



U-SPY KENNET MORRIS MEN



THE COMPLETE SPOTTERS GUIDE TO KENNETSHIRE - WRITTEN BY A FOOL

Join in the fun and learn whilst collecting points using this A - Z guide visitors to top attractions in Kennetshire, home of The Kennet Morris Men. The person with most points at the end of each season will be ... the winner.



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U-Spy Points: Collect 20 points for each venue visited to see us perform.
5 bonus points for each pint you buy the Fool at each of the pubs.





The similarity to Berkshire of old is only a coincidence and in these modern times we actually allow other Morris sides to dance within its boundary. This guide attempts to identify some of the places that are most special to us, but which have been rarely visited since The Great Embuggerance of the corona-virus. We'll be back - we hope. ☺

Abbey Ruins, Reading



It's been many years since we've been able to perform in the ruined ruins which were considered unsafe back in 2009. Restoration and conservation work only began in February 2017 and were completed just over a year later. As the ruins are now closed to the public overnight our traditional dancing at dawn has become impractical. A great shame as it made it very special – even though audiences have often been fairly sparse and the sight of the rising sun a tad unpredictable.

The ruins feature a plaque detailing and celebrating the song *Sumer is icumen in*, which was first written down in the abbey about 1240, and is the earliest known six part harmony from Britain. After dancing in the dawn Kennet will always give a rendition of the song, whether we're in the ruins or not. We can just about manage ye Olde English words as a melody. The 6 part round has eluded us thus far!



*Sumer is icumen in
Lhude sing cuccu
Growep sed
and blowep med
and springþ þe wde nu
Sing cuccu*

*Awe bletþ after lomb
lhoup after calue cu
Bulluc stertþ
bucke uertþ*

*murie sing cuccu
Cuccu cuccu
Wel singes þu cuccu
ne swik þu nauer nu*

*Sing cuccu nu • Sing cuccu.
Sing cuccu • Sing cuccu nu*

Allnut's Hospital



We've been dancing here on our Spring Bank Holiday tour since 1978 and Alnutts Hospital, also known as Goring Heath Alms Houses, has been first stop for every one of them. Its location on Deadman's Lane isn't usually mentioned, given the age of most residents! The glorious building is Grade 1 listed, built and endowed by Henry Allnut, a Lord Mayor of London from nearby Ibstone, about 1724. 2016 saw the quad's beautiful but completely impractical pebble cobbles replaced by a super new modern smooth surface. It might have improved our dancing ... Kennet are the only morris side ever to have danced here, and we always attract an enthusiastic, if elderly, audience, although some residents do choose to go on holiday!

Henry Allnutt was an infamous misogynist and would probably very much approve of Morris Men.



The Bell Inn, Aldworth



It seems like we've been dancing forever here with our brothers-in-law Icknield Way on the Wednesday of the first full week in June, but it's only been since 1993. The Bell was only claimed as part of Kennetshire in 1990 but it has to be one of our favourite pubs. Built in 1340, opposite Britain's deepest old well (365 feet), in the tiny Berkshire hollow of Aldworth, it's actually situated somewhere in the 1930s.

"The minute you walk through the creaking old green wooden door, you instinctively start to stoop. The pub's narrow corridors and low-slung alcoves are meant for smaller, nimbler drinkers than today's more generously-dimensioned breed." (Daily Telegraph).

Not that Kennet and Icknield Way aren't nimble, but the après session – always one of the best of the year - can be just a little cramped, and on a hot summer's night we have been known to decamp to the garden. That hasn't happened often! Our own dimensions are not helped by the excellent ales and copious rolls and sandwiches that Phil the landlord insists we consume.



The Bell and Bottle, Shinfield



As home to The Kennet Morris Men I suppose that makes it the capital of Kennetshire. After a long time without a regular pub to call our own, Jem Dance the owner made us feel really welcome many years ago. It helps that he keeps a fine range of real ales very well and at good prices – and has a very appropriate surname!

As well as hosting us for our Monday evenings after "closed season" practice nights (and they often reserves tables for us and provided chips on the house), we are now regular performers at their annual Beer Festival. It's hard work being a Kennet man. The Bell and Bottle is usually the home of Kennet Karols on the Monday evening before Christmas Eve; but we've had to suspend that until the pandemic is over. The men perform lustily sung traditional carols, some to morris related tunes, accompanied by our musicians. Christmas hats should be worn.

Bracknell



Best avoided – there may have changes since this was taken, but we haven't been back to find out. We'll leave the territory to OBJ Border Morris, but quite what they have to Be Joyful about we're not sure.





