SUCCESS TO THE BOWER!

By J. M. Graetz

The City of Lichfield, in Staffordshire, is fifteen miles north of Birmingham, or, for the more specifically beer-oriented, twelve miles southwest of Burton-on-Trent. With a population of 23,000, it is about the size of Amherst, Mass. Aside from being the birthplace of Samuel Johnson, Lichfield is known principally for its cathedral, which is the smallest in England, and the only one that still has all three spires.

Sunday, 25 May 1975. I call David Burke, flagman of the Green Man Morris and Sword Club, for directions to the Bower Festival.

David: "Don't forget to bring your kit."
Self: "Oh, uh, yeah, I can bring it along."
David: "Well, I assume you're dancing with us, of course."
Self: "-----" (A gracious, unexpected invitation does not lend itself well to a snappy comeback.)

The full title of Lichfield's Spring Festival is "The Greenhill Bower and Court of Array and View of Men-at-Arms" and it has been in existence nearly as long. The Court of Array was originally the annual inspection of military equipment and troops, and dates, according to Alex Helm [1], from the year 1285. There being at present no need for the City to maintain an independent military establishment, the Court is now held "in a light-hearted way in the Guildhall, with leading citizens being fined the statutory penny (now 1p) for non-attendance."[2]

The earliest train from Euston (change at Rugby) is at 9 AM, so I will have to miss the Court of Array. The day is ideal for dancing: sunny, mild, not too warm. By the time I arrive at the Blue Bells, the dancers are getting ready for the procession. From a huge stack of freshly cut elm boughs, each man makes up two buticled ones at the base with wire. During the procession, the dancer holds a bunch in each hand at or near shoulder height. I make my boughs, then look about for someone to hold my camera while I'm dancing.

The Bower takes its name from the Greenhill, where in former times the guilds of the city set up booths, or "bowers", to display their crafts. The Greenhill is pretty well built up now, and the bowers are no longer built, but the Bower House is still put up and decorated with branches, amidst the concessions and carnival attractions that manage to squeeze into the tiny street.

The procession assemblies in the Bower Yard at the Guildhall on Sturgeon's Hill, just above and across the railroad tracks from the Greenhill. It works its way through the city, taking about 3½ hours to finish where it started.

At one time, the Morris Men led the procession, but as the dancers fell into disrepute (read "drunkenness"!), they disappeared from the festivities. Some time after the Lichfield Morris Men reconstructed the Lichfield tradition in the 1950s, it occurred to someone on the Bower committee to invite them to join the procession, which they did: tagging along at the end. After a while, the dancers (now the Green Man Morris) got to be...
part of the main procession, and it occurred to someone on the Bower Committee (perhaps with a bit of prompting) that the Morris Men ought to lead the procession as they once did. So now they do, and everything has been put right.

The assembly yard is full of people, horses, cars, musicians, and the like. There are floats ("tableaux") created by various advertisers, trades, and service organizations, a marine band, acrobats, civic dignitaries, the Bower Queen and her retinue, and six-count-'em-six jazz bands. The lot will be led through the city by the Green Man Morris and Sword Club and the Hearts of Oak Morris from Uttoxeter, with special guest Jack Brown of Stafford Morris, and Shag Graetz of Pinewoods MM. Jack Brown was one of the Lichfield Morris Men, and is one of the principal reconstructors of the tradition. My luck is in: as the only other lone dancer, I'll be his partner in the procession.

Coves 12:30; the whistle blows; the musicians start the procession. Sudden panic: who'll take my camera? Too late; we're off. So there I am like an idiot, waving branches and prancing about hoping no one will notice this silly little black thing bouncing around off my shoulder.

The dance, like other processions, is not difficult: one plain figure and one slightly fancier. It's done pretty much as described in the Journal article [1] and in Bacon [3]; the pre-1897 version is used, with only detail differences.

Journal entry: "Waving the branches around for 3½ hours is quite a test of the horn-carrying muscles, but we had two pubs stops (free beer) & occasional periods of rest-4-walk, so it wasn't so bad."

