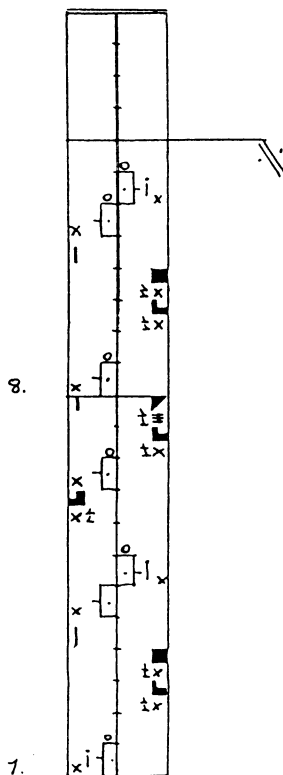


HORNPIPE STEP-:
MOORE'S DREAM.

DANCER-: PEGGY McTEGGART.

NOTATION-: CATHERINE FOLEY.

DATE-: FEBRUARY, 1980.



KEITH CHANDLER

A long time ago, with characteristic Taurean obsessiveness, I set myself the task of gathering every possible scrap of information on the historical aspects of the traditional morris dance form as practised in Oxfordshire and the contiguous counties up to the present day. It seemed then, as now, that this was the only possible way to evaluate accurately the evidence. During the middle years of the 1970s very little worthwhile historiographical material had appeared in print. Most of the texts which mentioned morris dancing were largely concerned with perpetuating the romantic (and, as we now know, outmoded) notion that the dance forms were directly linked to pre-Christian fertility rites. ¹ As even a cursory glance at the first and second editions of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library leaflet on the bibliography of the morris dance will reveal, ² interest in and access to material on the historical contexts of morris dancing has increased at least two-fold since 1978. It seemed to me, at that date, that the more data I could accrue and analyse, the clearer the overall historical picture would become. Now, eight years later, with fifteen thousand sheets of typed A4, representing a lot of help from a lot of people who were often more than generous with their time and materials, to work with, it has become apparent that quite the reverse is true. More on this later. Within the boundaries defined by the extant source material it has been possible to make strides in defining, for example, the limits of distribution, the chronology of performance, the biographies of known dancers and musicians and the like, so that much of my current research is in the nature of support and consolidation of a

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pre-existing historical outline. Some of the analysis resulting from this research has appeared in various formats, but a considerable amount lies on a shelf at home, unseen by few if any other eyes, and it is this "hidden" material which forms the basis of this progress report.

The piece of research which has most shaped my perception of the chronological and geographical distribution of morris dance sides is one which I have titled 'Chronology and Overview'. This consists of a sequentially-arrayed series of all known historical source material relating to the years between 1660 and 1914. Each of the verbatim sources are accompanied by a commentary which analyses and augments the inherent data, and relates it to contemporary circumstances, in addition to rooting it in the broader context of morris dance activity. When arrayed in this fashion it becomes plainly evident that the extant source material is merely the tip of a huge iceberg of unrecorded or as-yet-undiscovered data. As more and more references surface and are fitted into the historical jigsaw, I am increasingly convinced that if a mere note had been made each time a morris team, based on one of the communities in the South Midland counties (and at least one hundred and fifty communities did field a dance side at various times throughout this period), gave a performance on any occasion during the two hundred and fifty years prior to the First World War, enough volumes would have been filled to cover all the walls of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. When placed in that sort of perspective, it strongly suggests that the kind of historiography which I and others write can be little more than a superficial, and very likely distorted, outline of what actually occurred. But then this is a truism of any aspect of history and the trick in creating historiography is to remain true to the sources and make the best of the available material.

My conviction that morris dancing was far more widespread throughout the area during this period is periodically reinforced by particularly detailed data which surface. Some years ago I followed up a lead from Mike Heaney which led to the discovery of

