



# The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

*A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side*

## 7. The Modern Side - 'From Boys to Men'

### The emergence of the modern side

By 1969 the log books, originated by Roger Nicholls when he founded the boys side at Magdalen College School in 1959, were being maintained by 'Old Magdalanian Morris Man', John Weaver. John continues to maintain the side's logs and records to this day. The details and quotes in this chapter have been extracted from those log books. (19)

At this time, a number of the 'old boys' were still active with the school side as they wished to continue dancing. In July 1971 a meeting was held at the Old Sun in Nether Heyford 'with a view to discussing the future of the Brackley Morris'. At this meeting it became clear that 'Men favoured the idea that the Brackley Morris should be continued and that past members of the school side should still dance as the Brackley Morris Men' and that 'men living in the vicinity would continue to assist at the practices at MCS'

On 13<sup>th</sup> November 1971, the inaugural meeting of the Brackley Morris Men took place in St John's classroom, chaired by John Weaver. At this meeting an outline constitution was discussed. Old boys John Weaver and Jon Connor were appointed Squire and Bagman respectively. R Walker remained Squire of the School side.

The first outing of the newly-formed joint side was on Boxing Day. They danced at 10.30 at the Sun, Whitfield, then outside Brackley Town Hall at 12.00, and finally at the Brave Old Oak, Towcester at 2.30.

### There followed during 1972 a very full dancing season

May began with their six-weekly practice at the Old Sun in Nether Heyford, followed by 'Mayor-making' on the Market Square, and an appearance at the newly created Moulton Village Festival. On Whit Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> May, they danced at: the Butchers Arms, Greens Norton; The Brave Old Oak, Towcester; The White Horse, Silverstone; The King's Head Syresham; Brackley Market Place; (then to the boys lodgings for ale with the master); and finally the Crewe Arms at Hinton.

In June, they had bookings at Ravensthorpe Rural Trades Fair, Evenley Fete, and at Duston Fete.



In July they did fetes at Farnborough, Barton Seagrave, Spratton, and Little Horwood. They also danced at Ecton Barn Dance and Broughton Castle.

In August they performed at the Fox and Hounds Folk Club Whittlebury, and at the Birmingham Folk Festival. Finally they organised a four day summer tour over the Bank holiday weekend, based at Water Stratford.

During September they danced: at a fund raising event in Lavendon; at St Crispins Hospital fete; at Drayton Fete, at Nether Heyford Autumn Fayre, and at a social event as guests of the Bedford Morris Men.

On 28<sup>th</sup> October they danced at Hereward Wake House as part of the Annual Scout and Guiding event which this year had a folk theme. As the men weren't strong enough in numbers they were able to do a deal with the Northampton men, who were also short of dancers for an event on the same night at Whilton. This was described in the log as 'a curious conglomeration', but nevertheless gave 'considerable entertainment to the assorted peasants'.

The first AGM was held in St John's classroom at 4pm on 11<sup>th</sup> November. Subjects covered included:

- Subs to remain at 25p per year
- Hope to hold an 'Ale' next year
- Expression of desire to attend a ring meeting
- Battledress to include cummerbund as per old photos

The final outing of the year was on Boxing Day when the men danced at the Stratton Arms, Turweston, Brackley Market Place, and Cowpastures Farm, Whittlebury, followed by a late lunch at the home of the Tomblasons. The programme in this first year will seem fully familiar to the current side as these outings set the pattern for the general format and the kind of annual events which continue to the present day.

## But the times, they were a-changing

From 1971 until 1974, a series of performances were made by the two sides both jointly and separately. But times were changing. In 1974 the Brackleian reported that: *'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 ex-Magdalen boys'*. So the dancing activities became independent from the school and the modern side was born.

## Practices

In the early 1970s, practices took place at the Old Sun in Nether Heyford. But by 1975 they were being held fortnightly at Long Buckby School. The routine was an instructional for the boys, followed by a regular practice for the men, an arrangement which offered a potential source of new young recruits.

This photo from Roger Nicholls' collection, dated 1975, shows a side consisting of both Brackley men and Long Buckby boys dancing at the Butchers Arms, Greens Norton, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1975. Among the dancers, the man on the left hand side, facing, is Jim Woolard. The two men with their backs to the camera are Jon Connor, left, and John Weaver, right. The other three are Long Buckby Boys.

On Wed 7<sup>th</sup> Oct 1981. The log recorded that *'Negotiations with Magdalen College School for the use of a room free of charge were foundering'* but that *'the C of E Junior school (Brackley) had invited the men to go to the school to show the little lads and their parents the art of the Morris'*.