At one of the stops I finally found someone who can take the camera, after a quick course in how to point and shoot it. One thing about leading a procession is that you get to the rest stop first, and in addition to the beer you can look back and see the rest of the line. Immediately behind us is an official Citizen On Horseback; after him come the Band of H. M. Royal Marines (HMS Ganges), which occasionally makes life pretty tricky for us at the rear of the Morris when our own musicians up front turn a corner. After the Marines are the official party: Mayor, Sheriff, etc. Then there's the Bower Queen and her lot, the Fire Brigade float, and a Junior Military Band. After that come the floats, the acrobats, the six-count-'em-six jazz bands... it's a long parade, folks.

Holding up the branches turns out not to be as weary as I had expected. It's not like carrying horns, where you have to keep your arms bent in one peculiar position all the time. The boughs are held about shoulder height, and waved in horizontal circles at certain points in the figure. Eventually, one's arms begin to sag (though it is actually less tiring to keep them up), and about then the whistle blows and we can let the boughs down and walk for a while. That, combined with the two long beer stops and the general festivity, makes the three and a half hours pass very quickly.

We're coming down the Cathedral Close near the end of the procession. We're in the shadow of the Cathedral, and I wonder if my exposure setting will be adequate. I wonder if my camera-bearer is here. I wonder if I showed her the right button. I wonder... ah, there she is, and here we come, *click* (actually with my camera it's more of a clatter-bang-thump-hayyo-rumbelow!), and there, one hopes, is sheer proof in print that I danced in the Greenhill Bower.

There are "folk" people, including some professionals who ought to know better, who belittle the Bower because it is all "modern". It certainly is not a quaint survival; the bowers have been replaced by advertising floats, and the concessions and mechanical attractions (rides, shooting galleries, etc.) are up to date. In other words, the Bower is a real festival, not a self-conscious preservation. I'd suggest that it is as genuinely traditional as the Padstow May Day or Bampton Whit-Monday.

To an American, especially an adoptive New Englander raised in the Midwest, the atmosphere of the Greenhill Bower is very much like that of a county fair. Except for the absence of produce and livestock exhibits, the festival is quite familiar: pony shows and riding competitions, track and field events, bicycle (instead of horse) races, soccer matches, and band demonstrations (including a competition among the six-count-'em-six etc.—would you believe bands with names like Burntwood Bluebirds or Fazeley Scimitaires?). In short, like any real tradition, the Bower moves with the times, while still maintaining continuity with the past.
Nor is the Bower a struggling survival. The crowds are large: Staffordshire people on the whole. What tourists there are blend into the surroundings, partly because Lichfield is large enough to absorb several times their number; but partly because there is no way to stay separated from the action.

Anyway, I had a good time. The traditional toast seems to be working quite well: "Success to the Bower!"

4:30. The procession over, it's time to go off to the town center and Beacon Park for a few spots of Morris dancing. We pack off in cars up to the top of the hill at Chorley for an excellent potluck supper in the village hall with the morris men and their families. Afterwards, a scratchy phonograph ("pardon me, "gramophone") is set up for some country dancing to finish off the evening. Very pleasant, at least until Jack Brown has to leave, taking his stunning daughter Rachel with him.

A-hum. On the morrow. I caught the direct train to London to prepare for a bicycle tour of Lincolnshire. But that's another story.

References:

"INSTRUCTIONAL": COLD, RAINY, SUCCESSFUL

The School for Traditional Dance and Song held its "Cotswold Morris Instructional" on the rainy weekend of September 23-25 in Brattleboro, Vermont. It was fortunate that the program called for eighteen hours of morris dancing because the main building of Camp Waubanong (rechristened, "Woebegone") was unheated except by the exertion of the 35 participants.

Most of the effective dances of each of twelve Cotswold villages were covered (Adderbury, Badby, Bledington, Brackley, Bucknell, Eynsham, Field Town, Headington, Kirtlington, Longborough, Sherborne, Wheatley): a total of 93 dances. The purpose was to compare the different traditions' styles by dancing as many dances as time allowed. The interpretations used were as close as possible to the manuscripts of the various collectors (Sharp, Butterworth, Hamer, et al), using Bacon's Handbook and notes from Roy Dommett on the manuscripts. In cases where more than one collector worked, the more recent information was selected. The result was a surprise in several instances (notably Eynsham and Longborough) where notes called for much more vigor than published sources.