However there is one “leafy suburb”, South Hill, that features large in Kennet’s calendar – the home for many years of our world famous Annual Ale and Feast, held in the HQ (not a hut!) of 9th Bracknell Scout Group. It’s a brilliant affair hosting several morris teams from far and wide and the occasional Ring Officer, enjoying fellowship, dancing, the Chilli feast ... and ale. And there may be the odd pickle jar involved – some odder than others. A midnight port, cheese and singing session might be involved before camp beds are manned.

Brookfields School, Tilehurst



This special educational needs school has a very special place in the heart of Kennetshire and is somewhere we are proud to support whenever we can. Tony Bartlett, our long standing Treasurer (can anyone afford a seat for him?) has been involved with the school for many years and Kennet now traditionally provide an entertainment each May to which the children all look forward. The men in turn look forward to the “joining in dances” which are an absolute delight – and a privilege. Long may our relationship continue ...

The Calleva Arms



Although many morris teams now regularly appear at this village green pub in the heart of Silchester, Kennet were the first and, we hope, still their favourite. We have traditionally started the New Year here for several years, despite the land lady at the time saying that she didn’t open New Year’s Day, and then 10 minutes later ringing me back deciding it would be a rather wonderful idea – she was right! It is now a firm village “fixture”. We were also regular hosts to the Silchester Diggers from the Reading Archaeologists’ summer camp at the old Roman town. Always a fine summer’s evening with dozens of students streaming across the green to enjoy our entertainment, and to join in, but unfortunately the excavations are now down to

“geology”. It is hoped that another site may reopen in the future and the fun and games restart.



China

We have performed for Chinese Students attending Reading University's International Study and Language



Institute over many years, but sadly interrupted by COVID. So many have been educated in the history and ways of The Morris and Kennetshire that it might be considered an outpost. Whether they would agree that they wish to be part of a Shire whose men, they are told, all practice Morris on a Sunday after long bow practice, remains to be seen. Perhaps we'll get an invite one day if the post-COVID world ever returns to normal – and see how many schoolchildren know Shepherd's Hey.

The Crooked Billet, Honey Hill



The Crooked Billet name originates from medieval times when The King declared that all premises that sold beer must have a sign up outside to inform the public of this. As most people of that time were unable to read, there was no point in giving the pub a name that nobody could understand.

Many publicans decided to hang up pictures so that the general public would recognise what the pub was called. Astute innkeepers would use patriotic and royalist symbols such as a Red Lion or Kings Arms to help attract the loyal subjects, or pagan or wildlife symbols, such as The Green Man or Swan.

The owner of this establishment used real ingenuity however as the term 'Crooked Billet' refers to a twisted or Crooked Tree branch. Rather than pay to have a sign carved he just picked up a bent stick and hung that up. It may well have been one discarded by a morris man – we do prefer straighter sticks.

From then on this establishment became known as the Crooked Billet and although we haven't been dancing there since medieval times, it has featured on Kennet programmes since 1980 when a number of Kennet's new "southern" members fancied a more local local. The pub lies in the Civil Parish of [Wokingham Without](#) which came into existence in 1894 when it and its counterpart, Wokingham Within were created one urban and one rural. This is the region of Wokingham parish which was, until 1844, officially a detached part of Wiltshire, so transferring to Kennetshire has a precedent.

Forbury Gardens, Reading



These Victorian town gardens have featured many a performance by Kennet, whether massed displays on days of dance, our regular appearances at Reading's Waterfest or on the Castle Mound as the alternative to the Abbey Ruins for May Dawn appearances. We even celebrated Geordie and Karen Austin's wedding day there.

Probably the park's main asset is the band stand which has, all too often, acted as shelter for the men, given the vagaries of the British Summer. July 1st 2017 saw 16 morris sides present mass displays celebrating our 60th Anniversary. The famous Maiwand Lion statue dominates the gardens and is particularly dear to Kennet's dancers as, infamously, it's on the wrong foot – though some authorities disagree – much like some of our dancers do!



Goring Lock



We've regularly danced at Goring Lock for over 50 years – it was first included on a May Bank holiday tour in 1966 and has long been a fixture of village life usually ensuring a good audience. People come from as far away as Streatley. The view from the bridge of the dancer's below is always popular- until they realise they won't avoid our zealous collectors! For the record, the lock was on the Oxfordshire bank until claimed for Kennetshire – we have therefore removed the confusion as most seemed to think it was in Berkshire.

Henley



The Thursday of Henley Regatta week has featured in the Kennet programme since 1985, and before that the town was for many years visited on tour at the start or end of the morris calendar.

Falaise Square is now our venue of choice where we entertain the Regatta goers, and competitors, who by 8:00pm are usually very "relaxed". There are always overseas visitors delighted by our displays, and keen to join in so we always finish with a version of Shepherd's Hey. The English have also been known to take part. We usually share the event with guest sides who always enjoy themselves – until it comes to pay for the beer – always silly prices.

