

Morris Dancing in Lymm:
Revival of the Old Dance
and
Development of the New

Notes from a collector

Geoff Bibby

Getting Interested

It seems such a long time ago now. It all started in the mid 1970's. I was one of the Thelwall Morris Men. Our foreman was Chris Maple who had moved to the North West from Chelmsford. He taught us dances that he knew, mainly from Adderbury, Bampton and Bledington. Occasionally he would turn up at practice with little snippets of something different in an attempt, I thought, to widen our understanding and to trigger our interest and imagination.

On one of these occasions he introduced us to the Lymm notation as collected by Maud Karpeles in 1938 (see *The Journal of the EFDSS*, 1951, vol. VI, no. 3). We followed Chris's instructions and danced the 'step up' and the 'step and turn'. The whole thing seemed ridiculous to me! Maud Karpeles had collected the stepping from Charles Simpson, and had noted it down as *one* step per bar! So there we were to the tune of Yankee Doodle making large steps forward and back with the large over-arm bowling action of the notation. Each step and arm movement being impossible to perform with any confidence or conviction, fitting the tune as follows:

Yankee Doodle went to town riding on a donkey,
stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni.
(The underlined syllables indicate the steps).

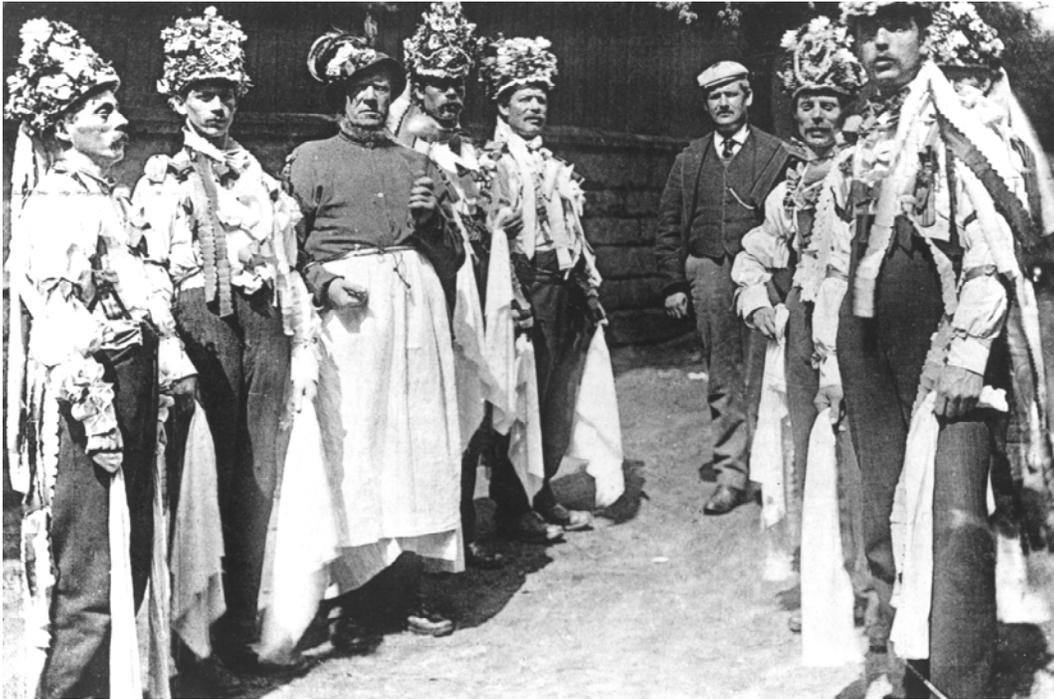
Maud Karpeles was a knowledgeable collector of dance with a long pedigree, but her notation just *had* to be a mistake.

Even though Maud Karpeles had collected the dance notation in 1938 and I knew that all her informants would be long dead, I nevertheless felt compelled to at least try to find out more of what was my local dance. So from 1977 onwards I began to devote some spare time to this end.

