

Beginners' Guide to English Folk Costume



Boss Morris, Image: EFDSS, Photographer: Brian Slater

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English Folk Dance and Song Society

The English Folk Dance and Song Society is the national folk arts development organisation for England, based at Cecil Sharp House, Camden. We champion English folk music, dance and related arts as part of the rich and diverse cultural landscape of the UK. We are a registered charity, a membership organisation, and a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England. Through our Education programme we enable people, of all ages and backgrounds, to experience high quality, relevant and inspiring folk arts learning, in schools, with music hubs, and cultural organisations across England. Cecil Sharp House is also home to EFDSS' Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML), England's national folk music and dance archive, which provides free online access to thousands of searchable folk manuscripts and other materials.

The Full English

The Full English was a unique nationwide project which took place 2012 - 2014 unlocking the hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) and run in partnership with other cultural organisations across England. The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary, and special educational needs settings, and ran community, family, and adult learning events. The Full English was supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Folk Music Fund, and The Folklore Society.

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Section One: Introduction

This resource is a guide to just some of the many wonderful costumes which are worn for an array of English folk customs including plays, dances, and community festivals. This resource is a celebration of the ingenuity and skill of costume makers past and present.

English Folk: The costumes examined here are part of England's rich folklore inheritance. This inheritance includes dances, plays, and customs performed by normal people. Many of these traditions had declined by the early part of the 20th century for a number of reasons, including the First and Second World Wars, social welfare changes and the arrival of more varied entertainments, particularly television. However, that was not the end, because some individuals took it upon themselves to revive lapsed traditions; researching them and creating their own, new versions. Historians looking at folk customs actually think that we should see traditions such as morris dancing as a sequence of revivals. Each revival makes the custom relevant for the present day, taking elements from the past which suit it best. Many of these customs are now performed at events such as folk festivals. There are hundreds of folk festivals across England where you can see people in traditional costumes, why not find one near you?

No Costumes – Just Clothing: Some types of English customs such as morris dancing are performative, that is they are meant to be watched, whilst others are social and are about participation. Historically these social customs were performed in people's everyday or 'Sunday best' clothing. Some of these are explored in the Other Dance (section 14) part of this resource. These dances and customs were considered to be a normal part of people's lives. People were not going to a folk dance they were just going to a dance, a normal social activity with other people from their community. Today some social dances and customs are still performed in this way. Special costumes were not, and are not, a necessity. If you want to do an English folk activity don't feel as though you have to wear a special costume, it can be done in any clothing!

Costumes: A costume differs from everyday clothing in that the act of putting on a costume signifies performance. The transformation of clothing into costume is an internal, psychological change within the mind of the wearer. Normal clothing becomes costume when the wearer starts performing. Unless the garments are very different from everyday dress, audiences might not be able to differentiate costumes from clothing, until it is clear that they are witnessing a performance. Costume can be highly decorative, full of beautiful detail or they can be a simple token of

performance, such as a ribbon, which shows to the audience and performer that something special and different is taking place. There has been much written about the transformative power of costume, that is costume giving you the power, or letting you get away with, activities that would normally be unacceptable. Halloween costumes today give children the transformative power to knock on strangers' doors begging for sweets. Likewise, costumes of the past would have given participants an excuse to do activities, often very similar to begging, which they would otherwise not have been allowed to do. This resource should offer you lots of ideas about special clothing which people wore, and continue to wear, in order to perform a wide range of English traditions.



Great Western Morris, Image: Megan Cumbes

Section Two: Early Morris

Where: Initially in rich or royal households, later moving out into rural locations.

Context: It is likely that Medieval morris was part of a wider European dance trend. Morris appears to have been created as a medieval form of courtly entertainment relating in some way to the Moors. In medieval-English, this meant 'Muslim', but by the Renaissance 'Moor' was being used to mean people of North-African descent. Many of the early morris performances would have been part of masques, an elaborate courtly entertainment with outlandish costumes and special effects. The performance and choreography would have been very different to the styles of morris done today. It was possibly performed as part of a drama containing characters such as the Fool (section 12) and female characters such as Beauty and Venus. This early type of morris eventually evolved into several different forms including Cotswold, border, northwest, and carnival.

What: The earliest reference to costume comes from the account books of a wealthy family from Lanherne in Cornwall in 1466. The account book of the family notes that they brought 48 bells and a large amount of paper and glue with which to perform a disguising and a morris. Disguisings were the forerunner to elaborate masques, involving costly costumes and elaborate scenery. Paper in its old form was thick, like parchment, and would have been imported and very expensive. What they did with all that paper and glue we can only imagine!

One account from 1511 describes a performance in the court of Henry VIII and mentions costumes of fine silk cloth in red and white. Each of the four dancers had 200 glittering 'baubles' on their costumes and 108 bells attached to their arms and legs – they would have made quite an impression. Over the course of the next two hundred years morris moved out of the court and into the countryside where it was learnt and danced by tradesmen as a form of additional income. With this came a change in the costume from garments costing hundreds of pounds, to everyday clothes adorned with additional items (particularly bells) which were used to symbolise morris. These symbolic items included, feathers, sashes and bell-pads. Bell pads which are still worn by many morris sides today, are pieces of cloth or leather, tied just below the knee which have many rows of bells attached to them. These additional symbolic items could have been worn over regular clothing, or special shirts and breeches made for dancing in.

Why Bells? It is likely that medieval morris dancers wore bells because in masques bells were used to represent Moorish people. Because of the sheer volume of bells used, it is possible that the earliest dancers had bells all over their body. By the 17th century bells had largely become confined to a special bell-pad worn on the shin.

Why Handkerchiefs? Only in the 1700s do dancers start to use handkerchiefs as a dance prop. People started to use handkerchiefs for morris when the dance was done without the special coats with long-hanging sleeves which were worn in the Medieval and Renaissance period. Later dancers did not have access to these special coats which would have added colour and movement to the dance. As a substitute they pinned fabric pieces to their clothing and eventually these became the large handkerchiefs, held in the hands, which are used by dancers today.



William Kempe, from Nine Days Wonder (1600)

Section Three: Cotswold Morris



Bristol Morris Men Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Where: Cotswold morris, also known as South-Midlands morris, was collected primarily from the counties of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, but also south Northamptonshire. Although there is some geographic overlap, the Cotswold style of morris dance was not exclusively collected from The Cotswolds. This is a specific geographic area between Oxford and Cheltenham, which contains the Cotswold Hills.

