

# **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

## **The Women's Morris Federation – from Start to Finish**

Val Parker  
pp. 279-293



**efdss**  
english folk dance  
and song society



**English Folk Dance and Song Society & Historical Dance Society  
London 2018**

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ISBN 978-0-85418-218-3 (EFDSS)

ISBN 978-0-9540988-3-4 (HDS)

Website for this book: [www.vwml.org/hom](http://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.

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Val Parker

## **The Women's Morris Federation – from Start to Finish**

### **Introduction**

Most readers will no doubt know that the Morris Federation is one of three support organizations for UK morris sides, and was founded in the 1970s as the Women's Morris Federation.

I was in the thick of it during the formation and development of the Federation and, because of that, I have been engaged more recently, together with Sally Wearing, Sue Swift and Shirley Dixon, in writing its history. When the Histories of Morris conference was announced, it seemed an obvious thing for us to take the opportunity to offer some of what we have been writing. What follows is therefore an insider's view of WMF's formative years.

### **The Influence of Tubby and Betty Reynolds at the University of Bath**

Any history of the Women's Morris Federation must begin with the University of Bath, as that was where it all began. Although I vaguely knew there was a thing called morris dancing, it wasn't until I arrived at the University as an undergraduate in 1971 that I truly and literally discovered it. On my first Saturday in Bath, I stopped to watch Chipping Camden Morris, who happened to be dancing in Kingston Parade, next to the Abbey. I did not know at that point that they were there at the invitation of the Bath University Folk Dance Society, which was led by Tubby and Betty Reynolds (Figures 1 and 2). I had no idea about morris history, its politics or its controversies, or that I was seeing something which, at least since the First World War, had been strongly promoted as a male-only pursuit, with the consequent stifling of any active involvement by women. I just thought it was magical!



Figure 1 (left): Tubby Reynolds on the Apley Morris tour, Bath 1973; Figure 2 (right): Betty Reynolds, Letterkenny International Folk Festival, 1973 (Photos: Val Parker).

A month or two later, I began to go regularly to the University's Folk Dance Society myself. I found that, although it was a mixed club, only the men were organized into a 'proper' morris side and routinely taught morris dances, by Tubby, each week. The timing was all, as it was at the Sidmouth Folk Festival in the summer of that very year (1971) that Roy Dommett (Figure 3) had run an impromptu 'ritual dance' workshop for women, after some had protested at being barred from the official morris workshops. Betty Reynolds had been at that impromptu workshop, and she returned to the Folk Dance So-



ciety the following October armed with two dances that she then taught to the women. These were Whiteladies Aston and Runcorn, both, the women were told, known to have been performed by female dancers in the past. The dances were subsequently performed at the monthly University ceilidhs during that 1971 autumn term.



Figure 3: Roy Dommett, Black Horse, Crookham, 22 May 1976 (Photo: Stephen Earwicker).

If I remember rightly, I joined the Society in November, learned the two dances and joined in the next ceilidh performance. We were

wearing just the ordinary clothes we would normally wear to a ceilidh, and I found the whole experience quite embarrassing. To cut a long story short, I refused to join in with any more such performances unless and until we organized ourselves properly, complete with kit and a decent repertoire. As it happened, the others had already considered the idea of having a kit before I joined them, so they didn't take much persuasion. The result was that Bath City Women's Morris was formed fairly quickly after that, first dancing in kit as a side at a University event in June 1972.

## **The Circle Widens**

At that time the Bath City Morris Men were in fairly regular contact with other men's sides, mainly from that part of the country, such as Cardiff Morris, Bristol Morris and Gloucester Old Spot, but also from further afield, such as Hammersmith. When those teams were invited to events run by Bath City, they were usually accompanied by their wives and girlfriends.

One such occasion was in 1973, at a festival run by Tubby and Betty at the University each February. When the female visitors showed a keen interest in what the Bath City Morris Women were doing, another impromptu workshop for women was slotted into the festival programme. This one was led by Tubby and Betty's son, Jim Reynolds, then dancing with Hammersmith. He introduced the women to the Wheatley tradition – I assume because no men were dancing it at the time.