And at the Boxing Day AGM of 1986 the Squire was finally able to announce *'the start of a new weekly Thursday practice at Manor Road School, Brackley'*. This was to take place in addition to *'the continuation of Wed fortnightly practices at Long Buckby School to assist the training of the younger boys only, not a BMM practice session'*.



Thursday night practices at Manor Road Junior School still continue to this day.

## The Morris Ring

In 1977 the Team was admitted to the Morris Ring of England, and took part in the Offley Ring Meeting of June 1978.

## Cummerbunds

Although the desire to wear cummerbunds (as worn by the men in the old photos) was first recorded at the 1972 AGM, it was to be another 10 years before this was achieved. At the Boxing AGM of 1982 *'the Squire reported that the twelve month experiment of wearing cummerbunds had been a success and it was agreed to continue the practice'*

## Overseas trips

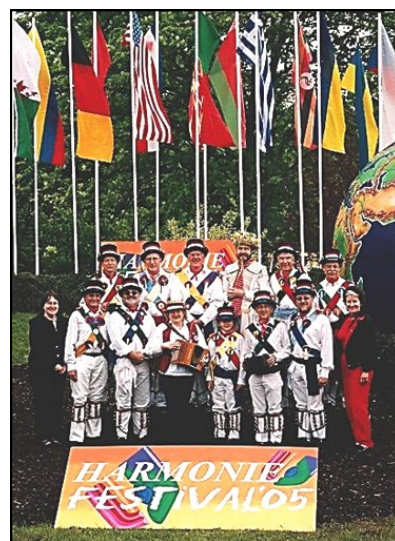
1980 saw the first overseas trip to Montabaur for a twinning celebration. Other such trips followed in 1984, 1990, 1999, 2009. These visits led to the invitation for the men to attend the Harmonie International dance festival at Limburg in the years of 1987, 1993, 1999 and 2005. The photo here shows the team there in 2005.

The men also went on a two week trip to Guernsey in 1985.

## Ales

The intention to hold ales was originally mooted at the first AGM of 1972, but the earliest mention in the log comes on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1986 when it was recorded that the men held an ale in Brackley Town Hall where they were joined by *'the Northampton MM and various odd bods from elsewhere'*.

By 1996, the BMM Ale had become established as an annual event held on the third weekend in November in Brackley Town Hall. Over the years, our guests, either full sides or representatives, have included Anker, Aynho Apricots, Bathampton, Bedford, Braybrooke, Cambridge, Devils Dyke, Ducklington, Fentstanton, Harbury, Hemlock, Lutterworth, Northampton, Owlswick, Oxford City, Royal Oak, Rutland, and St Albans.



## May Day

We have no evidence of the pre-war side dancing on May Day, though it's quite possible that they did so. The Magdalen College Reformation side of 1959 first danced on May Day in 1963. In the following years there are sporadic mentions in the logs of the men dancing on May Day, either in Brackley or Oxford, but not necessarily at the crack of dawn. But in 1981 they danced for the first time at 5.30am on Brackley Market Square. From that year onwards, early morning May Day dancing, followed by beer and breakfast in the Red Lion, became an annual tradition. Details of the May Day celebrations are covered in 'Chapter 8, *May Day*'.

## Mumming

To the best of our knowledge, the old Brackley side of the 1800s and early 1900s didn't indulge in mumming. But it seems that the men at Hinton did so: Fred Hamer in his 1955 article (15) wrote that: *'My informants in Brackley have told me that... there used to be dancers at Hinton but that they... were better known as Mummers than as Morris Men.'*

The first mention in the BMM log of the men performing a mumming play comes on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1982 when they put on a dance and mumming performance at The Maltsters Arms, Badby. From that year onwards, mumming performances on or around St Georges Day became one of the regular annual outings for the men. Details of these performances can be found in Chapter 9, *'Mumming - Here come I'*

## Summer Tours

Since the establishment of the mens side in the 1970s, the men have danced out on an annual Summer Tour over the August bank holiday weekend. Many of the men and their families set up camp, often behind a pub, whilst others take part as day boys. Details of the Summer Tour weekends can be found in Chapter 10 of our history.

## York



One of the most popular outings for the current side is the annual visit to the York Festival of Dance. The first of these visits took place in 1995 and continues to be an annual favourite for the current side. The log from that first visit records how the men found accommodation in the scout hut in Poppleton, and how they ate curry in the Indian Ocean at Acomb. Incredibly, these are the places where they sleep and eat to this very day. The men either have a very limited sense of adventure, or a very strong sense of tradition! They were captured in action in these photos taken in 2012 by George from 'Flagcrackers'.

## Maidford



The side first danced at Maidford Fete on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2004, and this too has become a favoured annual outing. The organisers have a knack of ensuring that the weather is invariably sunny. Even more importantly there's a nice man who entices the men into his garage between performances and gives them beer!



