

## **Disgysynges for the daunce**

*Morris and Guize Dance traditions in Cornwall*

I am not alone in enjoying the spectacle of Morris dance displays during the summer months, but I am intrigued by the accompanying introductions. These often begin by pointing out that some of the earliest records of Morris dance in Britain are to be found in medieval accounts from Lanherne and St Columb. Having set the scene in Cornwall we are then told that the dances about to be performed are from the tradition of villages in the Cotswolds, the Welsh borders, or from the clog traditions of the North West of England.<sup>1</sup>

So what is the message here, that Morris dances are universal and therefore Cornish folk tradition can be represented by dances from England? Well clearly not as the dances from the Cotswolds, East Midlands and Northwest of England are all very different from each other. Are we being told that Morris traditions died out in Cornwall so English dances had to be done in their place? This would be at extreme variance with everything we know about Cornish history and folk tradition. Cornwall is the place where the medieval carol tradition thrived when it died out elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Our wrestling tradition has clear continuity back to medieval times and the Sunday School Tea Treats preserved traditions like the Serpent Dance which has its roots a medieval dance called the "Farandole".<sup>3</sup> There is clearly a mystery to explore here!

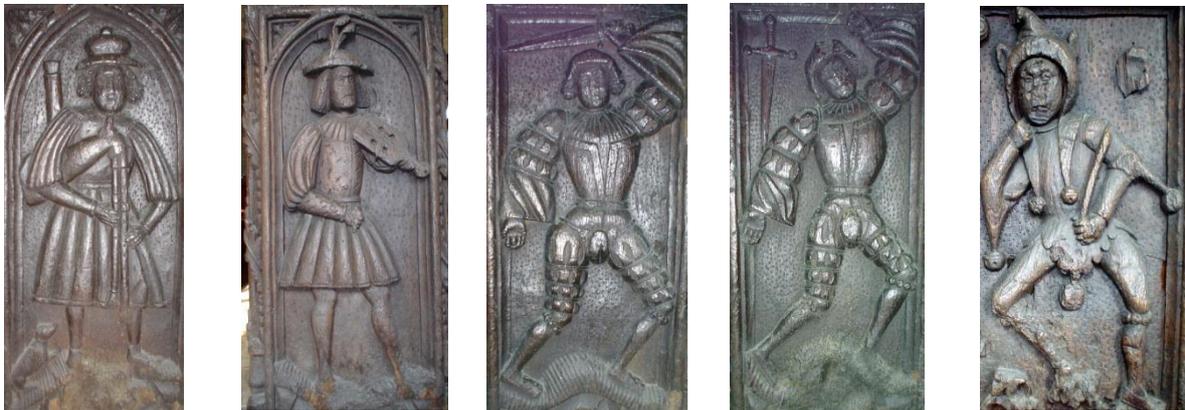
It is first important to understand the nature of folk tradition. Folk tradition is not a fixed artefact from certain period in history; it is better understood as a process or a social phenomenon that takes places within a community. It is the process whereby a song, a dance, a story, a custom or a combination of all of these is passed on person to person and generation to generation and altered a little each time it moves on.<sup>4</sup> Not only does the narrative and nature of the performance change but so does the meaning that it has for the participants. It is like the family Christmas tree, each year it is decorated in a slightly different way, some old ornaments lost some new ones added and what it represents will change as the family grows up and their circumstances change. Understood in this way it can be seen that folk traditions do not really have a single point of origin but rather coalesce from a variety of story lines and musical or choreographic ideas.

Modern scholars, such as John Forrest, explain Morris Dance in much this way. He shows that they do not have a single point of origin and are not even the same tradition where they occur in different places. He makes that point that what was referred to as "Morris Dance" in medieval records is something quite different to that described in later records. Forrest demonstrates that the Morris tradition has continuously evolved throughout its recorded history.<sup>5</sup> The very name Morris is an enigma and has appeared in a variety of forms historically across Europe from "Moresco" and "Maruscka" to "Moresque" and "Moorish". Whilst some forms can reasonably be understood to refer to a performance or play intended to represent the Moors of Spain and Morocco others have lost this connection, if indeed there ever was one.

The oldest references we currently have to Morris in Cornwall, and one of the earliest in Britain, are those of the Stewards Accounts for Lanherne Manor 1466-7.<sup>6</sup> Here are listed items procured for the "Disgysynges" and the "Moruske" of "Lady of Betty" on New Year's day and include glue, large amounts of paper, bonnets, Holland cloth, buckram and bells. From the materials and context this

was evidently some form of festive play taking place within the manor and thus “Moruske” is likely to be a description implying something exotic or “Moorish”. A reference in the same accounts some 38 years later to a payment for “the egyptians when they daunsyd afore me” sets a similar scene and reinforces this interpretation. There is just a touch of the glitz of our modern pantomimes here but certainly not Morris in the way presented by dance sides today.