The search begins

I wrote to everyone that I knew who could possibly have any interest or knowledge of the dance. These were mainly members or ex-members of the Manchester Morris Dancers, who over the years had tried to recover more information. I wrote to Julian Pilling, Dan Howison, Eric Pollitt, Derek Froome and to Peter Coe as I knew he had been involved in collecting traditional material in his home county of Cheshire. This would make sure that I didn't waste time collecting stuff already known, and maybe give me points from which to start.

I borrowed the copy of C.E. ('Pel') Arden's second edition (1913 I think) of the "Illustrated Guide to Lymm and District" from the local history section of Warrington Library, as in it was information about the dancers and a photograph of the team from 1905. I later managed to trace and buy a copy of the first edition of the guide (1900), which has an earlier photograph from before the turn of the twentieth century.



Outrington Morris Team - c.1899

I put notices up in local shop windows and in the village post office asking for any information and spent many hours in the library reading room looking through copies of our local newspaper.

Lymm Rushbearing and May Queen

George Ormerod, in the 1882 edition of "History of the County Palatine and City of Chester", wrote that the festival of Lymm Wakes featuring the Rushbearing ceremony was at use in the village in 1817, and that the cart of rushes was preceded by male and female Morris Dancers, who performed at each house and were attended by a man in female attire who rang a bell and held out a large wooden ladle to collect donations of money. The dancer in "female attire", known as "Maid Marian" or the "Old Fool" was the leader of the troupe and in charge of the dancers. Rushbearing in Statham and Lymm took place around the time of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which occurred on the 15th August. The formula for Lymm Rushbearing Monday was the first Monday after the second

Sunday in August, although the newspaper reports always refer to the Saturday before this as the day when the rushes were processed to the church.

A painting showing the Rushbearing procession at Lymm Cross from about the year 1840 was mentioned and pictured in Arden's guide. The picture belonged to Squire Trafford of Oughtrington Hall but was in the possession of Robert Oldfield of Lymm in the early 1900's, and was sold by auction after his death as part of his estate at Oak Villa Farm Burford Lane, Oughtrington, Lymm, on Thursday December 12th 1918 by John Arnolds, Auctioneers, of Altrincham. Although many locals were keen to acquire it, the picture was sold out of the village, and no-one knew the purchaser. The picture is described in the auctioneer's listings as a 'large Oleograph "Rushbearing at Lymm" in a gilt frame'. (Note: An oleograph is a print in imitation of an oil painting).



Lymm Rushbearing - 1840 Painting

According to the diary notes of folklorist Derek Froome, Donald Adamson, successor to Robert Oldfield, had many enquiries about the painting but could not help. In January 1954, Derek Froome met the old clerk of John Arnolds, the auctioneers, who remembered the auction, and he subsequently met with Mr. Arnold (son) who endeavoured to find a record of the auction which he also remembered, but all the records were pulped c.1938. The painting is now in the possession of the Castle Folk-Life Museum in York, but there is no record of when or from whom it was acquired.

C. E. Ardern in his 1900 edition of "An Illustrated Guide to Lymm and District" says that "Up to about 1881 a rushcart paraded the streets each Rushbearing drawn by grey horses" and that "Two troupes of Morris Dancers paraded the village each Rushbearing Saturday until a few years ago." So just before the turn of the twentieth century Lymm boasted two morris teams; one based in Lymm itself, and the other at Oughtrington. Only the Oughtrington team continued to dance into the 1900's and this became the only troupe of Lymm Morris Dancers, and it was *thought* that this surviving troupe had ceased to dance by the end of 1910.



1907 Lymm Rushbearing at Lymm Cross

Tom Holt of Sandy Lane and "well-known Lymm fustian cutter", Thomas (Dossey) Brooks were the leaders of the Oughtrington dancers and the Lymm dancers respectively and Ardern reports that they are "both now dead" in his 1900 edition. The photograph shows the 1899 team - the ribbons, which would be multicoloured, are offcuts/strips of "fustian" (velvet) which would be plentiful in a village which had fustian cutting as a major occupation.

