

The Lymm Morris,
the Statham Morris
and the Lymm
Soulcaking Play

Collected by Geoff Bibby

Before the turn of the century, the Lymm area boasted two Morris teams; one based in Lymm itself, the other at Oughtrington. Only the Oughtrington team continued to dance after 1900, and this team disbanded before the end of the first decade of the century.

So, on March 14, 1938, when Maud Karpeles came to this area in search of material, her chances of gleaning any dance notation on Lymm were slim. Fortunately, three dancers were still alive: Charles Simpson, John Robert Downward and Abraham Wilson. From Charles Simpson, Maud Karpeles noted a version of a 'step up' and a 'step and turn' (see Journal vol VI No 3, 1951); the step up being performed with "slow walking steps" — one to each bar of music, which is in itself unusual to say the least.

Armed with such little knowledge as this, I was determined to concentrate on collecting as much material together as possible. Looking back I cannot understand how I could be so enthusiastic. With no surviving dancers, how could I collect any more notation? It was impossible, although I did have one advantage over Maud Karpeles — I would be able to visit Lymm again and again, if necessary!

In order to avoid 'discovering' information which had already been collected, I made a list of everyone 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. Dan Howison was also very helpful, and gave me something to start on, with a copy of some notes on the dance that had been deposited at Warrington Library, but had since disappeared.

The notes 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 1900s. He taught her the dance).

FORMATION:

2	4	6	8
1	3	5	7

(or with 6 men)

MUSIC:

'Yankee Doodle' and 'Oh Susannah'

TEMPO:

Fairly quick.

'A' MUSIC

Hands circling alternately;

Dance — walk forwards.

'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 the boys of Statham had danced in 1923. Dan Howison said they were about eleven years old at the time, and this meant that I may be able to trace them.

My first action was a letter in the local newspaper. A simple statement that the Statham lads had danced a traditional morris dance in the 1923 May Queen celebrations, and an appeal for any information. I put a similar advert in Statham Post Office.

I returned to Statham in April, 1977, and was directed from the Post Office to the Star Inn, to see a "Mr Edwards, who knows all about the Statham May Queen".

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, 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 photographs of the Lymm (Oughtrington) team with me (copies from Arden's Guide to Lymm and District) and Ted Edwards, to my surprise was able to identify the dancers. He knew some first-hand—eg "Bob" Downward, and identified others by family likeness.

Ted Edwards 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, "who lives in Holly Road, off Rushgreen Road, next turn after the off-licence, at the bottom of Sandy Lane."

Oh no he didn't, and I spent all day looking.

On July 21, 1977, I visited Dick Rowles at 15 Fletcher Lane, and found him sitting with his wife in the sunshine.

Dick remembered the Statham lads who danced in 1923, and knows (vaguely) 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 she does find it.

July 26, I received a card from Mrs Rowles, and I called round immediately. Dick named all the boys on the photo, and I borrowed it to have a copy made.

From this date on (July, 1977), continuing up to the present day, I have a diary of my movements concerning the recovery of the dance, and peripheral information, which is unfortunately far too long and boring to be published here.

It is sufficient to say that my informants so far, number well over 30, and that each person I meet passes me on to more suggested sources, so that I will never get to the end of the list. I still have three of the 1923 dancers left to trace, and one dancer who is speculated as being a twelfth lad missing from the photographs.

The Statham Morris

KIT :

Ordinary shoes or boots; dark knee-length socks; ordinary school-boys' short trousers (with braces); white, or at best, pale shirts with rosettes pinned up the front and back in vertical rows, usually pinned onto braces; straw hats decorated with paper flowers; long ribbons hanging from waist band all round; a long white cloth held in each hand; some wore ties.

TUNE :

Various tunes eg "Pop Goes The Weasel", "Oh Susannah", but mostly "Yankee Doodle", which was generally called "Charlie Barber"; after the words sung by Ned Rowles :

"Charlie Barber shaved his father,
With a wooden razor;
The razor slipped and cut his lip,
Well done Charlie Barber."

"Toasted cheese is very, very good,
Toasted in a lantern;
A bit for me, and a bit for you,
And a bit for the Morris Dancers."

Ned also sang : "Smack 'em up me lucky lads."
Dancers numbered 8 or 12, but could be done with any multiple of 4.

FIGURES :

Step up
Step across (and back) = 2 figures
Star
Cast (up or down)
Corners
Double cast
The step up and turn is used as a repeated chorus.

NOTATION :

STEP AND TURN : 8 bars (used to start dance, and as a chorus),

FEET :

1

Jump on both feet, left in front of right.
Jump onto left foot.
Jump on both feet, right in front of left.
Jump onto right foot.

2

Turn (single upwards and outwards, starting on left foot making three steps and stamping right foot (walked)).

Repeat 1 with opposite feet.

Repeat 2 downwards and outwards starting on right foot.

HANDS :

1

Cross hands in front at waist level, left in front of right,
Flick hands outwards (apart).
Cross hand again with right hand in front.
Flick outwards again.

2

On first and third step, bring cloths smartly down from head level. On stamp flick cloths above head.
Repeat 1 with opposite hands in front.
Repeat 2.
Even numbers reverse feet and hands.

Stepping for the figures is a fast skip-step, two steps to a bar of music, with the free leg behind, and starting on the inside foot. Hands are over-arm bowling action, left arm with right leg etc, and are flicked above head on the 'feet-together stamp'.

FIGURE NOTATION :

1 STEP UP :

Three steps forward starting on the inside leg, then outside leg thrown forwards. Three steps back starting with the outside leg, then free leg is stamped 'feet together'.

REPEAT.—Eight bars in all.

2 STEP ACROSS :

Partners change places, and turn to face, using eight steps (four bars).

All perform step and turn, then repeat to cross back to original place. (16 bars of music in all).

