



# The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

*A Traditional Northamptonshire morris side*

## 1. The 1500s – ‘Early Beginnings’

The origins of morris dance are hazy. There are various speculative theories around pagan rituals, and links to other European forms of dance (morisco, moresco, morisque), details of which can be read elsewhere. But our main concern here is to gain an insight into the evolution of the Brackley Men throughout their long existence.

The first references to ‘morris’ are found in the second half of the 1400s. The earliest performances were in a court setting. From the royal courts it spread through time into the villages of England, where it was adopted as a form of entertainment by local people for their own festive occasions. By the mid 1500s, morris dancing had become common throughout much of the southern half of England.

### Cotswold Morris

According to the Morris Ring web site: ‘Perhaps the best known variety of the Morris is that which was collected by Cecil Sharp in the villages on the uplands of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire, and which has therefore become known as “Cotswold Morris”. The teams consist of six dancers and a musician, and often a fool or animal character. There may also be a cake impaled on a sword, together with a “treasury” which will be used to collect donations from the onlookers. (1).

Keith Chandler describes: ‘the apparent spread of morris dancing outwards from the City of London and the Royal Court at Richmond-on-Thames at the beginning of the sixteenth century to many areas of the country, to its subsequent contraction to the South Midland counties by the end of the seventeenth century’. (2). He goes on to explain how ‘a distinct form of morris dancing was practised in the South Midlands counties of Oxfordshire and those adjacent to it during the period 1660–1900. One hundred and fifty one locations have been identified as having fielded a morris dance side between these dates’. (2) Brackley was one such side.

### Early parish records

Under the Tudors, the churches were the administrative centres for parish business, and references to Morris dance become increasingly frequent in the accounts of the Churchwardens. (3)

- In 1509 ‘six peyre of shone for Mors dauners’
- St Lawrence Church Reading, accounts show ‘Moreys Dawncers’ performed on Dedication Day 1513 and were given 3d for ale.
- ‘In 1530, 12d was paid for ‘a grosse of bells for the Morece dawncers’
- At St Thomas Sarum 1557, they decorated ‘the endes of the banners with bells’ the Church procession jingled forth like the Morris.

According to Keith Chandler’s E,D&S publication ‘Morris Dancing at Brackley: A Study in Longevity’ (5), the earliest known reference to Morris in the ‘Cotswold’ region comes from Abingdon in 1560 when the churchwarden’s account books of St Helens Church recorded ‘1s.0d paid for two dossin of Morris belles’.

And only a short time later, we hear of morris dancing in rural Northamptonshire ‘At Canons Ashby in 1578 the curate of the church was “reputed to be a morris dancer”.’ (4)

### Morris dancing and the Church Ales

By the early 1500s, Morris dancing had become established in the parishes as the entertainment for local celebrations. In mediaeval and Renaissance England, the churches brewed and sold strong ales, including wassail (a hot mulled cider punch) for these festivities. The profits they made were used to cover not only church expenses but also to meet other parish needs such as distribution of alms to the poor. These festive occasions were both seasonal and sacramental. There was the leet-ale (held on ‘leet’ the manorial court day); the lamb-ale (held at lamb-shearing); the Whitsun-ale (held at Whitsun), the clerk-ale, the church-ale etc. The word ‘bridal’ originally derives from bride-ale, the wedding feast. So these parish ales were of much ecclesiastical and social importance in Tudor England, and the Morris dancers were an integral part of the entertainment. (6)

Of all the Church ales, Whitsun was the most favoured. It was already a holiday, the crops were mostly planted, and the weather was getting warmer. The Whitsun Ale celebrations were the common people’s version of the Royal festivals and they were often presided over by persons who were chosen to be lord and lady for the day, together with their attendants. These were the Lords of the Whitsun Ale. The festivities included the whole range of popular activities—food, drink, sports, games, music, and dancing. The existence of Morris dancing at such occasions is captured by Shakespeare when he has the Dauphin of France make mocking reference to this popular custom in Henry V: (6)

*‘And let us do it with no show of fear;*

*No! with no more than if we heard that England*

*Were busied with a Whitsun morris-dance.’*