Context: Cotswold style of morris was performed into the 20th century as an important part of village festivities. It was normally danced by tradesmen (builders, blacksmiths etc.) and men who worked on farms. Cotswold morris was performed around the Christian festival of Whitsun, which is also called Pentecost. Whitsun is celebrated 50 days after Easter at the beginning of the summer. From the Medieval period until 1971 it was a public holiday. In the 18th and 19th centuries teams performed at Whitsun Ales, which were money-making festivals hosted by the church. There they were often involved in competitions which could sometimes get nasty – there are many records of morris dancers getting into fights! At Whitsun dancers would leave home for up to two weeks at a time to do a tour of the surrounding villages, getting paid in money, alcohol, and food. The dancers were proud of their appearance and made a big effort with their costume, the historian

Keith Chandler estimates that an agricultural worker would have spent around 5 weeks' wages on his costume!

What: Cotswold morris dancers in the 19th century used to wear thin soled smart shoes which would have let them dance lightly and with elegance. It was not unusual for dancers to wear through the soles of their shoes in one season. Teams wore a diverse array of hats or caps, either trousers or breeches, and had white shirts decorated with a variety of decorative items such as: coloured belts; braces; rosettes; ribbons; single sashes; armbands; and baldrics. Arm bands are strips of cloth, tied along the arm, often tied just below the bicep, whilst baldrics are two sashes, or thick ribbons, which are worn diagonally across the shoulder and meet in the centre front and back. Bell-pads were normally worn by dancers on the shin of the leg, these too were often decorated with ribbons. In the 19th century ribbons referred to any narrow strip of fabric applied as decoration to a garment. Ribbons today are normally smooth and shiny like silk, but even into the 1960s ribbons made of wool were quite common.



Fool's Gambit, Image: Charlotte Dover

Women: There are a couple of Victorian references to women dancing morris. Percy Manning (1897) recorded that at Spelsbury in Oxfordshire the girls wore “*a head-gear of ribbons and flowers, with short dresses, and bells on their legs, similar to those worn by the men.*” In the 1900s some women and girls did morris dancing as part of the Esperance Club; this was a charity in Somers Town, North London, which provided help for female factory workers. The Club performed morris dances all over the country wearing a version of rural dress including frilled aprons and sun-bonnets. Many modern teams have both male and female dancers, and while some have gender specific clothes, others have a costume which both men and women can wear comfortably.



Mary Neal's Esperance Dancers, Image: VWML

Why White? Cotswold morris dancers often wear white clothes. It is probable that white clothing was preferred in the 19th century because of the dance's link at that time to the season of *Whitsun* which is a contraction of White-Sunday). Whitsun has been linked to the colour white since the 1600s. Christians often proclaimed their faith on this day processing from their church on whit-walks dressed in white. It was also the traditional day of baptism into the church, in the Anglican Church babies were often dressed in white for their baptism. Fashion might also have played a role, in the 1800s white was a fashionable colour for trousers! It is likely that the dancers wore white trousers initially because they were fashionable and then stuck with it because of the seasonal link with Whitsun.

Section Four: Border morris



Rag Morris, Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Where: The English-Welsh borders - the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire, and Worcestershire.

Context: In the 19th century border morris was a simple form of dance usually performed by men for money. Groups of dancers would tour their local areas in the winter months when there was less work on the land. Border morris was a cadging activity like busking today; the dancers offered entertainment (dance) in return for money. Historical border teams were small, and the music which accompanied the dancing featured much percussion, including instruments such as triangles and drums.

What: In the early part of the 19th century Cotswold, Border, and Northwest morris clothing would have been indistinguishable from each other. Dancers would have gone out in their finest Sunday best clothing, perhaps dressed in white, covered in ribbons, and topped off with a smart hat. Throughout the 19th century the quality of costumes in the Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire area deteriorated. One cost efficient method was to attach coloured strips of rags to old clothes. Sometimes these clothes were normal jackets turned inside out, in other places the (mostly male) dancers wore women's clothing (see molly dancing, section 8). In some places rags were even replaced with strips of paper. By the 1920s some dancers were wearing fancy dress costumes. There were two main purposes to the wide styles of costume used in this type of morris 1) to entertain and 2) to symbolise performance. This was something special and different, this was morris dancing.

Face Paint: In the 19th and early 20th centuries it was common practice for morris dancers in this geographic area to apply soot or other black substances to their faces. The most probable reason for this is that the dancers were cashing in on the popularity of minstrelsy, a highly offensive form of entertainment where white people applied black face paint as part of a show which featured the gross misrepresentation black people. In the 1970s revival of Border morris the historical use of face paint was not properly understood. Dancers thought that black make up had originally been used for disguise. Over time, dancers became aware that applying black face paint was offensive; teams took to wearing different coloured face paint, or masks instead, and now no morris teams dance in full blackface.



Boggart's Breakfast, Border Morris, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Further Developments: Today Border morris dances create eye-catching costumes often using facial disguise and rag jackets. Rag jackets, also known as tatter jackets or 'raggles' are a waistcoat, or coat covered in many rows of small fabric strips. Whilst some teams wear old fashioned working style clothing replicating what might have been worn in the past, other teams have used the rag jacket-and-disguise combination to great visual effect. Alternative morris is a recent development with teams creating dark, gothic style costumes. They dance wearing mostly black costumes and create very striking performances, often with heavy drumming and eerie tunes in minor keys.

Section Five: Northwest Morris



Royton Morris, Image: VWML

Where: Lancashire and Cheshire.

Context: Before the 1850s buildings were often carpeted with rushes, a plant which grows by water. Once a year the community would come together to replace the rushes on the floor. This was a big occasion, there was a fancy parade and people often dressed up in special clothing. Alfred Burton (1891) recorded that the men who carried the rush cart wore: *“straw hats with light blue ribbons, white shirt sleeves tied with many coloured ribbons, the brightest handkerchiefs possible for sashes and ribbons again below the knee.”* Morris dancers were an important part of these large community celebrations. By the 1880s Rose Queen festivals were also established in this area which often included a decorative rush-cart made for the festivities and morris dancers. Towns competed to have the biggest and best team in the fanciest costume, sometimes even owning the costumes which were then hired to the dancers for the day. Two types of modern morris dancing have developed from this history: carnival morris (Section 6) which has evolved from the large morris teams which performed at large town festivals; and northwest morris, sometimes also called clog morris, which has greater links to the broader folk festival scene and recreates the older style of dance.

