.¹⁴

In all of these instances the community is coming together in celebration and it's perfectly obvious that morris dancers are still very much in the public eye; but similar civil processions took place in connection with parliamentary events. At Abingdon in 1722:¹⁵

On Tuesday last Robert Hucks, Esq; our Representative in Parliament, being lately return'd from his travels, came to this Place: At Dorchester he was met by a considerable body of Horse from Wallingford...from thence they proceeded to Clifton, near which Place they were met by a Party of 300 Horse from this Town, with all the Town Musick and Drums,

¹² Charles Haskins, *The Ancient Trade Guilds and Companies of Salisbury* (Salisbury: Journal Office, 1912), p. 203.

¹³ *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 13 October 1746.

¹⁴ Sarum Morris, 'Giant and Hob-Nob'

<<http://www.sarummorris.co.uk/New%20Giant%20and%20Hobnob.htm>> [accessed 21 October 2017].

¹⁵ 'Abingdon, Oct. 11', *Daily Post*, 13 October 1722, p.1. Jameson Wooders also refers to this report in his chapter in this volume.

and two Colours belonging to this Corporation; this Body was drawn up in a very regular and handsome Manner on the Heath, where having join'd the other, they march'd in very good Order to this Town, preceded by the Servants and Musick; all the Street were strew'd with Rushes and Flowers, the Houses cover'd with Garlands and Greens, the Windows crowded with People, the Morrice-Dancers and several young Maids dress'd in White with Garlands of Flowers, met them at the Foot of the Bridge, and went before them thro' the Town, to the House of Clement Sexton, Esq; the later Mayor; all the Bells in the Town ringing; where all the Company were handsomely and splendid entertain'd at Dinner, the Town Musick playing all the Time, and several Barrels of Strong Beer were given to the Populace in the Market-Place.

In Bury St Edmunds in 1807:¹⁶

The election of two Representatives for this Borough came on at the Guildhall on Friday morning last, when after the usual formalities, Lord Charles Fitzroy and Lord Templetown, (the two late Members) were respectively nominated, and unanimously chosen; after which they each returned thanks, in concise speeches, for the honour conferred upon them, and were chaired round the town, (preceded by a garland and morris-dancers) amidst the loudest plaudits of the populace; among whom 12 barrels of beer were given away in different parts of the town.

It is not coincidental that a distribution of beer is also a feature of both these processions! They are all about the bestowing of largesse on the populace. In both of these cases the celebrations were after the event. But dancers also appear in the run up to elections. The same Bury St Edmunds newspaper reported 14 years later in 1821:¹⁷

Died. ...

¹⁶ 'Bury, May 13, 1807', *The Bury and Norwich Post: Or, Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, and Cambridge Advertiser*, 13 May 1807, p.2

¹⁷ 'Died', *The Bury and Norwich Post: Or, Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, and Cambridge Advertiser*, 26 December 1821, p.2.

On Friday last [21 December],... aged 63, William Lomax, who had been for 36 years grave-digger, in this town, and still longer, we believe, morris-dancer at the Borough elections.

Although these records point to a well established and continuing practice, Bury St Edmunds is not normally seen as an area in which morris dancing remained endemic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Cotswolds, however, are such an area and it is not surprising to find references from there. At the election rally held at Woodstock on 23 August 1727 (one week before the actual election) morris dancers were paid £1 1s.¹⁸

In 1727 Oxfordshire and the candidate hiring the dancers were Tory. One of the most bitterly fought elections of the eighteenth century was the Oxfordshire election of 1753-54, when Sir Edward Turner and Lord Parker, supported by the Duke of Marlborough and Lords Macclesfield and Harcourt, stood this time on the new or Whig interest, against the Tories, Lord Wenman and Sir James Dashwood. *The History of Parliament* describes it as 'probably the most notorious county election of the century, and no expense or chicanery was spared by either side'.¹⁹ The run-up to the election was protracted, and among the events:²⁰

The glorious D[uke] of M[arlborough] made his entrance into the town [Burford] ... Before his coach caper'd a long train consisting of Grenadiers, Sword bearers and Morris dancers.

At the same election in Wootton Bassett:²¹

We hear that Counsellor Provence and _ Cressel, Esq: intend to stand as candidates for Wotton Basset, in Wiltshire. There was a grand Entertainment given by them on Tuesday at Pinkney, near Great Sherston; at which were present above

¹⁸ Blenheim papers, vol. 368, London, British Library Add. MS 61468, fol. 183.

