



# MORRIS DANCING



Morris dancing is an English traditional type of dancing. Its origins go back for hundreds of years to pre-Christian times. The farmers and peasants who did these dances believed that the dances helped their crops to grow.

Each village had its own dances and its own team of dancers. The dances which we do come from different villages in the south of England: Bampton, Headington, Adderbury etc.

Some of the dances are fertility dances to make things grow (usually these are the dances with handkerchiefs). The height the dancers jump to in these dances is the height that the crops will grow to this year. Some are fighting dances (usually done with sticks). The sticks are a small version of the fighting sticks (called a quarterstaff) which peasants often used to defend themselves a few hundred years ago.

The traditional costume of male dancers is all white. The bells are to frighten away the evil spirits which might stop the crops growing. The baldrick (crossed bands) was the belt from which a sword or bag was hung to be carried. Nowadays each team of Morris dancers has its own colour of baldrick and a badge at the centre to identify it. The women dancers traditionally wear an English country woman's shirt and skirt in the team colours.

The dances are usually done by groups of six or eight dancers. Sometimes men and women dance together, other times the dancers are all women or all men (as often in the case of the fighting dances).

Music is provided by a variety of traditional instruments. The tunes that are used have existed for hundreds of years. Some of the tunes were made for Morris dances, others were taken from songs and music which were popular with the country folk.

As well as the dancers and musicians every team has a "Fool" (jester, clown) and an animal, often a horse. These are said to bring good luck to people. They also join in some of the dances.

More than **560** Morris Dance Sides now have a Web presence, so that well over a half of all Morris clubs can now be found by a click of your mouse button. Find them via the amazing 'google.co.uk' database, where a search for "Morris Dancing" gives 32,500+ hits!

The picture alongside was 'lifted' from the website of the Bathampton Morris Men, a Cotswold Morris Dance Group formed in 1934, distinguished by a red belt and baldric over a white shirt and trousers. The red baldric bears the symbol of Chaucer's *Wyf of Bath* on the front and rear, surrounded by a yellow rosette. Bathampton is a small village by the Kennet and Avon Canal on the outskirts of Bath in North Somerset.

*In investigating this article I sought more info on the reference to Chaucers Wyf of Bath. Herewith the first verse taken from The Canterbury Tales..Ed*

## **Heere Bigynneth the Tale of the Wyf of Bathe**

In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,  
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.  
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,  
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.  
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;  
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.  
But now kan no man se none elves mo,  
For now the grete charitee and prayeres  
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,  
That serchen every lond and every stroom,  
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,  
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,  
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes—  
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.  
For ther as wont to walken was an elf,  
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself  
In undermeles and in morwenynges,  
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges  
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.  
Wommen may go now saufly up and down.  
In every bussh or under every tree  
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.