

# Lessons with bells on

The Wheatley Boys' Morris at the opening of the restored Wheatley Windmill earlier this year. Standing, from left, Nikhil Desai, Lewis Braham and Phiwa Mthethwa. Front, from left, Harry Drewitt, Lihle Mthethwa and Samuel Francis

Photograph:  
Jon Lewis



How getting involved in traditional dance boosted these boys' confidence, writes **Gill Oliver**

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organisation The Ring warning that this ancient tradition could die out unless more youngsters get involved, the six W

■ prk, bells and ribbons  
pls normally d'wit h ten-year-old

Aptly, id Morris, who / explained: "Until the coaches the sides turn off the ; 20th century, jihad men's and bdys! Morris sides in the

"I was a mem Aof the men's side and the " last teacher pf ^BRS, but the sides died oftin - the 1990s."

■ "EachM^rDt nine to H tcMaj fit is traditional for girls aged 11-13 to dance around the May Pole, something thatas/rganised ihrough the local -> > Couttasd K pagf.ii ,



**Wheatley Boys Morris perform the windmill dance, under the watchful eye of Gareth Morris (left) and teacher Tom Harper**

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primary school. "The teacher in charge, Tom Harper, mentioned it would be a good idea if we could get something for the boys that age to do. As I was already going in to help with the May Pole dancing lessons, I said I would give it a whirl.

"This is the fifth year now that we have had a boys' side made up of pupils from the primary school," he added.

Each year in February, Mr Morris and Mr Harper recruit volunteers from Years 5 and 6 at Wheatley Church of England Primary School.

"We often start off with more than 20 joining, and are down to about eight by the time it comes to May Day," said Mr Morris.

The Wheatley Boys' Morris danced on May Day, at the opening of the restored Wheatley Windmill in May, and again at the St Mary's parish church garden party this month.

The impressive line-up of six includes ten year-olds Nikhil Desai, Lewis Braham, Harry Drewitt and Lihle Mthethwa, Samuel Francis, nine, and Lihle's eight-year-old brother, Phiwa.

"None of their mums or dads dance, as far as I know. They came to it completely cold, and have possibly never even seen Morris dancing before," said Mr Morris.

"Although the Morris men have danced at morning assembly occasionally, so they might have seen it that way, but other than that, they

have no connection with Morris, or any type of dancing.

"Some lads take to it really enthusiastically, some do not. You need an even number and six is about the minimum. Any less, and it is not a 'spectacle', and it is difficult to do the dances properly.

"The boys are really enthusiastic and **'Within the village and school there is a tradition of Morris dancing — it does the boys' confidence and self-esteem the world of good'**

their parents have been very supportive. It is nice when they are keen and most will carry on next year, hopefully," he added.

During the 'season', the team trains at school during one lunch hour a week.

Mr Morris added: "In terms of the Morris,



there is a right way of doing it and the dances, one in particular, are a bit involved but the boys tend to pick it up quite quickly.

"They do a slightly watered-down version — broken down into simple moves and steps. We only ever perform three dances, and each dance has lots of repetitions. We do one clapping and two stick dances."

There is no problem with the boys being a bit too exuberant while whacking each other with the Morris sticks, he said.

"Occasionally, they get a bit over-excited but they quickly realise that if they get hit with a stick, it hurts."

As for their costumes, the boys wear black school trousers, black shoes, and white long-sleeved shirts. Mr Morris supplies the bells and ribbons.

He moved to Wheatley 34 years ago, and is clerk to Wheatley Parish Council. Before that, he taught at the Oxford College of Further Education for 28 years, joining the Wheatley Morris Men in 1978.

"Within the village and school there is a tradition of Morris dancing, so they are carrying that on — it does the boys' confidence and self-esteem the world of good," he said.

"I admire them because on May Day morning, we dance in Crown Square. There can be a few hundred people watching, and it can be a bit overwhelming, but they really enjoy it."