The other records of Morris in Cornwall often cited are the St Columb Churchwarden’s Accounts where, between 1584 and 1597, there are a number of references to “Moryshe cotes” or similar.<sup>7</sup> Thurstan Peter puts these in the context of other entries in the same accounts to show that this was likely to be reference to a long standing play with Robin Hood characters staged by the “young men of the parish” which continued to possibly as late as 1616.<sup>8</sup> There are a number of other similar records of minstrels, pipers and players in Cornish parish and church warden’s accounts but without reference to Morris dancers.<sup>9</sup> These folk plays and processions are sometimes seen as descendants of the medieval Cornish Miracle Plays.<sup>10</sup>



Bench Ends at Altarnon Church

The bench ends in Altarnon Church (1530) provide one of the few images of minstrels and dancers we have of this period. The images are similar to the drawings and description of the “Mattachins” in a French book of dance published in 1598. The description of the costume could well have come from the list of materials in the Lanherne and St Columb accounts:

“..... the dance of fools or Mattachins, who were habited in short jackets with gilt paper helmets, long streamers tied to their shoulders, and bells to their legs.”<sup>11</sup>

This is a glimpse of Morris Dance as it was understood in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Cornwall and Europe generally but is still a long way from the Morris dances brought to Cornwall by the English Folk dance movement in the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> There is just one reference to Morris dance in Cornwall between 1600 and 1900 that we know of. A letter in the Gentleman’s Magazine of 1790 describes the “Furry Day” In Helston and includes a reference to a “Morrice Dance”:

“ In the afternoon, the gentility go to some farmhouse in the neighbourhood to drink tea, syllybub, & co, and return in a morrice dance to the town where they form a Faddy, and dance through the streets till it is dark...”<sup>13</sup>

Faddy is an old term for the Furry dance and a distinction seems to be drawn between this and the “morrice” which the revellers performed as they returned to the town. In which case it seems likely that this “morrice” was actually the Hal An Tow which we know was part of the Furry Day celebrations at this time.<sup>14</sup> With its reference to “Robin Hood” and “Little John” the Hal An Tow song echoes the Lanherne and St Columb records above.<sup>15</sup> The “dysgyng” of the Hal An Tow also provides us with a link to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century guizing traditions described by Polwhele in 1816 as a kind of carnival or Bal masque which “ answers to the Mummings of Devon, and the Morrice dancers of Oxfordshire”. In Celtic Cornish ges, means mockery, a jest.”<sup>16</sup>



Hal An Tow, between the Wars and in the 1970s courtesy of Helston Museum  
*Do you have photographs or information about the early days of the Hal An Tow?  
 Please let Merv Davey, Folk Song and Dance Recorder know.*

Nineteenth century Cornwall was fertile territory for antiquarians and folklorists and their work has left us with a very full record of Cornish folk traditions, but no mention of Morris Dances. What they do show is that the Guize Dance was a vehicle for performing and passing on Cornish traditions from generation to generation. Bottrell’s descriptions in particular show that Guizing involved a mixture of shallals (noisy musical processions), scoot (step) dancing and folk plays portraying Cornish legends.<sup>17</sup> In the early twentieth century a large amount of information about Cornish Guizing was also recorded and published by the Old Cornwall Societies, particularly by Robert Morton Nance and Tom Miners.<sup>18</sup> Guizing continues as a living tradition today in places such as Padstow, Helston, St Ives, Penzance, Bodmin and Polperro. At the time of writing there are also eight Cornish dance display groups who draw from guizing tradition for their repertoire and two that actually present as Guizers”.<sup>19</sup>

I will continue to enjoy the summer displays of the English Morris sides, perhaps all the more so for understanding a little of their history. They are part of the multi-cultural folk dance scene in Cornwall alongside American Line Dancing, Samba and Scottish Country Dance. We do have a distinctive *Cornish* folk culture, however, and it is important that we also enjoy and celebrate Cornwall’s own “disgysynges for the daunce”.

Merv Davey

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing were nine groups advertising themselves as Morris Sides in Cornwall. Four of these sides described themselves as performing dances from villages in the Cotswolds; three described themselves as performing dances from Shropshire and the East Midlands; and two explained that they performed clog dances from the North West of England.