Kennetshire Without



Kennet expeditionary forces each year have ventured as far north as Saddleworth, as far south as Portsmouth, as far west as Sidmouth and as far east as Kent. Most have returned safely but we have yet to declare them as colonies. For the present they remain Without.

Abingdon however, which had been annexed by Oxfordshire, has been reclaimed, as evidenced by the picture on the left, though we have left it in the safe hands of two Abingdon Morris sides who very much owe their existence to Wargrave Morris Men, our forefathers (see "Wargrave" below).

The Plough, Little London



Another "home from home" that is always one of the first venues to be included in our programme. A 200+ year old "Pub" pub, often described as a "real gem"- flagstone floors, wooden settles and gravity fed beer casks featuring excellent Ringwood and guest ales; it belongs to another era – so suits Kennet very well – and it is the perfect setting for the ever popular après session.

Dancing out front alongside the pavementless Silchester Road can be a tad challenging but mine host Terry always provides protective empty kegs, which the men do their best to add to over the course of the evening



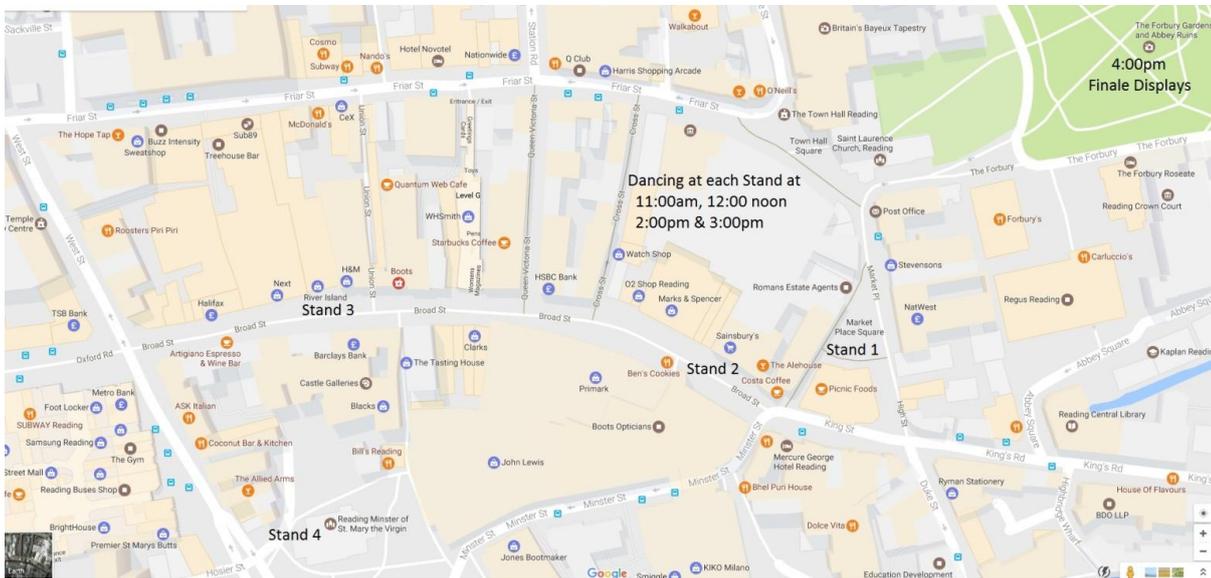
Pot Kiln, Frilsham

This ever popular pub has been the first stop on the Whit Monday/late Spring Bank Holiday tour for many's the year as can be seen from this particularly youthful side. From the old days of "just" a pub with a wooden drawer



for a till, it is now a fine dining establishment set in a conservation area overlooking the wonderful wooded Valley of The Pang. Unfortunately the nearby ford has resulted in the very late arrival of members with drowned cars. Parts of the building are mid-16th century, with the remains of an older building under the beer garden, although it has probably only been a pub since the late 1800s. We dance in the brick floored forecourt – somewhat restricted space which often results in men ending up in the file privet hedge flanking it. It was the original home of the West Berkshire Brewery and features a full range of its ales. It's a good job we appreciate excellent ales so we can support local business!

Reading



Our home town where we have enjoyed many a day of dance, often with visiting teams who really appreciate the place with its pedestrianised shopping streets which are ideal for dance displays – with an audience!

We tend to stick to daylight performances – the town is rather popular amongst "over enthusiastic" pub and club goers in the evenings.



For us the town centre is the wonderful Ale House where we will adjourn if given any excuse. The name gives it away and the range of beer and cider is phenomenal. I think they must be approaching 10,000 different beers served since 1993 when it changed from the London Tavern to the Hobgoblin. Other public houses are available

... and not forgetting the annual Reading Beer Festival where we have been performing, serving and drinking since 2000. Tough work but someone has to do it.