¹⁹ 'Constituencies: Oxfordshire, 1754-1790', *The History of Parliament* <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/constituencies/oxfordshire>> [accessed 21 October 2017].

²⁰ 'Election News', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 23 June 1753.

²¹ 'Bath, June 11', *The Public Advertiser*, 21 June 1753, p.1.

150 Persons, who, the next Day, went in Procession through Malmsbury, to Wotton Basset, where they were received and attended through the Town by the Corporation, the Bells ringing, the Musick playing, and Morrice Dancers dancing before them all the Way.

Fourteen years later at Abingdon in 1768:²²

On Friday last the Forty-five Club here, after breakfasting at one of their Members, set out to meet our new Candidate, Nathaniel Bailey, Esq. of Dover-street, attended by all the Post-Chaises and Carriages in Town, besides a large Number of Horsemen. At Half past One they returned, and paraded it round the Town in great Order and Solemnity. First came the Morrice-Dancers; after them, Drums, Fifes, Hand-bells and Violins; next, the Horsemen, two and two; these were succeeded by the Post-Chaises and other Carriages; then came a Landau and Six, with Gentlemen in it; after that, two Post-Chaises and Four with the new Candidate and Mr. Rook; a Band of French Horns brought up the Rear. A handsome Dinner was provided at the New Inn; where eighty Voters more promised, who, if they keep their Word, make up the whole Number, already engaged to the new Candidate, two hundred and six.... In short, there is nothing but grand Doings here every Day; Bells ringing all Friday and Saturday, &c. &c.

And twenty years later again, at Banbury:²³

On Wednesday we were greatly rejoiced with the arrival of Richard Lloyd, Esq. of Baddenham, Bucks, who had been invited by the principal inhabitants, to offer himself as a candidate to represent this borough; the joy of all the people is impossible to describe. On Thursday Mr. Lloyd canvassed the town, attended by seven hundred people, all the flags, streamers and staves of the wool-combers and shag-weavers, morris dancers, fifers, &c. bells ringing, &c....

²² 'Extract of a Letter from Abingdon, Jan. 10', *The St. James's Chronicle*, 9-12 January 1768, p.4.

²³ 'Extract of a letter from Banbury, April 5, 1784', *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 10 April 1784, p.3.

The report continues with partisan attacks on the rival candidate Lord North.

One of the questions I asked myself in looking at these reports is, who likes morris dancers? Who uses them? In the eighteenth century we did not have the strictly demarcated partisan politics of today, allegiances could shift and party labels were fluid things, but on the whole the century was dominated by the Whigs, supporting the aristocracy, against the monarchist Tories, in what's known as the 'Whig supremacy' (and this is a gross oversimplification). As the Whigs were so dominant, factionalism arose within the grouping and as far as I can tell, most of the reports of morris dancers are associated with 'opposition Whigs'.

But now I want to turn to those two great Buckinghamshire houses, Stowe and Claydon, the first the seat of the Grenvilles, the second the seat of their rivals the Verneys.

For both of these houses the family and estate papers are preserved in great quantity: in the case of Stowe, at the Huntington Library in California, and in the case of Claydon, in Claydon House itself. I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to go through both of these sets of papers.

There are references of payments to morris dancers in each of the families' papers. Two already well-known ones are that in 1844 the Duke of Buckingham at Stowe paid for the morris costumes for two teams to dance at his sons' coming-of-age – that being the third successive ducal coming-of-age to hire morris dancers²⁴ – and in contrast Lady Fermanagh at Claydon wrote in 1716:²⁵

We have whisen ayls all about us, w^{ch} brings such abundance of rabble & y^e worst sort of company round us y^t I wish noe mischife Happens - old Oliffe alarmed all y^e town a sunday night <.> cry^{ing} out thives & all y^e neighbours went to his assistance vpon his letting of 2 gunns - his daughter was come

²⁴ Michael Heaney, 'With Scarfes and Garters as you Please: An Exploratory Essay in the Economics of the Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, 6.4 (1993), 491-505 & frontispiece.

