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By David M. Schwartz

Morris dancers are coming, and so it must be May

Belled and beribboned, they wield sticks and handkerchiefs in a British ritual now spreading from Boston to Berkeley

The arrival of spring has always elevated all except the dreariest of human spirits, but this is ridiculous. Waving handkerchiefs and hefty sticks, teams of agile men and women in brightly colored regalia proclaim the awaited season by dancing in streets all over America. They step, hop and leap through an intricate wave of movements, accenting every step with a shake of the bells tied below their knees. Costumed jesters and hobbyhorses weave through the lines of moving dancers, mocking their motions. At the sideline, musicians play spirited tunes on accordions, fiddles, pipes and tabors. It's morris dancing time in more than 60 communities from New England west to California.

In Washington, D.C., the Foggy Bottom Morris Men provide dances at the foot of the Washington Monument and at the Jefferson Memorial. Ring o'Bells, an all-women team in New York City, delights museum goers and bystanders outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. Invited to appear at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel for a white-tie celebration of Queen Elizabeth's birthday, the Sunset Morris Men of Los Angeles drive up in a rented limousine. As butlers reach for the door handles, the dancers burst out of the car and break into a lively rendition of "The Blue Eyed Stranger."

American folk festivals and Renaissance fairs, parks and village greens, plazas and shopping malls are gaining new pageantry from these centuries-old dances, recently imported from the Cotswold Hills region of south-central England. Relatively unknown on this side of the Atlantic a decade ago, the activity—colorful, vigorous and virile—befits the spring.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are the members of Marlboro Morris and Sword, here to bring the 'morris luck' to the inhabitants of this fine domicile," bellows team squire Anthony Barrand as six male dancers form two lines on the newly green lawn. Strapped to their white-trousered legs, brass bells on leather pads jingle lightly as the men file into place. With crimson vests and white shirts, multicolored ribbons streaming from sleeves, and fresh flowers pinned to yellow felt hats, the dancers make an arresting sight outside this small wooden house in Marlboro, Vermont.

"Our dances will ensure full, proficient fertility for the garden, the livestock and the people," continues Barrand. Then, noting that fully half the spectators stand no higher than his hip, he lowers his voice: "Fertility for that last group doesn't seem to be much needed around here!"

The dancers turn to face the musician, raising two-foot maple staves obliquely toward their partners.

"Our first dance will serve to rid your garden of squirrels and other vermin. Ordinarily, it is called 'Hunt the Squirrel,' but last year a woodchuck was seen for the first time on these grounds, so I hereby rename this dance 'Hunt the Groundhog.' "

The music begins. All six dancers flex their knees and spring straight up. At the moment their feet hit the ground, their crossed sticks come down on each other with a *whack*. Every limb leaps into motion.

"Foot up!" shouts the lead dancer. The two lines

Morris dancers from all over join musicians on a Vermont green for the Marlboro Ale.

Photographs by Suzanne Szasz

Morris cake guarantees luck to the audience—
if donations to a "bagman" are also forthcoming.

shimmer forward, legs kicking out an emphatic double-step, one-two-three-hop, one-two-three-hop, with 25 or more brass bells on each leg chinking in time. Forward, in place, now backward go the lines, then once again, rising in unison, sticks clashing.

Like most Cotswold morris dances, "Hunt the Squirrel" consists of a series of double-stepped figures such as "foot up," "whole hey" and "cross over." The punctuation between figures is a repeated chorus that varies from dance to dance, but in all the dances of a particular English village, figures, arm and foot movements, and handling of handkerchiefs or sticks are virtually identical. American morris teams usually choose two or three favorite dance styles, or "traditions," named after their towns of origin—Bampton-in-the-Bush, Chipping Campden, Bledington, Ducklington, Badby, Field Town, Adderbury, Sherborne and others. The Marlboro men dance "Hunt the Squirrel" in the tradition of Headington Quarry.

"Chorus" is the call, and the dancers turn to face partners. Bowing their heads to waist level, they take long steps backward but at the turn of the music lunge forward, raising sticks. Like animals tilting in territorial battle, they twice bat sticks, legs flailing. Chorus again. Then, without missing a bellshake, they bound into the next figure.

Comic characters complete the cast

Dancing is only half the show. While six dancers perform, three comic characters cavort through an act of their own. Wielding a short stick tied to an inflated pig's bladder, a footloose Fool dressed in motley prances through the moving lines of dancers, clumsily mimicking every motion. *Whop* lands the pig's bladder on a dancer's posterior as he bows for the chorus. *Thonk* on the abdomen of another as he straightens to strike his partner's stick. Not one dancer flinches.