Unfortunately, in the quest to increase our repertoire, there was a perceived problem, in that there was a lack of what might then have been considered 'suitable' dance material for these newly emerging female sides. There was an idea that there might be 'women's dances' we could do or, like Wheatley, some traditions the men weren't doing, and which we could take up, without treading on too many toes, so to speak.

Recognising this, Betty called once more upon Roy Dommett, who agreed to run an instructional just for the women. This happened in March 1973, again at the University, and about forty women came, hailing from Bath, Cardiff, Cheltenham and Oxford (University). Roy

taught more dances from Wheatley, some from Ilmington, as well as garland dances and a variety of others.



Figure 4: Bath City Morris Women, Bath Abbey courtyard 1973 (Photo: Val Parker).

By this time, the Bath City Women were dancing out (Figure 4) with their male counterparts, touring with many other male sides, such as Apley, Cardiff, Hammersmith, Bristol, Colne Royal and even Arnold Woodley's Bampton team.

So enthusiasm and acceptance were definitely growing, and a further women's instructional was organized by the Cheltenham women, who had by then formed the side England's Glory. The instructional was run as part of what was billed as 'A Day of Traditional Festivity' to take place the following November at the Cheltenham Art College (Figure 5). This turned out to be a landmark occasion. During a break between sessions, the women found themselves discussing the fact that they had no formal way of what we would now call networking. They couldn't join the exclusively male Morris Ring, which was the only UK organization for morris dancers at the time, so they decided there ought to be some kind of association for female morris sides, to provide mutual support and to facilitate the exchange of information. The idea had been aired before, but it was not until the fledgling teams were all together at Cheltenham that it was seriously considered and subsequently taken forward, with Betty Reynolds and the

Bath City Women initially taking on the setting up of the new association.



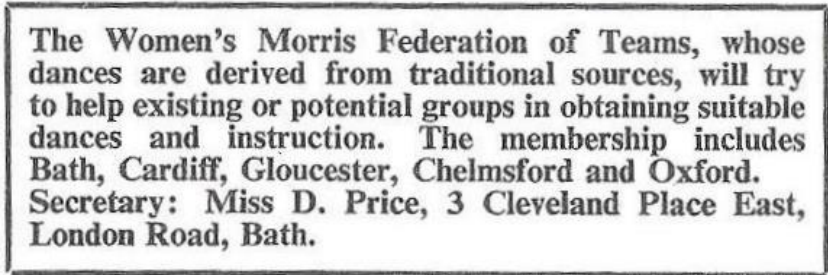
Figure 5: Poster for Cheltenham Day of Traditional Festivity, 1973.

## WMF is Born

The first thing of note was in the Spring 1974 edition of *Bristol Folk News*, which contained a report of that Cheltenham Day, headed 'The

Cheltenham Ladies Morris Instructional – a male view'.<sup>1</sup> It was uncredited, but it contained quotes from Tubby Reynolds, who had done some of the teaching. Roy Dommert had been due to teach but had been called away on business at the last minute, so hadn't been able to be there. The article also had a final paragraph headed 'The Women's Morris Federation "WoMF"', saying that more information about the organization was available from Betty Reynolds.

Next, a small box advertisement was placed in the Summer 1974 edition of the EFDSS magazine, *English Dance & Song* (Figure 6). The advertisement announced that the 'Women's Morris Federation of Teams, whose dances derive from traditional sources, will try to help existing or potential groups in obtaining suitable dances and instruction'.



**The Women's Morris Federation of Teams, whose dances are derived from traditional sources, will try to help existing or potential groups in obtaining suitable dances and instruction. The membership includes Bath, Cardiff, Gloucester, Chelmsford and Oxford. Secretary: Miss D. Price, 3 Cleveland Place East, London Road, Bath.**

Figure 6: WMF box advertisement, *English Dance & Song*, 36.2 (1974), 56.

