

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

Why do Morris Dancers Wear White?

Chloe Metcalfe

pp. 315-329



efdss
english folk dance
and song society



**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

Copyright © 2018 the contributors and the publishers

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

Introduction 1

The History of History

John Forrest
How to Read *The History of Morris Dancing* 7

Morris at Court

Anne Daye
Morris and Masque at the Jacobean Court 19

Jennifer Thorp
Rank Outsider or Outsider of Rank: Mr Isaac's Dance 'The Morris' 33

The Morris Dark Ages

Jameson Wooders
'Time to Ring some Changes': Bell Ringing and the Decline of
Morris Dancing in the Earlier Eighteenth Century 47

Michael Heaney
Morris Dancers in the Political and Civic Process 73

Peter Bearon
Coconut Dances in Lancashire, Mallorca, Provence and on the
Nineteenth-century Stage 87

The Early Revival

Katie Palmer Heathman

'I Ring for the General Dance': Morris and Englishness in the Work of Conrad Noel 115

Matt Simons

'Pilgrimages to Holy Places': the Travelling Morrice, 1922–1939 133

Roy Fenton

'Destruction not Inscription': How a Pioneering Revival Side Developed 151

Elaine Bradtke

Morris Tunes Collected by James Madison Carpenter 161

The Later Revival

Sue Allan

Merrie England, May Day and More: Morris Dances in Cumbria in the Early Twentieth Century 179

Derek Schofield

A Different Sort of Revival: The Life and Times of the Manley Morris Dancers 203

Sean Goddard and Ed Bassford

Consequences of Bringing North-west Morris to the South-east of England: The Chanctonbury Ring Effect 215

Robert Dunlop

Morris Dancing at Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Heyday, Decline and Revival 251

Women in Morris

Sally Wearing

What to Dance? What to Wear? The Repertoire and Costume of
Morris Women in the 1970s 267

Val Parker

The Women's Morris Federation – from Start to Finish 279

Lucy Wright

This Girl Can Morris Dance: Girls' Carnival Morris Dancing and
the Politics of Participation 295

Material Culture

Chloe Metcalfe

Why do Morris Dancers Wear White? 315

David Petts

Materializing Morris Dancing: Tangible Aspects of an Intangible
Heritage 331

Chloe Metcalfe

Why do Morris Dancers Wear White?

Introduction

It is possible to suggest two valid and interrelated reasons for the initial adoption of white clothing by morris dancers in the nineteenth century.¹ These reasons, which relate to fashion and seasonal association with Whitsuntide, are discussed in the first section of this essay. Within this article I offer a pragmatic analysis of the historical adoption of this clothing which seeks to consider the historical dancer as an agent of the world, making decisions which complemented his own contextual reality. This paper then, in line with the general attitude of folklorists of the early twenty-first century, seeks to discredit earlier theories which often discussed a 'universal' colour symbolism and/or analysed the colours' perceived ritualistic function. A clear example of this can be found in *English Folk Dancing Today and Yesterday* (1964) written by the then Director of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, Douglas Kennedy. Through the use of white clothing he links morris to cultural practices in Central and South America, writing:²

[T]he old stock is easily recognisable in the white costumes, the fluttery ribbons, the tinkling bells, the waving white handkerchiefs and the clash of the wooden-staves. These white-clad men now form an escort to the Virgin and Child as they once did to the Man-Horse or Man-Goat, or other pagan God.

And later:³

¹ This is an expansion of the work started in my undergraduate thesis 'Rags, Bells and Baldrics: A study of Morris Dance Costumes Past Present and Future' (Central School of Speech and Drama 2012, copy at VWML). This was part published as 'In Clean White Shirt and Trousers' *Morris Federation Newsletter* (Summer 2012) 20-24.

² Douglas Kennedy, *English Folk Dancing Today and Yesterday*, (London: Bell, 1964), p. 50.

³ Kennedy, *English Folk Dancing Today and Yesterday*, p.130.

Whiteness is the symbol, or one of the chief symbols of this new life of sunlit dancing vibrating energy, which re-enters the world at Easter, at May-time and at Whitsuntide.