Teachers for the weekend were Tony Barrand, Fred Reumig and Howard Lasnik. Musicians were John Roberts and Steve Woodruff with Marshall Barron. Participants came from Black Jokers, Fiddler's Reach, Greenwich, Marlboro, Northampton, Quaker, and Pokingbrook.

Individual reactions to the weekend indicated a successful venture:
"I used to have a gnawing desire to dance all of the known morris dances; now I just feel like concentrating on one tradition."

"I never knew the various traditions were so different!"

"My own dancing benefitted from the weekend. I feel so much more flexible having forced myself to do all those crazy things."

"When are you going to do this again?"

SUBSCRIBERS
There are now nine teams (encompassing 80 dancers) subscribing to the AMNewsletter at reduced rates for team members. With 105 individual subscribers (including single subscriptions from representatives of 20 more teams), the circulation now stands at 185. A lot more people than this read the Newsletter: if you are not a subscriber, or know of teams or individuals who might want to subscribe, have them send the coupon on page 5 or write: American Morris Newsletter, RFD#1 Box 9A, Putney, Vermont 05346.
Fountain Morris Men held their third annual Labor Day Workshop/Ale/Tour in Somerset, Kentucky (touring in Cumberland Falls State Park). About 50 dancers and musicians took part. The team also danced at the Levi Jackson weekend and the Kentucky Arts and Crafts Fair. At Levi Jackson they created and performed a new morris dance which now wants a name ("Raggedy Levi Jackson Morris Dance" seemed better suited for a handkerchief dance; "Hixie Dixie" is what John Ramsay suggests).

Contact: Peter Rogers, 1538 Bluebird Lane, Lexington, KY 40503.

Fiddler’s Reach Morris, of Maine, "First danced out on a bluff overlooking Fiddler’s Reach on the Kennebec River. The garden on which we danced and the team both flourished during the summer as we danced in local villages and towns." The team was joined by Strong Morris and members of Black Jokers, Winthrop, Huddy River and New Cambridge in a coastal tour ending at Litchfield, Maine.

"There has been interest expressed among the Maine teams in a Twelfth Night Celebration the weekend of January 6, 1978. If other teams are interested or are planning similar celebrations, contact Maggie Baum, Star Rt. 3, Bath, Maine."

St. Peter’s School in Philadelphia is planning another busy year of Morris. Last year there were several Morris teams made up of boys from grades four through eight and led by their teacher Eleanor Poe Barlow. A highlight of the year was dancing in the Spring Festival of the Country Dance and Song Society in New York.

Contact: Eleanor Barlow, St. Peter’s School, 319 Lombard St., Philadelphia, PA 19147.

The Men of Houston, Morris Dancers, recently formed, are loosely affiliated with the Houston Folklore Society. Relying on "Sharp’s Morris Book and the memories of our three English dancers for guidance", they practice weekly in hopes of a Christmas-time debut in the streets. John Vivian, one of the Englishmen, also edits their newsletter entitled "Green Garters", which is designed to inform the general public and the folk community about morris dancing, and of course, to generate interest in likely prospects. The Men are planning a green and yellow kit (baldrics and rosettes) over whites and would welcome suggestions for finding suitable green backing material "3 to 4 inches wide so that a 1 to 4½ inch ribbon can be sewn down the middle."

Contact: John Vivian, 3804 Villanova, West University Place, Houston, TX 77005.

Green Fiddle Morris of Toronto sent the AM Newsletter a copy of their first monthly newsletter. It was filled with glowing accounts of a visit by the Dartington Morris and Sword team from Totnes, Devon. During a week-long stay, the team toured, gave workshops and concerts (of various types of English dance), and saw the sights of Ontario. The Dartington team also appeared at the Fox Hollow Festival in July. Ed. Green Fiddle’s activities since the Dartington visit have been a performance at a major Toronto shopping mall and regular practices (Tuesday evenings and Saturday afternoons) to which are invited any morris dancers passing through Toronto. Green Fiddle has both men’s and women’s teams and would be "delighted to hear from other Morris teams and dancers."