What: In the 19th century teams were limited by the amount of money which they had available. Some teams kitted themselves out in suitable items which were mass produced and could be brought relatively cheaply. For example, a number of teams wore knickerbockers – a type of early football short, which would have looked similar to breeches. Other teams wore sporting headgear such as cricket caps. For those with more money, velvet, an expensive, luxurious material, was used to make breeches and waistcoats. Breeches were decorated with lace, ribbons, and occasionally small bells. Many female teams wore white everyday dresses with a diagonal sash, which in this area, appears to have been symbolic of morris dance. Modern northwest morris teams often choose colourful clothing, inspired by the festival atmosphere of the old rush cart processions. In the 1970s it was common for women's teams to wear clothing inspired by 19th century fashions. Today male northwest dancers often wear breeches and have many colourful accessories such as a sash, rows of beads, and highly decorated hats covered in flowers and feathers.



Sidmouth Steppers, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Clogs: Whilst Victorian and Edwardian teams seem to have preferred smart black shoes, which would have been a change from their everyday clogs, many modern northwest teams wear clogs (see Section 7). Clogs have become a distinctive feature of this style of dancing. The hard wooden sole is protected from wear either by a shaped band of iron, like a horse's shoe, or a layer of rubber. The dances often have heavy stepping, the feet hitting the floor in time with the music, producing a very upbeat, almost carnival, atmosphere.

Section Six: Carnival Morris



Solway Solitaires 1979, Image: Ian McKinnon

Where: Northwest England.

Context: Carnival morris evolved from the large town carnival movement which developed in the mid-19th century. Some large teams such as Horwich Prize Medal dancers had a number of different branches which included a girls 'line'. The number of men doing this type of morris declined in the early 20th century, and Carnival morris is now generally considered to be a female form of dance even though membership does not actively exclude male dancers.

Carnival morris used to be a regular feature of large town carnivals which included team competitions. However, since the 1990s the majority of performances have been for competitions alone, these are held in large spaces such as gyms. Carnival morris is danced to recorded music, often re-mixes of popular songs. The dancers move as one large unit with very precise hand and leg positions. Carnival morris dancers do not regularly perform at folk festivals, but instead compete and socialise at a vibrant community level. Often the team is supported or trained by family members who have been morris dancers for several generations.



Goostrey Morris, Image: Jan Guyatt

Historical Costumes: Women dancing morris in the northwest in the 19th century had many varied costumes. A 1901 team from Stockport wearing amber and black costumes was awarded third prize for the “*neatest and most artistically dressed lady in any section*”. In some teams the women wore velvet breeches like the boys, whilst others wore Zouave style jackets, which were also popular amongst male northwest and rapper sword dancers. Zouave style waistcoats and jackets became popular in the 19th century, inspired by the uniform of the Zouave Algerian/French regiment. Similar to a bolero top, the jacket does not have a centre back seam and the front edges are tapered and do not meet. Some of these jackets and waistcoats were trimmed with fringing and were referred to being in the ‘Spanish’ style. White dresses with colourful sashes were popular until the 1920s. This might well have been an economical choice, white was a common summer dress colour. Carnival morris was performed as part of wider parades and festivities where people would dress up, often in themed costume. By the 1920s some teams were wearing special carnival style costumes, such as fairy costumes with pixie hats. Sashes continued to be worn until the 1960s, and until recently, medals won at competitions were attached to the sash or team waistcoat.

Modern Costumes: Today, like the clean white dresses of the historical dancers the kit is well kept, often with pristine white socks, and white plimsolls or pumps. The dancers' appearance is very important, and even part of the judging criteria for the competitions. Over time, probably helped by increasingly larger competitions, the costumes became standardised. Today, a typical girl's carnival morris costume is a dress which finishes above the knee, with large full sleeves which are gathered to the wrist. A small group of little bells are attached to the white plimsolls, often by coloured ribbon. The dresses are very decorative, shiny fabrics are often used and often applied in bold patterns to a contrasting background. There is no limit to the patterns or materials used, but the costumes are designed to be eye-catching, attractive, and fun for the dancers to wear. The leader usually wears a contrasting costume.



Royton Seniors, Image: Ian McKinnon

Section Seven: Clog Dance



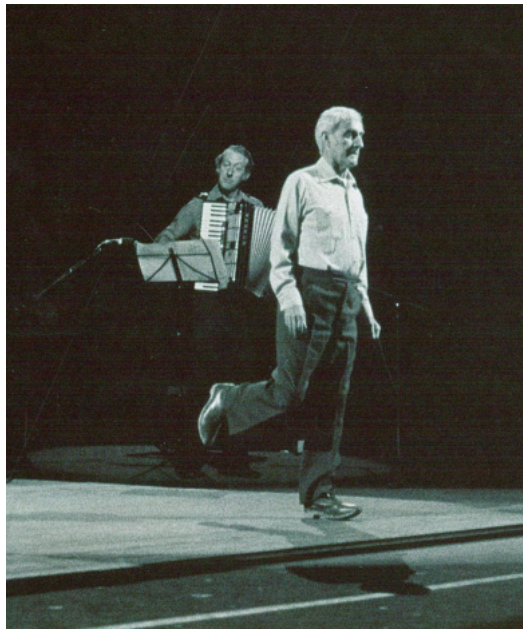
Heage Windmillers, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Where: Clog dancing developed into its most intricate form in the North of England and the counties of: Lancashire, Yorkshire, Durham, and Cumbria.

Clogs: English clogs are a shoe with a wooden sole (the bottom of the shoe) but a leather upper (top half). Until the 1920s they were the regular, everyday footwear for working people all over Britain. Because of the wooden sole they took longer to wear out than regular shoes and it was cheaper to replace the sole of the shoe with wood rather than leather. English dancing clogs are different to Dutch clogs or modern Crocs, they are tight and close fitting which allows the dancer a lot of control over the movements of their feet. English clogs with an iron or rubber protective layer on the sole are also worn for northwest morris (section 5).

