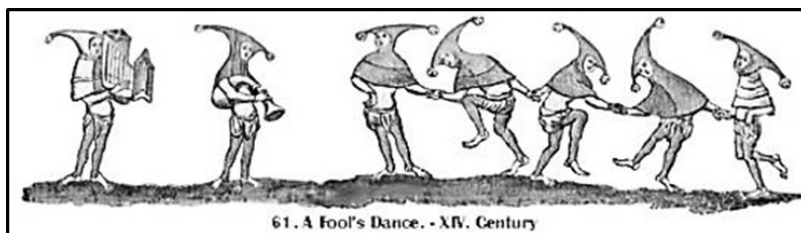




The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side

11. The Brackley Fool - 'Insolence' & 'Buffoonery'



The antics of the fool during public festivities and celebrations is a long established tradition. The following records show that the Brackley Morris fool has always played his role with gusto.



Jackson's Oxford Journal, 31st May 1766: "Yesterday the Squire of a Whitsun-Ale, attending his company of morris dancers in that city (which he had imported from Brackley in Northamptonshire) having been somewhat insolent as well as troublesome in playing the fool, had the misfortune to get himself committed to Bridewell as a vagrant".

The Oxford Chronicle, 25th May 1866: "A novel and amusing spectacle was afforded to young Banbury, on Whit Monday and Tuesday by a set of Morris dancers, which perambulated the streets of the Borough, dressed in many coloured ribbons and other gaudy finery, and marshalled by the fool of the troop, who was very active with his javelin, a cow's tail and bladder, who displayed much witless buffoonery.



The Brackley Observer, 1872: "Our morris dancers who had just returned from a two days engagement at Leamington, were performing their quaint dance in the streets of Brackley on Wednesday evening when the clown slipped up and sustained a severe fracture of the thigh. The man was at once removed to his home on a truck, and medical assistance obtained. The injured limb was set and the sufferer is progressing favourably".

The print above is a tiny part of a painting depicting morris dancing at Stowe House in 1844. It shows the fool dressed as a clown. Although the morris dancers on this occasion were not the Brackley men, this print gives an indication of how the Brackley fool may have looked in the 1800s.

In 1877 the men danced at a fete organised by the Finmere branch of the National Agricultural Labourers Union. In reporting on this event, the Buckingham Advertiser wrote: "...the Morris Dancers were surrounded by a crowd eagerly watching their antics, whilst 'Tommy' (that is to say, the fool) outmatched his companions in the style of dress, if not in the style of dancing, and caused much laughter."

The Banbury Guardian, June 1884. The Rev'd Helderic Friend, having seen the men perform on Whit Tuesday wrote a long article, including this description of the fool: "The Brackley Troupe consisted of eight men, one of the company being a kind of master of ceremonies, under the dignified and ancient title of 'Fool'..... The Fool was dressed in different fashion from the rest, having on a broad (rimmed hat) covered with gaudy trimmings and decorations, a short muslin skirt with numerous flowers over his pantaloons or knickerbockers which were of pink cambric and flowered pompadour, and were so short as to exhibit to perfection the odd pair of stockings one of which were black and the other pink. A muslin bodice or loose jacket, for one can scarcely give the article a name which will correctly describe it, covered the upper part of the body, while streamers and rosettes added to the general display. To make his appearance more befitting his name, he carried a whip, on the lash of which were tied a number of old bladders, most of which had already burst. This corresponded to the bauble which the fool is said to have anciently carried. I am disposed to think that this personage has gradually merged in one the two characters of 'Fool' and 'Maid Marion', who at one time figured in the dances." (15)

The illustration to the right is almost certainly based on the above 1884 description. It appears on page 50 of 'The English Mummers Play' written by Alex Helm, and published in 1981. The drawing was done by his daughter Alison G Helm. The original, which appears to be in coloured felt tip pen, is held at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House (Accession no. 7900). The image here is a photograph of the original, and is reproduced courtesy of the English Folk Dance & Song Society.



The Banbury Guardian, 1870: William Gardiner Daniels, in a letter dated 14th June 1870 'described how: *The fool of the morrice, a fellow who fooled most appropriately, put himself at the head of the Green Men, aptly strutting with the absurd majesty of a parish beadle, to the music hall tunes of the accompanying band.*' The full transcript of this letter appears in Chapter 4 'Witless Buffoonery & Disorderly Idlers'.



Alfred Tuckey, 'Brackley Fool' 1880s. Alfred Tuckey, 1859-1934 played the role of 'fool', and is assumed to have been active from 1879 onwards. (2) Was he the fool seen and described by Hilderic Friend? His great nephew Len Tuckey became an active Brackley dancer from around 2000 to 2016. Although he never played the fool, he loved dressing up and is pictured here in beefeater outfit on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

W Mallet, 1913. This photo of W Mallet, fool, is part of a photo of the full team taken on 4th Aug 1913. The full photo is included in Chapter 5 'The Early 1900s'.



George Chaplin, early 1960s. 'On 2nd June 1961, the last day of the Northampton town and County Education Week, both the Morris Team and the the Folk Dancing team took part in the open air massed country dancing..... The Morris Men performed three traditional Brackley dances. A feature of this display was the clowning of Mr G A Chaplin, fulfilling the traditional role of "fool", with the bladder, cow's tail, white coat, and



slightly oversized top hat. His clever and hilarious clowning, together with his facial expressions and walks, delighted the many small boys among the audience. (From 'The Brackleian', 1961) (19)

In January 1962 the Magdalen College School boy dancers performed at the EFDSS annual festival at The Royal Albert Hall. The Brackleian subsequently reported how: 'we are particularly grateful to GA Chaplin, our celebrated fool, now at London University, who forsook his studies to come and partake in the performance with some inspired clowning which delighted the capacity Albert Hall crowd'. This photo shows George Chaplin, fool, with Roger Nicholls on piano accordion. (19)

The 1970s - Paul Spaven and Jonathan Connor. In the early 1970s the role of fool was played by both Paul Spaven (left) and Jon Connor (right). Paul provided this photo of himself in 2013 and wrote the following words of explanation: "As you can see how young we are, it's probably around early 70's. I believe this was the first smock that John Weaver took over when I became a slave to the entertainment industry and very rarely danced. It could be that this smock and the hat came from Northampton Rep Theatre where I was at this time. I had a yellow stick with horse hair at one end and a bladder on a string, cured and blown up as a small balloon, on the other. The latest I finished Fooling was 1973 when I worked on a cruise ship for a year and I was 20yrs old."



Paul Spaven



Jonathan Connor

John Weaver, 1970s to the present day. The images to the left and right, taken in 1983 and 1984 show John wearing the same smock and holding the same yellow stick as used by Paul Spaven. That stick is still in use today.



1999 saw the introduction of the fool's new smock, made by the mother of our long term dancer Ian Phillips. The images below all show John Weaver wearing that smock in his role as the fool.

