

The Lichfield Morris

The Story of the Recovery of a 'Lost' Tradition

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English Folk Dance
& Song Society
Journal

EFDSS Journal Vol. VIII No. 2 1957

Although little mention of the Lichfield dances is made in any works of reference, the 'Bower' in which they paid a prominent part (known either as the Greenhill Bower from its location, or the Whitsun Bower, from its date) is held annually on Whit-Monday and is associated with the Court of Array, the yearly inspection of the military guns and equipment as demanded by the Statute of Westminster in 1285. The Corporation and trade guilds, bearing evidence of their craftsmanship, with the Morris dancers in attendance, marched in procession to the Greenhill, where all men answering to their names were regaled with cakes and ale in the Bower-house which was erected and decorated with elm branches for the occasion. In 1818 the Bower lasted for three days and included, *inter alia*, 'an unrivalled performance of Indian jugglers at the Guildhall', an exhibition of Wombwell's royal Menagerie with 'several animals new to the country, including the rhinoceros or the unicorn of Scripture' ¹. Lichfield Mercury 8 May 1818

As with most counties, Staffordshire's printed history is a story of successive plagiarisms, but it is convenient to begin with Stebbing Shaw's *History and Antiquities of Staffordshire*, where the account shows that the high constables fantastically dressed'. These 'morrice' dancers were further in attendance on the constables during their tour of the town's wards; later, on completion of the tour the order for the evening procession was:

Music

Morrice dancers

Armed men etc. etc

C. H. Poole gives the order of this procession as:

Tabor and pipe decorated with ribbons

Tom Fool and Maid Marian

Morris Dancers dancing sarabands, clashing their staves

Ten captains of the armed men, etc. etc.

Although the Morris dancers occupied a prominent position in the Bower procession, they were not necessarily held in high esteem. In the copy of Lomax's

History of Lichfield ' (1819), in the Birmingham Central Reference Library, by the words 'Morrice dancers' is a margin pencil note, 'a pack of Tom Fools', whilst in the 1816 *Lichfield Mercury* account, reference is made to the drinking ability of the dancers.



As a civic function the Bower was discontinued by order of the magistrates in 1805, but was revived by public subscription in 1816, civic dignitaries attended as before. From 1816 onwards its history can be followed through the accounts in the *Lichfield Mercury*, first published in that year. From these accounts it is clear that the Morris dancers accompanied by a band appeared up to 1827. By 1880, no dancers are mentioned, and in 1884, it is made clear (by inference) that they were not expected. In 1890, a bevy of boy dancers' appeared, and boys took part until 1907². Their inclusion signified an attempt to preserve the continuance of the Bower dance.

In 1908-9 H. Willisford from Stafford led a team; in 1910, dancers are not mentioned, but appear again from 1911-14. The dancers next took part in 1919, and were led by G. Gallimore until 1928; from 1929-36 the English Electric Morris team from Stafford took part ³.

From the time that the boys appear, it is evident that the dancers were no longer in attendance on the civic dignitaries, but were merely part of the procession; also that only the Bower Dance was performed. At some time prior to 1880, the original Lichfield dancers had left the Bower celebrations, though there is some evidence to show that they were still dancing, even if towards the end of the last century they were having some difficulty in keeping their team together. Their musician, a young flautist, disgusted by the hard drinking of the dancers, left the team ⁴. The dancing at the foot of the Greenhill, after the procession, became 'for as many as will' ⁵, and spectators mingled with the dancers up to the Bowerhouse, where the latter received payment of 1/- and a Bowercake (the cake still given to children who take part in the procession).

In 1898-9, three collectors ⁶ came to Lichfield and persuaded the team to meet together to perform the dances so that they could note them. Some of the dancers also copied the notation, and it is from certain of these copies that the dances have been revived.

The Recovery

The story of the recovery of these dances is in itself interesting. The bulk of the information and MSS came from an anonymous source, the same source which supplied the tunes of the 'Black Joker' and the 'Wild Rose' (over the telephone) on a flute. This gentleman insists on preserving his anonymity, but admits that he played for the old team and was present when the dances were noted. Whatever his reason for wishing to remain unknown, the wish must be honoured, but we would like to express our thanks to him, should he ever read this paper.

As part of the Coronation celebrations in 1953, the Men of Mercia (now the Burton-upon-Trent Morris Men and the Lichfield Morris Men) danced Cotswold Morris in the city. During their tour they visited Sandford Street, whose residents had (and still have) their own part in celebrating the Bower. Each Whit-Monday they gather elm branches, long straight saplings, which are cut and planted round the doors and windows as if they were growing there, exactly in the same manner as the Bower is decorated. Even though the street has been partly rebuilt, the custom still persists, and in this street the Morris Men were given a great welcome. The residents were soon giving details of the old Bower celebrations, and the older folk were soon singing their version of the tune.

