

MY YEAR AS SQUIRE OF WHEATLEY MORRIS Mick Jones 1976

My season as Squire began, in October 1976, with a visit to the Central Hall, Birmingham with Dick Brooker to represent the Side at a Meeting of the Ring. Dick made his presence known by addressing the assembly on two occasions but my impression was of the beaurocracy required to run this relatively massive organisation. Apart from David, the Squire, Kenneth Lovelace emerged as a character, announcing himself as belonging to Headington Quarry every time he "broke forth".

The next official engagement was to attend the 'Headington Ale' in November, with John Booth, our Foreman. I really enjoyed this evening. Roger Phillips the Headington Foreman, was retiring from his two-year session as Squire and he danced a retiring jig whilst Francis Parsons, the new Squire, danced a jig also. The Quarry men showed a couple of films including one of dear old Kenneth talking to Maud Karpeles about her research with Cecil Sharp. They laid on a fabulous buffet. I got a great kick out of dancing with these lads as well as the two representatives from Adderbury. Jim Phillips sang Ale and Jones' Ale and, for our offering, I sang the Devil and the Farmer's wife. We taught them the Wheatley 'Oh dear, what can the matter be' and received the breathless comment, 'That's not a dance'!

We helped in an evening of fund-raising activities for the Wheatley Windmill Restoration Fund, held in the hall of the Wheatley United Reform Church. Our contribution was to run a 'Guess the weight of the Wheatley Morris men' competition.

During the Christmas period we performed the Mummers' Play several times: at The King's Arms, The White Hart, and at The Sun. (The best reception was undoubtedly at the White Hart). We also went out for an evening with our wives and girlfriends at the Bear and Ragged Staff at Stadhampton: needless to say we ended up Morris Dancing with an accompaniment provided by a soda water siphon squirted by the 'management'.

We worked on 'Trunkles' during the closed season: sorting out the 'swing-step'. I maintained that, because of the long "Hey-up"....16 bars, we were playing the music at half speed and the notes on the chorus seemed to bear this out (it's such an odd tune and appears slow as we play it - but played at twice the speed would seem too fast.)

We also spent a good deal of time preparing our boys' side: we modified the figure work in our dances by dancing half rounds as double whole rounds -changing from clockwise to anti-clockwise after eight bars of the 'A' music. Peter Wiles was the boys' Squire and their first set dance in public was "Room for the Cuckoo" in Crown Square before the crowning of the

Lord and Lady of the Garland by Jon Drake.

The procession up the High Street to the Manor House, site of the Maypole, was most impressive: the Lord and Lady of the Garland, then the Maypole Dancers and Garland Bearers lined up behind the Morris-men after we had danced 'Trunkles' for the first time.

As we moved off to dance the "Wheatley Processional" the crowd followed on behind, and it gave me a real lift to think that this was "real Wheatley".

During the whole of our performance we were honoured by the presence of Roy Dommet and Tubby Reynolds who filmed and recorded us. The boys did all the Morris at the Manor House: they performed very well and got a very good reception.

The acoustic version of the Jubbly Ceilidh Band: Steve, Ian on 12 string; Dick on melodeon, and me on whistle, played for "Maypole" and Country Dancing: both were, quite honestly, diabolical: however, the Toddlers' Dance always goes down well!

The men then went on tour round the village: the Sun, the White Hart, the Plough, and finished off at Cramphorn's Carden Centre. We collected £20 for ribbons for a bigger maypole next year. The Sword Dance was performed for the first time in the open air. As May Day is such an important event, I felt that I needed a trip out beforehand, to get myself sorted out at Squire in relation to the set.

7th May: TOWERSEY'S DAY OF DANCE

This was the first day of dance to which we had been invited that we were able to attend. We assembled at a pub in Marlow and met up with our hosts and also the Swindon Morris Men. After dancing in Marlow we went off to Fingest - a beautiful spot in the Chilterns where the dances were accompanied by a Spitfire flying overhead! We had lunch in the garden and then drove off to Hazelmere near High Wycombe, to dance at a fete. It was here that Wheatley was joined by the other two sides in the "Wheatley Processional". We left the fete to go on to compete with a travelling fair at Princes Risborough, and then to invade Chris Kingham's home- to take tea with him.

After reassembling for a pint and a dance at the Shoulder of Mutton, near Towersey, we adjourned to the village hall Ale - and a splendid time was had by all. I remember particularly dancing "Saturday Night Out". One 'off-shoot' of this tour was that Dennis Manners, who had been impressed by our dancing, got us an invite to dance at the Towersey Festival. He also

helped by getting his son-in-law, Steve Heap, to act as our agent.