The second section of this paper turns to revival practice, exploring the influence of Sharp's choice of white trousers for the display team of the English Folk Dance Society (from 1932, the English Folk Dance and Song Society) (EFD(S)S). Considerations of the preference for coloured, rather than white clothing by female teams from the 1970s is considered in relation to the association between white clothing and Cotswold morris and the twentieth century interpretation of Cotswold morris as an intrinsically, even ritualistically, masculine dance form.

Nineteenth-century Practice

The use of white clothing for morris dancing dates to the middle of the nineteenth century. A painting known as *The Rush-Bearer, Lymm, Cheshire*, in the York Museums Trust which was probably painted in the 1860s is the earliest pictorial reference.⁴ Its northern provenance would seem to indicate that white clothing was not specific to teams based in the Cotswold area. Earlier coloured paintings such as *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palaces* (1600-1650),⁵ and *Country Round Dixton Manor* (1730)⁶ show dark leg-wear. This coincides with oral testimony gathered by Cecil Sharp. Sharp's interviews with old dancers imply that white breeches were worn at Chipping Campden (Gloucestershire) and at Ducklington (Oxfordshire) in the 1850s and 1860s.⁷ From Sharp's manuscripts, it would appear that

⁴ *The Rush-bearer Lymm, Cheshire*, York Museums Trust, YORCM:DA76636 <<https://www.yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/collections/search/item/?id=45022387>> [accessed 17 November 2017]; also Lymm Heritage Centre, 'Rushbearing', <<https://www.lymmhc.co.uk/rushbearing>> [accessed 16 November 2017].

⁵ *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace*, Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum <<http://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/1388>> [accessed 17 November 2017] (see Figure 1 in the chapter by Anne Daye in this volume).

⁶ *Country Round Dixton Manor*. The Wilson Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, reference 1957.22.

⁷ 'Chipping Campden Morris', <<http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/1/137>> [accessed 20 November 2017]; 'Ducklington Morris', Cecil Sharp MSS, CJS2/11/1/144 <<http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/1/144>> [accessed on 20 November 2017]; Keith

after 1850, and whenever possible, teams would wear white trousers or breeches, often made of cord or moleskin. At Ducklington, former dancer Joseph Druce (1830-1917) told Sharp that the trousers, worn by the team were white and 'fluffy', similar to what sailors would use 'but thinner. What officers wear'.⁸

Morris dance historian Michael Heaney has estimated that in 1844 a costume would have cost the average agricultural labourer five weeks' wages.⁹ Special trousers were complemented by shirts in fine material. In the nineteenth century cleanliness of appearance was prized in all classes of society, linked to the importance of being respectable.¹⁰ This is notable in Sharp's fieldwork. Joseph Druce told Sharp: 'Neither Bampton nor Field Town so clean as we. We had clean shirts every morning.'¹¹ Likewise at Wheatley, Oxfordshire, Albert Edward Gomme (1854-1929) told Sharp 'flash as we were with clean white shirts'.¹² Gomme recalls that the team were once invited to London to perform, but declined because the younger members of the team could not afford the correct clothing which included white moleskin trousers. The emphasis on cleanliness is made more prescient by the fact that on tour, morris dancers often engaged in fights and slept rough, practices which would have given considerable complication to the problem of keeping clean.¹³

Occasionally teams substituted dark clothing, but it would appear that white trousers were preferable. A photograph taken of the Abingdon (Oxfordshire) morris dancers in 1912 shows James Hemmings (1854-1935), and his son Tom Hemmings (1887-1960), in the leading positions at the top of the set, in white trousers. The rest of

Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, 1660-1900: Aspects of Social and Cultural History* CD-ROM (Musical Traditions MTCD250, 2002), Chapter 7 'The Learning Process'.

⁸ 'Ducklington Morris'.

⁹ Michael Heaney, 'With Scarves and Garters as you Please: An Exploratory Essay in the Economics of the Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, 6.4 (1993), 491-505.

¹⁰ Victoria Kelley, *Soap and Water*, (New York: Tauris, 2010).