In yellow chiffon dress and Panama hat, Barrand plays the part of The Betty, "mother" of all the dancers. In loud falsetto, she scolds her "children" during their performance: "Larry, tuck in your shirt!" as she pulls it out; "Danny, straighten your hat!" as she knocks it askew; "David, shine your shoes!" as she smears them with sand.

The third prankster, the "hobbyhorse," gambols among the audience, nuzzling children and bantering with the Fool. Draped in a quilted cloth that hangs from a hoop around his waist, he bears a carved wooden head, not always a horse's head. His wanderings take him to the middle of the set where he appears to be hopelessly confused amidst the raging stick-wielders. At the last possible moment before an inevitable head-bashing, he takes sudden refuge by falling flat on his face at the feet of the dancers.

Men from the Marlboro Morris and Sword dance "Castle Ring" around a hobbyhorse—in this case it is a hobbydeer, held by the man in the center—at last year's Marlboro Morris Ale, an annual fair.

"I am sure that these dances will bring you luck this spring." Barrand resumes his role as announcer when his troupe has finished warding off garden pests. "However, you should be warned that the morris luck is transferred only when there is a small piece of cake partaken." On cue, a local teenager unwraps a gingerbread cake and sets it on a wooden platter, slotted to accept the long metal sword he pushes through it.

"This is the morris cake, baked from an ancient recipe," continues Barrand. "A small piece taken between thumb and forefinger will guarantee luck for a year and a day . . . but only if there is a small exchange of gifts between the spectators and the dancers." A young "bagman" gives his upturned hat a jiggle. "We accept coins of any denomination, or green pieces of paper with pictures of Presidents, or checks, money market funds, even real estate deeds." Donations help pay for costumes, transportation and sometimes even a little ale for the thirsty dancers.

As the hat is passed, six women hustle onto the stage and spin through the pinwheel figures of "Maid of the Mill." Then the team forms two long lines and heads down South Road, band playing. Up go the handkerchiefs, left, right, around, around. A cluster of spectators follows. Children on crepe-paper bedecked bicycles swarm around the moving columns.

Before the sun is down, the team will have visited every house along the two-mile road that runs from Marlboro College to the white-clapboard Whetstone Inn—as close to a "downtown" as there is in this hamlet of 400 residents. Another Marlboro May Day—first Saturday of May—is over.

As a dance form, the morris has roots that are firmly entrenched in Europe, but just how deep they go and exactly where they originate is debatable. The term "morris" refers to a variety of English dances and dramas of which the springtime handkerchief-and-stick-dances from Cotswold villages are the most

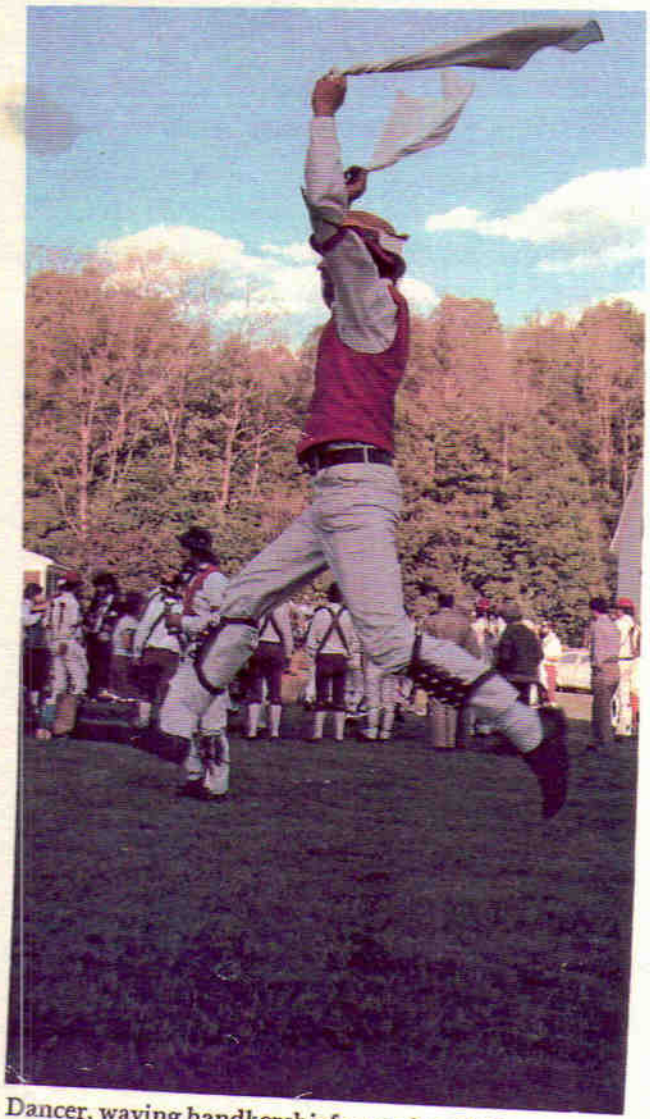
The author is a member of Marlboro Morris and Sword in Vermont. His article on weather vanes appeared in April 1976 SMITHSONIAN.

famous. But sword dances performed in midwinter in Northeast England and midsummer processional clog dances from Lancashire are also sometimes called morris dances.

