

Morris Talk

A lexicon of Morris dancing terms, phrases and expressions

Compiled by David Clampin FRHistS after an idea of Peter Morris

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To those approaching Morris dancing from the outside, it can appear as a strange and impenetrable spectacle. Whilst the dances themselves are innate and complex, the matter is further compounded by the fact that there seems to be a closed language amongst its practitioners and participants. Wherever there happens to be an accumulation of Morris dancers and musicians, careful aural scrutiny will reveal an apparently bizarre language spoken. Words or even phrases may be recognized but those on the inside seem to take different meaning beyond what those words imply.

At your service, provided here is a brief introduction to Morris talk: a phrase book and decoding device which will reveal more of this art, allowing you to feel integrated with these elite artists and athletes.

Adderbury Balls and Cock: Adderbury is a particular style and set of dances (aka “In the Adderbury tradition” (see “Tradition”)) described in the “Black book” as being ‘Active and lively, but less forceful than Headington mainly because of the more finicky arm-movements’ (Bacon 1974, 4). It is those arm-movements in the Adderbury hanky dances that this term “balls and cock” refers to and which broadly describes the shape inscribed in the air by the dancers’ hands and hankies. It is believed that one of the earliest and keenest practitioners of the Adderbury suite of dances was a plumber. Thus, the motion of the arms suggests the float ball extending up the lift arm typical of a lavatory ballcock assembly.

Adderbury Hey (see “Hey” also): This is the progressive move up or down the “set” in the form of a weaving movement. It is always initiated by passing right shoulder to right shoulder with the oncoming dancer. N.B. not all Morris dancers have the same right; for some dancers their right may be another’s left.

Bagman: The Bagman, also known as “Baggers” or “Father Christmas”, is one of the “Officers” of a Morris side. It is a rich, varied and most enjoyable role. Such an individual takes charge of organizing outings, “Stands” and events. He will draw together a viable “Side”, liaise with the venue, and ensure the logistics are clearly established. When actually out, the Bagman coordinates the venue or organiser’s expectations and requirements and ensures a timely delivery of fine entertainment (see also “GMT”). The Bagman is also responsible for the “Side’s” finances, both overseeing “Bottling” or collecting on the day but also banking and keeping the Side solvent. It is in this latter regard that the Bagman may be referred to as “Father Christmas”: this reflects his generous disposition and the doling out to the Side munificent bounty at every given opportunity. The role of the Bagman is very demanding and after a particularly long session, you may find him quietly dozing up a corner.

Baldricks: Item belonging to the fictional character by that name whom featured in the long-running BBC historic comedy television series *Blackadder* (see also “Foreman”).

Bampton Hands: This refers to the manner in which the hands and hankies move in Bampton tradition dances. These particular dances are lively and perhaps even brusque in their nature. However, for our purposes, it refers to the habit of bringing the hands down, quite sharply, to one’s hips. Interesting to note that Bacon describes this as a ‘living tradition...Fluid, with some variation’ (1974, 32) and so it has come to pass that Bampton Hands have come to coincide with a pelvic thrust reminiscent of the ‘Time Warp’ as featured in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). It is likely that earlier Sides

presenting dances from this oeuvre borrowed from that feature film (see also “Molly”).

Bell pads:

These are the leather strips or pads to which the dancer’s bells are attached and, in turn, securely fastened to the lower portion of a dancer’s leg. You will note that they come in a variety of styles, and are adorned with a multitude of different bells. Bells will vary according to pitch, tone and volume (on the latter point also see “Budgie bells”). Sides will sometimes rig one dancer’s bell pads in such a way as to shed all bells in the middle of a dance. This serves to add excitement and a frisson of risk to the proceedings.

Black Book:

This is a more common name for Lionel Bacon’s, *A Handbook of Morris Dances* (1974) (aka “The Bible”). This indispensable guide, generally presented in a black ring binder, hence the name, sets out the basic parameters of the different “Traditions”, instructions for each dance within that tradition, along with associated music. The Black Book is written according to Basil Bernstein’s “restricted code” and it is impossible to decipher how a dance should be performed unless you know how a dance should be performed. It is by virtue of this that Foremen are able to operate on the basis of a national cartel (see “Foreman”).

Bledington Crotch:

Each tradition has features which make it distinctive and when it comes to Bledington dances it is the “Hookleg” which frequently stands out. The Bledington Hookleg resembles the ancient tradition of double declutching (see “Synchronesh gearbox”) yet it often requires the dancer reaching back with the leading foot and, by virtue of this, presenting a splayed crotch, i.e. Bledington Crotch.