A letter, which contained a description and a drawing of Lymm Rushbearing, sent by Sir Bartle Frere to his very young sister in 1844, was donated to the Cecil Sharp House library by a descendant of Sir Bartle's in the 1940's. The letter was stolen* from Cecil Sharp House some time in the 1960's. Miss M. Dean-Smith, who worked at Cecil Sharp House until the April of 1950, said that at the time the letter was donated, manuscript material was not catalogued, so there is no specific

* It seems that a lot of desirable and collectable material goes missing from archival deposits.

or detailed record of what the letter contained. She suggested that the actual content of the letter could possibly be further clarified by locating papers bequeathed to the Folk Lore Society at this time, or through Dr. E. C. Cawte or Norman Peacock who had access to the papers. The missing letter has not been located. The editor's note, on page 101 of the 1951 Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, says of the letter:

"It describes and illustrates in a most lively manner, the Rushcart ceremony as he saw it. The pen and ink drawing shows the cart, the horses mounted by boys, the dancers, preceded by a flag bearer, and leaves to the imagination the Town Band omitted for lack of space."

As well as the Rushbearing in Lymm, from around the late 1880's, Bands of Hope Whit Walks took place, bringing many thousands of visiting people to the village. These walks of witness took place on various days during Whit-week and Lymm May Queen Festivities were fixed on Whit Thursday. The May Queen celebrations were abandoned in 1914 and re-commenced after the First World War in 1919, but in the meantime the Statham May Queen had been established in 1911 on the Whit Monday, and it soon became the major event of the two.

From the 1930's there were no separate May Queen celebrations in Lymm, and there were no May Queen festivities at all during the Second World War. A revived festival combined the Statham and Lymm celebrations on the Saturday of Whit weekend in 1947.

Reviving a Lost Dance

Dan Howison mentioned to me that notes about the dance had been deposited at Warrington Library for safekeeping by a Mrs. Louie Booth whose father, Mr. Higgins, was at one time a leader of the dancers, and had taught her the dance. The notes were no longer there* and so Dan sent me a copy. The notes ended with the information that "The boys of Statham performed a version of this dance in 1923, as part of the May Queen celebrations."

* (see previous footnote)

My focus shifted, and I immediately became a regular customer at The Star Inn in Statham.



The Lymm Morris Men - c.1904, at Henry Street, Lymm

I copied the photographs from both editions of Ardern's guides and took them with me whenever I went.

When I showed the photographs at the pub many of the dancers were recognised by sight or by family likeness and identified. I started on a trail, which was to last for years. It seemed that Ted Edwards knew everyone and he directed me to find Dick Rowles, one of the sons of Ned Rowles, the last leader of the dancers.



Lymm Morris Men - c.1910

It turned out that the men's team had danced up to at least 1912, and when Maud Karpeles had visited Lymm to collect information, many much younger dancers were alive than the ones she was aware of, including Ned!

When I eventually traced Dick, he produced a photograph of the Statham dancers of the 1923 May Queen, and named them all! The boys were all around eleven years old.



The Statham Boys Team, 1923

From that point on I slowly located most of the boys on the photograph. I met and interviewed many people including Albert Riley, George Finney, Frank Stirton, Herbert Taylor, Harold Struthers and Brian Leigh. All these lads still lived in the area. I contacted Robert Hartley, who was living in Macclesfield, by post.



Organisers and performers of 1923 May Queen

Frank Stirton provided me with a second photograph showing the 1923 May Queen participants on the bowling green at The Star.

Morris Dancing in Lymm - Press Reports

I combed the papers and noted every record of Morris dancing in Lymm and Statham from 1853 to the 1960's. Too boring to catalogue here, but...

Monday 14th August was the start of Rushbearing week in 1893, and the following report from the *Warrington Guardian* is worthy of quotation in full:

"On Monday the village had quite a deserted aspect. Most of the principal shops and places of business were closed, and the greater portion of the villagers went to Scarborough with the excursion. There is little doubt that, like other such customs, Rushbearing is becoming a thing of the past at Lymm. At one time the ceremony was conducted on a large scale, and a deal of interest taken in it, not only by the villagers, but by all residents in the district. Gradually, however, the ceremony became each year less impressive, until at the present time it has been put back to the preceding Saturday, so that it might not interfere with the annual trip that takes place on Rushbearing Monday. Even as it is there is very little left of the old custom, and the actual ceremony of Rushbearing is now conspicuous by its absence. The modern version is as follows: between twenty and thirty villagers rise in the small hours of Saturday morning, and having donned fancy costumes, they divide into three parties and proceed into the village, each from a different direction. A kind of morris dance, very pretty in its effect, is executed by each party, and assistance is expected at each house the dancers stop at. At nine o'clock the proceedings come to a close, and the morris dancers divide the cash and depart to enjoy themselves for the remainder of the day.

