

Windsor Morris

Shirley Dixon looks at Windsor Morris – started in the 1970s and still one of the best in the country

Windsor Morris was founded in 1974 by people who knew nothing initially about morris, at the height of that boom in grass-roots interest in folk music that arose from the radical changes in British society in the 1960s. The absence of preconceptions enabled the founders to 'think outside the box', exploring original sources for their information on the dances, and ignoring establishment restrictions, to embrace a new style of morris.

The founders were members of the folk club at Eton, run by Alan Whear, Jenny Joyce and Cherry Simmons. Alan was learning to play melodeon, and starting up a morris team seemed like a good idea. Jenny found herself responsible for teaching, so had to undertake some learning herself. Dances came from various sources, including Ellington Morris Men, and Jenny tried to work out the steps from Sharp's *Morris Book*. The first dance chosen was 'Bean Setting' from Headington, which had been performed at Cherry's folk club at High Wycombe as part of a mummings' play. Further recruits were gathered, and practices commenced in the upstairs room of the Christopher Hotel in Eton.

A workshop by Tubby Reynolds of Bath City Morris gave the team a grounding in the Brackley tradition, and we also chose to learn dances from Ilmington and Headington, approved traditions for women at that time since they do not emphasise high jumps and capers. Alan and Jenny made frequent visits to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library where they immersed themselves in the history of morris and learned from the original collectors' notes. Jill Coleman (now Griffiths) of Bath City came to a placement at Reading University in the first half of 1975 and helped to found Earley Ladies Morris. She was a source of much help and advice, and we were delighted when she came to live in London after graduating, and joined us.

We chose the name 'The Merry Wives of Windsor', but this was soon changed to the much



Cherry Simmons in 'that hat' at Sidmouth 2001

more straightforward 'Windsor Morris'. The first public performance was at a wedding on 17 May 1975. The kit was similar to that of all the women's teams of that time: flowered skirts, flowered hats, green-and-white baldricks and character shoes (with a small heel!), the bell-pads worn on the shoes. But the costume survived only one season, since Jenny and Alan returned from their visit in August to the Sidmouth Folk Festival with a new vision: they had seen the performances of Gloucestershire Old Spot – morris could be an inspiring and entertaining spectacle!

The 'approved' traditions were dropped and Badby adopted, like Brackley a tradition not commonly performed. We chose to perform only our interpretation of the two Northamptonshire traditions, aiming for a polished performance of dances emphasising the details of each tradition's nuances rather than trying to present a selection of dances from many traditions. We

concentrated on dancing, not just dances – vigorous stepping, height on capers and jumps, precision and teamwork. Alan put a lot of emphasis on accentuating his music to give the dancers the space to make expansive movements, and the decision was taken to perform always to solo melodeon, so that the musician can be completely in synthesis with the dancers.

The kit changed to heelless shoes ('Polyveltdts' – most unladylike!) with plain skirts. It was only a couple of years later that the radical change was made to trousers – a necessary form of attire if the intricate steps of Cotswold morris are to be seen, but what controversy it caused! A further move to projecting an entertaining spectacle was the institution of a fool, 'Shoz' Spencer taking the role for the 1976 season. Since then, Cherry Simmons has served in the office, her costume changing from smock with floppy hat to smart waistcoat with the inspired addition of a top hat in the shape of Windsor Castle's Round Tower. She is an important link with the audience, setting out a space for the dancers, announcing the dances and making terrible puns as she wheedles money from the onlookers.

In that first season of inspiration, we danced at Nettlebed and Berkshire Folk Festivals, and at Sidmouth. We went out to watch morris whenever we had the opportunity, and attended every workshop we could. Many men's sides reacted very rudely to women daring to dance, and the antagonism we encountered caused us to become very defensive. Especially after the change to trousers, we were accused of 'trying to be like men'. We started up *Morris Matters* in 1977, a magazine for discussion of all things morris-related, to provide a public forum for debate on morris history, repertoire – and controversies.

Our defensiveness only relaxed gradually, after the support and welcome we received from teams in the USA, though some influential figures here had been very supportive from the start. Roy Dommert and Tubby Reynolds were both putting out new ideas about morris, and they welcomed us to their workshops. Roy often came to our

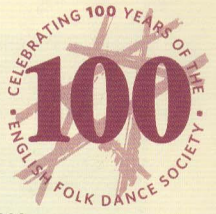


Photo: Bryan Ledgard



Christopher Hotel, Eton, June 1975.
Courtesy Windsor Morris Archives



At Southlands Arts Centre, West Drayton, 1976, with Shoz fooling

practices with his ideas and inspiration, and it was through their encouragement that we performed at Late Night Extra ceilidhs at Sidmouth in 1976 and 1977. Tim Radford, reviver of the Adderbury side, and Bernie Cherry of Old Spot were also encouraging, and we established friendly relations with sides growing up at the same time who shared the vision of morris as a performance.

