

Redding Moreys Dauncers

500 years of morris dancing in Reading



10 August 1513 – 10 August 2013

St Laurence's Church

Morris dancing in the early Sixteenth Century

While the origins of morris dancing in England remain obscure and open to conjecture, there is a clear pattern to the early records. These date from the second half of the fifteenth century (1458, 1466 and the first known performance in 1477), and are soon dominated by command performances at the Royal Court. Between 1494-1522, during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII (and the contemporary James IV of Scotland), the accounts of expenditure on courtly entertainment include payments for morris dancers, musicians, costume and scenery, with entries ranging from, “to theym that daunced to mores daunce xxvjs viijd” [1501], to:

“Before the banquet in the hall at Richmond, was a pageant devised like a mountain, glistening by night, as though it had been all of gold and set with stones, on the top of which mountain was a tree of gold, the branches and boughs frysed with gold, spreading on every side over the mountain, with roses and pomegranates, the which mountain was with devices brought up towards the King, and out of the same came a lady apparellled in cloth of gold, and the children of honor called the Henchemen, which were freshly disguised, and danced a morice before the King.” [Hall’s *Chronicle* for 1511]

Fashions fade and the focus of morris dancing soon passed to the towns – to participation in the processions of official Midsummer watches – think of their successors today, the Lord Mayors’ processions in London and Norwich – and to church-sponsored ales with their associated Robin Hood games. Like present-day church fetes, ales were a means of raising revenue for the local church, and helped fund its responsibilities for the poor of the parish. In order to encourage broad participation entertainments would be arranged, and open-air dramas, games on the theme of Robin Hood, and morris dancing would feature in the revels. That morris dancing was looked on with favour and actively sponsored by the church is attested by entries of payments in the church wardens’ accounts (see opposite).

The survival of such accounts allow us to trace the progress of morris dancing’s adoption up the Thames Valley from the royal residences in London and Hampton Court, and its dispersion throughout southern England and beyond. This is, perhaps, no surprise when one considers that the epicentre of modern morris lies in the Cotswolds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire – and the headwaters of the River Thames.

Perhaps the best-documented example of these early church accounts is that of Kingston (1507/08, 1509/10 and subsequent entries to 1538), but Reading (1513) follows soon after. Later examples include Guildford (1530), Abingdon (1554), Thatcham (1566), Great Marlow (1595) and Bray (1602).

Although morris dancing of the sixteenth century figured in other contexts – sponsored by the guilds, incorporated into the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and performed by the rural poor – it played an important role in the life of the church, alternately Roman Catholic and Anglican, until it fell from favour after the Elizabethan Settlement of 1560. Thereafter, tainted by association with Rome and condemned by an increasingly militant Puritanism, church performances dwindled; they became the target of Episcopal injunctions from 1571 and had largely disappeared by the early seventeenth century.

Morris dancing found other ways to survive, however, and remains a vibrant activity in Reading today – 500 years on from that first glimpse in 1513. Drawn from established local morris sides – Kennet Morris Men, Shinfield Shambles and HUMP – Redding Moreys Dauncers is the latest manifestation of a long tradition – despite our antique appearance!

Morris dancing recorded in Reading

*It. Payed for a hope for the joyaunt and for ale
to the Moreys dawncSs on the dedicacon day iijd.*

Charles Kerry's *History of St Lawrence: Reading's Municipal Church*, 1883

The quotation above starts a sequence of entries relating to morris dancing at St Lawrence's, or St Lawrence's as it was then known. Other payments followed, both here and at St Mary's

1513, St Lawrence

Item paid for a hoop for the giant and for ale to the morris dancers on the Dedication Day 3d

1529, St Lawrence

Item for bells for the morris dancers 3s. 6d

Item for three hats for the morris dances 6d

Item for three yards of buckram for the morris dancers 12d

1530, St Lawrence

Item for a gross of bells for the morris dancers 3d. 0d

1541/42, St Lawrence

Paid for liveries and painting the morris coats 11d

1553, St Lawrence

Debts – Item upon John Saunders, the apparent of the morris dancers.

He said he had delivered them to Mr Buklund.

1557, St Mary

Item paid to the morris dancers and the minstrels, meat and drink at Whitsontide 3s. 4d

Paid to them the Sunday after May-day 20d

Paid to the painter for painting of their coats 2s. 8d

Paid to the painter for two dozen of liveries 20d



Redding Moreys Dauncers acknowledge the support of the vicar and churchwardens of St Lawrence in facilitating this 500th anniversary performance, and of the bell ringers in ringing a celebratory peal. Also that of the trustees of Watlington House in making rehearsal space available.

Recreating the dance

The truth is, no one today really knows what morris dancing was like in 1513; none of us is 500 years old and able to recall it, and the surviving records are sparse. But we have found some clues to provide a basis for recreating the dances and the costume.

We take the tunes and associated description of the figures – the movements of the dance – from a surviving document of the time, the Gresley Manuscript of c1500. Uniquely for its date, this combines contemporary tunes with choreography, and was the source used by Redding Moreys Dauncers' forerunner, Rose Moresk. The music, then as now, is played on the pipe and tabor. The distinctive 'frapping' steps at the end of musical phrases is that described by Thoinot Arbeau in c1540: the earliest such attempt to record the detail of morris dancing, as opposed to the spectacle or simply the occasion of performance. And the style of dancing – the distorted gesturing and hop-stepping is hinted at by the imagery that comes down to us at the locations list below, along with the carved panel from Abington and the Betley window (a stained glass window dated 1621, but quoting engraved sources from the late fifteenth century).

- 1490. **York Minster** – one has pipe & tabor plus bells at knee, belt, wrist and hem
- 1520. **Beverley Minster** – fool's caps for four men and one with a bladder on a stick
- 1525. **Lancaster Castle** – includes a woman with collecting ladle, pipe & tabor, fool with pointed coat and two-point hat, and dancers with short, tight-fitting, tunic-type coats that appear to button up the front. *See illustration on previous page.*

Costume

The iconography also indicates the costume of early morris dancing and these images, combined with a study of Tudor textiles by costume researcher Cherry Hubbard, give us the means to extend the terse entries in church accounts. In short we can infer the following:

“Lawn” garments (shirts), with a coat of buckrum or fustian, painted black, white or various colours, and embellished with spangles and other metallic decoration. A hat above; and below, a leather garter with bells, and a pair of shoes. Each would have a purse.

We have chosen to dispense with the extravagance of spangles, which were more characteristic of lavish performances at court, in favour of the rustic simplicity of what was then a small country town. And the coats – sleeveless here for the hot work of dancing in August – we have decorated with chevrons typical of the Tudor period, in colours taken from the mitred crest associated with Reading Abbey's coat of arms.

In addition to the necessary musician and at least four dancing men, morris sides of the early sixteenth century would have featured a combination of ancillary characters: Maid Marian, Dysart (a fool), a friar, a hobby horse, and sometimes a giant. (At Reading in 1513, payment was made for “a hoop for the giant”.) Today we have a Maid Marian and hope, in future, to have a horse.

Redding Moreys Dauncers wish to thank Steve Rowley and Andy Richards, formerly of Rose Moresk, and Cherry Hubbard, for their help in researching the dances, music and costume of early Tudor morris.

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