

The Revival of the Wheatley Morris dancers  
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(Amended by Keith Chandler, 12 March 2005)

Around 1860 the *Wheatley Morris* dancers were regarded as the best dancers this side of Oxford. They were invited to dance in London and tried to collect the money to fund their journey, but did not succeed. The side seems to have disappeared during the late 1890's, followed soon afterwards by the *Wheatley Mummers*. Nearly a century later *Wheatley* still had no *Morris* side, which seemed a pity, but I learnt that a John booth used to dance with the *Abingdon* side. On contacting him, he said if I could find six men willing to dress up in ribbons and bells, he would come and teach us his steps. This took some doing and I found myself having to make up the numbers, but it beats jogging. In the summer of 1975 we rehearsed the *Morris* steps on the lawn behind the *Manor House*, Dr *Hassall* recorded *Percy Manning's* description of the costume about 1864, and *Mr Somme*, the last of the *Wheatley Morris* dancers confirmed this when I visited him in 1975.

They wore red and blue ribbons at the sleeves and waistband, white shirt and trousers, with bells and a box hat. We weren't quite sure what a box hat was and wrote to *Dunn's* the hatters. They not only told us what it was, a low crown hat worn by the coachmen who rode on the box, but still had the moulds to make them, which they did specially for us, and at cost price. *Cecil Sharp*, who collected folk dances throughout England, collected six dances from *Wheatley* in 1922 which had been danced for five generations. To be able to dance their own traditional tunes gave the new side great prestige in the *Morris* world. They were invited to join the *Morris Ring of England*. Only about twenty collected traditions, from 153 known *Morris* villages, can boast a collected tradition of local dance. East of *Wheatley* there are none.

*Percy Manning* also gave the names and occupations of *Morris* dancers c.1984, all of them labourers; they included *Tombs*, *Gommes*, *Putts* and *Currills*. Families intermarried with *Headington Quarry* dancers, including the *Coppocks*, the *Kimbers* and the *Coopers*. The late *Arthur Smith*, stone mason for *Wheatley Church*, and the last of the *Wheatley Mummers*, said that they had nothing to do with the *Wheatley* dancers - 'they were a rough lot'. It is interesting to compare and contrast the occupations of the revived *Morris* dancers: *John Booth*, *Squire*, (salesman); *Alan Rooney* (industrial chemist); *John Brooks* (university lecturer, *Jon Drake* (retired architect), *Chris Kingham* (salesman); *Ron Hollingworth* (PE teacher); *David Dillon* (laboratory assistant).

The *Morris* men danced throughout the 70's and *Mick Jones* and *Gareth Morris* were actually teaching a boys' side to follow up. Eventually *Wheatley Morris* was again regarded as an expert dance side and invited to London to dance their traditional dances. This time they fulfilled the engagement. Unfortunately the men's side gave up during the 1990s as they were now beyond the energetic dancing time in life. The 13 year olds did dance in public on *Mayday*, but, as they got older, they too had other interests and now *Wheatley* has no *Morris* dancers again.

(Also known to have danced in the *Morris* side: *Roger Simmonds* and *David Parsons*)