



The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side

6. The Reformation of 1959 - 'The Magdalen Boys!'

The Magdalen College School boys side of 1959

In 1959, Roger Nicholls started a boys' side at Magdalen College School in Brackley. He'd read modern languages at Oxford University, and whilst there, joined the Cecil Sharp Club. In Roger's own words, '*At the Christmas party, the O.U. Morris Men burst in, doing a processional, and I was hooked*' (18). So he joined them and subsequently took up the piano accordion to learn the tunes.

On graduating he took a post as resident master at Magdalen College School, Brackley, with some responsibility for the boarders. This role, together with his knowledge of folk music & dance, combined to create a fortuitous moment in the story of Brackley Morris, as the school side he created became the foundation upon which the current Brackley side later evolved.

Roger kept a hand-written diary of those early days, and the passages below, including the photographs, are taken directly from that diary. For those of a certain age it gives a wonderfully nostalgic insight into this particular period of our history. (19)

Autumn term 1959

'With the leaving of Mr Fairbairn at the end of the summer term, the Scottish dancing for the boarders on Saturday evenings came to a close. In its place some Morris dancing was tried, which was felt to be very appropriate, since Brackley once had its own side of dancers, and its own particular dances, collected by Cecil Sharp and others, are well known and popular. The old Brackley side last performed around 1920, and only two men are now alive from that number – Archie Kendall, musician, and Harold Rawlings.'

'At the first practice in 'Upper', 18 boys arrived – a formidable number! We tried 'Bean Setting' from Headington, and managed a number of figures. The sticks were still rather green, and the floor was littered with fragments of bark when we finished.'

'Bruised fingers and general apathy caused a considerable falling off in numbers, and we soon got down to a hard core of seven boys: Fisher W, Hartwell, Stewart, Wells, Bull, Richards S, Rogers.'

'The repertoire was extended to include some of the Adderbury dances, and also the shortened popular version of the Brackley 'Jockey to the Fair'.

First public performance

This took place on December 16th at the Christmas party organised by the VI form dancing class. It was held in the Driver Hall, and during the interval we performed 'Jockey', 'Beaux of London City' (Adderbury), and 'Bean Setting' (Headington). No "war paint" had been assembled by this time, and the boys hurriedly obtained white trousers to convey some of the right atmosphere. The performance had been well received and the ice had been broken.

Spring Term 1960

'A start was made on learning some of the dances peculiar to Brackley, where a certain amount of difficulty was experienced, since Cecil Sharp had published versions of the dances which did not tally with versions that surviving members claimed to have performed. Fred Hamer, former Squire of the Ring, and musician to the Bedford Morris Men had done considerable research on the subject and had published a convincing article in J.E.F.D.S.S. in 1955. The dances were learned in accordance with the article, and two surviving men of the former team



The boys pictured above are:

Back row, from left to right: Wells, Stewart, Hartwell. Front row, from left to right: Bull, Fisher, Rogers

War-paint" was now a major preoccupation. Bells were obtained from Cecil Sharp House, ribbons from Woolworths, and by much persistent asking, top hats were found (two of which are on permanent loan from the Brackley Amateur Dramatic Society). Shortly before Speech Day, the date of our next public performance, a practice was held after Sunday letter-writing on the terrace outside the hall, so that the general state of war paint might be assessed. The main discrepancies were Hartwell's ordinary trousers and Fisher's lack of a hat. We never did find one that fitted him, but a piece of elastic round the back of his head was the final answer.'



And here they are again, with sticks:

LHS, front to back:
Bull, Stewart, Hartwell

RHS, front to back:
Fisher, Rogers, Wells

Speech Day, May 28th

'The Master announced, at the end of the speeches, that "Mr Nicholls and his Merry Men would entertain the guests during tea" A display consisting entirely of Brackley dances took place and aroused very considerable interest. 'Bean Setting' came first, then 'Jockey' and we ended with 'Shooting'.

A number of people took photographs, one of which is included below.'