Context: Clog dancing is a form of step dance. The main focus and skill of a step dancer is in their footwork and dancers can create many different types of sounds using their feet alone: Irish and tap dance are other examples of step dance. Clog dancing was often performed very casually, people would dance at home, in the pubs or in the street. Pat Tracey (1959) wrote this wonderful description of the everyday-but-smart clothing worn by clog dancers performing in the street in the early 20th century.

“For their performance the dancers usually wore their normal working clothes – brown fustian trousers, striped shirt with red muffler knotted round the neck, navy blue jacket and soft cap. They danced in their everyday clogs though these were usually somewhat lighter in weight than those worn by the majority of weavers [...] the street dancers normally belonged to a set of rather dandified working youths and the lighter clog was part of their accepted dress.”



Sam Sherry, Image: Ian Anderson, VWML

In the 1800s clog dancing became a type of sport and competitions were popular. Like jockeys, dancers would perform in colours which would have made them easy to identify. Both men and women danced in breeches which would have allowed their leg movements to be seen. In the Victorian period clog dancing was a popular act in musical hall or variety shows, which were the predecessor to shows such as *Britain's Got Talent*. Sometimes dancers would wear special themed costumes as part of their act. The famous comedian Charlie Chaplin started his career in music hall as a clog dancer. Over time clogs, and clog dancing fell out of favour to be replaced with lighter tap shoes, and different percussive stage dancing styles.

Clog dancers today wear many different types of clothes. Some wear costumes inspired by the northern workers who brought clog dancing to new heights of technical brilliance in the 1800s. Other modern dancers wear contemporary clothing and fashion, using items which can be purchased from high street shops. Still others have a specially made team costume which are designed to present a colourful team image for public performance.

Section Eight: Molly Dance



Seven Sisters Molly, Image: Ben Potton

Where: East Anglia: Norfolk; Suffolk; Cambridgeshire; and parts of Bedfordshire; Essex; Hertfordshire; and Lincolnshire.

Context: Molly dancing was connected to Plough Monday customs. Plough Monday was the last day of the Christmas holiday. In the 19th century 'Plough Jags', a group of men who worked on farms, would take the plough through villages and ask people for money; it was another cadging activity. There was a dark undertone similar to Halloween's 'trick or treat'. If no money was received, then the plough jags could threaten to plough up the unlucky victim's front garden, although there are no verified records of this ever actually happening! Molly dancing was performed with or without a plough by men who worked on the land. The music, costumes, and dances, were usually considered to be quite rough, lacking the complexity of other dance forms. The dances themselves were often versions of country or couple dances (section 14).

What: In its 19th century form molly dance was often linked with poverty. Although we have references to dancers wearing ribbons these might have been strips of any fabric rather than expensive shiny satin. Some groups wore a wide sash of cloth, or a baldric, adorned with rosettes. Some of the costumes seem to have been deliberately humorous. *The Cambridge Chronicle* (1851) records “Parties of five, dressed and beribboned in a most grotesque fashion to represent various beings, human or otherwise”. The costumes seem to have a focus on humour or subverting normal expectations by dressing in an unusual manner. In the 1930s groups used masks, face paint, and even goggles!



The Fool Plough 1813, George Walker

One of the most distinct elements of molly costume is the use of cross-dressing (see section 12). At least one, but sometimes several members of the team would dress up in women's clothing. Sometimes the molly was dressed in fine clothes and treated with mock respect, but s/he was also the butt of lewd jokes. 19th century molly groups took pride in the appearance of their 'Moll' competing amongst themselves to see who could produce the best dressed. This is probably where the name *molly* comes from. In the past *Molly* was an offensive word levied at a man who was homosexual, or a man who did chores that were considered to be woman's work such as cooking or clothes washing.

Molly dancers today either try to give a historical feel to the dance by wearing Edwardian style working men's attire adorned with sashes, rosettes, rags, or ribbons. Or else teams wear exuberant costumes which subvert our accepted dressing patterns; wearing loud, bright colours and clothes which are not normally worn together. Some costumes play with, and celebrate, the cross-dressing history of molly dancing. Teams such as Gog Magog Molly wear costumes which make it difficult to see who is a man and who is a woman. It is common for contemporary teams to wear face paint in bright colours and patterns, and many teams have at least one man dressed in women's clothing, s/he is often known as 'The Molly'.



Pig Dyke Molly, Image: Indi Perry.

Section Nine: Longsword



Handsworth Sword Dancers, Image: Derek Schofield

Where: Longsword and rapper (section 10) are two types of English sword dancing. The Longsword tradition is based in Yorkshire and traditional teams including Handsworth and Grenoside, both from Sheffield, still perform the old dances in their distinctive costumes.

Context: English sword dancing is not done with actual swords. The swords were probably occupational (work) tools, such as the ones used to fix fishing nets. Longswords tend to be longer than rapper swords and are rigid or inflexible – they do not bend. Several sword teams in the past had a ‘Captain’ who was dressed differently from the dancers. In some performances the Captain is “beheaded” by the other dancers. In England sword dancing dates back to the 1700s and most of these performances seem to have been linked to Plough Monday customs which were celebrated across England in January (see section 8). The dancers would accompany the plough boys that went through the village asking for money from householders. This was done when the weather was bad and there was no work to do on the farms. The Goathland Plough Stot team, as their name suggests, are still linked to this annual custom. They have two teams who dress in either pink or blue tunics. These colours date back to the 1800s and the musicians who play for both teams wear half pink and half blue tunics. It is widely believed that the colours used

to represent different political parties, but now pink and blue are worn because they are traditional.

Ribbons and Rosettes: 18th century references to sword costumes in England describe the dancers wearing ribbons and rosettes over a shirt. This is very similar to many other costumes worn for performances of traditional dance in the 1700s and in the first half of the 19th century. The English Folk Dance and Song Society have a pre-1920s sword dance costume worn by the Sleights Plough Stots which features colourful applique cut outs on a white costume base. The Grenoside team also have a variety of team jackets dating back to the late 19th century. These jackets are decorated with rosettes or gathered strips of fabric and they are usually red in colour. Often paisley printed fabric was used, which has a distinctive curling tear drop /leaf shape as a repeating pattern. Grenoside's latest jackets were designed and created by a professional theatre department in 2007.

