

## WHEATLEY MORRIS MEN

As in many other villages Wheatley had its own side of dancers in the past, dancing their particular form of this tradition as one of a variety of rural customs. They were part of the pattern of village life but fortunately a brief note about them has survived from the late nineteenth century. The side in existence in 1860 was listed as follows:

Six dancers.	Thomas Brooks, labourer
	James Ring, labourer
	Will Putt, labourer
	George Putt, labourer
	Nathaniel Putt, labourer
	Christopher Tombs, labourer
Squire - with bladder and cow's tail -	Thomas Gomme, labourer
Pipe and tabour -	Old Tom Hall of Islip
Foreman and treasurer -	James Brooks, labourer

The note is not very helpful about their occupations but more can be learnt from contemporary census enumerators returns.

The Putts who formed the core of the side came to the village in 1856 and served it as shoemakers until 1976. The Tombs family included sawyers and the Brookses were apparently butchers. Their description 'squire' used differently in 1860 - today he is one of the six dancers who calls the dances but in those days he clearly acted as the modern Fool.

The Wheatley tradition died at the end of the nineteenth century, traditionally because the Bagman (today the equivalent of a secretary-cum-treasurer) ran off with the funds! In 1894, it was said of them that 'they practised all the winter in Hunt's hovel, and were the best set on that side of the country.' By the turn of the century they appeared only at Christmas and some of the dancers left the village. The last known dancers apparently died in the 1920s: Alfred Currill of Littleworth (in the parish) and A. E. Gomme of Horton-cum-Studley. Fortunately everything did not die with them since, apart from the late nineteenth century notes, Cecil Sharp and others collected information on the village's dances early in the twentieth century before they were entirely forgotten.

### The Dances

The total number of former Wheatley dances will never be known but notes on seven survive, as well as on the famous Wheatley Processional. The latter, our 'coming on'<sup>5</sup> and 'going off' sequence, is used by many other Morris sides in the country. Of the seven actual dances, four involve handkerchiefs and three sticks. Two, 'Oh dear what can the matter be' and 'Shepherd's Hey'<sup>7</sup> can be danced as jigs, that is by one or two dancers only.

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The 29th July 1977 was the second birthday of the revived side.

A little is known of earlier sides, whose line came to an end in the late 19th century, when the break in the tradition is said to have been caused by the Bagman's running off with the funds! A manuscript in the Bodleian Library records the names of the side in 1860, consisting of six dancers, a squire (our modern fool), a foreman/treasurer, and a musician. The last-named, Old Tom Hall, like today's musicians, was imported from outside the village, in his case bringing his pipe and tabour from Islip. All the dancers and officers were described as labourers but this term seems to have covered various occupations - for example the three Putts came from a family which in the late 19th century and until 1976 practised shoemaking in the village. By the turn of the century the side appeared only at Christmas and some of the dancers left the village. The last known dancers appear to have died in the 1920s: Alfred Currill of Littleworth (in the parish) and A. E. Gomme of Horton-cum-Studley.

Despite the break of about 80 years in the tradition the details of the 19th century costume, with perhaps the box hats ;he most distinctive feature, were preserved and today's Wheatley Morris Men are dressed

accordingly. Fortunately seven of the dances and tunes of this particular tradition within Cotswold Morris were collected in the early 20th century and the present side aims at faithful representation of these along with the famous Processional.

The revival began on a very tentative footing (recorded on cine film and shown to new members for encouragement!), on the lawn behind the manor house in the summer of 1975, at the suggestion of the Wheatley Society which hoped to include Morris in its revival of the also traditional autumn Feast. Despite the presence of only two experienced dancers among the original group it was decided to form a permanent side which made four public appearances in late 1975 and is now enjoying a second full season. The side is very proud of the tradition it has been fortunate enough to inherit and it is policy to dance only Wheatley dances, the interpretation of which it is now felt has been reasonably mastered. The only exception allowed is a longsword dance.

The last twelve months have seen two very pleasing growths from the original side. Subsequent to the Morris Men agreeing to organise the village entertainment on Jubilee night five of the side formed the Jubbly Ceilidh Band which has been in successful independent existence for several months. The side have also been delighted to establish the Junior Morris Men who began public appearances this season. The various developments came together in a highly successful street ceilidh in a packed High Street on June 7th at which the Headington Quarry Men were welcome guests.

