

Morris Dancing

& the Thaxted Tradition

~ Local Studies ~



Cover image **The Morris Ring** by Diana John
(the professional name of Di Barker of Littlebury)

This pamphlet is designed to help the reader find the titles held in the Gibson Library Collection on Morris Dancing, many of which mention the Thaxted Morris Tradition. Includes, important people involved in the morris revival, the history, songs and steps, along with books on related subjects.

What is Morris Dancing?

Morris dancing is a form of English folk dance usually accompanied by music. It is based on rhythmic stepping and the execution of choreographed figures by a group of dancers, usually wearing bell pads on their shins. Implements such as sticks, swords, and handkerchiefs may also be wielded by the dancers.

How Old is Morris Dancing?

No-one knows for certain, however it is thought that English morris dancing is a development of the morisco, or 'Moorish [dance]', that swept through Europe at about the time the Moors were driven from Spain in the early 1600s. A few of the dances that derived from the morisco, as well as those that may have inspired it, still persist in the folk traditions of Europe and northern Africa.

Certainly by Shakespeare's time, morris dancing was an established form in southern England. Enjoying a healthy popularity throughout society for a time, it fell into a slow decline. Its form was kept fairly

intact by rural communities until the Industrial Revolution, when systematisation of labour and urbanisation altered the character of agricultural village life, and the festive traditions attached to its seasonal calendar forever.

In 1899 the academic musician **Cecil Sharp** first encountered the recently-restored Headington Quarry Morris Men and subsequently embarked upon a life's work of collecting the traditional tunes of the English people. Social worker and suffragette **Mary Neal** collaborated with Sharp to collect the dances, which she then taught to the girls of her Esperance Club in London. Their performances, and the 1907 publication of *The Morris Book*, encouraged several attempts to collect and revive the abandoned village traditions - a process that was frustrated by the Great War.

This second English folk revival saw a wider development of the regional styles and a huge increase in the number of sides (bands of dancers named for their home villages): some resurrecting their unique village repertoire, but many more combining dances from several traditions. A third revival beginning in the 90s has seen yet another surge of interest amongst a new generation keen to connect with traditional dance, music and song with increasing enthusiasm, proficiency and innovation.

The Thaxted Morris

Thaxted Morris was founded in 1911, early in the revival of interest in Morris dancing begun by Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal. In 1905, Mary Neal invited two traditional dancers from Headington Quarry to teach Morris dancing to the young women of the Espérance Club in London. Soon after their arrival in Thaxted in 1910, **Conrad Noel**, Vicar of Thaxted, and his wife Miriam, invited the Espérance Club to send someone to teach Morris dancing to the young people of the town. Mary Neal appointed Blanche Payling to the task, and for a week in December 1910, she taught Morris Dancing to local girls and boys, women and men, giving rise to the Thaxted Morris Dance Company. Their first public performance was for the local celebrations of the coronation of King George V on 22nd June 1911.

Thaxted Morris Men started performing the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance around 1947, linking it to their annual Morris Ring meetings, though some sources suggest they might have been doing a version even earlier, possibly back to the 1920s, as part of the wider Morris revival led by Thaxted's vicar, Rev. Conrad Noel, with it becoming a fixture by the 1950s. The dance as done by the Thaxted side is particularly haunting with its slow melody played by a lone fiddler in tattercoat followed by six men holding deer antlers, a man dressed as a woman (a Molly?), an obby oss, an archer and someone ringing a chime on a triangle. Conceivably the enactment of an ancient hunting ritual,

Thaxted's adoption helped popularize it further within the Morris world.

Thaxted is the oldest surviving revival side in the country and 2025 marks the 97th meeting and the 78th documented dancing of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance for which they are known.

From www.thaxtedmorris.org

The Thaxted Morris Men Weekend of Dance takes place yearly in early June.

PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE

Conrad le Despenser Roden Noel

The Gibson Library also holds several books on Conrad Noel, (1869 – 1942) the vicar of Thaxted for more than 30 years. He brought life and controversy to the town through his outspoken political views, becoming known as the 'Red Vicar' of Thaxted, especially for the famous "Battle of the Flags". A man of enormous charisma, energy and talent, all of which he brought to bear in making Thaxted a centre of religious, political and cultural activity, the last in particular for the English Arts and Crafts movement. As mentioned above, Noel and his wife were integral to the revival of morris dancing to the town, for which it is now famous.