Uniforms: Military style uniforms appear to have been added in the late 19th century. The Victorians loved to dress up and perhaps it seemed appropriate for a sword dance that the dancers should be dressed as soldiers. The Handsworth team today wear a copy of the uniform first used by the team in the 1900s. The coats have bright military braid set onto a dark blue jacket, they are very smart and add to the performance of the dance. In contrast, the traditional Flamborough team wear replicas of fisherman's occupational clothing from the 1900s, a thick knitted jumper called a gansey (similar to a Jersey), white trousers and knitted hat. This is a very distinctive costume which visually links the dance to their locality. Like the Goathland team the Flamborough team recruit dancers from their community and it is very important to them that the dance is kept alive locally.



Flamborough Longsword Dancers 1910, Image: VWML

Section Ten: Rapper



Royal Earsdon Sword Dancers, VWML

Where: Rapper is another type of English sword dance which comes from Durham and Northumberland. See also Longsword (section 9).

Context: Rapper dance developed in the 19th century after the invention of sprung steel meant that the blunt dance swords could be bent and knotted into highly intricate shapes without snapping dangerously. The swords used for rapper dance are now made especially for dancing, however it is likely that in the past a range of suitable items were used from mining tools to steel bed slats. Rapper developed in coal mining villages and it is considered to be the dance of the coal miners. Originally rapper was danced in the winter months when the mines would have been shut for the winter. Performances would have provided extra money for the dancers

and their families. The teams were often a focus for community pride; some pit owners would even give the dancers days off work so that they could perform. Women started dancing rapper in the mid-20th century, and today there are many female and mixed gender teams.

What: The clothing worn for rapper in the late 19th century was very similar to what dancers in northwest morris, or clog competitions, would have worn (see sections 5 and 7). Teams which could afford to wore fancy black breeches, smart shirts, velvet Zouave style waistcoats (see section 6), coloured sashes, and black shoes. Earlier teams, or teams with less money, instead attached ribbons and rosettes to their shirts and danced in breeches, perhaps with team socks. In the 1930s, probably for economic reasons, many teams wore fashionable or everyday trousers. They also danced with neck ties, which were a part of regular smart clothing. Today many teams compete at the annual Dancing England Rapper Tournament (DERT), making sure that their kit looks smart for the competition. Most teams choose a plain white or black shirt and some have team waistcoats. Today, most rapper teams wear a wide sash wrapped around the waist, with a long tie at the side, which can have the team emblem on it. Dancers today wear hoggars (see below), trousers, or breeches, and woman's teams also wear short skirts or kilts.

Hoggars: Many rapper teams today wear long straight shorts called hoggars which expose the knees of the dancers when the leg is bent. This is the modern form of the hoggars which were worn by miners. The mines were very hot places to work, men brought long shorts or else cut down trousers to create hoggars. These are different from breeches because they do not touch the skin underneath the knee but are loose. Dancers today often wear hoggars because these garments are unique to rapper dance (unlike breeches which are worn by morris dancers) and because they are a visual link back to the original miners who created this beautiful dance.



Maltby Pheonix, Image: Brian Slater (courtesy Youth Dance England)

Section Eleven: Mumming



The White Boys, St Maughold and St George Fighting (2019)

Where: All over England with strong parallel traditions in Scotland, Ireland, and Newfoundland.

Context: Mumming plays are a type of drama which was historically performed by local men (rather than professional actors) at specific times of the year such as Boxing Day, Easter, or Halloween. In the 18th and 19th centuries mumming plays were part of a wider number of cadging activities. They were performed on the street, in pubs, and in people's homes, in return for money, food and drink. In the past, the plays were not performed in the naturalistic manner that we see in theatre or in films today. It is thought that people would have declaimed their lines, speaking the words loudly and clearly, perhaps stepping forward for their part, but making no attempt to be realistic.

The most common type of mumming drama is known as the hero-combat play. This has a hero (often St George) facing an opponent who is killed and then brought back to life. Historically some mumming plays revolved around stories of the legendary hero Robin Hood. Others were rom-coms, in which the lady is wooed by a number of

men, but chooses the fool. Alternatively, her love is recruited into the army, and then she goes off with the fool. Modern mumming groups today often make up their own plays which can incorporate references to local and national politics and important issues such as global warming.

Mumming costume: Many historical teams had a special mumming costume which was used by the whole group, sometimes with variations to represent different characters. These costumes were quite diverse; in Lancashire simple sashes were sold alongside toy swords for the play in the local shops. Other costumes had applique words and animals cut out of red and black fabric sewn onto a white shirt. Some costumes look very strange with clothes turned inside out or layers of thick wallpaper or fabric cut into strips and attached to the jackets and legs of the performers. Some teams or characters were even known as Ribboners after this form of disguise. Many teams had elaborate headgear with high hats covered in flowers and rosettes. Sometimes strips of fabric would hang over the face of the performers which would have added an element of disguise - some teams were even known as Guisers. Other teams applied face colouring made from soot and lard, sheep dye, brick dust, or whitewash.



Gloucestershire Morris Mummers, Image: Steve Rowley

Dressing in Character: Although not performed in a naturalistic manner some historical teams did have naturalistic costumes. The costumes represented the characters; they look like the sort of clothing that the character might actually wear. In some places some characters had their own special costume which became traditional. For example: a white tunic with a red cross for St George; Beelzebub (the devil) having a red face and horns; the Doctor wearing a top hat and frock coat; or the Fool's parti-coloured clothing (different sections of the clothes in different colours). The women's roles were usually played by men who would have been dressed as the caricature of women's attire (see Section 12).



Mummers c1900, Image: VWML

Today: Most mumming plays are now performed in a much more engaging naturalistic style. Men and women act and whilst there is still some cross-dressing (often for comic effect) increasingly the female roles are played by women. Some teams replicate the older ribbon-based form of mumming costumes while others include an element of disguise, often through the application of face paint.