- Border Dances:** This set of dances is quite distinct from those in the “Cotswold Tradition”. They originate from the area of the English-Welsh border and will most frequently be seen danced out in the winter months. They are distinguished by their rather aggressive style and ramshackle nature.
- Bottling:** This refers to the practice of collecting money from anyone foolish enough to tarry whilst the dance is in progress (the term is not to be confused with other expressions relating to “Sherborne” or the reaction to the term “Six up for...”). The vessels to collect in can take many forms varying from enamelled chamber pots, marionettes, or the beak of a mythical beast. Members of the public should not consider this to be a one off gesture, there is an expectation that they will “pay” for each dance.
- Bucknell Hey:** Bacon cautions that dances in the Bucknell tradition risk appearing rather ‘ugly’ (1974, 114) and at no point is exposure to this risk more pronounced than in the distinctive Bucknell hey. This hey is performed in pairs with the key requirement that those placed in the middle, in the first instance, face up the set, and pass inside of the opposing/oncoming pair moving towards them. Of course, as the middle pair seek to complete the next stage, they now find themselves as an end pair and, in moving off again, must pass outside of the oncoming middle pair, a matter complicated by the fact that, at this point, they will be travelling backwards, and so on. Whilst this description makes the manoeuvre seem quite simple, in practice it is fiendishly complicated.
- Budgie bells (see also “Bell pads”):** This is a term of derision with reference to weak, or quiet sounding bell pads. There is a degree of machismo associated with the Morris, and the volume

of one's bells is thought to denote virility and manliness (this term is not to be confused with "Budgie smugglers" which refers to something entirely different).

Caper:

The caper is a common feature to most dances in the "Cotswold tradition" and is described by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'A frolicsome leap, like that of a playful kid; a frisky movement' (www.oed.com. Accessed 9 April 2017, 11:05). Clearly, this is an ideal and the ability to perform in such fashion is precisely related to the dancer's propensity to frolic in general. Nevertheless, it is an opportunity to get airborne. It is possible to mitigate against those less able to gain altitude whereby the caper is characterized by exaggerated hand movements to distract from the feet.

Captain of Sword:

This is another of the posts that make up the "Officers" of any "Side". As the title suggests, this individual is responsible for the sword dances within the Morris canon. Ordinarily those filling such a role will have a background in, and experience of, macramé or crochet on account of the need to create and undo a series of complex knots.

Clampin hip:

This refers to the tendency in certain dances to place one's hand on one's hip. By turns this mimics the classical pose adopted by the swordsman notable in the sport of fencing. However, it might also be read as a welcome antidote to the ribald machismo which is often attracted to the Morris (see "Budgie bells").

Cotswold tradition:

This refers to the broad church of Morris dances typically performed with bells and hankies (as well as sticks, though of course the stick is also a feature of "Border Dances" in a way in which the hankie and, typically, "Bell pads" are not). It is understood that

these are the “original” set of Morris dances which were distinct to the various villages within the Cotswold area.

Fieldtown Hands:

The dances in the Fieldtown tradition might be considered amongst the most graceful. Indeed, Bacon describes the style as, ‘More graceful but less powerful than most...In some ways the best tradition’ (1974, 146). For the purposes of the movement of the hands in the hankie dances, it all stems from the wrist which whilst never permitted in Morris circles to be considered limp, should certainly be flexible: Bacon calls for ‘plenty of movement at wrist’ (1974, 146). It is understood that Fieldtown was the preferred tradition of John Inman (1935 – 2007).

Foot up:

For the majority of dances, this will be the first movement (see also “This time”). Whoever is placed at number one within the “Set” may call this out by means of drawing the attention to the “Side” that something is about to happen and to wake others who may have drifted off. There is a danger that those nearer the back may not have heard this instruction and therefore that first move may come in waves progressing from front to back (see also “Foot down”).

Foot down:

Generally this will be the second move in most Cotswold dances and is designed as a means to bring the “Side” together. Given the infirmity of some dancers and the fact that they are easily distracted, the “Foot down” is included as an opportunity for all in the “Side” to catch up to where they ought to be (see “Foot up”).

Foreman:

This is another of those “Officers” of the “Side” and, in this case, this is a hands-on role directly related to the dance. The “Foreman” is responsible for teaching the dances during the closed (practice) season. Whilst the “Black Book” contains detailed, step-by-step

instructions, it is deliberately written in an impenetrable style by means of assuring a role to the “Foreman” which is a closed profession organized on the basis of a national cartel. The “Side’s” foreman tends to be an unassuming and mild mannered soul noted for their extraordinary patience. The foreman revels in the goldfish like character of the Morris dancer who has a tendency to forget what has just been done as soon as it has happened. To this end, the Foreman loves starting from the basics and very beginning at the start of each practice season. When dancing out, the Foreman keeps a keen eye on the execution of the dances and can often be heard on the sideline making gentle and encouraging remarks. The Foreman also takes responsibility for eloquence, grammar and spelling within the side (see “Baldricks”).

