



The Story of the Brackley Morris Men

A Traditional Northamptonshire Morris Side

8. May Day - 'Dancing at the crack of dawn'

'The revival of a worthy tradition'



We have no records of the pre-war side dancing on 1st May, though it's quite probable that they did so.

The first mention of the modern side dancing on May Day comes from 'The Brackleian' of July 1963. *'Despite the rain and the early hour, the Senior team enjoyed dancing with the Oxford and Headington teams in the traditional May morning procession in Oxford'*. The quotes in this chapter come from the Brackley Logs. (19)

And the following year, 1964: *'May day was greeted with folk and morris dancing in Brackley market Place'* though the time of day isn't mentioned. The photo here, with

Brackley Town Hall in the background, was taken on that occasion on Friday 1st May 1964.

The Brackleian of July 1967 stated that: *'On May Day we celebrated for the first time in what is probably the most traditional manner available, dancing at the crack of dawn, up the High from Magdalen Tower, and into the Broad at Oxford as guests of the Oxford University Morris Men.'*

And in July 1969: *'We attended the Oxford May morning celebrations and we have been invited again next year.'*



The above photos are from Monday 1st May 1978, the first official 'May Day Bank Holiday'

But it wasn't until the 1980s that the modern May Day tradition of dancing at dawn in Brackley was born.

Thursday 1st May 1980. The log reports how the men danced the sun up at Hinton airfield *'Traditions tend to evolve. After a practice in March, men had harped over a pint of Hooky at the Sun at Whitfield of the possibility of dancing in the sunrise on May Day. At 5.30am as the sun rose in the East... the men danced the month of May, Jockey to the Fair, Beaux Badby and the Willow Tree... The populous expanded to seventeen'* and when the Squire went to pecuniate... *'they put in a green note apiece... It was a good morning. Brackley Market Square next year perhaps?'*

Friday 1st May 1981: *'Yea, verily, Brackley Market Square it was, at 05.33 hours as the sun was due to rise in the East... In darkness men (wise and otherwise) had travelled many miles to the mecca of the Market Square... The Northampton MM and the Stony Stratford MM both fielded sides. There was a large populus of 100 or so. The show got underway with the Month of May. The mayor welcomed the men and the revival of such a worthy tradition'*. More dancing followed, some individual, some massed. *'Brian Wiles opened the Red Lion, having obtained an extension of hours from 05.30-08.30... At 07.05 BGG was danced... most men repaired to the ale house for rest and more ale... The bag had taken an amazing £28.07, a trebor mint and some foreign coins... Breakfast was served at £1.50 per head... There was music and dancing and each in turn made his way back home.'*

Since 1981, dancing the sun up at 5.30am, on Brackley Market Place, followed by beer and breakfast in the Red Lion, has all become an annual tradition. Ever since that year we've always been joined by visiting sides. In the 1980s regular appearances were put in by the Northampton and Stony Stratford men, joined occasionally by Towersey, Chipping Campden, Ducklington or Polyolbian. In the 1990s, Northampton, Royal Oak, Queens Oak, Owlswick and Heyford all came regularly. From 2000 onwards our main supporters have been Northampton, Royal Oak and the Aynho Apricots.

Mayoral support. This photo from May Day 1984 captures the presence of the Mayor sporting a Brackley hat!



May Day Tours. Whenever 1st May falls on a week day, the men tend to come, dance, eat and then go off to work. But when it falls on a weekend or bank holiday Monday, it's more usual to follow the early morning tradition with a tour, finishing with a pub lunch. On such occasions the Northampton Men have been known to bring a minibus and a barrel of beer to provide them with uninhibited refreshment throughout the day.

May Day and the silver paten of 1623. Sunday 1st May 1983 saw the beginning of a new twist in our May Day tradition. Since that date, whenever 1st May falls on a Sunday, the early morning activities are followed by a church service in St Peters, in which the men re-present the paten. Chapter 2 on the 1623 Silver Paten includes details of the occasions on which this was done.



Unpopular with some! The Log of course contains many interesting anecdotes, far too many to include here, but a favourite has to be the little incident which took place at 5.30am on May Day of the year 2001 when the Squire, Paul Bestwick 'welcomed in the May and announced loudly the first dance, *The Month of May*, only for a woman to fling wide a second floor window above the newsagents and shout "PISS OFF!"

The photo above was taken on May Day morning 1998

The Red Lion. These photos were taken on May Day 2012, when the performances were rained off. So here we are, inside the Red Lion, Brackley, where some of the Royal Oak team can be seen enjoying breakfast, while the Apricots are about to dance.



The photos on this page were all taken on May Day morning 2013



The Northampton Men



Royal Oak Morris, Eydon