Section Twelve: The Fool



Royal Liberty Morris 2017, Image: Wikimedia Commons

The role of the fool in English customs is to entertain and be humorous, often being the most vocal and popular character. The fool can normally be recognised through certain costume elements:

Strange Costume: In the past this sometimes involved the humour of deprivation when it was considered socially acceptable to make fun of people who couldn't afford decent clothes, or else had unusual bodies, particularly hunch-backs. Several modern fools wear smocks, an old protective over-garment now largely replaced by overalls for dirty work. Smocks were seen as a distinctive English garment – perhaps even a form of national dress. However, they were also associated negatively with rural life, and so a fool might comically don a smock to appear as a 'country bumpkin'.

Comedy Costume: Examples include a silly hat, a tail, or even a complete comic outfit. In the 1920s and 1930s some fools wore clown costumes made like a hoodless-onesie with large neck frills. The character of Pierrot, the sad clown with loose fitting white clothing and white face, often with a tear drawn on, was one such favourite. Today a morris fool might wear a ready-made costume, dressing ironically as Darth Vader, or some other well-known villain.

A special fool's costume: Some elements of the fool's costume appear to have come from the medieval period. The hood, which it is believed, originally mimicked

the hoods worn by Christian monks, often had comic attachments, such as asses' ears or a chicken's comb. In the medieval period parti-coloured clothes represented the idea that the fool had one foot in this life and one foot in another, supposedly allowing the fool to poke fun and comment on our world, because he was not quite of it.

Accessories: It is an old tradition that the fool has a special stick – the fool's stick. In the past this stick often had a carved head and sometimes an inflated bladder attached to it. The fool's stick probably mocked official sticks of office (such as the Queens' jewelled sceptre). Today some fools still have an inflated pig's bladder, or more commonly a blown-up balloon or plastic glove on a stick, with which they assault the dancers. The wearing of bells by the fool also has a long history dating back to the medieval period. Perhaps as a practical joke, in the 19th century several fools used to hide bells in their clothing.

Cross-dressing (and the performance of gender): Cross-dressing is when a person of one gender puts on the clothes which are typically worn by another gender. In English folk customs it is nearly always a man who puts on women's clothing, although there are many folk songs where a woman dons male clothes.

In 19th century and early 20th century folk customs men cross-dressed in two ways:

- Sometimes they took a naturalistic approach, growing their head hair for the occasion, or shaving off their beard or moustache. This was often to play the role of the Lady, dressed in fine apparel.
- More commonly, men performed for comic effect as a caricature wearing stereotypically 'female' clothing whilst still maintaining identifiably 'male' features. This form of comedy and performance can be traced back to the medieval period when Christian priests used to put on women's clothing as part of the annual "Feast of Fools!". This type of cross-dressing performance was also used in political riots where people rose up against the ruling order – the most famous probably being the Welsh 'Rebecca Riots' (1839 -1844).

People still perform as another gender in folk customs as well as in other contexts. Sometimes, cross-dressing is seen as provocative or humorous because it subverts fixed cultural ideas as to how genders should behave. Cross-dressing can be done for comedic effect and without the intent to harm or belittle others – on the stage, the pantomime dame is an example of this. However, there are other presentations of performative gender which are merely rude or lewd caricatures.

Section Thirteen: Animals and Beasts



Great Western Morris, Image: Megan Cumbes

English folk costumes include a number of animal costumes which are either the centre of a custom, or an additional attraction. Animal costumes are used all over England although the most famous of all, the Padstow and Minehead hobby horses, are from Cornwall and Somerset respectively. Hobby horse costumes have been worn since the Tudor period, and whilst they can appear on their own, often they accompany mumming plays (see section 11) or morris dancers. Many modern morris teams have created their own fantastic animals including unicorns and cockerels. These animals accompany the dancing and act like team mascots.

Hobby Horse: Today, hobby horse means a false horse. The term is often used for a children's toy - the word *hobby* itself is actually a medieval word for horse! In England there are two main types of hobby horses. The *mast* (or stick) horse is made from a real horse's skull, or false head, which is attached to a pole. A person holds the pole and is covered entirely by a cloth. Sometime the horse's head is mechanical and the mouth, eyes, and even ears can be manipulated. In contrast, the *tourney* horse is made from a large round frame which covers the wearer. The frame

is covered in cloth and attached to the wearer's waist, normally with braces which go over the wearer's shoulders. A horse's head is attached to the front of the costume and sometimes false human legs are attached at the side.

The Minehead Hobby Horse is a large frame which comes to below the wearer's neck. The frame is covered in fabric and decorated with colourful roundels (round circles of fabric). The top of the frame is covered with strips of cloth. The wearer's head is covered with a mask and surrounded by a hood which is covered in ribbons or strips of cloth. A large stick comes out of the top of the hood.

The Padstow 'Oby 'Oss has a large frame covered by a black cloth with a hole for the wearer's head which is covered by a large mask with bold red, white, and black colours. At the front and back of the frame is a rather small horses head and tail (see Padstow Attendants Section 15)



St Nicholas Hoodenors, 1908, VWML

The Hooden Horse from Kent was part of a small play which was performed in people's houses by farm labourers at Christmas. The word *hooden* comes from *hooded* as the wearer's whole body is covered by fabric. The players would put on an improvised performance and songs would be sung. The horse was formed by a person bent over, who lent on a pole for support and was then covered by a cloth. . The pole had a wooden head attached to it which was decorated with horse brasses and rosettes, with ribbons for a mane.

The Derby Ram (Old Tup): is part of a Christmas visiting custom from Derbyshire. This costume is part of a short play performed at Christmas time, which includes the Derby Ram song, a dance by the ram, and then a mock killing of the ram by the other performers. The ram is made by throwing a sheet, sack, carpet, coat, or even curtain over the performer. The head could be a real sheep's skull, a wooden one, or a pair of horns mounted onto a pole. Sometimes the head was even made by simply by tying the cloth into horns, or just chalking a face onto the cloth.

The Straw Bear: In Cambridgeshire on Plough Monday in the 1800s a person would be covered in tied bundles straw from head to toe until they resembled a walking sheaf of corn. Led by a piece of rope, they were encouraged to dance for money from passers-by. This figure was called the Straw Bear and it is likely that this custom was inspired by dancing bears which were a popular but cruel form of entertainment that was banned in 1911. The straw bear can be seen today as a key part of an annual festival at Whittlesey.



