

A DEEPER LOOK AT MORRIS TOPICS

THE BODY

The Smile and Other Body Language Issues

Types of smile
Posture and poses
Gestures

The Anatomy of Steps and Movements

Muscles
Loads

Stretching

Why Use Only a Few Jumps?

Different possibilities
Preparatory movements
Spotters

THE IMPLEMENTS

Handkerchief Control

Size and weight
Wrist movement
Positions, candles
Floating, flicking, off-beat stress

Sticks and Sticking

TECHNIQUE IN STICK DANCES

No matter how good the technique one must start with a good stick. Willow makes the best sticks as it gives a good sound, is resilient and splinters safely. It should be cut over long, after the sap has stopped rising, and stored for six months or more horizontally on the flat to prevent bowing. Green wood is untrustworthy. It should be cut to the required length when needed. In the 19th century morris one usually provided one's own stick, on pain of a fine. They were often painted and shorter than normal today.

The grip is mostly with the thumb and forefinger, the rest of the hand provides the control and rotation. The fingers should tighten their grip at the moment of impact with another stick. This allows a good sound, bounce and control, and is safer because of the lack of a follow through movement. Hits should normally be upward, not across or downward. Clashes can be preceded by a large arm movement and rotation of the stick for effect but large movement does not mean great force.

Adderbury sticks are somewhat longer than other village's and are held and used differently. In "singles" the stick is held in the middle by the right hand and the stick is moved by a combination of rotation of the lower arm from the elbow and the fingers and the wrist. In "doubles", held in both hands, the butt pivots in the left hand which only moves a little, while the right hand does the stick rotation. The right hand slides along the stick as is necessary for each movement.

The worst performed and ugliest movement in the morris is the turn to face away from one's opposite and raising one's stick in both hands overhead to receive a stick hit. Thought must be given to the associated foot movements for balance and appearance. The body posture should be upright and not bent backwards. The stick should be held up in the air above the head and not behind it. This ensures that the hitting stick is not aimed at the head. A similar principle works for offering a stick up horizontally in front of the body. It should be high enough that the stick appears to cover the eyes of one's opposite when looking across the set. It is not part of the morris to hide the stick tapping from the audience, so all tapping should be reasonably high, and impacts points should be at eye level or above.

Dancers should listen to the music and follow the phrasing in tapping. They can avoid speeding up by making larger movements between taps. Pushing the music shows inexperience and possibly a lack of constructive practice.

The sticks are carried in different ways for each tradition, vertically in front, vertically at the side with the arm down at the side with the tip either up or down, or horizontally, the choice usually depending on the stick length. Whether the stick is swung with the normal or a reduced arm movement in stepping and jumps is also dependent on the tradition. The choice should be dominated first by safety and then by appearance considerations.

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Foreign experience with woods
Noise and splitting

Bells

Where to wear, ankles, knees, wrist, clothing
Materials, Dutch metal, old sets, number on pad, cost
Use at practice
Number of clangs - start and end of accel and decel - role of ribbons

Rosettes

and ribbons and baldricks and costume

SOME OBVIOUS FAULTS OF MORRIS DANCERS

If you are honest, who on earth wants to watch second rate morris through choice? Explanations about spirit and enjoyment and gaining experience, although true, are just excuses, not justifications!

1. Weak Posture and Fitness

To put height into stepping requires strength and this has to be developed in the correct muscles. It takes time and some understanding in training. Stretching, exercises and warm-up as well as cool-down should be appreciated and exploited as needed. Do not be afraid to ask similar relevant experts in fields other than morris dancing.

Pulling the stomach in and raising the rib cage gives the dancer a sense of elation as well as elevation. A slack body leads to a slack mind and to slack dancing.

Tucking the head down in jumps is common, obvious to the audience and bad body language. One should have a straight, proud back, not a curly one - it comes back to raising the rib cage and not being afraid to raise the arms away from the chest.

2. Weak Stick Tapping

The stick should be used as an implement, it is a tool, not an extension of the hand like a handkerchief. It should be wielded with a full arm and body movement, with confidence and vigour, with a good preparatory swing but controlled to the clash to avoid a significant follow through. Accidents happen through lack of this particular control. If this is thought undignified, unnecessary or for women unfeminine, then you do not understand the Cotswold morris, and you probably play lousy tennis and can not chop wood!

Stick tapping should be seen. The impact point should be at head level or above - the audience stands behind the dancers and needs to see what is going on - it also reduces the chance of accidents.

Women sometimes move in a way protective to their breasts thus inhibiting good arm movements, good clapping and good stick tapping. They sometimes hunch forward and swing their arms across their body providing a poor body language message. Arm movements should always be large and expressive, and the hands well away from the body at hits, claps etc. The technique has the same objective as stage movements - to look normal to an audience, it has to be exaggerated in performance.

3. Set Too Small

A Cotswold set should be spaced at outstretched fingertip length in each direction. It should be necessary to stretch out to clash sticks in figures. One should have a take a positive step forward for handclapping with one's opposite.

A small set is often due to how the side fits into its practice room. In

this and other things a set should deliberately practice as it intends to perform in public.

A narrow set can be due to laziness in practice. It also goes with making little effort and slow acceleration into figures so that the dancing lacks life. In other words "dull". Cotswold morris is dependent for its effect on jumps, capers and drive, and this does not necessarily mean speed.

4. Too Many Dances Too Soon

It takes time to make an effective dancer, and it is unfair to burden the memories at the expense of working on dance basics. Who wants to watch a load of mediocre dances? It is really better than nothing?

