

Women in Trousers

Remember feminism? Back in the 1960s and 1970s, women in the West were reacting strongly against the attitudes current in society that they were to strive to be decorative, diligent in child-care and supportive of their menfolk's more important roles. Women who wanted something different, and women who knew they were just as capable as men of undertaking demanding jobs outside the home, made their voices heard and changed society. Part of the reaction transformed the Morris dance scene from one of men's clubs presenting the dance as an ancient, pagan-based tradition to the hugely varied Morris world we now enjoy.

Kicked off by a few individuals who were interested in folk, often those frustrated by having to sit and watch while their boyfriends and husbands had all the fun of teamwork and public performance of this great form of dance, women's teams started to spring up (in many ways!) around the country. But what was a Cotswold Morris woman to wear? The men's teams imitated the dancers, and photographs of earlier teams, seen by the turn-of-the-century collectors; these had donned for performance either their cricket whites or tatter jackets. But those early teams had consisted solely of men. The 'revival' women's team, Mary Neal's 'Esperance Girls', had, of course, worn dresses – it was immodest enough back then, before the First World War, to be exhibiting yourself in public, but certainly no woman would wear trousers to do so.

Even by the 1970s, women did not sport trousers as readily as they do now. It had become quite common, especially since the Second World War (1939-1945) to wear 'slacks' in leisure time, and jeans became a unisex uniform of the young in the 1960s, but a woman had to be skirted in formal situations. Morris dancers have, of course, always 'dressed up' for their performances in their best trousers or cricket whites, decorated with ribbons and rosettes; women would tend to think of skirts or dresses in such a context. There was also an attitude of respect for, and attempts to follow, 'tradition', and a desire not to be seen as 'trying to be like men'. All this led many of the first women's sides to restrict themselves to the more 'ladylike', less boisterous, traditions and dances, and to adopt skirts for their costumes; but often the experience of dancing in the chosen costume led to amendment. Bath Ladies, one of the teams driving the formation of the Women's Morris Federation, as it then was, initially performed in the knee-length skirts which were then fashionable, but soon felt that to be an inappropriate choice and adopted instead a version of the old Esperance dancers' kit - ankle-length skirts with apron and sun-bonnets. This was a kit that could be worn for dances which did not involve jumps and capers, but even in the mid-seventies, there were women's teams which had a different attitude, adopting the vigorous dances and shape-revealing costumes that men's teams were displaying. Women's teams in North America were an inspiration to some; others chose such dances and kit simply because they had never felt that being women meant being 'fluffy'. Quite which was the first female team to take this line seems to be somewhat lost in the mists of time: I examine some of the claims below.

An issue that is always contentious in a women's side is how well the kit suits the team's members. Men in the 1970s did not have the same image-consciousness that is common now to both sexes, but women were only just escaping the pressure to be 'feminine', 'ladylike' - basically attractive to men (as 'prey' rather than as friends). Slim girls might have been happy to perform the Morris in trousers, but a woman with a larger frame, anxious to look her best, or at least not to be the butt of ribald comments, might be very reluctant to wear a costume so revealing of her shape. Sides which chose trousers or breeches often had pressure from some members to change to wearing skirts. Fiz Markham remembers the debates at Holdens Goldens on whether to change from long skirts as 'long, drawn-out and agonising', and Kesteven, according to Sue Swift, went through a period of four years when they changed kit every year (but never into trousers). However, those who cared strongly about the dance knew that Cotswold Morris as it had developed since the late 19th century cannot be shown off properly if the legs are not free of restriction and cannot be seen. Windsor Morris, a team which made a conscious - and contentious - decision to dance with strength and vigour, countered criticism after their change to trousers in 1978 by asking any questioning man "Would you like to dance Cotswold Morris in a skirt?"

Footwear was an even more important choice, since it would affect the style of dancing and the ability to dance without injury. Men's sides wore everyday leather shoes, but what was an 'everyday' shoe for a woman in the 1970s? A side which chose to wear skirts, especially skirts which did show some leg, would often opt for a shoe with a small heel, since flat shoes looked dowdy with such a costume. But even the smallest heel puts the foot in a position which restricts the calf muscles and where it is very difficult to avoid putting weight on the heel - and the springy step of Cotswold Morris needs to be danced from the ball of the foot. Trainers did not really exist - plimsolls were worn for sports such as tennis, but they were not particularly supportive for strenuous dancing. Suitable casual shoes began to be marketed towards the end of the 1970s, and Windsor Morris opted for 'Polyveldts' even when they were still be-skirted. For women's sides which chose to wear trousers, plimsolls were a popular option; the short-lived Queen of Herts, founded by Val Parker (in Hertfordshire) in 1976, wore white plimsolls. When trainers were available - a shoe which was designed to support the foot through the strain of vigorous sports - such teams adopted them enthusiastically. Jackstraws Morris could make their debut on Boxing Day 1977 wearing Dunlop 'Green Flash' trainers.

Windsor Morris are often cited as being the first women's side to choose to dance in trousers, but that is not the case. They were one of the first high-profile sides to do so, certainly. Teams who felt involved in the political wrangles tended to be circumspect about offending the Morris establishment any more than they had to. Queen of Herts wore culottes, a compromise between skirts and trousers. It was only during the 1977-78 season that Windsor Morris and another team at the forefront of the Women's Morris Federation, Holden's Goldens from Wolverhampton, changed their kit from skirts to trousers; less politically-aware teams had already jumped into the fray all unwittingly.

