

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

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

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

Introduction

Like the contribution in this volume by Val Parker on the Women's Morris Federation (WMF), this paper was triggered by writing the history of the first 25 years of the Morris Federation. Between us we are trying to cover all relevant issues, and this paper examines two important closely linked aspects of the women's morris teams that started in the 1970s. Female teams started to flourish then; this paper considers the challenges they had when choosing repertoire and costume.

What to dance?

Finding enough dancers and musicians was only the first step for women in the early 1970s. The biggest challenge was finding dances; this was even more pressing than what to wear (although that was very close behind).

There were three main issues affecting what dances we women did: availability of notation, precedents and perceived suitability for women.

Availability of Notation

In the early 1970s, it was difficult to find notation. There were Cecil Sharp's morris books,¹ but these were not readily available or easy to learn from. There was also *The Espérance Morris Book*,² but that provided little useful information. Bath City Morris Women found the dances in it rather disappointing, as most of the interesting parts had

¹ Cecil J Sharp and Herbert C. MacIlwaine, (George Butterworth), *The Morris Book*, 2nd ed., 5 parts (London: Novello, 1912-24).

² Mary Neal, *The Espérance Morris Book : A Manual of Morris Dances, Folk-Songs and Singing Games*, 2 parts (London: Curwen, 1910-12).

been removed and replaced by monotonous figures such as dancing on the spot.

In 1974, Lionel Bacon's *Handbook of Morris Dances* (the black book) was published by the Morris Ring.³ It included both Cotswold and border dances, and should have been a valuable resource. But it was not clear to women dancing at the time whether we were able to buy it. There were certainly plenty of rumours that it would not be sold to women. Val Parker managed to get a copy by asking one of Bath City morris men to buy a copy for her. But we have never found any instances of any woman actually asking to buy one and being refused.

Although many morris men were opposed to women dancing, there were some who were willing to teach women. This was the commonest way that women learnt the morris in the early 1970s. At least 12 of the 22 teams who joined the WMF when it started were initially taught by local morris men.⁴ They taught what they knew, which was mostly the 'traditional' Cotswold repertoire of the Morris Ring teams they danced with.

Some of the men prominent in the morris world were also willing to help. The most notable was Roy Dommett, who was initially Bath City Morris Women's main source of dances. As well as providing notations to Betty Reynolds, he taught workshops organized by the team, including one in 1973, where he taught dances from Wheatley and Ilmington, plus some garland dances, to women from Bath, Cardiff, Cheltenham and Oxford. This gave them a small stock of dances to work on, as well as a boost in confidence and morale.

Workshops at folk festivals were another potential source of dance notation, but this was not always an easy answer for women in the early 1970s. For instance, at Sidmouth Folk Festival in 1971, Griff Jones, the leader of the beginners' morris workshop, barred women even from watching. Roy was more welcoming and taught a couple of dances that year at an unofficial workshop for women. The following year, he suggested and ran two 'Ladies Ritual Dance Workshops',

³ Lionel Bacon, *A Handbook of Morris Dances*. (Henlow: The Morris Ring, 1974).

⁴ 'Side History Records', Morris Federation archive.

then 'Women's Ritual' workshops were programmed in 1974, 1975 and 1976, but the need for separate workshops then disappeared as the men teaching the starters' and advanced morris workshops at Sidmouth were ready to welcome women to them.⁵

Precedent

Almost everything written about repertoire in the early days of WMF included something about whether the dances had been performed in the past by women. Precedent was very important to many of the women who started dancing in the early 1970s. We felt that historical precedents would add weight to our right to dance the morris.

There was also a general assumption that women's morris may have been a different entity to men's morris; many women assumed that women who had danced the morris in the past had had different dances from the men. This was supported by the name of the organization started in 1975: the Women's Morris Federation. Many of the women were keen to learn 'women's morris', but could not find any evidence that this had ever existed.

In 1972, Bath City found out about Sam Bennett's girls' team which he formed in Ilmington in 1912. He'd failed to get enough men interested in establishing a team so he taught women instead. Women's teams fell on this information with glee – we were delighted to have a Cotswold morris tradition that women had performed in public in the past. 'Maid of the Mill' and other Ilmington dances became popular 'women's' dances. In 1995, Windsor Morris recorded that they danced Ilmington because it was 'deemed politically correct at the time for a women's side'.⁶

Many teams started by dancing North-west morris, because they were aware that women and girls had danced there in the past. North-west dances were considered to be more acceptable for women than Cotswold morris, at least by the men who danced Cotswold.

⁵ Derek Schofield, *The First Week in August: Fifty Years of the Sidmouth Festival* (Matlock: Sidmouth International Festival, 2004), pp. 71, 81, 88, 94.

⁶ Beth Neill, *Windsor Morris: The History So Far...*, (Windsor: Windsor Morris, 1995), p.2.

But precedent wasn't enough by itself. For instance, William Kimber had taught Headington to Mary Neal's *Espérance Club*, but there was an existing team in Headington so many women felt that they should avoid dancing their dances.

