

## CORRESPONDENCE

### THE LYMM (CHESHIRE) MORRIS DANCE

Readers of the *Journal* will recall Mr Alex Helm's article on *The Cheshire Souling Play* in 1950, and those who have visited the Library at Cecil Sharp House, or have seen the film strip of *Traditional Dress and Regalia of the English Ceremonial Dance* will be acquainted with the costume-models, among which are two of the Cheshire Morris made by Miss Turner at Mr Helm's direction. Mr Helm has spent many months tracing the vestiges of the Lymm tradition, which Miss Karpeles investigated before the war. To Mr Helm's account Miss Karpeles adds her hitherto unpublished notes. Mr Helm writes:—

The Lymm Morris is mentioned in Ormerod's *Cheshire* as accompanying the rushcart in 1817, and his account was subsequently quoted by Burton in his *Rushbearing*. Neither of these authorities was, however, interested in the Morris dance as such, their centre of interest being the rushcart. It was left to the enterprise of a local shopkeeper, the late Mr C. E. Ardern, to capture the Morris men on a photograph taken to illustrate a *Guide Book* which he produced; and possibly more valuable, to photograph a painting of the Morris and Rushcart, painted by an unknown artist, about 1840. This painting is now unfortunately lost, and has defied all efforts at discovery by various people for the last ten or fifteen years. Fortunately, Mr Ardern's original negative has been saved and is now in my possession.

The painting is valuable since it allows a comparison of dress between that worn by the Morris Dancers of 1840, and that worn by those who were still dancing about 1900. The former, as far as one can judge from the photograph, wore white shirts and trousers; over the shirt was a broad ribbon passing over the left shoulder and fastened at the hip, with the ends hanging down to the knees. A rosette was worn on the breast over the ribbon. Narrow bands of ribbon encircled the elbows and knees, and a panama-type hat was worn, with very little floral ornamentation. One dancer appears to have ribbons hanging at his back—the photograph is unfortunately insufficiently clear to establish this fact definitely. The dancers carry "napkins" in their hands.

The dancers of 1890–1900, however, most of whom were employed in the local trade of fustian-cutting, show a more elaborate taste in dress, and here once again we are indebted to Mr Ardern, for, in addition to his *Guide Book* photographs, he produced a coloured picture postcard of the Lymm Morris Dancers. The dancers of this period wear white shirts, dark trousers and elaborate tiara-shaped headgear, the basis of which was the ordinary bowler hat. This was profusely decorated with flowers and strings of pearls. The shirts were gay with rosettes and ribbons—the latter being used as ties at wrist, elbow and upper arm. On the shoulders, too, were bows of ribbon, whilst from the hat at the back were three streamers hanging to the waist. From a broad ribbon sash round the waist there were fastened, at the back, three more streamers, long enough, almost, to touch the ground. In the picture postcard, the dancers are shown as carrying what appear to be strips of material, which present inhabitants of Lymm remember as strips of fustian (material of their trade); in the guide book photographs, however, these strips are replaced by napkins, known locally as "Smack-rags".

With the dancers went a Man-woman, dressed in woman's clothes of the period, which always included apron, bonnet, ladle and bell, the latter fastened to "her" back. "Her" hat was trimmed with flowers. "She" was known locally as the Fool or Maid Marian—suggesting that originally both characters may have accompanied the dancers. About 1900 the man playing the part of the Man-woman was also responsible for training a team of boys who would fill in gaps in the adult team. Music was supplied by a melodeon, played by a musician dressed in his ordinary clothes. The musician who played for the last group of dancers is still alive, and he says that although there was a "proper tune" to the dance, the dancers preferred "Yankee Doodle" and this was the music which invariably accompanied it.

The dance was a processional, and the number of dancers seems to have been limited. Beyond the following, little can be remembered of the notation of the dance, and even this has been pieced together from several sources:—

"The six men shuffled their feet facing each other (stepping in position?) and flapped their hand-streamers; they turned left and repeated the movement. Then they took three steps forward, three back, and turned round. Whilst the dancers were doing this, the Man-woman danced

round and between the files of dancers, calling out 'Smack 'em up, my lads'. Following these movements, the dancers walked on to the next pitch, where they repeated the evolutions and the Man-woman went round collecting from the bystanders with 'her' soup-ladle".

The dance survived the rushcart by twenty years—the rushcart going round the village each August on Rushbearing Monday until about 1880. The dance seems to have disappeared with the supplanting of the hand fustian-cutting by imported industries between 1900 and 1910. Efforts are being made at the present time to revive the dance, but owing to the uncertain knowledge of the notation, it may well prove to be an abortive attempt.

Miss Karpeles adds the following from her notes made in 1938:—

The Morris was last danced in Lymm about thirty-four years ago, i.e. c. 1904, when it was performed on Saturday and Monday in Rushbearing Week. Until the rushcarts were given up some years previously, the dance accompanied the carts which were each drawn by six gray horses.

There were usually eight dancers and a Man-woman "Old Fool" who danced in and out among the dancers calling "Smack 'em up, my lads", and collected money in a ladle. Only three of the dancers, John Robert Downwood (Man-woman), Abraham Wilson and Charles Simpson (age 68) were still living in 1938. Songs were sung between the dances which were commonly performed to "Yankee Doodle" and "O Susannah", and the days' dancing was concluded by a supper.

Dress: as described by Mr Helm for the period 1890–1900.

Handkerchief or Napkin: a piece of linen or cotton 18" x 36".

Steps of Processional Dance (four couples):

- \* A. 1–4. 3 slow walking steps forward (one step to a bar) starting with inside foot. On the 4th bar the outside foot is thrown forward.
  - 5–8. 3 steps backwards and face partners, stamping free foot in last bar. Throughout these movements the hands are swung round continuously in a big circular continuous movement, the right hand counter clockwise, and the left hand clockwise, similar to over-arm bowling. Each circular movement occupies one bar.
  - B. 1–2. On the first beat of first bar jump on both feet with left foot in front and on middle beat hop on left foot. Repeat with right foot in second bar. During this movement hands are crossed at the wrists in front of the body, left over right, on the first beat of the first bar, and swung apart on the second. In the second bar the movement is repeated, right over left. Even numbers reverse the footing and hands.
  - 3–4. All make a whole turn upwards with slow walking steps. On the first beat the handkerchiefs are flicked down with a sharp movement called "slapping your handkerchief".
  - 5–8. Above movements repeated.
- Dancers progress throughout all movements. Mr Simpson showed and described the movements but he was rather vague and did not keep good time.

*My sources at Statham in the 1920s  
all said the figures of the dance were  
performed very fast—contrary to Mand  
Karpeles findings.*