Whittlesey Straw bear, Image: Phil Oldfield

Section Fourteen: Other Dance

Broom Dancing – Midlands and Southern England

Broom dancing does not have any special costume. It was either performed in morris costume as a solo jig, or in everyday clothing. There are records of farm workers broom dancing in a barn on a wet afternoon and people dancing as an endurance competition to see who could last the longest. In Devon it was performed at weddings into the 1930s by men and women, apparently in their Sunday best clothes. It was a matter of female pride that the women could do the dance as well as, or better than the men, even in their long skirts. Today it is often performed as a solo dance by morris dancers wearing their team costume – although they often take off their bells.



Simon Pipe, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Flag and Bone – Yorkshire

In the 1990s the Flag and Bone Gang revived a tradition from Yorkshire. This was another Plough Monday dance performed in January when there was not much work for people to do on the farms. The Flag and Bone Gang base their choreography on historical references to men dancing in lines holding flags or clicking bones. The new team created a costume based partly on an old picture of the 'fool plough' and they attach strips of fabric to their legs. An element of disguise is created through a thin black fabric veil which is attached to wide brimmed hats. The veil gives the performance quite a spooky feel.

Maypole Dancing – Nationwide

Our first records of maypole dancing in England date to the late medieval period. Maypoles reached the height of their popularity in the 1660s, before starting a slow decline. These town and village maypoles were brightly painted, covered in flowers, and very, very, high (up to 27 metres). We have little information about what dances were done around these maypoles. They might just have provided the centre piece for normal social dancing, done in, Sunday best clothing. Maypole dancing was revived in the late Victorian period. Children rather than adults now did the dancing, and often wore pastel or white clothes decorated with flowers. White clothing is now often associated with this style of dance. These costumes probably emphasised innocence, purity, and cleanliness, which were ideas valued by Victorian society. Sometimes themed picturesque costumes were made. If the celebrations had a May Queen then the dancers might be dressed as her followers. Today, if not performed in regular clothes, dancers, especially those putting on a performance, might wear white, or else a specially made historical costume.



The Full English Project 2013, Image: EFDSS, Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

Stave Dancing – South West

Staves are a stick with an ornamental end. The end of the stave normally had a symbol. Stave dancing comes from the friendly societies which acted as an early type of benefits system. Members would pay an annual amount and then if they were unemployed, or ill, the society would give them some money to support them. Every year the clubs would have an annual procession and it would normally be an



Somerset Morris, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

important event for the local area. The members each had a stave and would normally have a friendly society ribbon (often blue) attached to their smartest clothes. The club procession often involved dancing, and this was sometimes done with staves. A number of teams now do stave dancing, either wearing historical costume, or else a modern kit designed to look attractive and be practical for dancing in.

Social Dance – Nationwide

English social dance is also known as barn dance, country dance, and ceilidh dance. Social dances were participatory dances done by ordinary people. People danced in their homes, in their local meeting place such as a village hall, or outside in the streets. Sometimes it was a special activity with a hired band where people would dress up and wear their Sunday best clothes, at other times it was a spontaneous event, perhaps with someone singing the tune, then people danced in their normal clothes. With the establishment of the English Folk Dance Society in 1911, it became common to perform social folk dances. Members of these classes, and later clubs would wear special costumes to display the dances in. These could be historically inspired outfits, but in the 1950s and 1960s it became popular for men to wear colourful felt waistcoats, and the women large felt circle skirts. Today there are no rules, most people do social dancing in normal clothes, perhaps with sensible shoes or lightweight summer clothes, because the dances can be very energetic. Some women and increasingly also men, also take the opportunity to wear long floaty skirts or dresses.

Step Dancing

Step dancing is a type of dance where the main focus is on the dancer's footwork rather than their entire body. Step dancers can create many different types of sounds using their feet alone. Different types of step dancing can be found all over the world, examples include tap dance, Irish dance, and clog dance. In East Anglia and Dartmoor step dancing was done in people's homes, in the pub, and on the street for fun. Some more serious dancers used to travel great distances to dance if they knew that a musician was going to be at a certain pub. Today dancers have special shoes which are comfortable for dancing in or made a good noise when tapped on the floor. Sometimes the dancers make the most of Blakey's Segs which are a sole and heel protector made of metal. Blakey's can be attached to the bottom of the shoe, the part which gets the most amount of wear. This makes the shoe harder to wear through and longer lasting. Attached to a shoe, Blakey's make a distinct clicky sound which is favoured by some step dancers. In competitions today dancers wear normal clothing, although sometimes there is a nod towards the past with men wearing braces and flat caps. Dancers often experiment with different shoe types, and modern tap shoes are sometimes worn.



Champion Dartmoor Dancer Lisa Sture's Collection of Step Dance Shoes. Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Section Fifteen: Special Costumes

Abbots Bromley – Staffordshire

The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance is an iconic English folk tradition. The dancers perform carrying reindeer horns which are mounted on wooden heads and attached to a pole. The antlers/horns are very ancient and date back to the 11th century. They have been painted over the years, previously red, blue, and white but now they are brown and off-white. In the past the dancers wore their ordinary clothes with pink and white rosettes added to them, but in the 1880s special costumes were designed by Mrs Lowe the local vicar's wife. This style of costume has now become traditional and when the costumes are up-dated they are made in this old style.



Jack in the Green – Nationwide

Jack in the Green is a person covered in a large cone shaped frame which is almost entirely covered in green foliage. These walking sculptures can now be seen at special Jack in the Green festivals across England. Modern costumes, usually consisting of a frame which rests upon the wearers shoulders, are based on descriptions and images of 'Jacks' from the 1700s and 1800s. Originally 'Jacks' were created by chimney sweeps as one of a number of characters, including a Lord and Lady, who would process through London on the first of May as a cadging activity. A number of places in England now have their own 'Jack', the most famous being Hastings in East Sussex.

Hastings Jack in the Green 2023, Wikimedia Commons

Padstow Attendants – Cornwall

A key part of the Padstow 'Obby 'Oss celebrations (section 13) are the attendants who follow the horse. They look after the crowd, play music, dance, and collect money. A key attendant, called the teaser, leads the 'oss. There are two Padstow 'osses one blue, and one red and the attendants either have decorations (sashes, hats, and ribbons) of blue or red over white clothing. Photos from a 100 years ago, when hat wearing was much more common and clothing more expensive, show less white clothing, and more people wearing hats decorated with flowers. The clothing of the contemporary attendants adds to the carnival atmosphere of this vibrant community event.



