

The Kennet Morris Men - dancing to a great tradition

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The Kennet Morris Men are looking for new recruits

'Tis the merry month of May and time to revel in the joys of spring with maypoles, crowns of daisies, picnics and, of course, morris dancers.

Bernard Bale talks to the Kennet Morris Men.



They dance to a band

May Day as a festivity dates back to the days of the Roman Empire and possibly beyond. The Romans liked their festivals and at the end of April they celebrated Floralia, named after Flora the Roman Goddess of Flowers. The Anglo-Saxons had their own pagan festivities so it was a case of any excuse for a party.

The origins of the maypole are up for debate. Some see a link with fertility while others simply see it as a tribute to the tree. Its true origin has never been established and here in our part of the world it has simply become the focal point of country dancing and a possible picnic.

Virtually every country has its own May Day traditions, beliefs and reasons but as well as baking special cakes, most people make a May punch, involving fresh strawberries, white wine, soda water or lemonade and woodruff, which these days has largely been replaced by an artificial aroma. In truth, you can chuck in anything you want as long as it smells and tastes good.

Another old practice is to make a garland of flowers and hang it on your neighbour's door without them seeing you. If they catch you they are entitled to ask for a kiss. Sounds as if that could make a come-back.



They know 40 or more dances

Of course, May Day is about fun including country dancing and especially morris dancing. They don't come any better than the Kennet Morris Men who are based in the Reading area and perform mainly around Berkshire and South Oxfordshire.

Jon Holmes is the Kennet Bagman and explained: "Between October and April we meet on Monday evenings at St Mary's Church Hall in Shinfield to practise our repertoire of dances and learn new ones. In January, we venture out to dance on New Year's Day and to wassail one or two of the local apple orchards. But it is from 1 May when you would normally have the best opportunity to see us in action.

"One evening each week we usually go 'on tour' to dance at some of the pubs in the area. We can also be seen at weekends dancing at local village fetes and festivals, and further afield when we join other morris teams on their Days or Weekends of Dance."

The Kennet Morris Men were founded in 1957. In 2007 they celebrated their 50th anniversary in style, hiring two narrowboats for a week to navigate the Kennet and Avon Canal from Bath to Reading, stopping to dance at ^[1]_[SEP]50 pubs along the way.



The Kennet Morris Men rehearse between October and April

But morris dancing is far older than that. Its origins are lost in the mists of time and are subject to much speculation. By Tudor times, though, it was well established as a public entertainment and a means of earning money for the performers.

The earliest record of morris dancing in Reading is found in the Churchwarden records of St Lawrence's Church for the year 1513. The church paid for a hoop for the giant and ale for the morris dancers for three pence on its dedication day, which would have been 10 August – the feast day of St Lawrence (or St Laurence, as the church is now known). Records for subsequent years show payments for bells and other items of apparel for the dancers.

The Kennet Morris Men felt that the 500th anniversary of this event should not go uncelebrated. On 10 August 2013 they organised a Day of Dance in the town, starting with a welcome by the Deputy Mayor of Reading outside St Lawrence's Church. They were joined by eight other Morris teams from the region, together with the Redding Moreys Dauncers, who were formed in preparation for the anniversary, dressed in Tudor costume to perform dances reconstructed by an expert on that period.



The Kennet Morris Men go on tour to dance

After dancing outside the church, the Tudor side retired to The George (a nearby inn of the era) where a round of beer was ceremonially purchased for three old pence.

This summer, you should have been able to see the Kennet Morris Men dancing at various local fetes and festivals but sadly the coronavirus has meant many cancellations. They are hoping to get their dancing shoes back on before the year is out.

Keep up with their news and engagements at kennetmorrismen.co.uk

Differing styles

Jon, the Kennet bagman, explained: “The traditional morris dance nowadays comes in different styles. We perform dances that are collectively known as ‘Cotswold morris’, typically performed by six dancers and a musician or two, often supplemented by a fool and an animal character such as a hobby horse (which the wearer appears to ride) or a “hooden horse” (which covers the wearer down to the legs). The fool provides the link between dancers and the audience so he must know the dances well to interact with the dance without disrupting it.

“Each town or village produced its own steps and dances, which have become the ‘traditions’. We perform dances from the Cotswold traditions and others we have invented ourselves. Experienced members may know 40 or more dances but annually concentrate on a core of about 25, some involving the clashing of sticks, while others involve waving handkerchiefs or clapping hands.”