¹¹ 'Ducklington Morris.'

¹² 'Horton-cum-Studley, Oxon, Morris Tradition', Cecil Sharp MSS. CJS2/11/4/80 <<http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/4/80>> [accessed 20 November 2017].

¹³ Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*, Chapters 1,4,5.

the dancers wear dark trousers.¹⁴ It is possible that the two Hemmingses, who were the gatekeepers of the tradition at Abingdon, were wearing trousers which dated to 1901, when the custom of annual dancing had lapsed. As Chandler notes, the other dancers' costumes appear to be 'anything they could get which would be suitable for performance'.¹⁵ Given time and financial resources, perhaps all members of the newly re-formed team would be attired like the Hemmingses.

Similarly, at Ascott-under-Wychwood (Oxfordshire) white breeches were the preferred option but some, 'hadn't legs big enough, so wore trousers'.¹⁶ In the 1850s there were two teams active, an older and a younger one, which could explain the reference to breeches which were too big for the dancers.¹⁷ Likewise, at Longborough (Gloucestershire) the team wore "Trousers, but breeches and blue stocking were the "right things"". ¹⁸ The use of breeches for morris dancing in the 1880s and 1890s, when they had declined in popularity for day wear over fifty years previously, is paralleled by the continued popularity of breeches in other dance forms. Traditional dance historians Phil Heaton and Chris Metherell, commenting on breeches worn for rapper sword dancing from Tyneside, have suggested that the choice of breeches was a means of emphasising the specialness of the dance.¹⁹ It is possible that breeches may have been a deliberate attempt at historicalization. Dance historian Theresa Buckland notes that the Godley Hill (Manchester) dancers adopted breeches in 1881, after wearing trousers in the 1870s. She postulates that 'the dancers' own consciousness of their longevity as a tradition' could have been an impetus for this change.²⁰ However, conservatism is also im-

¹⁴ Keith Chandler, 'Ock Street Morris Dancers, Abingdon, Berkshire 1912', *English Dance and Song*, 14.2 (1984), 22.

¹⁵ Jonathan Leach, *Morris Dancing in Abingdon to 1914* (Oxford: Chandler, 1987).

¹⁶ 'Ascott under Wychwood Morris', Cecil Sharp MSS. CJS2/11/2/41 <<http://vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/2/41>> [accessed 20 November 2017].

¹⁷ 'Ascott under Wychwood Morris.'

¹⁸ 'Longborough Morris', Cecil Sharp, MSS. CJS2/11/1/138 <<http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/11/1/138>> [accessed 20 November 2017].

¹⁹ Phil Heaton and Chris Metherell, *Rapper: History of the Miners' Sword Dance of North-east England*, DVD (Garland Films, 2012) 'Costume'.

²⁰ Theresa Buckland, 'Hollo: "Here we are again:" Godley Hill Morris Dancers: A Study in Longevity.' *Traditional Dance*, 2 (1982) 37-58 (p. 47).

portant: formal dressing, especially for high ceremonial occasions continued to favour breeches long past when they were worn for normal attire. Breeches were included in some forms of servant's livery into the 1920s.²¹

White, cream or buff leg-wear was common in men's wear from the Regency era until the 1880s. This was initially complemented by the white Grecian-style dress common in women's wear from the 1790s until the 1830s. The use of white trousers extended into military uniforms throughout the nineteenth century, with a number of regiments wearing them.²² The trend for light-coloured trousers was not limited to the upper and middle classes. In her history of working class fashion, dress historian Avril Lansdell notes that light-coloured trousers were the everyday wear for working-class men throughout the Victorian period until the 1880s.²³ At this point dark-coloured sombre trousers became common and have remained normal for men's attire ever since.²⁴

In the nineteenth century outer garments were washed with much less frequency, and brushing to remove dirt was more common than immersion in water and detergent.²⁵ Light-coloured trousers were treated with cleaning aids such as stale bread, Fuller's earth, magnesia, or expensive chloroform.²⁶ If the cloth was submersed in water then often a commercially produced, branded blueing agent was added to increase the vividness of the white.²⁷ Before the stronger chemical aniline dye treatment in the 1860s colours were much more difficult to treat; some dyes even changed colour when a hot iron was applied. To avoid disappointment, buyers of cloth were advised to take a sample and launder it to check for colour fastness and

²¹ Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Occupational Costume in England: From the Eleventh Century to 1914* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968) p. 189.