Suitability for women

Perceived suitability was the third major factor that affected the repertoire of the first women's teams.

WMF had an 'official' view on this issue, which was discussed at the inaugural general meeting in 1975. The minutes record that 'It was agreed that sides should be able to dance as they wish, but also that they should avoid dancing those traditions accepted to be traditionally for men and which have never been danced by women, e.g. Bampton, Abingdon etc.'⁷

In February 1976, a WMF meeting at an instructional in Cardiff decided which dances were most suitable for a new side: Ilmington, Wheatley, Knutsford, Lancaster and Basque Garland, Pershore stick dance and 'Mona's Delight', because they were 'fairly straight forward in themselves and give a reasonable selection of the type of dances done by women'.⁸ Garland dances were not generally danced by men and were seen as being quite feminine, so they were therefore suitable (even those that were not English!). 'Mona's Delight', from the Isle of Man, was not a morris dance, but it was traditionally danced by women.

This list of 'suitable' dances illustrates how the majority of women's teams in the 1970s danced a variety of morris styles, i.e. Cotswold, North-west, garland and border.

Some traditions, such as Longborough, were thought to be unsuitable as they were too strenuous. And at least one specific step was avoided by women in the 1970s: galleys. WMF's newsletter in March 1977 included an invitation to an instructional organized by Windsor Morris, which was going to focus on presentation and stepping. It

⁷ Women's Morris Federation (WMF), 'Minutes of The Annual General Meeting, Sunday, October 12th 1975', p. 2, Morris Federation archive.

⁸ WMF, 'Minutes of Meeting 29th Feb 76', p. 3, Morris Federation archive.

was based on Fieldtown, but only the sidestep and stick dances ‘as these don’t include the galley’.⁹

One of the other influences on what was ‘suitable’ for women was kit. The first women’s teams in the 1970s often did not consider the practicalities of morris dancing and were far more influenced by current fashions. Many teams either avoided dances that did not work with their kit or altered the dances to make them possible.

What did Women Dance in the Mid 1970s?

Wherever possible, we are basing the history of the Morris Federation on its archives. Soon after WMF started, it gathered information (including repertoire) about its members by asking them to complete Side History Records. We have records from 18 of the 22 teams who joined WMF during its first year, 1975.¹⁰ These show that what they danced initially was dictated by the availability of teachers, notation and instructionals. Then some teams changed their repertoires to dances considered more suitable for women, especially those that had been danced by women in the past.

The most popular tradition danced by women in the 1970s was clearly Ilmington, performed by 17 of the 18 teams, demonstrating just how important precedent was. The next most popular Cotswold tradition was Wheatley (10). Eleven sides danced North-west and seven garland, often in addition to several Cotswold traditions.

Two-thirds of the 18 teams were first taught by local morris men. Of these, five initially learned traditions that WMF said women shouldn’t do, such as Bampton and Headington. Four of them soon stopped and changed to dances then considered suitable for women such as Ilmington, Wheatley, North-west and garland. Only Teign Ladies continued: when they added Ilmington in 1978 they kept their existing repertoire of Bampton, Adderbury, Headington and Fieldtown.

⁹ Windsor Morris, ‘WMF Instructional at Windsor – May ’77’, enclosure accompanying *WMF Newsletter* (March 1977), Morris Federation archive,

¹⁰ ‘Side History Records.’

Quick Progress

The workshops and instructionals organized by the first women's teams and WMF concentrated on learning new dances, which increased the notations available.

The initial scarcity of notation also led WMF to be proactive in recording and publishing notation. By 1979, the Federation's Notation Group started. One of its aims was to provide dance notation for sides with no access to an instructor.

So although the first women's teams struggled for notation, the problem was short-lived. Notation, workshops and instructors all soon became available. Precedent and suitability also became less important, and by 1977, WMF had stopped advising its members about what they should or shouldn't dance.

What to Wear?

The next big question was kit. What to wear was often a subject of great debate in the early days of the WMF. In the 1970s, there were no obvious models available that the teams could copy.



Figure 1: Espérance Girls' Club (from Mary Neal, *The Espérance Morris Book*, 2nd ed. (London: Curwen, 1910), p. xiv).

The only historical model available was the Espérance Girls' Club (Figure 1). When responding to an enquiry from a student in 1976, Val Parker said 'The past, apart from Mary Neal, tells us nothing, so most sides have adopted a kit which "fits" the image, or what they like and what "suits" the style of dancing'.¹¹

In fact, the photographs in WMF's Side History Records and scrap-books¹² show that many sides chose an old-fashioned look, which they felt 'fitted' their image of the morris. These frequently included long skirts, influenced by the fashions of the time (especially early Laura Ashley). Other old-fashioned touches included mobcaps or bonnets and aprons, frequently together in the same kit.

Teams who opted for patterned fabrics were frequently caught out, being unable to kit out new members as fashions changed and fabrics became unavailable. Some changed their old-fashioned costumes quite quickly, having found them to be impractical, especially for Cotswold morris, as long skirts made all leg movements invisible and some difficult. But what we looked like and what was acceptable for women in the 1970s mostly took precedence over what fitted the dances. And shorter skirts could cause problems; a few male dancers would lie down on the floor in order to get a 'good' view.