Reading Old Town



More recently known as The Eldon Square Conservation Area, this has featured as a walking tour for many, many years, usually calling at the 3 pubs within the boundary; The Lyndhurst, The Retreat and The Eldon Arms (now renamed the Weather Station – but largely ignored!). The narrow terraced streets were originally occupied in the 19c by Huntley & Palmers biscuit factory workers. We dance in the road, usually to decent audiences often including kids – and the odd adult - in pyjamas. Fortunately the infrequent car drivers are rarely a problem – perhaps the sticks discourage road rage?

The evening usually concludes with one of the better après-morris session of the season in either the Retreat or the Eldon.



An Eldon Arms session

The River Kennet



The story goes that the founding members originally thought The Thames Valley Men would be a good name, before finding out there was already a Morris team of that name. You'd think they could have checked on Google. So they chose the Kennet instead, starting off with The Men of Kennet, before adding Morris to the name. We've danced alongside the river at many venues, including the source – rather a long way from any water when we visited.

... and the mouth of the Kennet



South Stoke



In the north of Kennetshire, South Stoke nestles on the east bank of the Thames, just in what is also called Oxfordshire. Berkshire is on the west side. A compass comes in handy. We've been invited to celebrate the May Queening on the May Day Bank Holiday since 1997, leading the Primary School children from the church to the Maypole erected in their play ground. The whole village celebrates with a street market, a silver band and the crowds are wonderful. As the Fool, I have had the honour of crowning the chosen Queen – or Queens on the one occasion when twins were appointed.



Shinfield



Shinfield Village Fete - 1971

Sometimes it seems we're one of Shinfield's best kept secrets as we've yet to recruit a single person from the village, despite our best efforts. We used to dance at the Shinfield Village Fete, as can be seen in this photo from 1971, but they moved the date some year's back to the traditional Saturday of our End of Season Tour. You can't have an end of season tour before the end! They've now moved the date to the end of June – but COVID put a stop to that. One day! At least we keep the village pub afloat – on a Monday night at least.

Tutt's Clump



This was the last performance, and a rare winter excursion, to the wonderfully named Tutt's Clump and Tim Wale's cidery, for the annual Orchard Wassail – which we've been doing ever since the apple trees were planted. Wellington boots often feature as we toast the trees in song and dance – and enjoy its products. We also make a lot of noise with what is usually a very appreciative audience. It's good to clap your hands when it's mid-winter.

Wallingford Bunkfest



The Bunkfest is an annual fixture in our calendar in the northern reaches of the Shire, where the sun nearly always shines. This is a most marvellous free festival attracting morris sides from all over Kennet shire and beyond and has the added attraction of a wonderful beer tent hosted by Kennet's sponsors, Loddon Brewery. The whole town is given over for the weekend and has been for nearly 20 years and is now much more than a folk festival – more a community event. All in support of the Wallingford Bunk - a single-track branch line built between Cholsey and Wallingford. The legend goes that, on

one occasion, the engine left the station without the carriages (which had been uncoupled as a prank). As the engine had done a bunk, the line was nicknamed the Wallingford Bunk and is now run by a preservation society - wish we were.

Wargrave



Wargrave Hall, as it used to look when Major Francis Fryer owned it and established the Wargrave Morris Men in 1933, very much our forefathers. We used to dance regularly in Wargrave in the street outside The Bull, but it became increasingly dodgy – literally – with through traffic, and it is now many years since we performed there. It still is a very special place of importance to the history of Kennetshire. See my [Foolish History](#) for more on our relationship with Fryer, the Hall and the Wargrave Morris Men.



Yattendon



Our records show that we first danced in Yattendon at Whitsuntide in 1970 and we have appeared there ever since, interrupted only by the Foot and Mouth “lockdown” of 2001 and more recently the COVID pandemic restrictions on public gatherings.

It is always a very special afternoon with wonderful crowds in beautiful village given over to the Fete – or the Revels as they used to be known. It was also home to the West Berkshire Brewery that is well supported between – and during – performances. It can be very warm (or wet) work.

Yateley

No history of Kennetshire would be complete without mention of our nearest southern neighbour and regular cross-border visitors, the Yateley Morris Men, as they made me an honorary member. There – I’ve done it.

I hope you have enjoyed our light-hearted look at this finest of English traditions and have learnt a little more about Kennetshire and The Kennet Morris Men. Any similarity to I-SPY books is completely coincidental. Besides I think you ought to do the spying, not I. If you want to learn even more, visit our Website www.kennetmorrismen.co.uk where there is a mass of information about our dances, our full programme, and maps of the venues.

You will also find other books in this (growing) series. U-Spy Kennet Morris Dances is a guide to our 2021 season’s dance repertoire, Your Welcome to Kennet Morris, an introduction for anyone considering joining us, and a companion volume, The Kennet Morris Men – A Foolish History. Have fun.

Yours foolishly
Peter de Courcy

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