²² Robin and Christopher Wilkinson-Latham, *Infantry Uniforms Including Artillery and Other Supporting Troops of Britain and the Commonwealth, 1742-1855* (London: Blandford, 1969).

²³ Avril Lansdell, *Wedding Fashions 1860-1980* (Aylesbury: Shire, 1986), pp. 28-30.

²⁴ Anne Buck, *Victorian Costume* (Bedfordshire, Ruth Bean, 1984), pp. 185-87.

²⁵ Christina Walkley and Vanda Foster, *Crinolines and Crimping Irons: Victorian Clothes, How they were Cleaned and Cared For* (London: Peter Owen, 1986), p. 33.

²⁶ Walkley and Forster, *Crinolines and Crimping Irons*, p. 135.

²⁷ Walkley and Forster, *Crinolines and Crimping Irons*, p. 32.

heat reaction.²⁸ In this context, white clothes, which could be fully submersed in water were much easier to launder than coloured or black garments. This explains the persistent use of white for undergarments, household linen and children's clothing from the medieval period until the mid twentieth century.²⁹

In the nineteenth century the traditional time for teams to dance in public was Whitsun, the British colloquial term for Pentecost, and probably an abbreviation of White Sunday; the week after Whitsun was referred to as Whitsuntide.³⁰ Pentecost was the third most important festival in the Christian calendar. Celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Easter, it is a non-fixed holiday, and falls in spring time between 10 of May and 20 June. Whit Monday was a bank holiday from 1871 until 1972 when the holiday date was secularized and transferred to a fixed date, the last Monday in May. The derivation of Whitsun is unclear, first mentioned in 1067; the most plausible explanation is that the name referred to the white chrisom cloth used at Baptism.³¹ The ceremony of baptism was considered particularly appropriate at Whitsuntide, when worshippers remember the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the early disciples of Jesus. Whitsun became the focus for a diverse range of customs including well-dressing, decorating churches with boughs of trees, factory wakes, fetes, parades and pageants.³²

The use of white within the Christian church has historically been considered to be symbolically important, and has been linked to the concept of purity.³³ Biblical references such as 'Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy'³⁴ are seen as the foundation for this Christian interpretation of white as an auspicious

²⁸ Walkley and Forster, *Crinolines and Crimping Irons*, p. 32.

²⁹ Michel Pastoureau, *The Colour of Our Memories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 16.

³⁰ Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*, Chapter 4.

³¹ Steve Roud, *The English Year: A Month-by-month Guide to The Nation's Customs and Festivals, from May Day to Mischief Night* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 260.

³² Roud, *The English Year*, pp. 260-61.

³³ Edwina Ehrman, *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashion*, (London, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2011), pp. 9-10.

³⁴ Revelations 3.4 (King James Version).

scious colour. In the middle ages, Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) decreed that white garments should be worn by priests at all festivals.³⁵ There is evidence to support that the wearing of white clothing at Whitsuntide was common throughout the nineteenth century. Well known are the Whit Walks or Processions of Witness, which developed from Robert Raikes's (1735-1811) Sunday-school movement, 1801 marking the year of the first walk in Manchester.³⁶ Although Whit Walks retained their popularity for longer in Lancashire and Cheshire, with thousands of participants wearing their best, preferably white clothes, in the 1800s they were popular throughout England.³⁷ From the same region the aforementioned painting *The Rush-Bearer, Lymm, Cheshire*, shows a group of morris dancers wearing either white trousers or breeches.³⁸ Rushbearing, the custom of taking new rushes to carpet the church floor, was undertaken from the spring to the autumn period but throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Whitsuntide remained associated with rushbearing in many areas.³⁹

In addition to Processions of Witness there are other secular sources to support a deliberate use of white clothing at Whitsuntide. Published in 1872 and set in a Dorset village, the novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) includes this speech from an older member of the village: ⁴⁰

'twas on a White Tuesday when I committed it. Mellstock Club walk the same day, and we new-married folk went a-gaying round the parish behind 'em. Everybody used to wear something white at Whitsuntide in them days. My sonnies, I've got the very white trousers that I wore, at home in a box now.

