

# English Country Traditions

by

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Originally published on "Laughter Loaf" <http://molyworld.net/laughterloaf/>

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Being English, and in exile in New Jersey, I have a soft spot for foggy weather. When I see echoes of Scottish and Irish culture displayed over here in the colonies, I get a warm glow. However, I must confess my true delight is in the specifically English folk traditions which are rarely seen in these far flung parts of the world.

One such tradition is a form of dance that goes back into the mists of time, probably back to the days of the druids or earlier. It's called Morris Dancing.

Why it's called Morris Dancing nobody really knows. Is the name from 'Moorish'? Did the Moors bring it from Northern Africa? Is it related to witchcraft? Is it a fertility rite? Does it work? These are just some of the questions asked about The Morris.

Let me describe it a little for you. The typical Morris dancer is dressed in white - not an inconvenience in England since that's what one wears for cricket anyway. Our dancer may wear a baldric, a crossed strip of colored material. He'll be sporting a set of bells below each knee and holding in each hand a large, clean, white handkerchief.

Morris dances, mainly, are team affairs. Two rows of three men face each other - a 'set'. The dance steps are a vigorous hop-skip, hop-skip; the music 4/4 time. Turning in mirror images the two rows will dance forward and back, crossing through each other and circling around, while in graceful arcs they flick their handkerchiefs in the air. It's a sight guaranteed to draw a crowd.

The Morris is a tradition that was handed down from generation to generation and, like all such traditions, therein lies its strength and also its weakness. Morris dancing was almost wiped out in the early part of the last century. Rural England was devastated by a combination of the First World War and the Flu pandemic. It is said that there were too few able-bodied men returning to some villages from the war, to form even a single set of dancers.

So, how do I come to know so much about all this? Am I myself a recovering Morris dancer? Yes, and no. I used to dance a related tradition - the Rapper Sword Dance - a death defying display, involving music in 6/8 time and flexible spring-steel swords that are tied in knots during the course of the dance. But that's a topic for another time. Suffice it to say for now, that there is a certain rivalry between the clever, fascinating and talented sword dancers and their slower-witted Morris dancing step-cousins.

The opening day of the Morris Dancing season is May the First, May-Day, also known from Pre-Christian times as Lady Day, commemorating the English version of the Earth Goddess. The dancing will happen off and on until the time of the Harvest Festivals. Some teams go out to dance at dawn on the winter solstice, but that's just a rumor - I know of no one who has been out to check.

One May Day, quite a few years ago, I was one of fifty or so dancers traveling on a bus between dancing displays. We had performed in a small town and were heading for lunch, and another dance, at a country pub. The traffic was slow getting out of town. We stopped at a traffic light and one of the dancers called out, "Cor, did you see them girls on that bench?" Fifty or so young fellows, with a couple of beers already in them, all rushing to one side of the bus to look at what, I have to admit, were two highly attractive young ladies, caused the bus to tip quite some way off the vertical.

When the light changed, the same voice called out, "Hey driver, can we go round again?"

By the time the driver had taken us round the block, through the traffic, the bench was empty.

So, it was off to the next dance - a pleasant drive past fields of cows, woods, and more fields, even some with flocks of contented sheep.

The voice of a burly Morris dancer sounded from the back of the bus, "Cor, did you see them sheep? Hey driver, can we go round again?"

Ah, those English country traditions.