We joined the Women's Morris Federation, and participated enthusiastically in the debates at their meetings, being strong supporters of the move to rename it – we disliked the implication that there is a 'women's morris' distinct from the real thing. We hosted a 'moot' in 1980, but our enthusiasm for our own vision made us rather too arrogant in those early days; the WMF weekend we hosted eight years later was a more relaxed affair, finishing with a '60s disco.

Since our first descent upon the Sidmouth Folk Festival in 1976, we have danced on the Esplanade there every year. We were invited to run the 'Women's Ritual' workshops at the 1977 festival. 'Morris' workshops were for men – women had been barred in previous years from even watching! We declined the offer, refusing to be ghettoised. We danced on the Arena that year, but in 1978 the hostility of most men's sides made the EFDSS organisers unwilling to showcase women's teams. Jenny Joyce eventually got to run *morris* workshops at the festival in 1986, when attitudes had relaxed, and in 1993 we finally appeared on the Arena as an 'invited side', a thrilling experience. Another highlight of Sidmouth for us was the fancy-dress parties we held on the Esplanade, at which our guests would compete to make the most dramatic entrance. Great Western's iceberg and Berkshire Bedlam's longboat are still remembered.

We run two or three 'Home Tours' (days of dance) per year, opportunities to perform in Windsor with our favourite teams. 1981 saw our first trip abroad, to the Marlboro Ale in Vermont, the premier morris gathering in North America, after which we visited New York and Boston, hosted by women's teams Ring O'Bells and Muddy River. We were amazed by the sheer enthusiasm of American dancers and audiences, and have attended Marlboro four further times

since then (once including a visit to the London, Ontario, Ale). In 1985 we represented England at a Youth Festival in Jamaica, and we've also danced at international festivals in Windsor's twin town in Belgium, Kortrijk, and at Bricquebec in Normandy, and in 2006 had a 'European tour'



Double leap in Rochester, May 1989

when we stayed with Ferrette Morris in Alsace, dancing in three countries in one day!

Jenny retired from the team in 1989, and Alan in 1992 – but not before he had found a very able successor, our current main musician, Jerry West. The pressure on a Windsor Morris musician is very great, since he or she is always a solo performer (with a drum accompaniment), and we are very fortunate to have had excellent musicianship from some of our dancers as well. More than one hundred dancers and musicians have performed with the team over the years, many of who have been (and are) outstanding performers. We became famed for our leapfrogging, and particular mention must be made of Sue Holmes and Sue Graham, who were the first to go for that death-defying leap over two bodies at once which impresses audiences at the

end of our 'Old Frog' dance. Windsor dancers have frequently been placed in the John Gasson Memorial Jig Competition at Sidmouth, and Sue Graham was the first woman to win.

From the early days, we have seen morris as a living dance form, open to interpretation and invention, and over the years, team members have composed more than forty new dances – indeed, there is only one collected dance (Badby 'Beaux of London City') in our current repertoire. Jenny Joyce was an inspiring leader and composer of dances, and her example has been followed by her successors, including Pauline Woods-Wilson who adapted the Brackley tradition to cross-shaped dances for 8. In recent years, we have added a third tradition, based on an American invention, which we call 'Windsor-on-Thames'. It has flowing rather than springing stepping, in an attempt to ease pressure on old knees.

In our third decade we suffered, as most sides did, from the decline in interest in all aspects of folk. We recruit via an annual beginners' course which anybody can attend – old and young, women and men – inviting promising participants to join the side. However, new recruits became hard to come by, and the average age of the dancers rose to alarming heights – although our 40-somethings can still outleap many a 20-year-old. We're very proud to have still in our ranks, as well as founder-member Cherry, three of our earliest recruits: Beth Neill, who attended practices regularly even when she lived in Kent – before the M25 was built! – and has served as secretary for 21 of those years, Marian Ballhatchet, who has been publicity officer and catering supremo for longer than she cares to remember, and Jill Griffiths, who tried to retire when she reached 40 but was persuaded to return.

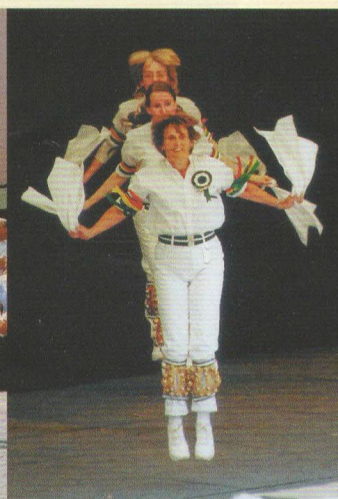
But it is good to see that folk is 'cool' once more, and we now have five dancers under the age of 30, all of whom joined us because of our reputation for high-quality performance. The future is bright for morris.

<http://windsormorris.org.uk>

Shirley Dixon took up morris in 1978 with Glory of the West. She joined Windsor Morris in 1993 and is currently the side's foreman.



In Windsor, 1988



On the Arena at the Sidmouth Folk Festival 2002



Chiltern Open Air Museum, May Day 2011