Galley:

‘A low flat-built sea-going vessel with one deck, propelled by sails and oars, formerly in common use in the Mediterranean’ (Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com. Accessed 9 April 2017, 11:49).

GMT:

This stands for “General Morris Time”. Whichever time zone a Morris “Side” is found in, it will be the prevailing time plus one hour. Therefore, if you have been notified that a “Side” will be performing at 7 o’clock they will actually appear at 8 o’clock local time.

Hankies:

An abbreviation of handkerchief, these are the large squares of white fabric held in the hand and which gracefully glide and flutter to accentuate the dance. However, they are multipurpose and provide a variety of useful functions. Notably, they are able to mop up general spillages and light seepage which often besets the dancer. Where sticks and swords are concerned, they can be used to dab away at wounds or stem the flow of blood. In the face of maidens swooning and

potentially fainting at the spectacle of manly assertions, they can fan those affected and help to revive the afflicted.

Henry hip:

(See "Clampin hip").

Hey:

The means of moving from one end of the set to the other in the most convoluted and confusing manner possible. This is best witnessed where the dancer has perfected the look of wild panic and elects to barge their way to whatever they believe to be the end resting spot allowing nothing to get in their way.

Lichfield Hey:

The Lichfield Hey is that "Hey" pertaining to the Lichfield "Tradition". Thus, it is much the same as other types of "Hey" only a good deal worse. The principle involves moving around the set in a convoluted fashion only to end up precisely where you started out from and to no clear purpose. To add to the thrill, it is not a continuous motion but is punctuated by pauses and a system of yielding, or giving way, to other dances which may give rise to such an impasse as is sometimes occasioned where a number of vehicles all converge on a mini-roundabout at about the same time.

Lines:

This expression will most likely emerge from the mouth of the "Foreman" at volume and through the course of various dances. It is believed to be triggered as a result of enhanced arousal consequent upon seeing a dance performed particularly well. In short, it is a form of Tourette's and references the Foreman's previous vocation as a teacher, i.e. "That boy there give me 100 lines of "I must twist my feet when executing Fieldtown back steps".

Melodeon:

One of the choicest instruments of the "Musician" often on the basis of its gentle and mellifluous cadence. It

has a certain subtlety that allows it to sit unassumingly in the background of any ensemble.

Molly:

The “Molly” is a character featuring in dances performed in the Molly “tradition”. It is a member of the “Side” dressed in female attire (see also “Bampton Hands”) and affecting to be alluring to anyone who chances to catch his/her eye. There would appear to be little real rationale for this phenomenon beyond the very natural disposition amongst the British male to cross-dress. This is considered to be all very natural and just a part of growing up and finding one’s place in the world.

Morris Ring:

This is the over-arching body responsible for keeping the “Tradition” alive, maintaining standards, and ensuring the reputation of this ancient form does not fall into disrepute. It is most unlikely that they would approve of this frankly disrespectful lexicon.

Musician:

Music is a key feature of the Morris, not only setting the guiding parameters within which the dancers perform but generally making for a pleasing effect, appreciated by the audience, no matter how chaotic or dishevelled the dancing may be. They may be seen to perform on a variety of instruments, many of which will be “Melodeons”. Musicians are often identified by the blueness of their extremities. Some of them, unlike the dancers, may be of a female persuasion (see also “Molly”).

Officers:

All successful enterprises require a group of hearty individuals to guide that association through the potentially choppy waters of the day-to-day, the Morris is no exception. The “Officers” are level-headed people of calm disposition, they give rise to a warm and inclusive atmosphere where the contribution of all is

valued and appreciated. There is nothing they enjoy more than long-winded discussion and debate around a matter of principle. In their spare time they enjoy herding cats (see also “Bagman”, “Captain of Sword”, “Foreman”, “Squire”).

The Rose:

This is a dance in the Fieldtown tradition that permits a member of the audience to witness the spectacle of the dance from the inside. In the event that you are given the opportunity to participate in “The Rose” you should do so without hesitation, absolutely nothing untoward or of an unpleasant nature occurs. That the *volunteer* often chances to be an attractive young lady in diaphanous attire is purely coincidental.

Set:

Most dances will start from a stationary state with the dancers arrayed in a distinct pattern, this is known as a “Set”. Whilst it may appear from the outside to be an exceedingly easy thing to accomplish, for example standing in two rows of three side-by-side, it is actually extraordinarily complex. There are a variety of calculations and considerations to be taken into account before individual members can settle into a satisfactory position and thereby make up a set. Thus, in what “Tradition” is the dance to be executed? How substantial is the man opposite you and what is the girth of his stick? Is the crowd particularly rowdy? What is the prevailing lunar phase? Where is the “Foreman” positioned? Forming a coherent and workable “Set” is not something to be taken lightly and involves a good deal of debate and negotiation. The whole process may take up to twenty minutes. It is well known that an audience enjoys nothing more than standing around and watching this spectacle unfold.