Women's sides that were closely associated with a men's team (i.e., joint teams) often tried to find kit that matched what the men wore. For instance, Bath City Women's first kit in 1972 was intended to echo their male counterparts, with white blouses and black short skirts to match the men's white shirts and black breeches. But this didn't last long, as we moved onto long skirts with *broderie anglaise* aprons in 1973, which were devised after Val Parker found pictures of the Espérance Girls in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (Figure 2).

¹¹ Valerie Parker, Letter in response to enquiry from a student, 28 July 1976,, Morris Federation archive.

¹² WMF, 'Events Scrapbook 1976-1981' and 'General Scrapbook 1', Morris Federation archive.



Figure 2: Bath City Morris at Bampton, 1973 (Copyright Val Parker).

In the 1970s, women usually wore skirts, especially when 'dressed up'. Only about ten women's teams who began in the 1970s chose from the start to wear trousers or breeches. The first was probably Royal Borough, who wore yellow trousers from 1974 to 1976, but then chose to change to long blue pinafore dresses. The others were Updown Hill in 1976, then Hamwih, Jackstraws, Norfolk Biffin and Oyster Morris in 1977, followed by Belas Knapp, Immingham School, Knighton and Ring O'Belles in 1978. Bucknell also started in trousers in 1978, but they based their kit on a photograph of the Bucknell team in 1870s, who were, of course, all men. Some of the sides who wore trousers hedged their bets by wearing smocks, both for their traditional appearance and because they hid their figures.

A few sides that started in skirts realized quite quickly how poorly they suited Cotswold morris, and changed to trousers. Windsor (1975) and Phoenix (1976) both started in knee-length skirts but soon changed to trousers: Windsor in 1978 followed by Phoenix in 1979. Holdens Goldens had the fastest change, from long skirts in 1976 to short skirts in 1977 and finally to trousers in 1978 (Figures 3-5).



Figure 3 (left): Holdens Goldens in 1976; Figure 4 (centre): Holdens Goldens in 1977; Figure 5 (right) Holdens Goldens in 1978.

But they were in the minority. In the 1970s women were only just starting to escape the pressure to be 'ladylike' and attractive in a docile way, and some were reluctant to reveal their shape. Sides were often aware that wearing trousers or breeches risked condemnation and accusations of 'trying to be like men'. So most sides wore skirts, whatever type of morris they danced. A couple of sides, Queen of Herts (1977) and Glorishears of Brummagem (1978), chose culottes as a compromise.

WMF tried to make it clear that it was not there to decide what its members should wear, unlike its approach to repertoire. Val Parker, Secretary, said in the Newsletter in 1980 that WMF had always avoided setting itself up as a judge of others, including whether its members 'must or must not dance in trousers'.¹³

Footwear was important, since it affected the style of dancing. Men's Cotswold sides wore everyday leather shoes in the 1970s but there

¹³ Valerie Parker, letter to Women's Morris Federation members, January 1980, p. 2. Morris Federation archive.

was no female equivalent. Sides in skirts often wore shoes with heels, but even the smallest heel restricted their calf muscles and made it impossible to avoid putting weight on the heel – inappropriate for springy Cotswold stepping. Some teams tried plimsolls, but they did not provide enough support for strenuous dancing. When trainers designed for vigorous sports became available at the end of the 1970s, Cotswold morris sides who wanted to improve their dancing adopted them enthusiastically. Better footwear led to the evolution of ‘white shoe’ morris teams, who danced higher and slower. Although most of these were male, the notable female example was Windsor Morris.

Most North-west sides opted to wear clogs from the start, seeing them as ‘traditional’ footwear, often not aware that many teams in the Northwest had worn shoes.

Women in skirts or culottes usually wore their bells on their footwear or around their ankles; some teams chose to wear bells around their wrists instead or as well; and some to have none at all. The women who opted for trousers or breeches usually wore their bells around their shins, as did some women in shorter skirts.

Most of the early teams wore something on their heads. Many chose straw hats, while others wore bonnets, scarfs or decorated Alice bands. A few were more unconventional, such as Cardiff Ladies who wore bowler hats.

There were only a few mixed teams in the 1970s, but they had their own challenges. Some mixed Cotswold sides chose to put their men in trousers or breeches and their women in skirts, risking giving more of the impression of a social or country dance side. But there were sides who decided to all wear trousers or breeches, such as Fenstanton in 1978, one of the first mixed teams to join WMF when it started to open up. The few mixed North-west teams chose skirts for women and trousers or breeches for men.

A few teams managed to find kits that have stood the test of time. When they started in 1977, Betty Lupton’s Ladle Laikers chose blue dresses with white pinafores and red tights. In 2017, this kit is still going strong.

Over time, the controversy about what female morris dancers wore decreased. Although the Morris Federation's members still display a wide variety of kit, most sides have settled into something in keeping with the public's image of morris dancers, with a few still reminiscent of the early days of WMF.