Newsletter editor: Judy Greenhill, 141 Redpath Ave., Toronto, Ontario M4P 2K5 Canada.

Folklore Village Farm in Dodgeville, Wisconsin has a very lively tradition of English folk customs. Inspired by a visit of the Monkseaton Morris Men in 1970, they developed a morris team, a Padstow ‘Obby ’Oss, and an English May Festival complete with maypole, Queen and Jack-in-the-Green. In traditional fashion, the morris men dance only in the spring and then only locally.

Contact: Bob Warner, P.O. Box 42, Ridgeway, WI 53582 or Folklore Village Farm, Rt. 3, Dodgeville, WI 53533.

The American Travelling Morris composed of Binghamton and New Cambridge Morris Men had a very successful second year of tours in August. This year the site was South Berkshire County, Massachusetts, within striking distance of an orchard on a milking farm. About 25 dancers were warmly welcomed by the southwest Mass. communities where they danced for a week.

Contact: Ed Saymanak, 2820 Smith Dr., Endwell, NY 13760.
Pinewoods Morris Men elected a new squire at their annual Ale in August: J.M. "Shag" Graetz, 50 Moulton Road, Arlington, MA 02174. The Pinewoods Camp tour followed on very soggy ground in front of $10-a-seat (Pinewoods Camp benefit) dignitaries at the "Porch and Rail". The team's twelfth annual Fall Tour of Harvard University and environs was scheduled for October 1. Contact: George Fogg, 40 Gray St., Boston, MA 02116.

READERS WRITE

"A couple of points about your last newsletter: 1) Ann Arbor: I'm using bells supplied by Tandy Leather intended for Indian dances. At least less than $1.00 for a dozen they seem most economical. I managed to get bells (4 dozen, 2 sizes), buckles and leather, sufficient for one pair of pads, for less than $10. I'm also sure that all volumes of Sharp's Morris Book are in print; at least that's what the latest EF DDS magazine suggests. 2) Bacon. I was surprised to hear that it was available. I have been under the impression that it was accessible only to Ring sides, and then only under Masonic-type rites of secrecy."

John Vivian, Houston, Texas

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Letchworth Morris Men in England have three cassette tapes of morris music available (two more planned for "mid-1977"). "They are not intended as 'musician substitutes' but as a stimulus to good morris music." Produced for the Morris Ring by Brian Holeman, recorded by Barry Colbeck, and backed financially by the Letchworth men, the tapes cover a selection of dances from several traditions plus all collected Lichfield and Ducklington dances. A long-term goal of the project is to record all known morris tunes. For further information contact: Brian Holeman, 128 Hitchin Road, Stotfold, Hitchin, Herts., England or Morris Sunderland, 13 Park Lane, Henlow, Beds., SG16 6AT England.

The School for Traditional Dance and Song and CDSS of Southeast Vermont will be co-sponsoring a weekend course, December 16-18, 1977 in Putney, Vermont, entitled "Traditional Christmas Customs." A major part of the weekend will be learning the sword dance and play from Ampleforth or Greatham. Participants will select or be assigned to a team which will work intensively on one of the sword plays. The course will also include learning carols of the season found in oral tradition and examining the relationship between the pagan midwinter rituals and the celebration of Christmas. For more information: School for Traditional Dance & Song, Box 51, Marlboro, VT 05344.

NEWSLETTER SPECIFICS

The American Morris Newsletter is published four times per year (April, July, October and January). Subscriptions are available for anyone at $1.50 per year; please make checks payable to the "American Morris Newsletter" and send to RFD#1 Box 9A, Putney, Vermont 05346. Morris or Sword clubs may subscribe at a lower group rate: write to the editor for details.

Copy deadline is the last day of the month prior to publication. Next deadline is December 31, 1977.

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