

Meet the morris (wo)men

Morris dancing was once thought to be strictly for men – but women fought for their place in this age-old British folk custom, as **Caroline Roberts** reports

A mention of morris dancing often conjures up an image of a group of older men skipping awkwardly, jingling the bells on their shins and waving their hankies. But there's so much more to this centuries-old English folk dance, says morris dancer Cherith Simmons. There's a multiplicity of local traditions and complex choreography, and it requires a good deal of athletic prowess. 'Morris dancing involves a lot of jumping and twisting in the air, so you need strength and skill,' she explains. 'It often takes beginners about two years to build up the required muscle power.'

What's more, it's likely that morris women now outnumber morris men. But that wasn't always the case. Back in 1974, when Cherith helped found the all-female Windsor Morris group, or 'side', it caused a huge amount of consternation among those who believed the dance form to be a strictly male preserve. 'Nobody told us that women weren't meant to do it, so we started practising,' she says. 'We decided to dance a style called Cotswold morris, which is quite vigorous and athletic, and some men just didn't think women could dance it to the right standard.'

The Windsor Morris members soon demonstrated that their standards were as high, if not higher, but they got a rude awakening when they received an invite from the Sidmouth Folk Festival – a fixture in every keen folk dancer's diary.



Boss Morris, with founding member Alex (second from left)



Alex in action

'It was where you went to see good, new sides, but they said we could only dance there if we called ourselves a "women's ritual side". Of course, we refused! Luckily, they had a few staunch supporters among the male morris community, so the organisers relented and they were allowed to perform as Windsor Morris on the main

stage in 1976. The side went on to dance in Jamaica at the World Youth Festival and has travelled to the USA five times.

DANCING FOR JOY

'Being with a group of like-minded women is a great experience,' says Cherith. 'Through lockdown, we've still practised every Wednesday in our

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kitchens on Zoom. But one of the nicest things we do in summer is to appear at many folk festivals, meet up with other sides, watch each other dance, and have a good time. We can't wait to get back to it.'

Nowadays, there are many mixed sides around the country. One is Miserden Morris, which grew out of a local all-male group five years ago and is named after its home Cotswold village. 'We're a small, happily mixed group,' says member Alison Merry. 'It's all about live music, traditional dancing and just being together.' Even within the Cotswold morris tradition, every village will have its own version, she explains, and it's as good for the brain as it is for the body. 'We get so cross when people mock, because it's complicated stuff. Every dance will have a slightly different footfall pattern, and you have to know what your feet and hands are doing and where you are in relation to the other dancers. I'd love to see them try it on *Strictly*!'

Alison's husband had been a morris dancer as a student, but there were no opportunities for women when she was young. 'I wish I'd started when I was in my 20s as it's a bit late for my knees now, but I'll go on as long as I can. I do have a special dispensation to avoid the "split caper" – a jump where one leg goes forward and the other goes back. It's quite difficult.

'Morris dancing is brilliant exercise and brilliant fun. We've made such close friendships and we're longing to get back together and try to remember all the dances we've learnt before we all start to seize up.'

But there are plenty of younger dancers ready to carry the tradition into the future. One of them is Alison's daughter, Alex, who is a founding member of the all-female Boss Morris, based in Stroud.

'I have a vague childhood memory of Dad hopping around the sitting room with hankies,' says Alex, 'but it wasn't until I was living in London that I came across an advert for morris classes and decided to give it a go. I got completely obsessed.'

MORRIS THROUGH THE AGES

Morris dancing is thought to have originated in the European courts of the Middle Ages, and there are references to 'moreys daunce' in England dating back to the 15th century. By the 16th century, it had become a feature of church festivities, village fetes and May Day celebrations.

Its popularity has fluctuated over the centuries, but it has always survived in pockets around



Mary Neal

the country. There's no historical precedent for excluding women. In fact, a key figure in its revival in the late 19th century was the social worker, suffragette and collector of English folk dances Mary Neal. She taught the dance to members of the

Espérance Girls' Club, a cooperative set up to support girls working in dire conditions in the London dress trade. The resulting Espérance Morris group went on to showcase the dance around the country and even in the USA.

DANCING TO THEIR OWN TUNE

Boss Morris came about when Alex moved back home to Stroud. 'I was really surprised by the interest it sparked. There's a whole new wave of people starting to connect to English folk culture.' The side's dance style is traditional, but members, many of whom are crafters, have gone to town on the costumes. 'It's been so much fun coming up with our own unique identity. One of our costumes features culottes decorated with a pattern of dance moves. Stroud is famous for its cloth trade and we want to weave in as much local history as possible.'

The group has danced on stage at Glastonbury, at the Royal Albert Hall and on tour with legendary folk singer Shirley Collins. Members missed last

year's festival season badly, although they did manage to get together a few times when restrictions allowed, says Alex. 'I have a lovely memory of practising a jig in a car park and using the parking bays to help us keep our distance.'

At the time of writing, it was still unclear if morris groups will be able to perform, or 'dance out', during this summer season, which begins on 1 May. 'On May Day morning, lots of Gloucestershire sides meet up on Painswick Beacon on the Cotswold Edge and we dance up the sun,' says Alison. 'It's an age-old celebration of springtime renewal and brighter days ahead. If it does take place, it will certainly have a special significance this year.'



Cherith (in hat) dancing with Windsor Morris



Miserden Morris's Alison Merry (right)