At one level, interest is maintained by novelty. Initially this can be achieved by having variety in the material, but later on by the variety in the occasion in which the morris is used. An understood, structured programme of learning should overcome the need for endless dance fodder. Keeping a balance during the learning of techniques and dances requires skill from the foreman. New sides and new foreman should realise when they need help, advice or guidance.

Variety in a show is desirable, but the idiom is very limited, whole set v. corners, handkerchiefs v. sticks. How many Trunkles can you use?

Dancing out is part of the making of a dancer. It should not be delayed but it should be introduced with care.

5. Attention to Basics

Principles are no substitute for good dance basics. Most cant about the "tradition" ignores that the tradition had very good and experienced examples to copy, and that the teachers in the traditional sides in this century at least, have been insistent on good grounding.

A constant review of basics is important as dancers do improve and their technique can be upgraded. Perhaps the commonest problem is avoiding inflexibility.

6. Self Discipline

Do you remember the following?

- a. Talking in the set and delaying Once to Yourself or missing calls.
- b. Begging the sixth dancer to come and dance.
- c. Arguing in public, especially having post mortems as soon as the dance stops.
- d. Temper and other emotional outbursts.
- e. Bad behaviour in pubs. It is not your pub, and you have obligations. Who likes to see men or women the worse for drink? Why is there a need to emphasise public drinking?
- f. Making social or political points. Whatever your personal beliefs the Morris is no place to sail against accepted conventions. There is a responsibility to all morris not just your own.

7. Honesty

Because it is recognised that many people dance better and make a better show if they care about their dances, it is accepted without adverse comment that sides go their own way, make their own choices of how things should be done and develop a club style. This was never intended as a manifesto for anything other than better dancing, but sometimes it is used to justify abuse of our heritage.

The way dances are sometimes passed on makes one wonder, we all know of workshops that reflect more of the leader's own ideas than tradition, often people are not honest about what has been changed or developed from the original. Finally care is not taken to see that the dance has been learnt, or noted accurately, even when the learner actually wants a particular interpretation.

When performances are only a faint reflection of the original, it is surprising that announcing a place of origin continues as a convenient label. It mystifies the audience who will hardly have heard of any of the places, and, as most dances went with leaders and the dancers who performed them were drawn from a territory, it was not strictly correct. It puts an unnecessary barrier between the dance and the audience. Are the dancers ashamed of having dances of their own? It is surprising that sides do not often choose local names to identify themselves nor introduce local associations into their dance titles. The dance movement is not wedded to a tune, otherwise there would be only ONE tradition.

8. Costume

The choice of the word to describe what is worn reflects an attitude, "costume" is a theatrical term, "kit" suggests an issue as in the forces, "gear" to be exhibitionist in, "regalia" is an add-on. Whatever it is called, it is seldom chosen with the needs of dancing in mind. Often it is fixed before the side can dance and know what is suitable. One does not hear of new sides going to look at others to see how the clothes dance! The choice is not often related to the clothes that are practiced in. Jeans and trainers, like a smooth sprung floor, are no preparation for dancing outside. How far the dance clothes and trimmings have to be simulated, for example wearing bells, in practice sessions should be considered.

A general issue is that fat is difficult to hide whatever the sex.

a. Men

One of the Puritan complaints against the morris was the selling of favours and liveries, in today's terms buttons and teeshirts, so little have things changed! Early references to the morris in England commented on the elaborate coats. Some dancers insisted in being buried in theirs' as their most expensive possession, perhaps like the heirloom type of folk costumes in Europe. Having something special to wear does not mean that it was worn for the dance. Today the cost dominates the care that clothes are given.

At one time clothes were white or rather light. Concern for cleanliness, changes of whites, and brushing off the dust of dancing, was once common. The Victorian fashion was for many rosettes and tied ribbons and fancy baldricks which did little for showing the movements of the morris, but perhaps did wonders for sexual attraction in those times. Is it still a factor?

The modern image can be quite untraditional, with the proportions of the clothes almost appropriate to marionettes. A beflowered and badged straw hat, beard, an appliqued tabard or waistcoat over a baldrick, loose breeches, large bellpads with great rag tufts, ribbons, beads, and a beer mug - no wonder they dance low to the ground.

b. Women

Should women wear breeches or trousers? The audience sees most of the dancing from the rear. Bums are the extra fat that develops at puberty. Women's dress has evolved to cover this shape attractively. Some of us are old enough to remember the ribald comments when women first started to wear pants. Some of the observations are still true but the clothes are better fitted now. However I would admit that many sides manage to look great.

A good skirt is as effective as a second pair of handkerchiefs. Petticoats prevent seating - round buttocks may look nice but they do not need to be emphasised. Petticoats, an apron or a long lined tabard provides the weight to prevent distracting riding up. If the skirt is very long it restricts the choice of movements and removes the point of others. Usually something has to be done deliberately to compensate, eg noise with the feet or emphatic jumps.

The advent of the bra liberated women by allowing them to participate in active sports without embarrassment or discomfort. We do not believe that anyone can come up with a good aesthetic reason why breasts should fly around in the morris. Wobbling flesh is distracting where ever it is on the body.

9. Footwear

Height in the heel of shoes throws the weight back and this is poor for the Cotswold morris. To maintain the appearance of the morris step with the soles parallel to the ground, that is not to curl the apparent shape and look comical, requires that the toe is pointed downwards, which strains the leg in the wrong way. A heel reduces the shock absorbing travel of the foot and ankle muscles in landing from steps, jumps or capers. The strain on muscles is greater, the risk of injury higher, the stepping can look abnormal and there is not the distance for acceleration to get the body up off the ground or smartly into movements, and the "guts" goes out of the morris.

Sports shoes generally protect the heel from shock, what is best is the aerobic shoe design with its protection for the ball of the foot.