ten payments to morris sides which visited the Manor House at Sherborne, Gloucestershire, between 1777 and 1799.³ This was, in itself, a very important discovery but what made it more so was the fact that in three instances the location of origin of the dance set was given. More recently, I pursued a reference in a published local history of the village of Aynho, Northamptonshire,⁴ which led to a set of account books for the Manor House in that village. Between the years 1696 and 1732, sixteen entries are recorded of payments to morris dance teams. Again, this is an important discovery, but what increases its importance immeasurably is the fact that in thirteen of the entries the location of origin of the visiting dance set is noted. These offer data which can be interpreted in a number of ways. Firstly, we can now say with confidence that in the decade between 1723 and 1732 morris dance sides within a six-mile radius of Aynho House were commonplace. During this decade there were dance sets at Aynho, Croughton, Kings Sutton, Brackley, Syresham, Middleton Cheney, Somerton, Hethe and Chesterton. The geographical distribution is displayed in Figure 1. Of these nine locations only two (Brackley and Kings Sutton) are previously recorded as a community which fielded a morris side; and this adds further fuel to my suggestion that the morris was far more widespread than we know. Further, this source indicates a degree of ongoing continuity of performance. The side from Aynho village danced at the house in both 1723 and 1731, the Chesterton side in 1723 and 1727 and the Brackley side in 1725 and 1731. One community, Croughton, supported two dance sets, both of which danced at the house around Whitsuntide in 1731. The squire of the village, Sir Thomas Cartwright, was obviously a good touch for the various morris dance sides and they clearly exploited his generous nature whenever possible.

To illustrate further the rather hit-and-miss quality of the recorded sources, Figure 2 graphically displays the distribution of morris dance activity during the decade 1720 to 1729. A series of decadal maps in this format form an integral part of the work under discussion. Formerly the map for this decade contained a mere

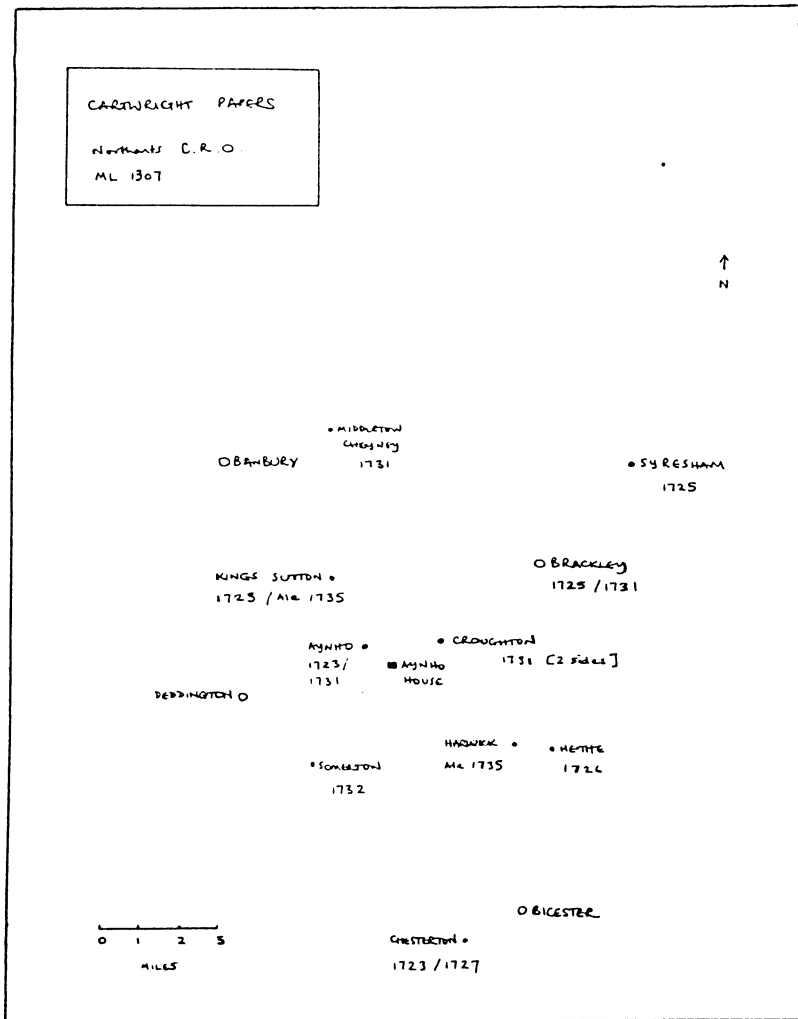


Figure 1

three entries, at Dixton, Gloucestershire, and Churchill and Kirtlington, both in Oxfordshire. These three well illustrate the type of sources which can contribute to the whole. The first takes the form of a painting of activity in harvest fields, in one of which a group of morris dancers are apparently processing in a single line; the second derives from a set of accounts for the 1721 Whitsun Ale at Churchill; and the third comes from a manuscript collection of 1723. The account books from the Cartwright collection trebled the number of entries on the map for this decade.

