



# The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

*A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side*

## 4. The 1800s - 'Witless Buffoonery' & 'Disorderly Idlers'

Although the processions of the Lords of the Whitsun Ales began to subside in the early 1800s, the Morris dancers continued to play a central role in the Whit holiday entertainment well into the late 1800s. We have many records from this century.

**Stowe House, 1821.** The Brackley men received one pound for their performance there. (*From Stowe House Account Books 1817-21*) (Stowe MSS., ST vol 419, payments by J Poole (misc Bucks Estates) 1817-1821). More on activities at Stowe House on page 2.

**25<sup>th</sup> May, 1866, the Oxford Chronicle reported on page 7 how:** *'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 musical department consisted of the customary pipe and tabret, to whose doleful sounds the dancers performed their jigs with more strength than gracefulness. It is nearly 20 years since a similar exhibition of such a bye-gone pageant was witnessed in Banbury. The men came from Brackley and its neighbourhood.'*

**22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1869, the Northampton Mercury reported on the Foresters Festival in Brackley** which took place on Whit Tuesday: *'During the afternoon the members paraded the town with their band... A great number of persons followed the procession... The Sun shone out brightly and the town seemed alive with pleasure-seekers. The Morris dancers performed about the town during the whole of the day.'*

**On 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1872 the Brackley men performed at the Grand Odd-Fellows Fete at Leamington Spa.** According to the Leamington Spa Courier (25<sup>th</sup> May, page 4): *'Whit Monday was the people's holiday at the Royal Spa. The railway companies imported several thousands of excursionists... The Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire Morrice dancers amused the spectators by their fantastic costumes and gambols...'*

**On 23<sup>rd</sup> May they were performing back in Brackley. The Brackley Observer wrote on 29th May 1872, page 8:** *'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.'*

**In 1877 they danced at a Fete organised by the Finmere branch of the National Agricultural Labourers Union.** An advance advert proclaimed that *'a first rate troupe of morris dancers will be in attendance'*. And the Banbury Guardian, reporting on the event, noted that: *'Soon after the arrival of the band, the troop of morris dancers engaged for the day arrived from Brackley, and clad in their characteristic costume, commenced their peregrinations, and by their merry antics promoted the amusement of the many juveniles, and children of an older growth were also equally delighted. Visits were made by and welcome given to these merry dancers'*. And the Buckingham Advertiser added: *'...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...'*

**13<sup>th</sup> June 1878, the Banbury Guardian reported on page 8 how:** *'On Tuesday the Whitsun morris dancers again enlivened the town with their picturesque dance, and were exceedingly welcome, in no way ashamed of their business, and the fool was as good as the character allotted him as it was possible to be. On Monday and Wednesday the lovers of old customs in the neighbouring villages were equally gratified.'*

**Charlotte Burne writes in her Shropshire Folklore in approx 1883** that the Brackley team is still dancing *'at Whitsuntide in the neighbouring village of Syresham'* (12).

**In 1884 the Bicester Advertiser wrote of** *'The Morris in their quaint dresses, a revival of that old historic joy to which a consumption of old October was not unnecessary'*.

**12<sup>th</sup> June 1884. Revd. Hilderic Friend wrote in the Banbury Guardian that:** *'This well-known troupe prides itself on having kept up the old custom through an unbroken succession of years, and one of the present company can boast a connection extending over something like half a century, while his sons are also being trained for keeping up the art when he shall fall...'* (8)

**In 1885, Thomas Curtis wrote:** *'This morris dancing is quite an old affair in the towne... Brackley has been the metropolis of this morris dancing...'* (13)

## The Brackley Morris Men and Stowe House during the 1800s

The print to the right, taken from a painting owned by the Buckingham Archeological Society, shows Morris Dancers at Stowe House in 1818 on the occasion of the coming of age of Richard Grenville, second Marquis of Chandos (later to become the second Duke of Buckingham).

In 1844 he himself organised extravagant celebrations to mark the coming of age of his own son, the third Marquis of Chandos.



The painting shown below, by James Danby, depicts those festivities at Stowe House on 10th September 1844. The Bucks Herald reported how there were performances by 'Two companies of morris dancers in alternate sets who footed it the remainder of the day to the merry pipe and tabor.' (Keith Chandler: *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands*). The two morris sides were from the two Buckinghamshire estates of Stowe and Wotton. Costumes and bells were commissioned for the occasion and paid for by the Duke. This painting was purchased by the Stowe Preservation Trust at auction in 2017, and now hangs in the Development Centre at Stowe School.



Although neither of these paintings depicts the Brackley men, they do give a useful indication of their likely appearance in the early/mid 1800s.

This close up shot shows the dancers in detail, with the musician to the left, and the fool or clown to the right.

Keith Chandler quotes eight sides who were paid between half a guinea and one guinea for Whitsun performances at Stowe House in the period 1797 to 1821.

In 1821, the Brackley men received one pound for their performance there. (*From Stowe House Account Books 1817-21*) (*Stowe MSS., ST vol 419, payments by J Poole (misc Bucks Estates) 1817-1821*).