²⁵ E. Fermanagh, Letter of 22 May 1716, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Films dep. 1299, and reproduced in *Verney Letters of the Eighteenth Century from the Mss. at Claydon House*, edited by Margaret Maria Lady Verney. 2 vols (London: E. Benn, 1930), II.41.

home to him without cloaths & he sent her back againe for y^m, & it is thought some of the Kings Companions did it to fright y^e old man. - I cant help giveing y^e morrices monny when they come, for they tell me everybody doing it is y^e best way to send y^m goeing - there is one at St^p Claydon [margin interpolation: one at Hoggshaw] one at Buckingham & one at Stratten audley...

Four days later she wrote:²⁶

I thank God all y^e routs now as to y^e whitsun ayles is over - it has cost 2 half Guineas and half a Crown in all - and yet I gave as Little as anybody...

More evidence of their support for morrices and Whitsun ales is found in their respective responses to requests from their villagers for a maypole. In In 1688 five men and two women from Claydon asked the steward to write to Sir Ralph Verney to give them a maypole as had been the previous practice, and they were given ten shillings towards the same. The same amount was given several times over the following decade.²⁷

Now this may seem generous till you compare it with the Stowe accounts. These are a century later but inflation in the interim meant that Sir Ralph Verney's ten shillings would have been about thirteen shillings had he given an equivalent amount in 1782.

It was in 1782 that Lord Temple at Stowe, to quote his steward's words in instructing the estates keeper:²⁸

...gives the people of Whitchurch a Maypole, which they are to fetch on Wednesday, you will therefore get some Timber down in Grenville's Wood as fall [sic] as you can, in order to have some proper for the purpose. I fancy it must be of three pieces, viz. -- a Stock, middle piece, and Spire. The Stock I suppose to be about 25 feet long, and 18 or 20 inches square

²⁶ E. Fermanagh, Letter of 26 May 1716, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Films dep. 1299.

²⁷ Claydon House, Verney papers 4/5/41/31; 4/5/41/46; 4/5/42/8; 4/5/47/18; 4/5/47/21; 4/5/49/37; 4/5/49/40; 4/5/51/14.

²⁸ San Marino, Huntington Library, STG Correspondence Box 225, Folder 17, fol.1^r.

at the bottom, which will diminish 5 or 6 inches, as it may happen, the next piece of course must diminish in proportion, and be 20 or 25 feet long as it happens, and then any long taper Small Tree for a spier. If such pieces as I have described [crossed through: may] are not proper let them have such as are so.

Not only is this a much more 'hands-on' approach by Lord Temple, we also have the valuation of the wood supplied, exactly as specified, and it cost £7 18s 4½d.²⁹ In other words Lord Verney's ten shillings represented around one tenth of the true cost of a maypole.

That gives a flavour of their attitudes to morris, and it's backed up by literally dozens of payments to teams visiting Stowe on their annual circuit,³⁰ but hardly any at all from Claydon.

In the case of both families we have sets of election accounts, though these vary in their detail – in most cases they are just summaries. But it's not surprising that it's the Stowe accounts that provide more detail. We have the accounts for expenditure of George Grenville in elections as M.P. for Buckingham in 1741 – that's the town not the county, though Richard Grenville was contesting the county at the same time:³¹

8 Morrice given by Chandler 3 by Doggett

Winchendon Westcot Boarstal Dyntor Horwood Adstock

Preston Chandon Northmaston Tuston 5 15 6

(There are only ten places mentioned for the 11 performances; and each performance was paid 10s 6d. Contrast this with the Oxfordshire election in 1727, when the dancers' payment was £1 1s.)

On the next leaf we have the total spent in the county so it seems that the accounts for the two elections have been conjoined. But the total expense for the county was £926 – that's equivalent to around £60,000 today. The morris dancers are clearly only a minimal ex-

²⁹ San Marino, Huntington Library, STG Correspondence Box 225, Folder 17, fol. 2v.

³⁰ Heaney, 'With Scarfes and Garters as you Please'.

³¹ San Marino, Huntington Library, STG Elections Box 1 Folder 4.

pense – much more is spent on bands of music, on ringers and on food and drink for the populace.

The map (Figure 1) indicates the places in which performances were held, and the seats to the two county families. No centre of gravity is obvious from the relative location for either of the two providers of the morrises, who have not been further identified.

According to *The History of Parliament* ‘Grenville and Verney seem to have had no liking for each other... but Verney was never claimed by the opposition’;³² George Grenville, on the other hand, was very much a government man.