³⁵ Herbert Norris, *Church Vestments: Their Origin and Development* (New York, Dover, 2003), p. 70.

³⁶ Roud, *The English Year*, p. 266; Steve Fielding, 'The Catholic Whit-Walk in Manchester and Salford 1890-1939', *Manchester Region History Review* 1.1 (1987), 3-10 (p. 3).

³⁷ Steve Roud and Jacqueline Simpson, *A Dictionary of Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 388.

³⁸ 'The Rush-bearer Lymm.'

³⁹ Alfred Burton, *Rush-bearing: An Account Of the Old Custom of Strewing Rushes*, (Manchester: Brook & Chrystal, 1891).

⁴⁰ Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* [1872] (London, Penguin, 1994), p. 211.

Club walking, processions of local Friendly Society clubs, often happened at Whitsun.⁴¹ The clothes of the women's club or Friendly Society in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are also white.⁴² Hardy was, of course, writing from a literary rather than a documentary perspective and literary scholars have been keen to explain the use of white clothes as a symbolic trope to emphasise Tess's virginal condition. Hardy himself refers not to Whitsun but to 'Cerealia', a Roman festival held in April, and 'The May-Day Dance'.⁴³ This begs the question of why the white of morris dancers relates to Whitsun and not to the first of May.

This relates to changed perceptions of May Day since the 1970s. This has been encouraged by an increased awareness of the festive possibilities of May Day and an increase of teams dancing in the dawn on the first of May, an event which is often reported in papers as an ancient tradition.⁴⁴ Along with general cultural secularization, there is also a decreased awareness of Whitsun and its historical significance. Nonetheless, as Hardy's description in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* demonstrates, the delineation between May Day and Whitsuntide has not been clear for many years. Hardy continues that the white gowns were 'a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms'.⁴⁵

The Victorian re-introduction of May Queens often featured white clothing. The choice could have been symbolic, white flowers, particularly hawthorn were often referred to as 'may' and were used to decorate buildings, transport and may garlands in the eighteenth

⁴¹ C. W. Shickle, *Bath Friendly Societies* [pamphlet repr. from *Keene's Bath Journal*, 21 October and 11 November 1911].

⁴² Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891] (Suffolk: Guild, 1980), p. 11.

⁴³ For using Hardy as a historical source see Anne Buck, 'Clothes in Fact and Fiction 1825-1865' *Costume* 17 (1983), 89-104, and literary criticism such as Alka Saxena and Sudhir Dixit, *Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Delhi: Atlantic, 2001), pp. 60, 167.

⁴⁴ Norman Stanfield, 'Rough Music, Rough Dance, Rough Play: Misrule and Morris Dance' (doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2008) <<https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/1056>> [accessed 20 November 2017], pp.71, 144; see also John Forrest 'How to Read *The History of Morris Dancing*' in this volume. Forrest, like Stanfield, links May-Day dancing to the twentieth-century practice of Oxford University Morris Men to dance after the annual May morning singing of the seventeenth-century *Hymnus Eucharisticus* from the Great Tower in Magdalen College.

⁴⁵ Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, pp. 10-11.

and nineteenth centuries.⁴⁶ With Whitsun falling any time between early May and mid June it is possible that, at least by the end of the nineteenth century, there was some overlap in association between May Day and Whitsuntide. An example of this conflation is demonstrated in Joseph Druce's comment to Sharp that they started each morning of Whitsun week by dancing Bonny Green Garters around the maypole⁴⁷. However, for a large number of Victorian women, there could also have been a number of pragmatic reasons for the adoption of white clothing. Roy Judge notes that a May Queen from 1854 had put on 'her very best, and has put on that white frock for the first time since last summer',⁴⁸ In addition to wearing white at May Day, white was also worn by females for many other mass gatherings. These included the suffrage marches of the Women's Social and Political Union, and performances of morris dancing in Lancashire and Cheshire.⁴⁹ White was a common summer dress colour, which arguably made it easier to match than coloured or patterned garments.