3 STAR :

Partners cross passing right shoulder, then all turn left to form left hand stars in groups of four. Stars travel half way round, and partners again cross (this time left shoulder) and turn right into right hand star back to place.

Inside foot start : 8 bars in all : no information on hands.

4 CAST (UP) :

Bottom couple dance together up the middle of the set, and cast out and down the outside back to places, with continuous steps starting on the inside foot. As this couple pass the top (four bars of music) the next pair dance up together and cast round, followed by each couple in order. While not on the move, all dancers perform the step and turn, and move off at four bar intervals.

This was also performed as a CAST DOWN.

5 DOUBLE CAST :

This is a combination of the CAST UP and the CAST DOWN, and was invented by Ned Rowles.

Each couple goes in a different order, and in alternately opposite directions : Bottoms cast up, followed by tops casting down, and so on, until all couples have performed a cast. Again step and turns are performed in position while awaiting turn, or after returning to place.

FIGURES 4 and 5 both take 24 bars of music for an eight-man set, and 32 bars for 12 men.

6 CORNERS :

First corners, in each group of four cross over, passing by right shoulder, while the second corners do a step and turn. Second corners cross, while first corners do a step and turn.

This may be four bars or eight bars long, and the step and turn could be either 'half' or 'whole' in each case. If the crossing takes eight bars, then this is really two figures : a corners cross, and a cross back, as in FIGURE 2.

The story still does not end here : I have recently found that the Statham team existed for a few years, and that other generations of 11-year-old boys danced under Ned Rowles' instruction until around 1930, although I have found no other photographs from later dates.

On April 3, 1980, in the Pickering Arms, Thelwall, I met Jack Gilbert. Jack used to live in Statham and danced with the team in 1928-9, but unfortunately he can remember nothing of the dance, apart from his friends who danced with him.

Jack told me that he also took part in a soul-caking play during his last year at Pepper Street School in 1930, and that he could remember the whole script, and part of a song that they sang!

Jack Gilbert's granddad, John Bate, had been in the play in the "old days", and Jack's headmaster, Mr Clark, had heard Jack repeating some of the lines, and had become so interested that he collected the play, and got a school team together to perform it in All Hallow's Week, 1930.

Jack is proud that he caused the play to be revived, and he chose to be King George, although he learned all the other lines as well. He has an excellent memory for words, but says he cannot recall any detail of the costume.

The Lymm Soulcaking Play

as performed 1930

from Jack Gilbert, April 13, 1980

CHARACTERS :

Letter-In, King George, Black Prince, Old Woman,
Quack Doctor, Beelzebub, Derry Doubt

The song is sung before the action starts, and again at the end

LETTER-IN :

In comes I, Letter-In, Strike a fire and make a light,
'Cause in this house, there's going to be a terrible fight,
'Tween King George and the Black Prince,
If you don't believe these few words I say,
Step in King George and clear the way.

KING GEORGE :

'Twas I who fought the fiery dragon, and brought it to the slaughter,
And by these means, won the King of Egypt's daughter,
If you don't believe these few words I say,
Step in Black Prince and clear the way.

BLACK PRINCE :

In comes I, Black Prince, born of high renown,
This night I come to take King George's life and courage down,
If that be him that standeth there,
That slew my master's son and heir,
If that be him of royal blood,
I'll make it flow like Noah's Flood.

KING GEORGE :
Stand back thou black Morocco dog,
Or by my sword thou'll die,
I'll pierce thy body full of holes,
And make thy buttons fly.

BLACK PRINCE :
How cans't thou pierce my body,
And make my buttons fly ?
When my body's covered with steel ?

KING GEORGE :
On guard !

(They fight, and the Black Prince is defeated)

If you don't believe these few words I say,
Step in Old Woman, and clear the way.

OLD WOMAN :
Oh! King George, King George, what hast thou done?
Thou'st killed and slain my only son, my only heir,
See how he lies bleeding there.

KING GEORGE :
Well, Old Woman, he challenged me to fight,
Better to fight than to die,
If you don't believe these few words I say,
Step in Quack Doctor and clear the way.

QUACK DOCTOR :
In comes I, Quack Doctor,
Here I come from the continent,
To cure this man which King George has slain,
In my inside, outside, backside pocket,
I've some ooky-pooky-snooky,
It will bring a dead man back to life again.

(Doctor revives Black Prince with small bottle)

If you don't believe these few words I say,
Step in Beelzebub, and clear the way.

BEELZEBUB :
In comes I, Beelzebub,
On me showlder I carries me club,
In me 'and me dripping pon,
I reckon mesel' a reglar owld mon;
If you don't believe these words I say,
Step in Derry Doubt and clear the way.

DERRY DOUBT :
In comes I, Derry Doubt,
With me shirt-lap hanging out,
Five yards in and five yards out,
Out goes I, little Derry Doubt.

SONG :

—Jack only remembered two verses. There are five verses in A W Boyd's collection of 1931, but no tune.

God bless the master of this house,
And the mistress also,
And the dear little children,
That gather round your door,
With your ale, rum, gin and brandy, and all kinds of wine.

Please put your hand in your pocket,
And pull out your purse,
And give us a souling,
For better or for worse,
With your ale, rum, gin and brandy, and all kinds of wine.

Thelwall Morris Men have now revived the Statham dance, and I hope that the Lymm souling play will again be performed annually in Lymm and Statham before very long, some of the Statham locals having already expressed an interest.

POST SCRIPT :

On August 14, 1980, I called on 'Bob' Downward's daughter, who still live at his old address, and she recalls many things very vividly. 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 "Mr John Robert Downward", 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 notes on the dance and the tune, and before they left, they gave him two pound notes.

This was obviously the visit of Maud Karpeles to Lymm in 1938.