The Wheatley men have now danced with some of the local sides but look forward to more such contacts in the area. Practices are held weekly on Tuesdays in the club room of the White Hart in the High Street. Anyone interested in joining in the continuation of the village's dancing tradition, is most welcome to come along, whether of school age or maturer years. Slight pretensions to tolerable fitness, though not essential, are recommended as Wheatley dances are fairly strenuous! For further details on joining, or to secure the services of the side for any function please contact the undermentioned (honest) Bagman:

John Brooks

19 Templars Close Wheatley Oxford

Tel: Wheatley 2023

### The Costume

The present side is dressed like the one in the late nineteenth century, Perhaps the most distinctive features are the box hats, probably similar to those worn by the coachmen when Wheatley was an important place on the old coach routes. 'Accessories' are also as before – hence the two-coloured 23" sticks - although the Fool finds an inflated rubber glove rather less objectionable and more durable than the traditional pig's bladders which are rather hard to obtain nowadays.

### The Present, Side

A group interested in reviving the tradition came together in July 1975. Only two members had danced Morris before and the first faltering steps on the lawn behind the- Manor House were not very traditional. The scene was recorded on cine film and is occasionally shown to newcomers to make the point that we all had problem at first- The present side is drawn, partly from Wheatley, partly from the vicinity - as in the nineteenth century our regular musicians are imported. We are very proud of the tradition that we have been fortunate enough to inherit and accordingly we stick exclusively to our own dances, the one exception being s longsword dance. Associated activities include a mummers play at Christmas and a tendency to burst into song when visiting alehouses.

There have been two very pleasing developments since the end of 1976. The first has been the formation of a junior side. Boys aged between 6 and 14 began attending weekly practices, and in 1977, began public performances with us a separate side. Few other Morris men have such a junior side and we hope that its existence will ensure that the tradition does not die again. The second development has been the

creation, by five members of the side, of the Jubbly Ceilidh Band which also began public appearances in 1977.

We practice almost every Tuesday throughout the year, at 7.30 pm for boys and 8.15 pm for men. Since no-one is now quite sure where 'Munt's hovel' is we use the clubroom of the White Hart in the High Street. If you would like to join or to beck us, please contact me John Brooks (the Bagman) 19 Templars Close, Wheatley (tel. 2023).

### THE WHEATLEY MORRIS MEN

The tradition of Morris dancing in Wheatley was revived In 1975. It had died out in the late nineteenth century due, it is said, to the Bagman's having run off with the funds I (The Bagman is the Secretary/Treasurer) The task of revival was made possible by the survival of at least part of the essential details of the tradition. 'A Handbook of Morris Dancing' (ed. L. Bacon) records eight dances in the Wheatley tradition and W. O Hassall's 'Wheatley Records' includes a description of the costume.

The eight known dances specific to the village are 1. The Wheatley Processional, 2. Room for the Cuckoo, 3. Bobbing- a-Jo, 4. Rigs and Mallow, 5. Constant Billy, 6. Shepherds' Hey, 7. Oh dear, what can tie matter be, and 8. Trunkles. It is hoped (rather faintly) that further village dances may yet come to light.

The present costume is based on the recorded tradition except that, until now, performances have been without hats. The problem here is just what did a 'box hat' look like? A recent letter to Charlie Chester appealing for a description was kindly broadcast on the radio but has unfortunately not yet produced a response from his audience.

Dr Hassall's book incorporates a villager's recollection reputedly listing, the personnel in 1860. The six dancers were Thomas Brooks, James Ring, Christopher Tombs, William, George, and Nathaniel Putt, all described as labourers. The Squire was Thomas Come, the Bagman James Brooks, again both labourers, and the Musician (with pipe and tabour) was Old Tom Hall of Islip. Other former dancers named in the book were A.E. Gome and Alfred Currill. It seems doubtful whether the list does in fact apply to 1860 as the Census of 1861 fails to show a close correspondence of names but the family surnames are certainly represented. The Census also casts some doubt on the accuracy of the occupations recorded. The Currills and Commas were apparently simply labouring families and the Rings and Tombs were in part, but the latter also included a publican and sawyers respectively. The Brooks in the 1861 and 1871 Censuses (William) was a butcher, and the Putts then, as now, served the village as shoemakers. The present Morris Men have various and different occupations. In the face of an assertion at a recent conference on 'The English Village' that all modern Morris sides were 'computer programmers to a man' it should be noted that none of the current dancers are so engaged!

The present side gave its first public performance in September at the Wheatley Festival. Despite its really being the close season it has since performed at Long Wittenham, Haddenham, and Lady Spencer Churchill College. A mummings play, 'The Saint George Play', a traditional local performance of the last century has recently been added to the repertoire, which also includes a wide and varied range of songs.

Two final points, on either of which th© Bagman ('honest. John Brooks) would like to hear from you:

1. If you are reasonably fit, live in or near Wheatley, and are male (sorry ladies, but we can officially enrol you as camp followers!) why not join in? Practices are at 6.00pm. on Tuesdays in the White Bart nail.
2. If the crops aren't growing too well and you need some good traditional dances to encourage them.....