Far more examples could be adduced as revealing data on the pre-1914 morris, from manuscripts and other printed sources such as local newspapers, but I would like to move on and briefly mention some results of oral interviews conducted over the past eight years. I have tried, though failed, to interview everyone involved with the morris in some form (either as participant, relative of participant or observer) in the communities which fielded a traditional side. It has, however, been possible to explore many avenues of potential information, and this has taken a variety of forms which include personal visits, letters or telephone conversations. A great deal of important contextual material has been recovered at such places as Bampton, Chipping Campden, Abingdon, Bledington, Ilmington, Brackley, Bucknell and many of the Wychwood communities. Space limitations prevent too much elaboration, although I would mention as a prime example what I consider to be my most important piece of oral research. The dancers at Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, have maintained a degree of aloofness since Cecil Sharp first tried collecting there in 1909. Virtually nothing has appeared in print on the tradition and very little survives in manuscript. Of the surviving traditional sides the history of three - Bampton, Headington Quarry and Abingdon - are reasonably well, and, more importantly, are accurately documented. The historiography relating to the Chipping Campden morris is largely riddled with inaccuracies, especially where dates are concerned. A major ongoing project over the past five years has been to document as fully as possible the history of

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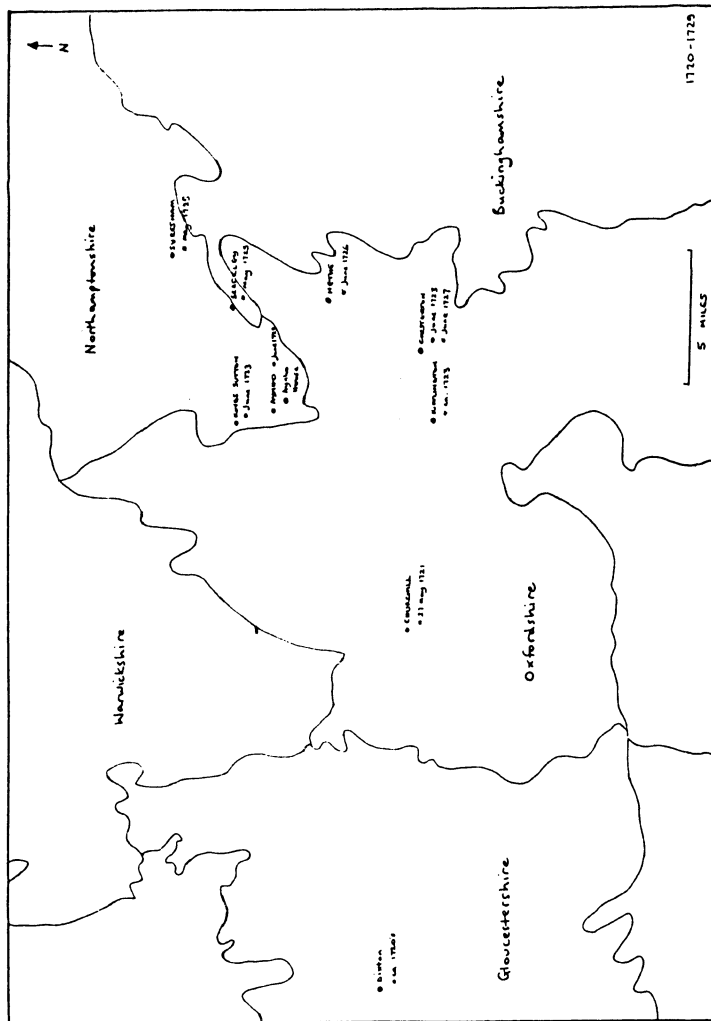


Figure 2

this side. With the interviewing of two brothers involved in the 1932 revival, conducted six days ago, I have now recorded all the men involved with the morris prior to 1939, including multiple interviews with the sole survivor from the 1910 boys' side which danced for Cecil Sharp. In addition, I have interviewed the majority of men involved since 1945, including all but one of the currently active dancers. Although some of the Campden dancers do not wish to see their history published, at least the evidence now exists in a permanent form.