Why "morris?" It has been suggested that dancers used to blacken their faces, so antiquarians have conjectured that the dance had a Moorish origin. Yet for years it has been the opinion of some folklorists that today's morris dancers are the cultural descendants of members of a pre-Christian priesthood who performed seasonal rites.

But Anthony Barrand, the Marlboro team leader who teaches psychology and folklore at Marlboro College, disagrees. He has spent the last six years promoting and studying English ceremonial dance. He and some other folklorists assert that there is no evidence of anything called "morris" or "moorish" dancing before the 15th Century.

Not until the 17th Century, they say, did a dance form with two-line sets appear as a popular amusement in the courts of England, France and Spain. Close to the royal manor house at Woodstock, built by Henry I, the Cotswold villages became the English center of morris activity. Basques of northern Spain and southern France developed a similar dance, perpetuated in Boise, Idaho, by Basques who emigrated to the American West. When morris dancers performed in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1980, a Basque exchange student raced across the square to check out what appeared to be, even at a distance, very familiar to him.

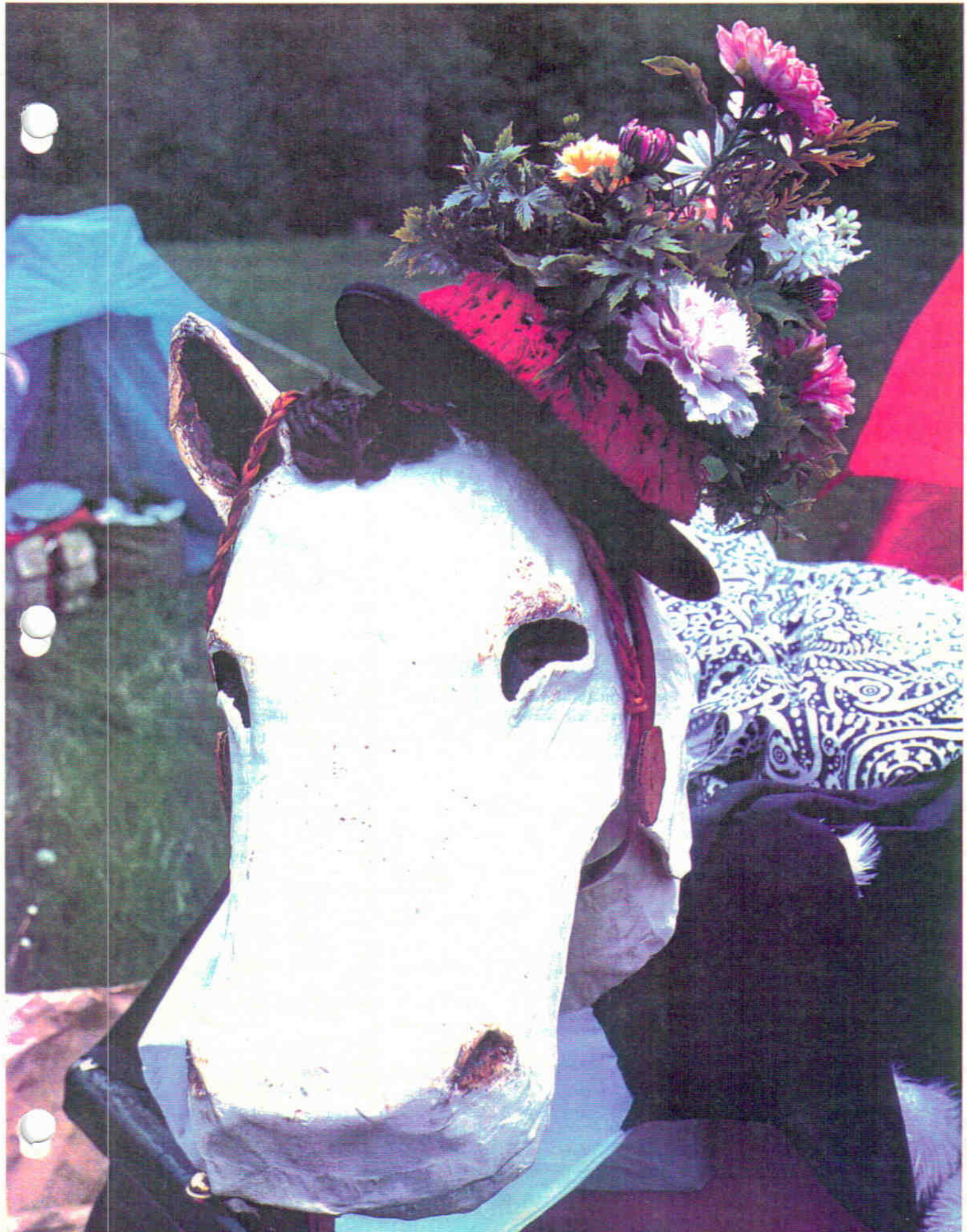


Dancer, waving handkerchiefs, gets in a little practice for his solo jig at the Marlboro Ale.

