

**GEOFF BIBBY** (Thelwall Morris Men)

## THE MORRIS IN CHESHIRE

Before the turn of the century, the Lymm area of Cheshire boasted two morris teams; one based in Lymm, the other in Oughtrington. Only the Oughtrington team continued to dance after 1900, and it was thought that this team had disbanded before the end of the first decade; so in March 1938, when Maud Karpeles came in search of material, her chances of gleaning any notation seemed slim. She knew only that three dancers were still alive: Charles Simpson, Abraham Wilson, and John Downwood. From Charles Simpson Maud Karpeles noted a 'step up' (and back), and a 'step and turn'. Both movements are typical of what are described as 'Penine' tradition figures, although Maud noted that the 'step up' was performed with 'slow walking steps', one to each bar of music -- which is in itself unusual.

Armed with such little background knowledge as this, I determined to concentrate on collecting as much material as possible. Looking back, I cannot understand how I could have been so enthusiastic; with no surviving dancers, how could I collect any more dance notation?

It was impossible. I did have one advantage over Maud Karpeles however; I would be able to visit Lymm again and again if necessary.

In order to avoid 'discovering' information which had already been collected (a frustrating situation when you eventually find out), I made a list of everyone I could think of who might have further knowledge of the dance, and began writing.

Principally, these were ex-Manchester Morris Men -- Derek Froome, Eric Pollitt, Julian Pilling and Dan Howison. Derek and Eric were very helpful, but could offer no real clue as to where to go from here. Eric Pollitt wrote to me with the opening words 'Welcome to the league of the Dead-Horse Floggers -- not very encouraging!

From Dan Howison, I learned that some brief notes on the dance had been deposited at Warrington Library in the Local History Archive, and when I discovered that these had gone missing, Dan Howison sent me a photocopy of the information. In the meantime, I had collected together the 'already-known' information:

- 1) Maud Karpeles' notes (March 14th 1938) see JEFDSS Vol.VI, No. 3.
- 2) Ardern's 'Illustrated Guides to Lymm & District'; 1900 & 1913 editions.

The notes from Warrington Library via Dan Howison were as follows:

**The Lymm Morris**

Information given by Mrs. Booth of 15 *Barnsbank Road*\* (Her father, Mr. Higgins, danced with the Morris Men in the early 1900's. He taught her the dance.)

**Formation**

2   4   6   8  
1   3   5   7   (or with 6 men)

**Music**

"Yankee Doodle" or "Oh Susannah"

**Tempo**

Fairly quick

'A' music: dance/walk forwards, hands circling alternately.  
'B' music: Turn to face opposite end; hands and feet crossing together.

Same for procession and stationary dance.

No. 1 may call out any figure, such as 'Corners', 'Back to back', etc.

The boys of Statham performed a version of this dance in 1923, as part of the May Queen celebrations.

So there had been dancing too in Statham in 1923. Dan Howison said that the boys were about 11 years old at the time, and this meant that I may be able to trace them. A tiny light at the end of the tunnel; at last I had a direction to follow.



*Lymm Morris outside Arderns' shop, Eagle Brow, Lymm c. 1904*

My first action was a letter to the local newspaper; a simple statement that the Statham lads had danced a traditional morris dance in the May Queen celebrations of 1923, and an appeal for any information. I have since found that many relevant people read the plea, but at the time there was no response. My next step was a trip into Statham to place an advertisement in the window of the local post office, and to call for a lunchtime drink at the village pub, 'The Star Inn'. There was immediate interest in the post office, and in the Star, but I did not follow up any leads straight away, thinking it best to call back and spend a full day there. Hopefully, the locals would begin to talk of the morris, and memories would be jogged, and the word get round.

It is very fortunate that Statham was, and still is, a very close-knit community, and on my next visit, I was immediately directed to the Star to see a 'Mr. Edwards' who 'knows all about Statham May Queen, having been involved with the organising for several years' Mr. Edwards of 34 Oldfield Road, was an invaluable informant. He confirmed that the Statham lads had danced 'over a number of years, from about 1920 onwards,' and that the leader was dressed as a woman,



*Ned Rowles, last leader of the Lymm side, 1912*

wearing a bell on 'her' waist at the back, and carrying a wooden ladle, dancing up and down the set shouting, 'Smack 'em up, lads'. I had the photograph from Ardens' guide books with me, and Ted Edwards was able to identify the dancers — to my surprise! He knew some first hand — for example Bob Downward, but identified others by family likeness.

Ted told me that Ned Rowles, 'an old Lymm dancer' had been the leader of the Statham boys' team, and he suggested that I call on his son, Dick Rowles, giving me directions to his house. In 1946 Ted Edwards, together with his wife had managed to re-establish the Statham May Queen celebrations, after a break of several years, and in one particular year a 'morris' team had been hurriedly put together with local boys; but no-one could remember the dance, so they had used figures from country dances. This was only performed the once.



*Statham Morris Dancers (11-year-old lads) 1923*

Dick Rowles did not live in the suggested area, and my next trip to Statham was a long search. I eventually traced Dick Rowles at 15 Fletcher Lane, and found him sitting with his wife enjoying the sunshine.

Dick remembered the Statham lads who danced in 1923, and knows (generally) where they live now. His wife said she has a photograph of the team, but cannot find it, so I left my address, and asked her to let me know as soon as it turned up. A week later I received a card from her, and I called round immediately. Dick named all the boys on the photograph, and I borrowed it to have a copy made. Dick was a year or two too old to dance in his father's team, as Ned only had boys of 11 years old, so Dick knew nothing of the dance itself! This was in July, 1977.

From that date onwards, continuing to the present day, I have a diary of my movements concerning recovery of the dance, and peripheral information which is too long for publication. My informants so far number well over thirty, and each person I meet passes me on to more suggested sources, so that I can never stop. I still have two of the 1923 dancers left to trace, and one dancer who is speculated as being a twelfth lad missing from the photographs. On August 14th, 1980 I called on Mrs. Massey who still lives at her father's old address. She told me that most of the old dancers were 'fustian' cutters in Lymm, and that her uncle 'Jack Wilkinson' who ran the Fustian-cutting shop, employing about 12 cutters, was the musician of the team, playing the melodeon, which belonged to her father.

The fustian was white velvet, which when cut into ribbon was sent to Manchester in packet steamers to be dyed. She told me that she would never forget one particular Monday morning when 'a gentleman and a lady' pulled up outside the house in a large car, and asked for her father by name, saying that they had come all the way from London to see him.

They asked him to dance the old dance for them, and this sight apparently tickled his daughter extremely. They took out a music stand, and made notes on the dance and the tune, and before they left gave him two pound notes. This was obviously the visit of Maud Karpeles to Lymm in 1938. Mrs. Massey said her father died aged 84.

**MORAL:** No matter how impossible a task seems, have a go — and cast the net as wide as possible.

**PROBLEM:** Once you start collecting, the difficulty is not when to stop, but HOW. All information becomes import, & collecting becomes addictive.

*Below: late 19th-Century morris; the Lymm Morris side photographed in Henry Street, about 1899.*

*Bottom: Lymm Morris were also involved in the Rush-Bearing ceremonies then current; Painting dated 1840. (courtesy of Castle Museum, York).*