After the 'Towersey Day of Dance', we embarked on a season of 'domestic' Tuesday night tours: the first of these was organised by John Booth on 24th May. This was a tour of Cuddesdon (another cake vicar?). Little Milton and Haseley. At the Lamb at Little Milton, we were watched by a number of lads on motor-bikes who seemed genuinely disappointed when we stopped dancing. During the ensuing 'song session' we were pleased to have John Booth's uncle who played the bagpipes - much to the annoyance of a possible N.F. member in the bar!

JUBILEE DAY

On 6th June, the day of the celebration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, we danced for a fete at Garsington after lunch. This was our most ambitious 'stand* up to that time. We had organised a street Barn Dance, and invited Headington Quarry to join us. The area for dancing was outside the White Hart in the High Street (which had been closed for the celebrations). Earlier, in the afternoon, there had been a street party for the pre-school children.

In the evening we were to perform in Wheatley High Street. The weather was cold and rather blustery. We were due to start at 7.30 pm and the Quarry lads began to arrive: to our surprise Roy Dummett came but not many spectators. The Scouts were spit-roasting some beef and we were hoping for about 200 spectators.

The band had told Dave Dillon not to worry about floodlights as we would probably seek refuge in the Merry Bells for warmth. How wrong could we have been? By the time the Morris Men came out to dance the area between the shops and the pub was packed and we were welcomed enthusiastically. The men and the boys danced two dances each - in turn with the Quarry Men, and I felt quite honoured when Francis Parsons asked me if, after a couple of spots, they could dance non-Headington dances.

I thought the standard of the dancing was the best yet but, needless to say, I fell over! As for the band - we were overwhelmed by the reception and, much to Dave Dillon's disgust, he had to *rig*

Up the floodlights after all!

The Scouts ran out of meat very early in the evening but, all in all, we were stunned by our reception. We continued to play for the dancing in the street until Harry Parker shut the pub

at 11.15 pm. He'd had enough!

After Jubilee Day we felt in good spirits for our trip to St Albans on 11th June, to take part in the Morris Ring meeting there. On our arrival we joined the Forest of Dean and White Horse Morris Men for a mid-day tour. It was good to mix with other sides and to see them dance. I was particularly interested to note that the Forest of Dean Men only danced six different dances and, although they were from different traditions, their repertoire for the day was smaller than ours. We were 'chaperoned' by a St Albans man, complete with blazer and brief-case, who was so excited by the singing in the lunch-time pub that he went to sleep! We 'sobered up' by dancing during the afternoon in a shopping precinct and at a rather nice Water Mill.

We then proceeded to central St Albans for MASS MORRIS. Fortunately, as we dance only 'Wheatley' we couldn't participate! I found the sight of nearly one hundred men dancing a bit overbearing, and the massed musicians looked rather like the Muppet Show Band- Dr Teeth! Each side as asked to dance a 'show dance'. We did Bobbing-a- Joe after having processed n. We danced well. I must say I enjoyed watching all the sides dance individually - but Mass Morris leaves me cold!

John Booth and I, as Foreman and Squire, were invited to attend an official reception in the Town Hall. As we were the only side with its own 'tradition' we attracted much of the Squire of the Ring's attention! At the Feast which followed, I was (unfortunately) required to sit at one end of the top table: but this was rather a disadvantage because I only had one bloke to talk to. The meal was disappointingly Spartan but the booze flowed and then, after the official speeches (the Mayor couldn't make it) a couple of sides were awarded their staffs of office, and then a quaint custom took place: the passing of the St Alban's Loving Cup. This was a large, silver, two-handled tankard containing mulled wine which was passed around the whole assembly. The person passing the cup nodded to the person next to him who was going to receive the cup, and they both stood up together with the person next in line. When the middle man drinks the other two turn their backs! When my turn came I had noone to pass the cup on to so 'naturally I took it out of the room, as I was sitting next to a door. (The side told me later that the Squire was not amused.)

After the formal part of the feast, each side was invited to do a turn and, as I felt the 'official' business of the evening was over, I went to join the side. Dick sang "Brave Martin". The most impressive solo was by John Ralph, the musician from the Forest of Dean: he played 'Kemp's Jig' on a recorder.

At the practice after the Ring Meeting there was some adverse criticism about my behaviour: I suppose this was fair because I was the elected representative of the Wheatley Morris Men. However, I did feel that after a whole day of dancing (and a fair amount of drinking) a formal dinner is not really appropriate. Had I known what was expected, I would have acted accordingly. (If one lives 'below the salt' what else can you expect?)

Our next spot was to precede Steve Heap's production of "Sticks and Bells" at Chinnor. (This was the first of a series of jobs at festivals run by Steve to which we were specifically invited.) We helped continuity by dancing outside the Village Hall. The show was really good, being a personal view of Morris from past, present and future, told in dance, song and narrative with both acoustic and electric music.