From *The Hundred Parishes*.

Alec Hunter, 1899-1958: founder squire of the Morris Ring

Kenworthy Schofield, 1999

The Morris Ring is one of three umbrella groups for Morris dance sides. Founded in 1934 by 6 sides: Greensleeves, Cambridge, East Surrey, Letchworth, Oxford and Thaxted. On 20 October 1934, at Cecil Sharp House attended by 60-70 men. Alec Hunter was elected first Squire of the Ring.

Mary Neal and the suffragettes who saved Morris dancing

Kathryn Atherton, 2024

Series: Trailblazing women

Tells the story of the indomitable and irrepressible Mary Neal and her suffragette collaborators in the Morris dance revival - Lady Constance Lytton, Evelyn Sharp, Mabel Tuke, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Laurence Housman, Lady Isabel Margesson and the young women of the Esperance Club.

Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work Maud Karpeles, 2008

Others came before and after him, but no person is more strongly associated with the revival of English folk song and dance at the turn of the twentieth-century than Cecil Sharp (1859-1924). He collected about 5000 folk songs and nearly 500 dances.

HISTORY OF MORRIS DANCING

With a crash and a din comes the Morris dancer in: a celebration of fifty years of the Morris Ring, 1834-1984 The Morris Ring. Doc Rowe, 1984

The title takes the opening line of a well-known folk song, often performed to a traditional tune, that pays tribute to women who kept Morris dancing alive in villages after WWI. Also it celebrates The Morris Ring's history, highlighting the lively, noisy tradition of English Morris dancing.

History and the Morris Dance: A Look at Morris Dancing from Its Earliest Days Until 1850 Dr. John Cutting, 2005

In the middle of the 1970s, a storm swept through the world of Morris: women had started to dance what, up to then, had been widely considered to be a men-only tradition. John Cutting had joined Herga Morris in 1972 and was thus a newcomer at the time, and he was both surprised and curious at the strength of the emotions aroused. This book attempts to separate fact from fantasy and answer questions about the nature of the Morris tradition; was it entertainment or some mystical rite? Where did it come from and how old is it?

History Of Morris Dancing: Tales Of A Band Of Brothers And The Ancient Morris Dancing Custom: The Morris Tradition

Long Creamer, 2021

Tales of an anarchic band of brothers who challenged the received wisdom and almost accidentally stumbled upon the essential core of this ancient custom. A story of friendship, fun, and the bonds that unite people in a common cause. It also happens to be set against a backdrop of folk culture and Morris dancing.

NB: The above is not about Thaxted but has interesting information about the Morris Tradition.

The Ancient English Morris Dance Michael Heaney, 2023

The idea that morris dancing captures the essence of ancient Englishness, inherently carefree and merry, has been present for over 400 years. Tracing the history of those attitudes, from the dance's introduction to England in the 15th century, through contention of the Reformation and Civil War, during which morris dancing and maypoles became potent symbols of the older ways of living. The quest for authentic understanding of what that meant led to its revival at the beginning of the twentieth century, which in turn further evolved into the many forms and styles encountered today.



Elizabethan actor Will Kempe morris dancing from
London to Norwich in the year 1600.

The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750 John Forrest, 2025

Morris dancing, one of the more peculiar of the English folk customs, has been greatly misunderstood. John Forrest analyses a wealth of evidence to show that Morris dancing does not, as is often assumed, have pagan or ancient origins. He examines early documentation to draw Morris traditions into the wide area of communal custom and public celebrations, showing the passage of dance ideas between groups previously considered folklorically distinct. Careful, detailed and encyclopaedic, this is an essential reference work for specialists in English drama and social historians of the period, as well as offering fascinating insight for those who enjoy Morris dancing.

The Morris Tradition The Morris Ring

A small but comprehensive overview of the Morris Tradition.

Also available on **The Morris Ring website**:

<https://themorrisring.org/publications/morris-tradition>

SONGS AND DANCES

The Espérance Morris Book: Part 1 A Manual of Morris

Dances Folk Songs and Singing Games Mary Neal, 1911

Part I of "The Esperance Morris Book", a vintage manual of Morris dances, folk-songs and singing games includes detailed descriptions of and simple explanations, making it ideal for those wishing to learn the dances and related activities.