## Somerton



The first invitation to dance at Somerton came in 2002 through Dave Reed, an 'occasional' Brackley man who lives in that village. Since that time, we've often made twice-yearly visits: in January for the Winter Wassail, and in May for their May Queen celebrations.

The generosity of our hosts Victoria and Sebastian Prentice, together with their very fine home-produced cider and pork sausages make these visits most enjoyable for the men.

These photos above were taken in May 2012

## Everdon



1984



2011

Everdon Fete, which always comes on the August bank holiday Monday, has long been a part of our summer tour programme and one of the most favoured annual events for the men and their families. The road is usually closed and the audiences are always appreciative.



2011

## Anniversary of the reformation – 16<sup>th</sup> December

Each year on 16<sup>th</sup> December, the men celebrated the anniversary of the 1959 reformation. There's no particular routine for this. Sometimes a dance tour is arranged, and on other occasions just a simple meal for the men. But on major anniversaries something more formal is organised as illustrated in 1979:

The opening lines of the log (19) for the twentieth anniversary in 1979 recorded that *'the sun shone early on the day which was the twentieth anniversary of the first public performance of the revived Brackley Morris Men. A day of celebration had been planned and it started at the Fox at Juniper Hill'*.

At 12.30 the anniversary convoy moved on to the Great Western at Aynho. After dancing, the party moved inside the pub where there was *'a large hot, open fire to warm the inmates. Luncheon was taken here, and platesful of ploughmans kept appearing in manner slow, but sure. Eventually some 40 speakers were provided for'*. From there they moved to Turweston and danced outside the church, and then on to Brackley Market Square for 3.30. *'During the course of the day, the entire current Brackley and Hinton dances (jigs excepted) had been performed.'*

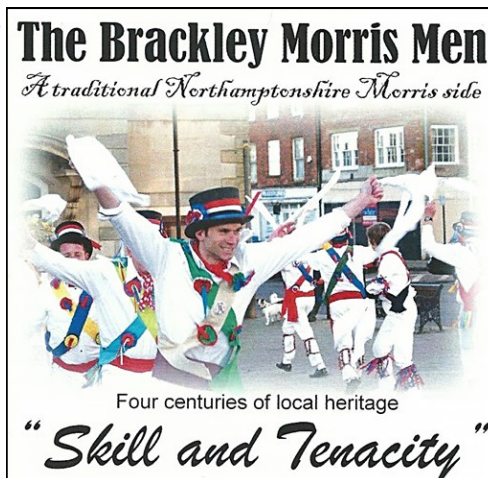
The party then moved on to the warmth and hospitality of Magdalen College School where tea was provided. They looked at old scrapbooks and logs, and were treated to a slide show of old photos dating back to 1963. *'The men took great delight in seeing themselves as they used to be, and laughing at others as they used to be'*.

There then followed a meal, after which *'Margaret Hamer cut the twentieth anniversary cake, beautifully iced with a Brackley Top hat. Roger Nicholls proposed the health of the men and commended the spirit which had pervaded the past twenty years. He spoke of the links with the past, and to mark the occasion presented a beautifully mounted photograph of the men in 1963 surrounding Harold Rawlings, one of the last survivors of the pre first world war side'*. This photo appears in Chapter 9 of our history, 'The Reformation of 1959'.

Finally there were songs and more dancing and *'all those attending the day signed the Twentieth Anniversary Parchment'* (19)

### The CD - 'Skill and Tenacity'

In 2013 the side produced a CD entitled 'Skill and Tenacity' which, through music, dance, song, and narrative, tells the story of morris dancing in South West Northants from Tudor times to the present day. The 21 tracks include the sound of our dances, our tunes, and our mumming play. Most of the current men read short narrative snippets from our records. 300 copies were produced and, at the time of writing in Dec '14, 200 had been sold.



### And so to today (December 2014)

A snapshot from the log shows that the volume of outings hasn't changed greatly over the last 40 years.

1972. The log recorded a total of 27 outings.

1986. Boxing Day AGM. The bagman recorded 31 bookings and 34 practices during the year.

2014. The men attended 13 paid shows, 20 social or unpaid events, and 35 practices. The events were attended by an average of between 9 and 10 men

Clearly the side is still thriving, as shown in this group shot at Gateridge Farm during the Summer Tour of 2014.

But it is also ageing. So in 2012 a campaign of publicity was initiated to spread the story and raise the profile. A new, modernised website was established, a number of illustrated talks were given to local groups, and a whole array of articles were achieved in newspapers, village newsletters, folk publications, and on websites.

Long may the side 'Continue to Flourish'