Responses to this advert exceeded all expectation. They came from newly formed and potential women's teams based all around the country. Contacts were made, although progress towards a formal association remained slow, mainly because Bath City was a university side, with vacations and industrial placements tending to get in the way. However, letters were eventually sent to all the female sides we knew about, inviting them to come to the Inaugural Meeting of the Women's Morris Federation in October 1975, at the University. As most of the original Bath City Morris Women had by then graduated, the weekend was organized by Somerset Maids, a new Bath-based side started by Barbara Butler, who had been one of the Bath City dancers.

<sup>1</sup> 'The Cheltenham Ladies Morris Instructional – a Male View', *Bristol Folk News*, 14 (1974), 6.

The weekend was attended by thirteen sides. As well as Bath City, England's Glory and Somerset Maids, there were Cardiff Ladies, Bourne Bumpers, Earley Ladies, Holdens Goldens, Jacquard, Magog, Maids of Barum, New Esperance, Oxford (University) and Windsor.

It was during the dancing tour on the Saturday afternoon, that Roy Dommett was overheard to say to another male observer: 'I don't know what you think about all this, but I know one thing – you'll never stop it!'

## The Opposition

Well, of course, there were people who wanted to stop it. When we morris women started dancing in the early 1970s, there was considerable opposition, the majority, not surprisingly, from male morris dancers, although by no means all. The objections were, broadly, of the following types:

1. Firstly, those founded on assumptions concerning the roots of the dance, such as those expressed in a 1978 Morris Ring pamphlet, which asserted that 'all varieties of "morris" ritual are by tradition wholly masculine.'<sup>2</sup> A letter published in *Folk News* in 1978 started off in a similar vein by saying, 'Cotswold Morris is a men's fertility ritual.'<sup>3</sup> This writer added a statement that was outrageous even in the 70s, 'The woman's place in it is horizontal, after the dancing has been done'.
2. Secondly, there were those based on how women looked. Some examples of this were quoted in newspaper articles: 'The steps are not elegant. There's no reason why women should not dance morris in private, but they should leave public dancing to the men.'<sup>4</sup> 'Women just don't look right doing the Lancashire Morris dance [...] It's just essentially a

<sup>2</sup> Russell Wortley, *The XYZ of Morris* (London: The Morris Ring, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Harrington, 'On Your Backs!', *Folk News* 19 (1978), 5.

<sup>4</sup> 'Morris Men follow in Cecil's footsteps', *St Albans & Hatfield Review & Express*, 11 August 1977, p. 2

masculine dance'.<sup>5</sup> 'Women doing the morris at best look vaguely foolish, at worst grotesque.'<sup>6</sup>

3. Thirdly, there were those that came from male dancers who clearly saw female dancers as a threat which could undermine their own positions, especially with regard to their masculinity. One such appeared in a *Daily Mirror* article, although I accept that this may have been a journalistic paraphrase:<sup>7</sup>

*The Morris movement has spent forty years trying to convince people they are not a load of raving poofers. We're just getting accepted as normal, healthy blokes, when a load of women come on making Morris dancing look a bit sappy.*

4. And finally, there was the accusation that the women had a hidden agenda, and were just belligerent women's libbers trying to prove a point. For example, from a report on a 1978 Morris Ring discussion: 'What is the motive behind "Women's Morris"; are the girls really trying to maintain tradition or are they trying to show that they are just as good as the men?'<sup>8</sup> Or, from the 1978 letter to *Folk News* already quoted: '...the use by the women of the word "Morris" to describe their dancing is needlessly provocative. Moreover, the sight of women dressed up as men and copying the more vigorous male traditions, just to prove that they are as good as the boys is stupidly so.'<sup>9</sup>

Of course, these sentiments were not shared by all morris men, and there was, in truth, a lot of co-operation. There were many men who gave WMF and its members much needed support. Not just the well-known people already mentioned, like Roy Dommett, Tubby Reynolds and Arnold Woodley, but also many others who taught women's teams, or who joined them as musicians.

<sup>5</sup> 'Morris Men Only: Cloggies Refuse to Let Girls Step out in Bells, Flowers and Velvet Breeches', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 29 August 1977, p. 6

<sup>6</sup> 'Morris Dancing is for Men Only', *Beckenham Journal*, 12 February 1981, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> 'Dolly Dancers Tame the Cloggies', *Daily Mirror*, 13 June 1977, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> John Wilson, 'Women's Morris!!!: An Informal Discussion', *Rocking Chair* 7 (1978), 21-23 (p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Harrington, 'On Your Backs!'