Such was the ceremony which took place on Saturday, (12th August 1893) and a stranger would certainly have found it difficult to see the connection between it and the old custom. Collin's fancy fair occupied one of the large fields outside the village, and was well patronized by young and old alike."

Another entry worthy of quoting in full is the report of the 1923 Whit Celebrations for which a photograph has already been shown to play a part this research.

Whit-Monday 18th May 1923.

1923 Whit Celebrations - The Star Bowling Green

The Warrington Guardian of May 23rd 1923 reports:

“STATHAM MAY QUEEN FESTIVAL - PICTURESQUE SCENES”

"Statham's May Queen Festival was held on Whit-Monday with full pageantry, the weather being ideal for the purpose. The scene of the revels was the same sylvan arena as the past, and the innumerable visitors who flocked to the village from all quarters were afforded an ideal afternoon's entertainment, which was at once spectacular, graceful and picturesque. The day is regarded in the village as one of family and general reunion. It was first organised by the late Mr. F. Lockyer, 12 years ago. During the afternoon the sun shone with brilliance, and its warmth was tempered by a breeze, which added greatly to the comfort of those taking part in the festival as also to the spectators, young and old alike. Infinite care and taste had been bestowed upon the costumes of the children taking part, and for this purpose a generous sum out of the funds is set aside annually.

THE PROCESSION

An early start was made with the procession, which, headed by the silver band of the Lymm branch of the British Legion, resplendent in blue uniforms with scarlet facings, proceeded from Cross Brow through Booth's Hill to Lymm's historic Cross, the return journey being made by way of Lymm Station. The tableaux were picturesque, particular care having been lavished upon the decoration of the lorries. Fortunately the inconvenience caused by the level crossing last year was not repeated, and the procession and visitors were very fortunate in being able to cross both the Statham and the Lymm level crossings. This year, for the second time in its history, Statham was able to boast of a queen. The character was portrayed with dignity and charm by Miss Mary Davies, who, attended by her court, presided over the subsequent revels. These included symmetrical plaiting of the maypole ribbons in a serpentine dance, which was executed with marvellous precision and grace; characteristic Scotch and Morris dances; a picturesque dance with gaily-hued garlands, and a naval hornpipe, executed by girls charmingly garbed. The children and the aged afterwards were entertained to tea in the school, and the children were given prizes and ices. The dances were repeated in the early part of the evening. Apart from the thanks due to Mrs. Lockyer, her son and her band of willing workers, great credit must be accorded to Miss. Wibberley for having trained the children who participated in the Maypole dances. The chief organisers and workers were Messrs. J. Bryers, B. Drinkwater, Finney, W. Jolley, N. Leigh, C. Lamming, C. Moss, Massey, E. Rowe, Rushworth, Wibberley, Sturton, Whittaker; Mesdames Appleton, Leigh, Sturton, and Miss. Wibberley; Mr. and Mrs. B.A. Lockyer (honorary treasurers), Mr. W. Lockyer and Mrs. J. Smith (joint honorary secretaries).

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Rose Queen - Miss Mary Davies,
Maids of Honour - Misses Grace Bryers, Margery Hinglefield (Inglefield?), Iris Parton and Lily Atherton,
Train Bearers - Joe Hewitt and Geo. Owen,
Fairy Queen - Mollie Hartley,
Fairy Queen Attendants - Misses C. Smith, Elsie Taylor, Dorothy Brazendale and Elsie Bryers.
Britannia - Sarah Atherton.
John Bull - A. Massey,
Peace - Doris Clark,
Faith - Annie Bate,
Charity - Doris Hewitt,
Hope - Mildred Rigby,
Spring - Clarissa Hinglefield (Inglefield?),
Summer - Doreen Dixon,
Autumn - Annie Moss,
Winter - Irene Smith,
Flower Girls - Annie Raymore, Elsie Appleton and Mildred Hinton,
Nurse - Mrs. Broadfield,
Red Riding Hood - Lily Atherton,
Pack of Cards - Harry and Arthur James,
Jack Horner - Henry Hartley,
Jazz Band - Harold Ravenscroft,
King of Diamonds - Wm Gilberts,
Robin Hood - Jimmy Taylor,
Miss Muffet - Joyce Ravenscroft,
Creche - Edward, James and Harry and Fanny Brookfield.