Reveling at English rural fairs

During the 200 years following the Restoration in 1660, morris dancers turned out for the popular spring pageants that flourished in the Cotswolds. Village teams competed for a coveted spot at the Whitsun ales, or fairs (named for the most popular beverage consumed). Country fairs, with their attendant revelry and dancing, were so much a part of English rural life during the 18th century that many New England towns were given, by charter, permission to hold such ales. In Marlboro the Charter from George II in 1751 reads, "as soon as there shall be fifty families resident and settled thereon [the town] shall have the liberty of holding two fairs one of which shall be held on the last Monday—in the month of May—and the other on the last Monday—in the month of October."

Changes wrought by 19th-century industrialization depopulated the English countryside and eroded English country ways. By the late 1850s, the Whitsun ales had been stopped by the Church on the grounds of insobriety. Morris dancers were out of luck, and they disappeared except at the rarest occasions.



Traditional bell pads consist of brass bells attached to leather strips, decorated with colored ribbons.

It was an off-season appearance on a snowy Boxing Day in 1899 that brought the Headington Quarry dancers, all laid-off stone masons trying to put some needed coins into the hat, before a Cotswold audience that included Cecil Sharp, the famous folk song collector. Turning his attention to dance, Sharp began notating the music and movements of every morris dance he could rout out of Cotswold villagers. If their memories strained and their bones creaked as they pressed their tired calves through one more turn, it was a propitious exertion. No ivory-towered academic was Cecil Sharp. He trained demonstration teams and hit the lecture circuit. While he was on a visit to New York, the Country Dance and Song Society was founded under his guidance in 1915, and C.D.S.S. students were soon pounding the floorboards there.

In the late '60s and early '70s, a small number of young people taught by C.D.S.S. classes formed the first morris teams. They got a foothold in the streets of New York, Boston, Cambridge and Binghamton, New York. Women took an early role in American morris dancing, forming a team of their own in New York City. Some clubs danced with mixed sets.

With 12 American teams active by 1976, Tony Barrand of Marlboro decided to hold America's first ale, thereby consummating—some 225 years later—the sanction of his town's charter. At that Marlboro Morris Ale, 117 dancers and musicians kitted up in team colors and double-stepped through three full days of morris dancing, starting at their base camp on the Marlboro College campus and, like spring birds dispersing into every available niche, spreading out to the village greens, schoolhouse lawns and pubside alleys of 19 towns in southeastern Vermont.

The following spring, the second Marlboro Ale drew 21 teams with 261 dancers, musicians, fools and hobbyhorses, as well as a hobbydeer, a hobbyunicorn, and a hobbyalligator. (For the 1980 ale, the Binghamton Morris Men trucked in a 15-foot polyurethane hobbydinosaur.)

At least 60 morris teams are now shaking their bells in the United States and Canada. Although the ales—a second ale, in Toronto, was instituted in 1978 by Green Fiddle Morris—stop the most traffic, morris teams usually find their *raison d'être* in dancing for their own city folk on familiar streets.

"What I love most about our performances is the interaction between the crowds and the dancers," says Kit Campbell of Ring o'Bells. "We provide a pageantry that comes as a total surprise to New Yorkers going about their business. Their usual reaction is 'What in the world *are* you?' "

The residents of Marlboro, Vermont, know very well what in the world morris dancers are. Sally Beaudoin's anticipation of their arrival is typical: "In February, I start to say, 'Only three months till the morris dancers are here!' It really helps us get through the winter." And one farmer takes the fertility pitch at its word: "I used to breed the Jerseys in April but they never took. Now, I don't even bother to try before the morris dancing."

Nancy Leach, who fortifies the dancers with a smorgasbord of food and drink at her house near the end of their exhausting May Day route, is as enamored of the ritual as of the dancing itself. "It's really something quite special to live in a place where rituals are honored, to know that the dancers are coming every year. When they finally appear over the hill, waving their handkerchiefs, you get tears in your eyes."

Morris hobbyhorse head awaits its rider—a clown figure in the dance. The animals aren't always horses.