The Espérance Morris Book: Part 2 Morris Dances, Country Dances, Sword Dances and Sea Shanties Mary Neal, 1911

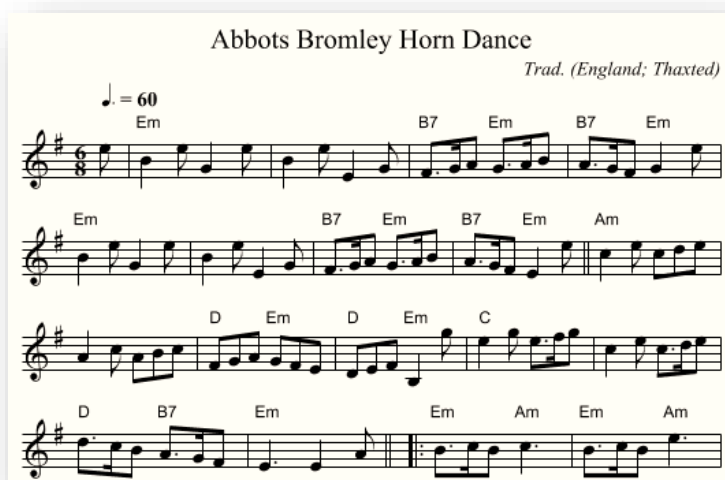
An enthusiastic celebration of English folk dance, specifically the Morris dance, capturing the spirit of a national revival, exploring the historical roots of these dances and their social significance in a changing England.

The Morris Book, with a description of dances as performed by the Morris Men of England. Part 1. Cecil J Sharp (Cecil James), Herbert C. MacIlwaine, 1912

A history of Morris Dancing, with descriptions of Eleven Dances as performed by the Morris-Men of England.

The Morris Book: With a Description of Dances as Performed by the Morris men of England 1913, facsimile

This book details the traditional dances performed by the Morris Men of England, including step-by-step instructions and history behind each dance. A must-have for anyone interested in English folk traditions or traditional dance.



BOOKS ON RELATED SUBJECTS

The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England Joseph Strutt, 1867

Including the rural and domestic recreations, May games, mummeries, shows, processions, pageants, and pompous spectacles, from the earliest period to the present time.

Truculent rustics: Molly dancing in East Anglia before 1940

Elaine Bradtke, 1999

Truculent Rustics shows how Molly dancing developed from Plough Monday and other wintertime communal celebrations, evolving from older customs to become a unique style within the broader Morris world. It was boisterous, even riotous, combining elements of rough music, alms-seeking, and guising. An appendix gives details of known troops of Molly dancers.

The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival Georgina Boyes, 1993

An examination of the background events and people that led to the Folk Revival of the 1970s. Explores the present folk music revival, which traces the history of English folk songs and dances. The author argues that the existence of a folk revival is a direct and urgent response to a cultural crisis caused by the pressures of industrialization and urbanization.

The Hobby Horse and Other Animal Masks Violet Alford

Violet's book discusses the types of animal masks used throughout Europe. It has an excellent Index and Bibliography, and was prepared for publication after she died, and Edited by Margaret Dean-Smith F.S.A..



Mummer's in costume, from Joseph Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes* (1867),
as featured on *The Library Book: A History of the Gibson Library and its Collection*
by Clare Mulley.

ARTICLES OF INTEREST

Molly Dancing in East Anglia Joseph Needham and Arthur L. Peck
Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society Vol. 1, No. 2
(December 1933), pages 79-85 Available to read on JSTOR website.

The Horn Dance: A prehistoric hunting dance – said to be the only one of its kind surviving in this country. Gordon Ridgewell
Essex Countryside Vol. 8, No. 37 (September 1964) page 92.
Photocopy available to read in Thaxted Local History Pamphlet Box 2, Reading Room.

Folk Dancing and Religion Jack Putterill (Vicar of Thaxted).
Thaxted Local History Pamphlet Box 2, Reading Room.

Truculent Rustics

**Molly dancing in East Anglia
before 1940**

Elaine Bradtke



FLS Books

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From the cover of 'Truculent Rustics'.



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The Gibson Library was founded in 1832 as the Saffron Walden Literary & Scientific Institution, and the Library is still housed in the Grade II listed building that became the home of the Institution in the 1850s. The collections, which are continually added to, consist of more than 40,000 volumes, old maps, photographs, newspapers, directories, periodicals and local ephemera.

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A Gibson Library Reading Guide, 2025