The originals of all the black and white photos on pages 1 & 2 of this chapter are kept with the logs (19)



Display in the Market Square, June 2nd

'As part of the celebrations for the Septcentenary of the Borough a folk dance was held in the Town Hall. By way of an advertisement, a display of Folk, Maypole, and Morris dancing was given in the Market Square. Juniors from Syresham and the B.H.S / M.C.S. team, which won at the Aylesbury Arts Festival provided the Folk Dancing; The Brackley C of E Juniors did the Maypole; and we did the Morris – again an all-Brackley display. There was only time for us to do 'Bean Setting' and 'Jockey'.

Brackley Septcentenary 1960

The photograph below, though not from Roger's collection, shows the Oxford University Men dancing in Brackley on the occasion of the Septcentenary of the Brackley Charter. The accordionist on the left is Roger Nicholls, and the man on the far right hand side, holding his cap, is Archie Kendall, one of only two surviving men from the pre-war side. Archie Kendall was a musician – a whistle player.



'The Brackleian'

From 1961 onwards, Roger's diary contains, not hand-written notes, but articles cut from *'The Brackleian'*, the Magdalen College School newsletter. The details below are taken from those cuttings. (19)

By July 1961, Roger had established both Senior and Junior sides, which soon made performances at a number of local barn dances and ceilidhs. The Seniors listed in 1961 were: *Chaplin, Richards, Sowerby, West, Wells, Bull, & Rogers*. The Juniors were: *Ingrey, Dudley, Sellers, Harvey R, Weston & Fisher*.

In May 1963 they became serious participants in the local *'Cotswold'* scene when they danced out with the Oxford and Headington men as part of the May morning procession in Oxford. Outings with other Cotswold sides soon followed.

They also participated in national folk dance activities. In January 1962 the seniors 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 was to be the first of a series of such performances.

On May Day, 1964 the boys danced in Brackley Market Place, the start of an annual tradition which still continues to this day.

In January 1964 they performed for a BBC broadcast of morris and folk dancing, and in February 1966 they were filmed for the ATV programme *'ATV Today'*. This ATV clip now appears on the Brackley Morris Men website.

From past to present

The photograph below, dated 1963, and currently in the possession of John Weaver (19) shows the school side with Harold Rawlings, one of only two men surviving from the pre-war side. It captures an important link between the old and the new.



Back row

Michael Dudley	Richard Harvey	Christopher Sellers	Jeffrey Creek	Hugh Greaves	Richard Weston	Andrew Simpson
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Front Row

Patrick O'Meara	Neil Butters	Jonathan Conner	Harold Rawlings	Adrian O'Meara	John Weaver	Leslie Carver
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In 1964 Roger Nicholls left MCS to take up a new post elsewhere. In July the Brackeian wrote: 'a word of gratitude must be given to Mr Nicholls, whose organisation and accordion playing has enabled both morris and folk dancing to continue. We all wish him every success in the future'. And again in December: 'We were very unfortunate in losing our founder Mr R J Nicholls at the end of last term, but luckily Mr J E Ellaby has taken charge of the morris men'.

Throughout the 1960s the school team continued to thrive, but by 1970 a new situation had begun to emerge. Some of the ex-school boys wanted to continue dancing. In December 1971 the Brackleian reported that 'as a result of J Weaver's efforts to consolidate the Brackley Morris tradition, it is planned to form a new Brackley team comprised of various seniors and recent 'Old Boy' Morris Men. Accordingly the first meeting was held in the school on Old Boys day when 17 attended'.

For the following three years, the side continued to thrive with a combination of school boys and ex students, as captured in the Feb 1974 issue of the Brackleian: 'In summer '73 the School Morris Team danced some thirty times in public, in conjunction with the senior Brackley Side'.

However the tide was beginning to turn because by July 1974 we heard how 'interest in the lower forms for Morris Dancing is non-existent, and so I regret that this ancient traditional dancing will be done henceforth by only ex-Magdalen boys'.

Nevertheless Roger Nicholls and those who followed him at the school, had firmly re-established the Morris tradition in Brackley and given it the solid grounding upon which it continues to thrive to this day.

The story of how the modern side evolved is told in the next chapter (Chapter 8 The Modern Side)



Various shots of the Magdalen College School boys during the early 1960s