Twentieth-century Practice

Cecil Sharp's work with the EFDS implicitly or explicitly affected the choice of clothing selected by morris dancers during the twentieth century. Sharp's choice of white shirt and white flannel trousers became the standard to which, in the words of morris commentator Antony Barrand 'many teams automatically conform or from which they strive to deviate'.⁵⁰

Sharp's male demonstration team of dancers dressed in costumes based on the clothes worn by the Headington Quarry (Oxfordshire) team in the 1880s, the first morris dancers that Cecil Sharp ever

⁴⁶ Roud, *The English Year*, p. 208.

⁴⁷ 'Ducklington Morris.'

⁴⁸ Roy Judge, 'Tradition and the Plaited Maypole Dance', *Traditional Dance*, 2 (1983), 1-21 (p. 10).

⁴⁹ For examples see the Morris Ring Archives images of the 'Fleetwood Girls', 1920s (NW78) and 'Spencer's Juveniles' c. 1905 (NW100).

⁵⁰ Tony Barrand, *Six Fools and a Dancer: The Timeless Way of the Morris* (Washington: Northern Harmony Publishing, 1991), p. 177.

saw.⁵¹ Headington Quarry had one of the simplest Cotswold costumes, which appears to have appealed to Sharp and his followers in the EFDS: 'A revival cannot live if it is to be merely a revival. "Merrie Englande" may have existed in the past; it does not and it cannot exist now.'⁵²

For the EFDS team there would have been great practical benefit to such trousers, which could be brought from the ready-to-wear sports market which was well established by the 1900s. White trousers were also markedly different from the more sombre colours of men's fashions in the early twentieth century. Certainly the sartorial association with sport seems to have appealed to Sharp's dancers. In their history of the EFDSS, Helen and Douglas Kennedy write approvingly that: 'The dress of the men was equally athletic being that of the cricket pitch and tennis court, the bells and crossed baldrics being the only traces of traditional practice.'⁵³

This choice inadvertently led to the false impression that perhaps nineteenth-century morris dancers wore white trousers because they could get a cheap source in second-hand cricket whites. By the late nineteenth century, traditional dancers did adopt elements of sports wear: sporting caps were worn by teams from Headington Quarry and Ilmington (Warwickshire), as well as teams from Lancashire and Cheshire.⁵⁴ But white clothing for cricket was not standard until the 1870s, at which point mass-produced trousers rather than tailor-made ones also became available.⁵⁵ Thus while traditional teams might have worn cricket whites by the end of the century, availability and economies of scale were probably not the reason for their initial adoption.

The choice of white trousers for both morris and social dancing (normally with the bells removed) can be seen in EFDS/S groups

⁵¹ Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work* (London, Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 25.

⁵² 'An English Ballet' *EFDS News*, 3 (1922), 56.

⁵³ Helen and Douglas Kennedy, *A Jubilee History: Folk Dance and Song 1911*, (London: EFDSS, [1961]), p. 2.

⁵⁴ Lesley Edwards and Janet Chart, 'Aspects of Morris Dancing in Cheshire 1880-1914', *English Dance and Song*, 43.1 (1981), 5-9.

⁵⁵ D. Rait-Kerr, 'The costume of the Cricketer' *Costume*, 7 (1973), 50-54.

from the 1920s until the 1960s.⁵⁶ Until the late 1940s, English folk dancing was certified, demonstration teams were formed from selected dancers and the period is criticized for promoting homogenization of style, including costume.⁵⁷ At the formation of the Morris Ring in 1934, an organization established to encourage and support male morris teams, all of the six founder members – Cambridge (est. 1924), Oxford City (est.1934), Letchworth (1922-1950s), Thaxted; Essex (est. 1911), East Surrey (est. 1926) and Greensleeves (London, est. 1926) initially danced in white, normally flannel trousers (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Thaxted Morris Men (Photo: Chloe Metcalfe).