THE DANCERS

The following is a list of those who participated in the dancing:-

Maypole Dance - Annie Rushworth, May Manning, Dolly Struthers, Lizzie Wibberley, Margery Manning, Edith Hinton, Olive Clare, Eva Clare, Marion Finney, Gladys Drinkwater, Edith Thomason, May Field, Dora Watts, Amy Hartley, Elsie Owen and Mildred Manning.

Sword Dance - Edna Phillips and Celia Phillips

Scotch Dance - Maggie Bell, Ada Field, Edith Gilberts, Mollie Turton and Eva Struthers.

Girls Hornpipe - Annie Rushworth, Lily Bell, Daisy Field, Margery Hinton, Edna Phillips and Celia Phillips

Morris Dance - Kenneth Lockyer, Bert Appleton, Harold Struthers, Jimmy Brooks, George Finney, Wilfred Watts, Frank Sturton, Egbert (Herbert?) Taylor, Bryn (Brian?) Leigh, Ernest Leather and Arnold Appleton

Garland Dance - Ada Field, Mary Griffiths, May Field, Dorothy Field and Margery Hinton, Mildred Riley, Mollie Sturton, Edith Gilberts and Beaty Burrows.

Highland Fling - Edna Phillips and Celia Phillips

Special prizes were presented to the Rose Queen, Miss Mary Davies, and to last year's queen, Miss Olive Clare. These were a brush and comb and hand mirror and a box of chocolates. Miss Dolton made the presentation."

Morris to Carnival

Whenever traditions are under threat there are always those who try to set up situations to help their continuance. This has always been true of Morris Dancing. There have been many peaks and troughs in the popularity of Morris dancing and interested parties will endeavour to revive flagging teams, re-awaken traditions that are dormant or collect and preserve dances from 'dead' sides - so that these dances are able to undergo a renaissance. Whatever form the input takes, this input itself inevitably has an effect on the tradition.

After WW1 many sides found themselves unable to raise a team - the men simply weren't available. The responses to this situation were variable:

- Some sides didn't dance again.
- Some sides re-formed as mixed adults.
- Some surviving dancers taught boys and some taught sides of mixed sex children.

Most of the 'old' dancers tried to maintain the 'maleness' of the dances but continued to struggle and the cancellation of many 'traditional' events such as Whit and May festivals during WW2 caused further breaks in continuity. It became rare for boys to dance and girls took it up in large numbers.

In the north of England and particularly in the north - west, competitions were organised in an attempt to encourage troupes once more to be a part of the village festivals. To this end the idea was very successful, but much was changed, and some would say lost, in the process. Prizes were awarded to the winning troupes in various age categories and there was a massive revival. However the structure which needed to be created for the competitions to succeed, changed both the form and style of Morris dancing very rapidly over a very short time span and in any traditional context, revolutionary change, rather than evolutionary change, is unusual, not to say rare.

Points were lost if lines weren't straight, so movement in dances became much more regimented and shape changes in figures became slower to give more precise control. Regular stepping was rewarded, and the judges agreed on specific rules that regularised exactly what was 'correct'. The rules stipulated what was to be assessed and how it was assessed. Thighs had to come up to the horizontal, pumps had to be clean, innovation in costume and dance gained points. There was thus a very active encouragement for the dances and costumes to be changed annually to meet the demands and standards set by the competitions. Regional differences in dance and in style of performance could not be maintained if a troupe wanted to win and their dance and style did not match the criteria!