Sherborne:

Any reference to Sherborne, for example in the expression, ‘Six up for Orange in Bloom, Sherborne’, is

a coded message well understood in the Morris fraternity as to make oneself scarce or preferably invisible. It is an amazing spectacle to witness but you may get the opportunity to see a large gathering of burly gentlemen apparently dissolve into thin air. One classic technique is to withdraw into any public house or bar that may come to hand and adopt the countenance of a member of the general public (see also, "Six up for...").

Side:

The term "Side" is the collective noun for Morris dancers. We are not a group nor troupe and certainly not a team. Other terms you may hear in this connection are, "a Shambles of Morris dancers", sometimes simply truncated to "Shambolic", or even just "Pitiful" people.

Six up for...:

Amidst the grand excitement of encountering a Morris "Side" there will be a great deal of hubbub and general excitement. However, remember you are in the presence of great athletes and there is a very complex set of preparatory motions that need to be worked through before the full force of such exertion can be allowed to unfurl. One call to action, something of a feint, that you may hear is one member of the "Side" calling out, "Six up for [name of dance, tradition]". This may leave the impression that something is about to start but, fear not, there is actually little in prospect at this stage (see also "GMT"). This call to action is actually an important reminder to the dancers to ensure they have sufficient fluids to hand with the standard response being that all dancers take themselves off to the bar, assuming they are not there already.

Squire:

The "Squire" is another of the "Officers" of the side. On first appearance, and to the uninitiated, you may get the impression that here is the preeminent functionary.

This is not the case. Morris sides tend to operate on the basis of an autonomous collective with each member full of excellent ideas and plenty of scope at any gathering for each and every participant to give full vent to their opinion. Indeed, deliberate steps are taken to be sure that the "Squire" does not get too high an opinion of himself given that he is singled out for special title and sometimes distinctive kit by gainsaying every proposition which the "Squire" puts forward. Generally speaking the "Squire" really enjoys this exchange and can often be heard muttering to himself, "I never wanted to do it that way any road".

Stand:

This refers to an occasion where the Morris is to be performed. It might be better understood in the context of, "We are going to make a stand here against anybody enjoying themselves, or being able to indulge in polite and civilized conversation over an extraordinary hullabaloo and a rising musical cacophony" (see also "Melodeon"). It can also refer to the practice amongst Morris dancers of standing around and apparently doing nothing (see also "GMT" and "Six up for...").

Synchromesh gearbox:

This type of gear box is similar to the constant mesh type in that all the gears on the main shaft are in constant mesh with the corresponding gears on the lay shaft. The gears on the lay shaft are fixed to it while those on the main shaft are free to rotate on the same. Its working is also similar to the constant mesh type, but in the former there is one definite improvement over the latter. This is the provision of synchromesh device which avoids the necessity of double declutching. The parts which ultimately are to be engaged are first brought into frictional contact which equalizes their speed, after which these may be engaged smoothly (National Programme of Technology Enhanced

Learning, www.nptel.ac.in. Accessed 11 April 2017, 17:12).

This time:

This is a misleading call to action which gives the impression that a dance is about to start. It is called out over the playing of music. In actual fact, it does not literally mean "*This time*" but rather means "Let's start dancing next time, or the time after when the music gets to the same point". "Musicians" love this habit because it gives them more opportunity to practice the tune and also get the circulation flowing in their extremities.

Time for a rest:

Please call a crash team and grab the nearest defibrillator, one of the "Side" is having a cardiac seizure.

Tradition:

It is reckoned that Morris dancing is an ancient pursuit having been passed down from social outcast, to social outcast. Being the nation's dance it is important that it is preserved in pure form rather than being corrupted or contaminated (see also "Brexit"). To this end set traditions, guidelines and instructions must be followed. However, please note the frequent caveat kindly provided by Bacon (1974) that this is a "living tradition". This basically means we can do as we darn well please.

Walford Buzz:

Morris dancing is a lively and vigorous pursuit. It is denoted by its extraordinary athleticism and amazing feats of exertion. Frequently, in the course of these activities, dancers will reach a higher plane of total ecstasy whereby the dance will take on the most amazing character. This is known as "Walford Buzz": at such time you will see dances performed in a most unique fashion as order balances on a precipice and, literally, anything can happen.

References:

Bacon, Lionel (1974) *A Handbook of Morris Dances*, The Morris Ring, London, 1974.

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