## How WMF Organized Itself

Although the reasons for forming an organization for female morris dancers were relatively clear, little thought had been given as to how it would actually run. Therefore, discussion on an organizational structure was inevitably the main topic of that first General Meeting in October 1975. The meeting agreed a constitution which specified an executive made up of 'a President, a Secretary and a body of Representatives', and just one category of membership, that being for 'practising women's sides only'.<sup>10</sup> Individual membership was rejected as too complicated and expensive, although it was brought in the following year. The constitution also stated the aim of the society to be 'to maintain interest in women's morris and to provide a channel of communication between sides'. In retrospect, this was very simplistic, and perhaps naïve, but it was a start.

Unsurprisingly, the meeting went on to vote in Betty Reynolds as WMF's first President. Helen Parsons, of Cardiff Ladies, was returned as Secretary (Figure 7).

## WMF Services and Activities

As the first *formal* WMF Secretary, Helen hit the ground running, issuing the first of her regular Newsletters within a few weeks. In the very first issue, she asked sides to send in photos and press cuttings for a Federation scrapbook. She encouraged teams to run events, especially instructionals, which would be advertised through future newsletters. She requested information from sides about their dances, their kit and details of when and where they practised, which she went on to incorporate into address lists circulated later. She also asked for the notation of their dances, so she could begin to build up a notation library.

<sup>10</sup> 'Constitution of the Women's Morris Federation', 12 October 1975, Morris Federation archive.





Figure 7: Helen Parsons, WMF AGM Weekend, Cardiff 1977 (Photo: Val Parker).

Helen's later newsletters offered advice on practical topics such as organizing dance tours and instructionals, and how to collect money legally from the public. They contained articles on relevant topics, like the history of women in morris and detailed reports of instruc-

tionals, as well as letters airing members' views on the issues of the day, especially those concerning public image and standards.

All this effectively defined the role and purpose of the Federation from that time on, although things inevitably grew and evolved.

## **Executive Structure**

In fact, it was only about eighteen months into the life of WMF that it became clear its first constitutional arrangements were no longer adequate. Gill Smith, ex-Bath City and now of Strand on the Green Morris, wrote a letter to the newsletter suggesting that WMF needed to widen its aims and put more emphasis on events where sides could meet and dance together, in order to motivate them to improve their dancing.<sup>11</sup> Also, the Federation was starting to grow, from 22 member sides in its first year to 32 in its second. With every sign that this rise was going to continue, there was going to be an inevitable increase in workload, for the Secretary in particular, and the Federation needed to be ready.

As a consequence, a new, enlarged committee structure was agreed at the 1977 AGM. The job of Secretary was split into three, with the establishment of a Meetings (Events) Secretary, Bev Lane (ex-Cardiff Ladies), and a Technical Officer, Sarah Jarrett (ex-Bath City).

The two new office holdings were highly significant. Having a dedicated Meetings Secretary enabled WMF to begin a programme of instructionals and workshops which built up over time to address many issues, including providing dance material, giving tips on good presentation and helping teams to improve their performance. Having a dedicated Technical Officer led to, not only the formation of a useful library and archive that members could access, and the collection of data from those sides, but also the setting up of the Notation and Research Groups.

<sup>11</sup> Gill Smith [Letter ], *WMF Newsletter*, (September 1977)..

## **WMF Opens Up**

At that same 1977 AGM, Holdens Goldens surprised everyone by proposing that the word 'women's' be removed from the constitution. The word appeared in the membership eligibility section, in the stated aim of the organization and in the constitution's title, so the proposal would have had the effect of opening the Federation up to all dancers, regardless of gender, and, arguably, changing its name to the Morris Federation, at a stroke. However, as it hadn't been on the agenda, it was put to the wider membership through a subsequent postal referendum, and was defeated.

The experience of the 1977 AGM showed up several weaknesses in the original constitution. I was voted in as Secretary at that meeting, and so spent much of my first year overhauling it quite radically: introducing a set of standing orders to help meetings run more smoothly and devising a fairer, more sophisticated voting system.