The Brackley Men were very active throughout the 1800s, and although we have no more records relating to Stowe House, it's quite possible that their appearances there continued periodically because Cecil Sharp, when collecting in 1922, was told by some of the old dancers that they could remember dancing through several villages (Fritton, Tingewick, Middleton Cheney, Dadford, Westbury) on their way to Stowe House, 'the performance at which was the chief event of the week's festivities'. This took place 'somewhere about 20 years since' (Cecil Sharp, *The Morris Book, part III, 1924, page 88*)

## They liked their drink!

**Partaking too much of Brackley Ale.** The later period of Victoria's reign brought a more serious mood. With the development of modern industry, and the tightening of moral behaviour, the outdated Whitsun festivities were going into decline, and its attendant Morris dancing was once again falling out of favour. *'The rough-and-ready ways in which the working classes enjoyed themselves inevitably led to withdrawal of support, and later downright opposition by local élites across the country, and the Whitsun ales were suppressed, to be later replaced by more controlled village fêtes or local club feast days'* (14).

**1870, The Banbury guardian.** This letter to the Banbury Guardian gives a wonderfully colourful description of the Whitsun Ale celebrations in the late 1800s, ranging from *'the distribution of small rewards to deserving children'* to the *'rabble of disorderly idlers'* paying *'homage to the worship of King Beer'*. It was posted onto the Facebook page entitled *'Brackley Memories'* in March 2016 by Patricia Moore, the great grand-daughter of its author.

*SIR - In your paper of last week appeared a very flattering account of the anniversary meeting of the Brackley branch of the Foresters' Club on Whit-Tuesday; apparently supplied to you by somebody interested in the drinking trade, that being the principal interest advantaged by these meetings at public houses. If you can find space will you allow me to provide your readers an impartial observer's account of the general holiday proceedings on the day above named?*

*The glorious summer weather was most favourable for out-door demonstrations. The Vicar of Brackley gave also tea and entertainment to the children of the numerous and increasing Church school. A field being mown for the occasion adjoining the Vicarage, rural sports were permitted, which, with the distribution of small rewards to deserving children, were much enjoyed by all, including many parents and respectable inhabitants of the town.*

*On the other hand, a party of the fortunately almost extinct Morrice Dancers paraded the town, assailing the ear with barbarous and discordant noise and perpetrating gymnastic antics appropriate in these modern times only*

*to Kaffirs or Australian savages in costumes suggestive of the fancies of lunatics, and under the influence of frequent strong potations levying black mail with the most audacious pertinacity. The Foresters procession approaching, during one of their interludes, 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, around which all the scum of the neighbourhood were attracted in sympathising homage to the worship of King Beer. A rabble of disorderly idlers there were who are always too ready on any excuse to leave work and indulge in drinking, to which the meetings of benefit societies at public houses lend an obvious sanction.*

*Allow me to apologise for my very long letter by saying that I consider it the duty of every thinking man to raise his voice against every custom that tends to promote drunkenness, the foremost disgrace and reproach to our country.*

*I am Sir,*

*Your obedient servant*

*WM. GARDINER DANIELS*

**Whit Tuesday 1884.** The Revd. Hilderic Friend, after seeing the Brackley Men perform on Whit Tuesday, 1884, wrote: *'I am informed that many years ago, the Brackley Morrice Dancers were largely patronised and encouraged by a religious house that used to exist in the town. (NB: presumably the parish church of St James, recipient of the 1623 silver paten). Unfortunately now-a-day the performers are frequently the worse for the patronage they receive during the day, and become incapacitated for dancing properly through partaking too much of Brackley Ale'* (8).

**In 1885, D'Arcy Ferrers** of Bidford was enlisting the help of Timothy Howard and Thomas Curtis of Brackley to raise a revival side at Bidford. Curtis wrote in 1866 that: *'...they make a lot of money when they go out but people give them too much to drink. On several occasions this made them so that by midday they were obliged to discontinue.'* He also wrote: *'I find this man (Timothy Howard) taught the whole of the present troop but they are not men (several of them) that I could recommend to you, to engage in a round, they are not reliable, they might start, but by two days they (some of them) would abandon the affair'*. He went on to write: *'It is a strange thing that they will not teach youngsters. It is kept too much with men too fond of drink and this damages it'*. (13)

**24<sup>th</sup> June 1886, Hilderic Friend wrote once again in the Banbury Guardian (page 7):** *'After their usual festive Whitsuntide tour of the village clubs in the locality the Brackley Morris dancers are this week engaged in a competition at Bidford, Warwickshire'* (8). This same story appears in the Northampton Mercury on Sat June 24<sup>th</sup> *'This antique appendage to rustic sport appears to have lost none of its popularity in its old age.'*

**Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1887.** The men are presumed to have danced on this occasion because Cecil Sharp claimed to possess a baldric made especially for the occasion (16).

The current side has in its possession another of those baldrics believed to date from 1887. It's pictured here and is described in detail in Chapter 13, *'The Kit'*



**In 1888 it was reported in the Banbury Guardian (24<sup>th</sup> May, page 8) that:** *'The Morris dancers have not come out on this occasion and the general verdict on Whitsuntide this year is that it is the dullest known for some years'*.

**In 1889, Timothy Howard died.** Hilderic Friend had written of him in 1884 that: *'one of the present company can boast a connection extending over something like half a century, while his sons are also being trained for keeping up the art when he shall fall'*. (8) The loss of their long term leader must have had an impact on the other men. Nevertheless, the side regrouped under the leadership of his son, also Timothy, who continued to lead the men into the 1900s. Their activities are picked up in the next chapter: *'The early 1900s - Skill and Tenacity'*

## The Bucknell Team of 1875

This photograph of the Bucknell Men is included here both as a rare example of an early contemporary morris photograph, and as a good illustration of how a full morris team, including its piper and collector, would have appeared in the late 1800s.



**Bucknell Morris Men in 1875.** *Probably the oldest morris photo. Jim Powell, playing the pipe and tabor, must have been one of the last players in the country.*