Tuesday 21st June

We danced at South Moreton, at a school event, and this was the first time we had enough men to dance two sets at once. We ended the evening with some dancing and songs at The Plough in Clifton Hampden.

Saturday 25th June

We danced at the National Deaf Children's Society Garden Party at the home of Mrs Livingstone in Yarnton. Then we went on to Summertown Middle School/Oxford Old Boys' Rugby football Club at the Marston Ferry. Pam Ayres was guest of honour.

Sunday 26th June

We danced for the Wheatley Cubs at a group camp held on Westfield. The boys danced with us (or we danced with the boys) as some of them were camping there.

We took the boys out with us again, to dance at a Tory Party gig in Haddenham. It's good to have the boys with us on tour as it gives us a good opportunity for us to rest, especially when we don't have a lot of 'men' out.

Tuesday 19th July

After this 'Real Ale' tour (organised by bick) of Berwick Salome, Brightwell Baldwin and Warborough, I now understand why the nineteenth century Morris Men died out they got lost wandering about, endlessly trying to find the pubs. We eventually found the spots and enjoyed the tour.

Saturday 23rd July

This was a very warm day and we danced for a pleasant, domestic fete at Waterperry Horticultural College.

Sunday 7th August

The first two Holton Working Steam Rallies were cursed by bad weather on the Saturdays - but we danced on both of the following Sundays when the weather was fine. Frank Watts was there to watch his son and grandson perform on their motor bikes, but he showed his obvious delight in the boys' dancing that he slipped a quid into the kitty! We ventured away from outside the beer tent, but our best crowds were outside the bar. I'm afraid we did interfere with the Religious Service by starting our spot before it was ended.

Tuesday 9th August

I planned a tour which would end up at Wr'n'll (Worminghall!) when there were due to be thousands of Americans there. We started at The Star in Stanton St. John, then moved on to the White Horse at Forest Hill, and thence to Worminghall. Unfortunately I took Ian's waistcoat (which had his car keys in) instead of my own. Brooksey sped back to Forest Hill and Ian was highly 'delighted'. Needless to say, none of our 'Trans-Atlantic cousins' were seen!

Our next spot was meant to be at a barbeque in the Garden of the Clifton Arms at Worminghall. But somehow we ended up at Upper Brook Farm where we danced and played for a couple of country dances and then made our way back to the Clifton Arms for a 'booze up'.

Monday 29th August (Bank Holiday)

We danced as part of the Towersey Festival - touring in Woodstock and Thame with the Reading Cloggies and a "made up" Morris Side.

We joined in the Procession, doing Winster, behind 'Hoddesdon Crownsmen' a very good rapper and clog side. We danced in the arena (after the Marlow dog handling club had bored everyone sick), but we went down quite well.

There was a Ceilidh in the evening which turned out to be a concert. I made the mistake of asking the Morris men to wear their gear, thinking there might be other Morris men dressed as wellthere weren't! It didn't matter - those who went enjoyed it.

Saturday 3rd September

There was a combined Morris/Band spectacular at 'Wellbury House Special School' at Offley, on the far side of Luton. This was a bit dangerous because there was also a local Morris side. We were asked to dance at a local pub to help advertise the fete (which included a Viking battle!) It was very pleasant just having to do one spot at lunchtime, and it was a lovely fine day. Our second session involved dancing on grass - which really saps the energy. The band thoroughly enjoyed the open air dance in the evening - before it got too cold!

Saturday 10th September

This was our second appearance at the East Oxford Street Festival and, although it wasn't as well attended as last year, we danced with the boys and our performance was certainly much better than the previous year.

Saturday 11th October

The Wheatley Village Produce Association dinner always includes an entertainment and this year, it was us! This was my last function as Squire and I had played rugby in the afternoon and had twisted my knee - so I was heavily strapped. Unfortunately, as retiring Squire, I was required to dance a jig (Shepherd's Hey) which I did to the best of my ability the show must go on!

AFTER THOUGHTS

Looking back on this our second season in existence, I felt that our contact with other Morris

sides had been very favourable, and we had made a good impression on our audiences. We were particularly delighted that Denis *Manners* had given us an almost 'rave' notice in the magazine 'Rocking Chair'.

I felt we needed to organise more mid-week tours for people like Chris Kingham who work on Saturdays. Of course, the emergence of the Boys' Side had been a major success, and this was the first season when we had danced all of the recorded Wheatley dances. We still struggled a bit, because of our small numbers, and must keep looking out for more dancers.

I was sad to retire because I had enjoyed the year as Squire immensely. (In contrast to my feelings when I retired from captaining the Oxford Old Boys' Rugby Club - when the end of the season couldn't come quickly enough!