Then, a couple of years after that, in 1980, a new organization came into being, which threw up a fresh challenge. This was Open Morris which was, as its name indicates, open to all morris teams, regardless of gender, although the majority of its early members were actually teams that danced in mixed sets. Such teams had no organization to go to, as the constitutions of neither the Morris Ring nor the Federation covered that option. Nor did they cover the situation where two single-sex teams operated as a joint club, attending bookings and events together.

And so, at the 1980 AGM, Windsor Morris put forward three new proposals addressing the membership and the name of the Federation.

After a long and very lively discussion, the first proposal, that WMF should admit mixed and joint sides, was passed, albeit by a very small margin. The second motion, to allow in men's sides, was put straight to the vote and narrowly defeated, also by a very small margin. It's worth stating here that a two-thirds majority was required for a constitutional change, and more people had, in fact, voted for the proposal than had voted against. The third motion, for the organization to be renamed the Morris Federation, was also defeated.

Another year passed, and the two failed proposals were put forward again and were, again, defeated.

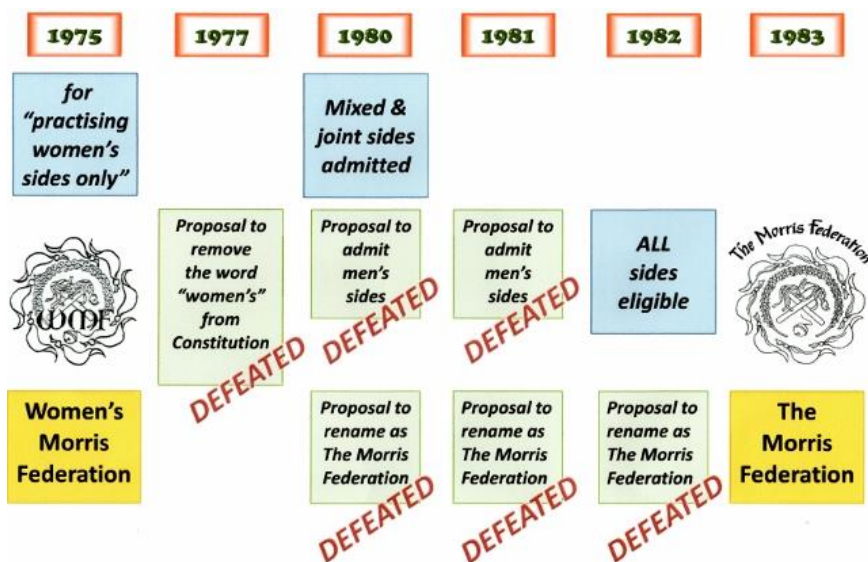


Figure 8: Constitutional changes, from Women's Morris Federation to Morris Federation.

All these repeated discussions at AGMs about membership and the organization's name were becoming tiresome (Figure 8). Time was always short and debates always left unfinished and unresolved. So the Federation, at Somerset Maids' suggestion, held a separate conference in May 1982 to consolidate all the arguments and thrash them out thoroughly over the course of a day. Only 11 sides were there, but they came to a consensus and put forward fresh proposals to the 1982 AGM. This time, the proposal to admit men's sides was passed with over 80% in favour. However, the proposal to change the name was still rejected, and it wasn't until a further year, and after a second conference, that it was finally passed, this time with no discussion and hardly a ripple. The Morris Federation had finally come into being.

## The Morris Federation

Thus, 1983 marked the end of an era. Although the first eight years of constitutional arguments and changes were at times frustrating and apparently never ending, the result was a solid framework which has since stood the test of time. The Morris Federation was

able to move on and to concentrate, ever since, on doing the job it was originally set up to do.

As Betty Reynolds put it (without actually mentioning gender at all!):<sup>12</sup>

*We started the Federation to give out information on material to be had and from where, to give friendship and help, and to have get-togethers to discuss problems and DANCE.*

<sup>12</sup> Beth Neill, Introduction to *Twenty One Years* ([Chalfont St Giles]: Morris Federation, 1996), p. 1.