Oyster Morris in Canterbury was one. Now a joint side, they started in 1977 as a women's side, taught by John Jones (now well known as the melodeon player in the Oyster Band). Rhiannon Owen reports 'We had no idea that it was controversial for women to dance Cotswold (John taught Bampton, Brackley and Adderbury, then later Fieldtown and later still Badby when we had men). There was one of us who was a bit older and big in the EFDSS dance scene but she was the only person who mentioned skirts. As far as we were concerned Cotswold Morris dancers wore trousers (or breeches). The local Morris teams were Wansum & East Kent - one black breeches with tabards and one all white. Effectively we went for the "current" fashion solution - black flared trouser and whatever we could buy as white blouses/shirts (I think mine was even cheesecloth!)... basically because we were great innocents in the Morris world and didn't realize we were being at all controversial, we just did what we wanted (an advantage of East Kent being at, if not beyond, the edge of the known universe)'.

I have heard rumours also of a side at Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire who wore trousers at about that time, but have definite reports – and photographs – of a side founded earlier still, in 1976. Updown Hill Morris was founded in Windlesham, Surrey, by a former member of Windsor, Brenda Gosling, and she chose breeches. Jackie Emerson (now Jackie Weller) describes the kit thus: 'We wore a wide brimmed straw hat, tied under the chin and decorated with ribbons and dried flowers. A beige cotton long sleeved blouse with a drawstring neck and baldricks, with Updown Hill emblem in the middle. Brown corduroy breeches, long woollen socks, which were far too hot in summer, and suede lace-up ankle boots'. It was a very seventies look, but they were daring to project themselves as vigorous dancers as well as trendy dressers! This is the earliest example I know of a side founded by and for women which chose to wear kit which revealed the shape of the legs. The side did not last long, but Jackie founded Jackstraws, and she put her team in long trousers. However, they wore smocks, so an individual dancer's figure was not on show. The team was amused after performing in Sidmouth Market Place one year, with dancers including Kris, a wiry 4ft 11, and Maggie, a strapping 5ft 9, to have a compliment on the dancing followed by a comment that it must be easier to present a uniform appearance when your dancers are all such similar sizes!



'Updown Hill Morris, founded 1976'

But there were even earlier pioneers, arising from mixed sides. In the mid-1970s, Mike Boston, now fool of Great Western Morris, was a teacher at the Blyth-Jex School in Norwich. He asked Norris Winstone of the local side, Kemp's Men, to teach Morris as an activity for the Sixth-Form Club. Started in 1974, the side was mixed initially, and wore jeans, but the boys did not stay, leaving it a girls' side (with no desire to change into skirts). However, the earliest example that has come to my attention is Red Stags Morris, the Southampton University side. Established men's sides at universities were finding themselves forced to open up to women, as

Student Union policies insisted on team memberships being open to both sexes. Jenny Howard, rebuffed at her first naïve attempt on arrival at Southampton in 1971 to be part of Red Stags ('But you're a girl!'), could join in at last in the summer of 1973 – mainly because the men's side had folded through lack of dancers. She recalls 'the Winchester man who taught us wasn't keen, but in fact we were needed to make up the numbers, so he put up with us.' The women simply donned the same costume as the men when they came to dance out – white trousers and white shirts with tabards, and Jenny has a memory of her first appearance in public 'as Peter Bellamy's warm-up act for a University event; I was wearing skin-tight white loons, and he passed behind us just as I was putting my bells on and said "Cor, I like lady Morris dancers" which, however ignoble his motives, boosted my confidence no end!' When a separate women's side, Hamwih, was formed in 1977, they chose to wear breeches with short waistcoats, and former members who went on to found other sides felt it normal, indeed necessary, to recommend trousers or breeches to their colleagues. Norfolk Biffin, founded by Jenny Howard and Hilary Gomme in 1977, chose white trousers, and Eryri Morris, started by Nicky Heinersdorff in 1982, black breeches, both adding waistcoats.

I recall the reaction of a male Morris dancer in 1980 when he saw a photograph of the Hamwih women executing the extended 'RTB' in Bampton 'Flowers of Edinburgh': 'That's not very ladylike!' Fortunately, there were enough of us who didn't care about such opinions, so that today we can dress as we like, and dance as we like.



"Not Very Ladylike"
Hamwih Morris in
Llangollen, April 1978

With thanks to: Jenny Joyce, founder of Windsor Morris; Jackie Weller, founder of Jackstraws Morris; Jenny Howard of Rockhopper Morris; Norris Winstone of Kemp's Men; Hilary Maidstone of Golden Star Morris; Rhiannon Owen of Oyster Morris; Fiz Markham of Windsor Morris; Clare Mach, Nicky Heinersdorff, Heather and Paul Rosser and Christine Dover, all formerly of Red Stags; and Sally Wearing, Sue Swift and Val Parker, former officers of the Women's Morris Federation.

Shirley Dixon

If you know of any other Morris women who danced in Cotswold sides wearing Breeches or trousers as early as, or earlier than, 1976, please send details to the Editor who will pass them on to Shirley who will then update her very interesting article.

Thank you. Jayne, Ed.



A Happy Morris Dancer's vital piece of Kit.