Great Wishford Apple Day, Image: Chloe Middleton-Metcalf

Wishford Oak Apple Day – Somerset

On Oak Apple Day (see Castleton Garland Ceremony) the residents of Great Wishford, Somerset, have a day celebrating their right to gather firewood. The day includes two special dances which are performed by four women of the village. This is said to be in memory of the four Wishford women who were punished for trespassing whilst collecting firewood in the 1800s. Since the 1900s the women have dressed in old fashioned rural costume. Today the women wear cotton sun-bonnets which are handed down from dancer to dancer, special thick aprons made out of rough hessian fabric, cream jackets, and long black skirts with an oak apple and oak leaves pinned to their jacket. Despite its charming name an oak apple is actually a small, white paperish hollow caused by wasps laying larvae within oak trees

Castleton Garland Ceremony – Derbyshire

The Castleton Garland Ceremony from Derbyshire is performed annually on Oak Apple Day (May 29). In 1661 this day became the focus for many customs, which were previously held on the 1st of May, as May 29th was created as a new holiday to celebrate the Restoration of the Monarchy. Once a large national day of celebration it is now only celebrated in a few places. In Castleton a King and Queen process through the town on large shire horses wearing fancy historical clothes. A large garland is then placed over the King which covers his torso and head. This garland is made of wickerwork and is entirely covered with flowers. Later, the flowered garland is hoisted to the top of the church tower. The costume of the King and Queen have changed over time, originally the Queen was played by a man, he had a shawl and a special bonnet but also trousers (see Section 11). The King used to wear a shirt covered in rosettes and ribbons, with a servant's livery, or smart uniform coat which had belonged to a coachman. Like the Abbots Bromley horn dance the costumes appear to have been re-designed in the late 19th century.



Abbot's Bromley Horn Dancers 1904-1906 Image: Sir Benjamin Stone's Pictures

Section Sixteen: Further Reading

The **English Folk Dance and Song Society** has hundreds of wonderful free online resources including: *British Folk Customs: From Plough Monday to Hocktide*, *British Folk Customs: May*, and the *Beginners' Guide to English Folk Dance*.

<https://www.efdss.org/>

The **Vaughan Williams Memorial Library** also has many wonderful free online resources such as the ebook *The Histories of the Morris in Britain*. Here you can also find extensive readings lists on the subjects of morris, sword, and social dance. If you have a specialist inquiry, you can visit the library yourself, or e-mail the staff who will be happy to advise. <https://www.vwml.org/>

If you are interested in calendar customs why not contact **The Folklore Society**. They arrange regular public events, including quality virtual lectures on a rich variety of subject areas: <https://folklore-society.com/>

This resource is based on the research of **Chloe Middleton-Metcalf**.

<https://middleton-metcalf.weebly.com/> she also runs the **The English Folk Costume Archive** in Milton Keynes <https://www.facebook.com/englishfolkcostumes/>

The **Traditional Drama Research Group** has much information online about mumming. Including photographs and an article about The Cropwell Ploughboy's Costume of 1893 <https://folkplay.info/>

For sword dancing both **Rapper Online** <https://www.rapper.org.uk/> and **The Sword Dancer's Union** are excellent resources <https://www.sworddanceunion.org.uk/>

Members of **INSTEP** research traditional step and clog dance from the UK <https://insteptr.co.uk/>

For information about modern morris dancing visit: **The Morris Federation** <https://www.morrisfed.org.uk/> **The Morris Ring** <https://themorrisring.org/> or **Open Morris** <https://open-morris.org/>

The **Museum of British Folklore** is a virtual museum which holds occasional exhibitions across the country. <https://www.museumofbritishfolklore.com/>

Calendar Customs provides a fairly comprehensive guide (arranged by month) to British traditional festivals and celebrations: <https://calendarcustoms.com/>

To find your nearest folk festival try the **UK Folk Festivals** website: <https://www.ukfolkfestivals.co.uk/england.php>

Section Seventeen: Credits

Author Biography

Chloe Elizabeth Middleton-Metcalf

After becoming fascinated by both folk dance and garment making, Dr. Middleton-Metcalf's earliest research was into morris dance costumes. Her undergraduate thesis 'Rags, Bells and Baldrics' collected information and kit histories from over 300 current teams, and its historical analysis provides the basis for this resource pack. She continued her research into English folk dance costume with an MA in Investigating Fashion History, where her thesis focused on step dance and sword costumes. Her TECHNE funded PhD 'Barn Dances, Ceilidhs, and Country Dancing in England 1945-2020: An Examination of Non-Specialist English Social Folk Dance' at Roehampton University, focused on a non-performative dance genre, often engaged in without special costumes. Dr Middleton-Metcalf is an editorial board member of *The Folk Music Journal* and a member and trustee of the Instep dance research team. More information about her work, including links to many free-to-access articles can be found on her website: <https://middleton-metcalf.weebly.com/>



Chloe Middleton-Metcalf, Image: Susan Bell

Quotations

- Section 3: Manning, P. (1897) 'Some Oxfordshire Seasonal Festivals' *Folklore* Volume 6, Number 4. pp.307-324.
- Section 5: Burton, A. (1891) *Rush-bearing: An Account of the Old Custom of Strewing Rushes*. This book can be read for free on Google Books.
- Section 6: *The Stockport Advertiser* 24th May 1901 p13. Quotation taken from Buckland, T. and Howison, D. 'Morris dancers in Crewe before the First World War'. *English Dance and Song*. Volume 42, number 2 (1980) pp.10-13.
- Section 7: Tracey, P. 'More about Clog Dancing: The East Lancashire Traditions'. *English Dance and Song*. Volume 23, number 2 (1959) pp. 39-41.
- Section 8: *The Cambridge Chronicle* (1851) Quotation taken from Forster, T. *Molly Dancing into the 20th Century*, Morris Federation Library Series. (2002)

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- | | |
|--|--|
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| • Forrest John: Early Morris. | • Shuttleworth, Ron: Mumming. |
| | • Wright, Lucy: Carnival morris |

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To be added



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