The possibility of amplifying material recorded by the pre-1914 collectors even today is illustrated by this anecdote about an incident which occurred on a field trip to Brackley, Northamptonshire. I was giving a talk to the local history society and happened to mention that Cecil Sharp had noted the surname of one of the morris fools as Tuckey, but had not recorded a Christian name, thus making identification impossible. One middle-aged lady in the audience immediately announced that this was her grandfather, Alfred Tuckey, and gave me the name of her ninety-year-old aunt (Tuckey's daughter), Annie Wyatt. I visited Mrs Wyatt and she gave me a great deal of information on her father, the activities of the Brackley Morris Dancers around the turn of the century and also named two other men who had been morris dancers in her father's day, neither of which had been previously recorded.⁵ More than being a mere manifestation of the "train-spotting" syndrome, this type of information has a very real value, inasmuch as it is the participants in the dance-set who determine the social and economic factors inherent in performance. Roy Dommett has recorded the story that a joint side of Brackley and Whitfield morris dancers performed in 1923 to collect money for a blind man, and that this had been the final occasion that a Brackley morris side had danced. Having been through the contemporary local newspapers and discovered nothing during that year, I asked Mrs Wyatt if she had ever heard the story. Her daughter, who was present, stated that one of her friends was, in fact, the daughter of this blind man. Coincidentally, while I was

still in the house, her friend arrived and confirmed the fact that the morris dancers had performed and collected money for her father. She queried the date I had suggested and claimed to have the receipt for the money collected at home, which she promised to pass on. That evening I got a telephone call from Mrs Wyatt's daughter which cleared up the whole story. The morris dancers had performed at a fete held on 31 July 1920, with the specific aim of raising money to buy her friend's father, who had been blinded during the war, a house, and they had collected £5.3.8d. Such results make all the trudging around and the frequent disappointments all worthwhile.

Finally, I would like to say something of the minute detail with which I record the activities of the current traditional sides. The definition of the term 'traditional' continues to rage and each of us is forced to define it according to his or her perceptions. Of those sides currently active I ascribe the term to seven sides from four communities: three from Bampton, generally acknowledged to be led by Francis Shergold, Arnold Woodley and Alec Wixey; two from Abingdon, namely Abingdon Traditional Morris Dancers and Mr Hemmings Abingdon Traditional Morris Dancers; and Headington Quarry, and Chipping Campden. I have been concerned to document adequately the performances of these sides, recording details of composition, choice of repertoire on a given occasion, position of each dancer in the set, and so forth. In addition, I have noted internal politics and policies, details of how each man has been absorbed into the side, how each participant perceives his role in the tradition, and, for a greater understanding of the social context, personal details of each participant, such as age, occupation, and the like. There are many problems in the handling of such details, not the least of which is a possible invasion of personal privacy, and so these field-notes remain largely unpublished and inaccessible. Again, they exist for future historians of the traditional morris and also for my immediate personal pleasure.

If the foregoing set of anecdotes has any point at all, it is to

indicate that my research at all levels, bibliographical, biographical, oral collecting, documentation of current traditional sides by tape, field notes and photographs, and the general accretion of all manner of source material continues not merely unabated but with increased intensity. I make a final plea for others to follow the same route and, just as importantly, to share their researches with others.

NOTES

1. A succinct assessment of prior scholarship in this field may be found in Theresa Buckland, 'English Folk Dance Scholarship: A Review', in Traditional Dance, 1 (Alsager: Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education, 1982), 3-18.
2. Russell Wortley, Bibliography of the Morris Dance, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library leaflet, no. 16 (London: English Folk Dance and Song Society, 1978); Mike Heaney, An Introductory Bibliography on Morris Dancing, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library leaflet, no. 19 (London: English Folk Dance and Song Society, 1986).
3. A full assessment of this source appeared in Keith Chandler, 'Morris Dancing in the Eighteenth Century: A newly-discovered source', Lore and Language, 3, no. 8 (January 1983), 31-38.
4. Nicholas Cooper, Aynho - A Northamptonshire Village (Banbury: Leopard's Head Press, in conjunction with the Banbury Historical Society, 1984), p.150. This book contains no references, but the relevant accounts books may be found at the Northamptonshire Record Office, reference Cartwright Papers, ML 1306 and 1307.
5. On the same date as my talk to the Brackley Historical Society, 3 July 1985, I had recorded from the son of one of the older dancers a further eight names of men who had been morris dancers at the same time as his father, around 1900.