This version had, however, already been noted from Thomas Skelton (36) of Burntwood in 1947. Mr. Skelton had danced the Processional circa 1924-5, and he was able to demonstrate the method of dancing. It was clear from his demonstration that the double step at Lichfield was similar to that of Cotswold, and this information was ultimately useful when the Manuscripts were received.

Enquiries were also made of patients and staff in St. Matthew's (Psychiatric) Hospital, Burntwood ⁷. A patient aged 73 remembered eight men dancing and pushing each other away with the soles of their feet, and as a result of what he said, an appeal for information was made through the *Lichfield Mercury*. This produced the notation of two dances, sent anonymously through the post to the Squire of the Men of Mercia, Mr. George Manning, on one of which was written 'This was among the papers of the late Mr. T. George. I hope it has some meaning for your'. Mr. C. George was Squire of the old team, but his daughters could give no information about his namesake.

Since then, other papers have been received by Messrs. F. C. Phillips, Jack Brown and William Everett. Mr. Brown's papers bear an admonition for dancing on the Sabbath: 'I trust you will not defile the Sabbath by further dancing on that day', --- this presumably as a result of the Sunday dancing during the 1955 Lichfield Ring Meeting.

All this information was pooled, and it was found possible to evolve the notation of some of the dances, though some modification has been necessary since. The first demonstration of the resorted dances was given at a patients' dance in St. Matthew's Hospital. A patient suffering from depression became most animated and volunteered information about the Bower Dance, how it can be altered, and most important of all, full details of original version. (See below).

The Music

On the invitation of Mr. George Sammons of Gentleshaw, choirmaster of the local church, a search was made through the papers of his late uncle, Mr. Philip Meacham, well known in the county as an organist and collector of folk songs. Two tunes for the Lichfield dances were found, a curious arrangement of 'Bobby Shaftoe', with a B music with three phrases of seven bars each, and the latter, a typical flute arrangement according to Mr. James Coleman, for 'The Sheriff's Ride' ⁷.

Unless otherwise stated the music, which is given below, was obtained or written down by Mrs. H. Manning, and Messrs. G. Mendham and F. C. Phillips.

Dress of the Dancers

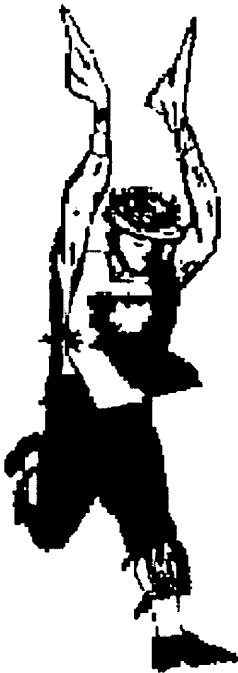
There are several accounts of the dress, which for reasons of space are summarised briefly below:

Harwood: *History of Lichfield* (1806)

'Morrice (or Moresque) dancers, who appear in hair shirts with ribbands of various colours tied round their arms, and flung across their shoulders'.

Mrs. Morgan, writing to Miss Charlotte Burne, June 26th 1891 (Ordish Papers, Folklore Society: EFDSS Copy, Vol. II, p. 117)

'... They wore clean white shirts with ends of coloured ribbon sewn all over them, straw hats with similar ribbons, ordinary trousers and boots. Maid Marian wore a flowered chintz dress and jacket, gay bonnet and parasol, in exaggeration of the prevailing fashion of the day'.



Miss Charlotte Burne, June 21st 1891 (Ordish Papers, Folklore Society: EFDSS Copy, Vol. II, p. 118):

'... Four dancers, Maid Marian and her attendant swain (name unknown) dancers in trousers and loose jackets of flowered chintz...'

Sir Benjamin Stone: Collection of Photographs, Birmingham Central Reference Library. Photo 20, Box 76, Negative 17995:

Team of boys in dark school clothing, M. T. S. (Midland Truant School) across their chests. Straw hats with big brims, turned up at one side. In the background, one of the men can be seen in white shirt and trousers, displaying his handkerchief.

Mr. Skelton of Burntwood describing the costume worn circa 1924-5:

White shirts and black breeches on silky material. Hat as above, bells on shoes. Flashes of ribbon on the shoulders, ties at the arms. Sashes worn across and shoulder, yellow and red waist bands for the odd numbers, red and yellow for the evens. Faces were blacked.

Other descriptions are usually based on white shirts and trousers. The hats worn by the present Lichfield Men are based on the Stone photograph, but are green instead of white for serviceability.

Conclusion

The discovery of this Morris has opened up new territory for exploration, (though much more would need to be discovered before any firm theories could be advanced), but the main question remains: Is this an isolated tradition, or is there still more to be found? There are already straws in the wind, which show the story is only half told.

See also: ['The Morris in the Black Country and Birmingham'](#)



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