I do not think we have enough evidence to draw firm inferences – a slight hint of a support base among Opposition Whigs – which may seem surprising, as *a priori* the Tories might be expected to be more sympathetic to customary practices – but the Stowe and Claydon contrasts show, I think, that personalities were the predominating factor rather than policies. In the nineteenth century members of the Stowe household were certainly Tories, but by that time the significance of party allegiance had changed. The Tories were certainly dominant in the 1727 Oxfordshire election, but by 1753 the Duke of Marlborough supported the Whigs against them.

Most activity died down after the great Reform Act of 1832, and certainly after 1854 when the secret ballot was introduced. We do have one late reference from 1832 itself when at Chacombe near Banbury:³³

³² ‘Member Biographies: Verney, Ralph, 2nd Earl Verney [I] (1714-91), of Claydon House, Bucks.’, *The History of Parliament* <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/verney-ralph-1714-91>> [accessed 21 October 2017].

³³ A Spectator, ‘[Letter] To the Editor of the *Oxford Journal*’, *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 16 June 1832, p.2.

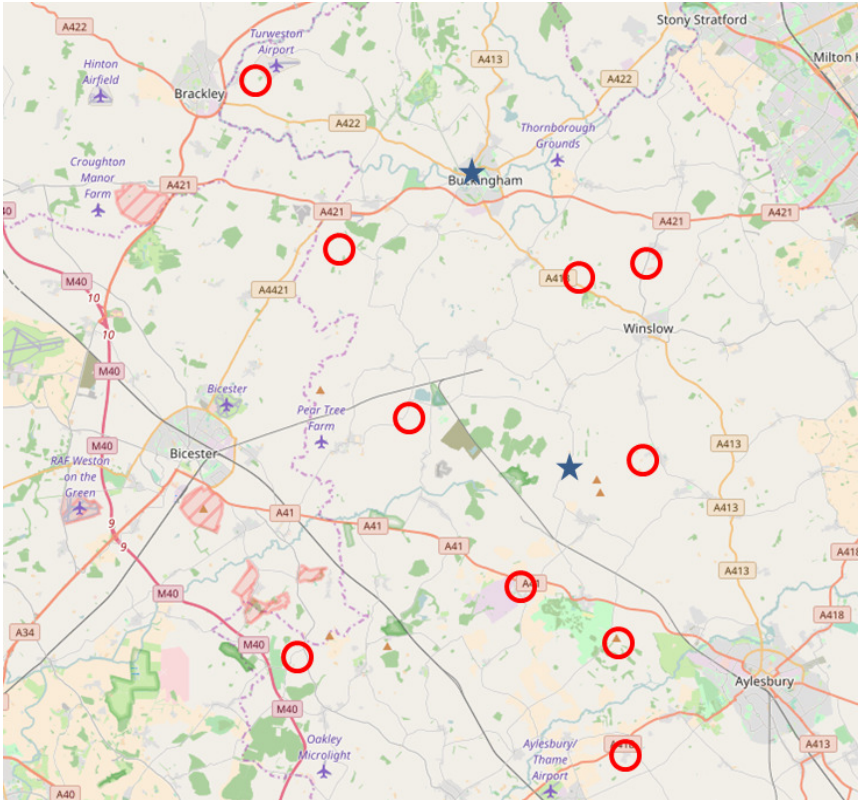


Figure 1: Buckingham election morrises 1741. (Red circles: performance venues; blue stars: country seats (Stowe northerly, Claydon southerly.)

It appears that it is the annual custom of the Club of that village to assemble on Whit-Monday, with their banner, music, morris dancers, &c., to enjoy the usual convivialities of villagers. On this occasion, to mark their respect for the worthy resident of the Priory, who at this time aspires to the honour of representing the freemen of Banbury in Parliament, the villagers had manufactured a flag in their rustic way, kept out by sticks, to exhibit more conspicuously the very honourable motto – a more gratifying one than King’s could give – viz., “Mr. Pye, the Poor Man’s Friend”. ...

In the event Pye withdrew after there were riots and disturbances in Banbury; he would have been a Liberal supporter if elected (the bor-

ough was still in the hands of the Marquis of Bute, and his subsequent nominee did win the seat for the Liberals).

I think the main lesson that emerges from this review is that, far from being invisible to the upper classes, morris dancers were known to them and used by them as a means of engaging the support of the local population as part of the civic and political process. Ironically, it may have been the introduction of the secret ballot and the disappearance of large-scale bribery of the electorate that took it off the public radar just as the first antiquaries were beginning to take their own interest in it.