So regional differences were soon sacrificed for the sake of winning prizes and prestige. However the rapid growth of these 'carnival' morris troupes soon swamped the village fetes and festivals and the competitions became unwelcome to many organisers. Competitions now take place as internal events in carnival morris circles.

Morris Competitions

The morris troupes and the entertainer troupes were highly competitive and the competitions were a major influence on how the performances evolved over the years. The dances and the design and colours of the uniforms were revised and changed each year and were always a closely guarded secret. It was not unknown for rival troupes to have spies!

The competitions were in 3 age categories:

- 'Tinies' - under 11 years old
- 'Juniors' - under 16 years old
- 'Seniors' - any age (including Tinies and Juniors if good enough)

The judges of the entertainers troupes awarded equal marks for the following aspects of the display:

- Entry
- Uniform
- Figures
- Timing & Rhythm
- Manner of Performance
- Content of Programme
- Formation
- Exit

"Figures" refers to the static tableaux shapes formed, and "Formation" refers to the danced movements on the ground.

Competitions often went on till quite late and if troupes used the same music then they would sometimes dance at the same time in order to fit all the troupes in. Pauline Doorbar remembered one occasion when they had to dance in car headlights. The morris troupes tended to use traditional tunes picked from a handful of about half a dozen possibles but the entertainers performed to any music they wished.

The decline in the popularity of carnival troupes at village fetes, May Queen and Rose Queen celebrations etc. over the years is always regretted by those involved in the heyday, because the presence of many troupes "made the processions". All mourned that in the later years the troupes danced to recorded music, and remembered with delight the joy of dancing to live bands. They danced to what they described as "the old band music" and tunes like 'Blaze Away' and 'On the Quarterdeck' were mentioned. The troupes became increasingly less interested in the processions, which tired everyone out, because they attended the fetes solely to win the competitions. When there were many troupes, these competitions would take all or most of the day, which didn't always suit the organisers. Nowadays the troupes arrange their own competition venues and invite the other troupes to attend and compete. This means that the carnival morris troupes have become a rarer sight at village fetes and are not seen so much in open public performance in any great numbers.

Teams performing dances from earlier traditional sources in the North West, or teams performing Cotswold style morris are now more common at village fetes in the north.

Recent Morris in Lymm

Since collecting information on the 'old' Lymm dance, I decided that I should continue gathering material on morris dancing in more recent times in Lymm. The history of the morris in an area does not occur in separate unrelated lumps and in spite of rapid changes in style and content, the development of the dancing is a continuum. Many of the participants in more recent teams are relatives or descendants of older dancers e.g. the stepfather of the Mrs. Louie Booth whose notes were deposited at Warrington Library was also Bill and Alice's dad, Danny Higgins.

Well into the 1960's Bill Higgins regretted that he never achieved his ambition that the old Lymm dance would again be performed by a male team: do what he could, he never recruited sufficient boys to make up a set.

Broomedge Morris was founded by Alice Walker nee Higgins, and run by her and her brother Bill Higgins who both danced in the 1928 Statham team.



Broomedge - 1948/49



Broomedge - 1951

Pauline Doorbar (nee Ratcliffe) danced with Broomedge and later helped to form Lymmdale Entertainers with Fran Matulko, another Broomedge dancer.



*Pamela Stars
1954 Lymm May Queen*



*Lymm Embassy
1955 Lymm May Queen*

The Pamela Stars was created in 1950 as an offshoot of The Lymmtonians by Pamela Carter's (nee Bedows) dad.

Mrs. Shaw, who ran a school of dance, formed and trained the Lymm Embassy Morris Dancers who later became the Lymm Embassy Entertainers.

In 1980 The Thelwall Morris Men began to dance the Lymm/Statham Dance on specific occasions, and since 1986 have danced in kit as close as possible to that of the original Lymm teams.



Lymm Revival Team - 1986 Rushbearing)

A smaller and less grand version of the Rushbearing procession and ceremony has been revived, and the dance is now performed annually by interested and willing individuals at this event.

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Morris Dancers, Lymm - 100 Years Apart
- A coloured post card and a modern digital photograph -



The 1904 Lymm Team at Henry Street



The 2005 Lymm Team at Henry Street