Throughout the twentieth century it was common for dancers to be part of a team or group who performed different styles of folk dance. Until the 1960s many men did social and sword dancing in their morris whites. In 1930 the EFDS adopted black sword-dance breeches for performances of morris dances by the male members of their

⁵⁶ See images in Derek Schofield, *The First Week in August: Fifty Years of the Sidmouth Festival* (Matlock: Sidmouth International Festival, 2004); Derek Schofield, *Towersey Festival: 50 Years in the Making* (Matlock: Mrs Casey, 2014).

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Metcalf, 'Change and the Morris', *English Dance & Song*, 26 (1961), 45-46.

demonstration team. This change was ‘prompted by the very urgent problem of “laundry” presented by the use of white flannels’.⁵⁸ It was considered that audiences preferred the knee breeches and they were ‘particularly suited to a stage presentation of the dances. The costumes was [sic] considered to be as suited to the Morris and Country dance as it is to the rapper dance.’⁵⁹ In the same paper the Society announced that at all formal demonstrations the male members of the EFDS team would be in knee breeches. Certainly the 1950 EFDS promotional film *Wake Up and Dance* shows the demonstration team in black breeches; however, the switch was by no means universal.⁶⁰

In an interview discussing the formation of the Liverpool Morris Men in 1960, dancer Jim Jones (1923-2010) recounted the reason for the teams’ switch to black breeches in 1964:⁶¹

The thing with the whites was that they were never all the same white and they had difficulty keeping the bells up. Somebody said we looked like a load of out-of-work painters. Liverpool of course had danced in breeches and the Liverpool men that had come through to join Mersey were used to them. We thought they looked smarter and were easier to dance in. Also, we thought that the footwork was shown off better; so we got breeches in time for the ring meeting down at Stratford... I still think they look smarter. I know that there’s a case for the whites but I have to say for dancing, I prefer to dance in breeches; for one thing, as I say, you never had the feeling that the bells were coming off.

The gender of the dancers appears to affect the adoption or otherwise of white clothing. Black trousers are more common in mixed

⁵⁸ ‘Knee Breeches’, *EFDS News*, 22 (1930), 257-58.

⁵⁹ ‘Knee Breeches.’

⁶⁰ Pauline Hinchcliffe wrote in 1964 that ‘In our area the men are half for and half against breeches, but I have noticed that the more they wear them, the more they are for them.’ ‘Festival Dress’, *English Dance and Song*, 37.1 (1964), 16-17 (p.17).

⁶¹ Jim Jones, *80 Years of Morris in the Liverpool Area as told through the Personal Recollections of Jim Jones – Morris Dancer*, in interview with Richard Stapleton in 2000 (2008) <<http://www.merseymorrismen.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/JimJonesbook.pdf>> [accessed 20 November 2017], pp. 15-16.

gender or female-only teams than all-male teams. Very few twentieth-century women's teams adopted white leg-wear at all, exceptions being Oyster Morris from Canterbury (est. 1976), Stroud Ladies (est. 1978), Windsor Morris (est. 1975), and Acorn Morris from York (est. 1977).⁶² While in the early days of the revival the participation of female teachers was key to the success of the folk-dance movement, by the 1920s morris dancing was being re-imagined as an exclusively male, ritual dance:⁶³

The women's morris was beautifully done, accurate and full of life. But it was totally different from the men's Morris, and the difference lay not in the style of the dances chosen for the men and women respectively, but in the fact that Morris dancers were invented by men and for men, and that women's Morris dancing must be and always will be, however charming in itself, a new thing, quite different from the traditional Morris.

When, some fifty years later women started to establish teams with a similar structure of public dance outs and weekly practices to the all-male Morris Ring, their decision to participate was not always actively supported by male dancers.⁶⁴ Shirley Dixon of Windsor Morris associated their change of kit from green to stone-coloured skirts in the late 1970s to their desire for enhanced performance, 'power team work and eye-catching dances'.⁶⁵ Windsor's switch to white skirts anticipated their eventual bold move into white trousers in 1977 (Figure 2): 'those who cared strongly about the dance knew that Cotswold Morris as it had developed since the late 19th century cannot be shown off properly if the legs are not free of restriction

⁶² A twenty-first-century female team wearing white leggings is The Belles of London City (est. 2008).