<sup>2</sup> Davies Gilbert's collection of Cornish medieval carols, *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* (London, J Nichols and Son, 1823), was instrumental in reviving the carol tradition in Britain and is a major source for the *Oxford Book of Carols*.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Davey, Merv Davey, and Jowdy Davey. *Scot Dances, Troys, Furrys and TeaTreats: The Cornish Dance Tradition*. (London: Francis Boutle & Co, 2009), pp. 40 -129.

<sup>4</sup> This is actually a quite complex process involving both an individual's experiences and memories and their interaction with the experiences of the wider community around them. For a full discussion see Merv Davey, "As is the manner and the custom", (Doctoral Thesis, Institute of Cornish Studies, Exeter University, 2011) p 15.

<sup>5</sup> John Forrest, "The History of Morris Dancing. 1458 – 1750", (Cambridge, James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1999), p27.

<sup>6</sup> H.L.Douch, "Household Accounts at Lanherne", *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 1953, pp25-32, citing Sir John Arundell's Stewards Accounts Royal Institution of Cornwall, Courtney Library: HK/1 7/1

<sup>7</sup> Thurstan C Peter, The green book of St Columb: Supplement to Journal Of Royal Institution of Cornwall 1912. Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro, 1912, citing St Columba the Virgin Churchwardens Accounts Cornwall Record Office: P/36/8/1

<sup>8</sup> Thurstan C Peter, The green book of St Columb

<sup>9</sup> For example:

1470-1 Bodmin: Paid to the players in the Church

1505-6 Bodmin: Paid to the dancers and minstrels

1522-3 Stratton "recevyd of the Egeppcions"

1550 Poughill: "Paid to the Kynges enterlude plaers"

1550 Camborne Churchwardens accounts "Paid to the Piper In the play"

1565-6 St Breock: "payed to Lydwan dauncers" (Between 1566 and 1591 players and dancers from Grampond, St Eval, Feocke and St Mawgan are mentioned as well as those of St Columb)

1571-2 St Ives, "Payd to the pypers for there wages"

These records are all held at the Cornwall Record Office but usefully collated in Sally L Joyce and Evelyn S Newlyn, *Records of Early English Drama: Dorset and Cornwall* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999)

<sup>10</sup> Joan Bakere, J. *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Critical Study*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1980), pp 19 -22 citing Camborne Churchwarden's Accounts. Pendarvis Collection, D.D. PD322/1-3. Cornwall Records Office Truro.

<sup>11</sup> Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography*. (Langres, 1597), English Translation plus notes (Toronto, Dover, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> The first Morris side introduced to Cornwall were Trigg who formed from members of Bodmin Folk Club in 1970. They specialise in dances from the Cotswolds.

<sup>13</sup> Durgan, letter addressed to Editor, Sylvanus Urban. *Gentlemans Magazine and Historical Chronicle* for the year MDCCXC, p. 520.

<sup>14</sup> Davies Gilbert, Thomas Tonkin, and William Hals. *The Parochial History of Cornwall, Founded on the Manuscript Histories of Mr Hals and Mr Tonkin*. (London: J.B. Nichols, 1838).

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of the Meaning of the "Hal An Tow" and its lyrics see Donald Rawe, *Padstow's Obby Oss and May Day Festivities : A Study in Folklore and Tradition*. (Padstow: Lodenek Press, 1982): Also Inglis Gundry, *Canow Kernow : Songs and Dances from Cornwall*. (St. Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 1966) p12.

The words of the song were known to Nicholas Boson of Newlyn in 1660

<sup>16</sup> Richard Polwhele, *The History of Cornwall, Civil, Military, Religious, Architectural, Agricultural, Commercial, Biographical, and Miscellaneous*. (London: Michel & Co., 1816) Vol 3 p58

<sup>17</sup> William Bottrell, William. *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*. (Penzance, Deare and Son, 1873).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Morton Nance —Redruth Christmas Play, *Old Cornwall* Vol 1, (St Ives, Federation Of Old Cornwall Societies, 1926), pp. 29 - 32.: Tom Miners, —The Mummings Play In West Cornwall *Old Cornwall* (St Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 1928) Vol 1, no 8, pp. 4 – 16. Robert Morton Nance, *The Cledry plays; drolls of old Cornwall for village acting and home reading*. (Marazion, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies 1956).:Cledry Plays Courtney Library, Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro, Nance Manuscript, Boxes 1 –13.

<sup>19</sup> See the Cornish Dance Society Newsletter or their Website [www.cornishdance.co.uk](http://www.cornishdance.co.uk) for more information about Cornish dance displays groups.