

Morris Dance, a traditional dance style associated with England, is well known but often misunderstood. Here Linda Ashley explores Morris Dance in New Zealand and the dance form's early roots and contemporary expression.

BY LINDA ASHLEY



STREET DANCE – TRADITIONAL STYLE

Hey Nonny – **Yes!**

May Day dawns over Mt Eden – the sun rises to light the dancing of Auckland Morris Dancers and Britannic Bedlam Morris Gentlemen (Wellington). “*Hey Nonny no!*” As well as marking the religious calendar, St George’s Day (12 April) and community milestones, traditional English street Morris Dancers have long celebrated the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox. However, if there’s one thing that culture does it’s travel, and New Zealand has 13 or so ‘sides’ (the collective noun for a group) spread from Auckland through to Dunedin. David Barnes from Britannic Bedlam Morris Gentlemen, notes:

“There is evidence of dancers and musicians moving here in the 19th century, but no indication that they were able to get dancing going here, presumably through low population numbers. It was taught at Wellington Girls in about 1920 by a young teacher who had been taught by Mary Neal in the Esperance Society... [I] Met a lady in Napier in the mid 80s who’d been taught by her. In the 1930s it was danced as part of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), particularly strong around New Plymouth and

Nelson I think. They didn’t form sides but merely danced these amongst a variety of country dances. The first proper sides appeared around 1977 in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington. While formed independently they had a common theme in English ex-pats who were able to get it going with plenty of locals who had been exposed to the folk scene.”

New Zealand has a busy Morris Dance scene open to all comers. No longer solely the domain of men; women and sometimes children participate. Age is no barrier it seems, with dancers aged from 10 to 90 years. David notes how some dances are common to all sides, however, “*Most sides dance a number of ‘traditions’. Bedlam has gradually developed its own tradition, based originally upon Headington but with a couple of dances more along the Adderbury style done to singing rather than music.*”

There is something for everyone. In England, and here, some sides include theatrical characters such as the comical Betty (a man dressed as a woman), others demand upper body strength to dance intricate group formations, and do somersaults and jumps holding double handled flexible swords called rappers. Of course there are jingling bells and the flick of hankies to add sound and visual accents, but make no mistake these props require

co-ordination and rhythmical skills. Light flowing Cotswold style may dominate here, but as traditions develop alternative approaches such as the punk-come-gothic raucous stick wielding battles of the English-Welsh border style, performed by England's *Stone the Crows Border Morris* can result. Dressed entirely in black with heavy metal mixed with folk dance vibes, there is a non-conformist and anarchic edge to their wild style. When I saw them in Brighton in the 1990s, the crashing demolition job that they did left the sticks they were carrying in splinters! Nevertheless, their description of themselves as a "group of ordinary men and women who share a passion for English traditional dance" could apply to the 130 participants that David Barnes of NZ Morris Dance has on his mailing list.

The origins of Morris Dance are continually disputed. Although there are European records in various forms such as diaries, paintings and sculptures from as far back as 1069, the origins may well be lost back in the mists of time. There are theories that it may have originated from military dances of Ancient Greece, or evolved from the Morisco dance of North African Moors. The Moors invaded Spain in the 8th century, and after a complex series of power struggles, including ethnic cleansing by the Spanish Inquisition, the Muslim Moors converted to Christianity on threat of expulsion from Spain in the 15th century. Many travelled through Europe and there are traces of Morisco in Germany, Italy and, of course, England.

There is considerable evidence to show that Morris dancing developed in England as a way for poor farm labourers to earn money during the times between busy

agricultural seasons when the wealthy landowners didn't pay them – think zero hour contracts here! These labourers blackened their faces so as not to be recognised by their current or possible future employers. Or the black faces could have been a way of acknowledging the Morisco roots. Morris dancing is also sometimes associated with pagan rituals and Celtic folklore that is bound to the myths of the land, seasons and nature.

Nowadays, sides here and in England align with a variety of differing purposes be they Celtic pagan, political, entertainment or just keeping the culture alive. Whatever the purpose, its energetically charged footwork, jumps, social interaction and musicality most certainly provide a way of dancing English traditional culture. In England it is being developed in various ways including an urban street style that involves many young people. Although often made fun of in the past, the revival of Morris Dance is well and truly underway bringing together the vibrancy of this living and developing traditional dance with the associated benefits of fitness, cultural awareness, theatre, live music, a sense of community and just good fun.

David Barnes points out that Morris dancing is social and good exercise: *"Bedlam also like it because people throw money and we are obliged to drink it... it worked 150 years ago for the same reasons it does now"*. It's thirsty work; let's not get precious. Open to all, give it a go – hey nonny yes! ■

Sincere thanks to David Barnes for his contribution to this article. More information on Morris Dance can be found on the following links:

sites.google.com/site/nzmorrisdancing/bedlam

www.facebook.com/pages/NZ-Morris-Dancing/169798769730124

aucklandmorris.org.nz/

stonethecrows.org.uk



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