⁶³ W.S.S., 'On Festivals', *EFDS News*, Special Festival Number, 2 (1921), 22.

⁶⁴ Sally Wearing, 'What to Dance? What to Wear? The Repertoire and Costume of Morris Women in the 1970s' in this volume; Shirley Dixon, 'Women in Trousers', *Dancing On* (2007), 4-7, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110727151615/http://www.open-morris.org/DO_Dec07.pdf> [accessed 20 November 2017].

⁶⁵ Shirley Dixon, e-mail to Chloe Metcalfe, 7 October 2011, digital copy on CD held at Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Chloe Metcalfe *Rags Belles and Baldrics* – Supporting Research File., VVWL Barcode: 18269.

and cannot be seen'.⁶⁶ Perhaps their move from coloured to white garments was also significant in showing a move away from an acceptably different *women's* morris.



Figure 2: Windsor Morris, Windsor 2014 (Photo: Chloe Metcalfe).

Conclusion

White clothing is, for many, intrinsically associated with morris dancing. Twentieth-century British comedy, when it includes morris dancing, usually selects white-trousered, (male) dancers.⁶⁷ Indeed the sociologist Pauline Greenhill, writing in a Canadian context, draws attention to the whiteness of dress as supporting the ideologi-

⁶⁶ Dixon, 'Women in Trousers', p. 5.

⁶⁷ 'The Godiva Affair', *Dad's Army*, BBC1 Television, series 7 episode 4, first broadcast on 6 December 1974; 'St Boltoph's Country Dance Team' (sketch), *The Two Ronnies*, BBC1 Television, series 5 episode 4, first broadcast on 25 September 1976; 'Bhangraman Fights the Evil Morris Dancers' (sketch), *Goodness Gracious Me*, BBC2 Television, series 3 episode 6, first broadcast on 31 January 2000: 'Morris Dancer', Bhangraman's nemesis, wears white trousers.

cal associations between this dance form and white English ethnicity.⁶⁸

This article has shown that associations between this clothing and the dance have changed. White trousers are no longer the fashionable option, not substantially harder to launder than dyed clothes. Instead, with our washing-machine culture, white trousers need extra care when wearing to avoid staining; they demand separation and a special wash with other white clothes, perhaps with a special whitening detergent.

Rather than selecting second-hand cricket whites or naval attire as has been previously suggested, the evidence from Sharp's manuscripts demonstrates that considerable care was taken over items of clothing and that the choice of white was deliberate, not accidental. The selection was probably linked to the seasonal association between morris dance and initially Whitsuntide, which has declined in general consciousness during the twentieth century, and later perhaps also to May-Day celebrations, which has seen a strengthening late twentieth-century association.

The non-use of white clothing by women's teams in the latter half of the twentieth century emphasises their attempt to create a form of the dance which was acceptable and therefore different to men's morris. White clothing represented the normative masculine form which was not welcoming to their efforts and so other colours were adopted instead. White trousers are still the most popular choice in all-male teams, although the increasing trend towards mixed-gender Cotswold teams in the twenty-first century has seen a corresponding rise in the use of black trousers for performance.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Pauline Greenhill, *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 114.

⁶⁹ Metcalfe, *Rags Belles and Baldrics* – Supporting Research File, analysis of file containing correspondence with 136 teams and 75 teams who performed Cotswold morris. Eight of these danced other styles of morris (Border and North West). In accordance with wider trends all-male Cotswold teams made up the majority of respondents with 35 replies, this was followed by 23 mixed teams, three of which had different costumes for male and female members, 15 women's teams and two children's teams. Counting only Cotswold costumes worn at the time of correspondence, the majority of my correspondents (35) wore white trousers or breeches, 26 black and 14 coloured leg-wear. While many male teams wear white trousers, only one male Cotswold team wore black trousers. All other respondents who wore black trousers were mixed gender or women-only teams.