

## A PERSONAL MORRIS HISTORY

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I first became aware of the Morris in 1960 at the age of 12 while at school in Birmingham, England. We all used to laugh at our woodworking teacher (behind his back, of course) who, we were told by the "big" boys, used to participate in this strange English tradition called morris dancing. Of course, none of us knew what morris dancing was, but we followed suite and continued to promote the illusion that he was a bit weird! Little did I know that, 28 years later, that same woodworking teacher would visit and stay with me in Vancouver BC Canada and be teaching the basics of the Lichfield tradition to the Vancouver Morris Men! That woodworking teacher was Colin Spencer, stalwart member of the Green Man's Morris & Sword Club, a side which has the stalwart reputation of maintaining the Lichfield morris tradition.

And that was "it" for my exposure to the Morris for the next 15 years, until 1975 when I was living and working in Hong Kong and exploring ways to maintain my "Englishness" in a British colony (as it was back then) on the south coast of China. I was a keen guitarist, having dabbled in numerous rock bands during my teenage years, and I'd taken a mild interest in folk rock - a new-fangled form of music at that time in the early 70s - inspired by the likes of Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention. Rather than joining a regular rock band, I was looking for something more "English". Some friends of mine suggested I contact the Hong Kong Morris Men (as they were called in those days) since they apparently did "strange English stuff". So I showed up at their practice with my guitar in hand....

In those days, the Hong Kong Morris Men were a group of British expatriates formed in 1974 and run by a guy called Roy Foggin. They took one look at me with my guitar and someone said "Who do you think you are....Martin Carthy?" "Who?", says I, being somewhat ignorant of much of the traditional folk genre at that time. "Never mind. Put that guitar in the corner, grab this stick and stand it the set over there", someone said. And that was how I first got into the Morris....



*Figure 1: Two of the founding members of the Hong Kong Morris Men, Jim Carter (left) and Tony Reynolds*

At that time, the Hong Kong Morris Men performed South Midlands morris, longsword and rapper. I recall learning a couple of stick dances – one was Lads a Bunchum (Adderbury) – and a couple of simple hankie dances, one of which was Shepherd's Hey (Headington). I also remember being recruited into a longsword set at one dance-out (where they were short one man) and being told to simply grab hold of the sword, follow the bloke in front, and, whatever you do, DON'T LET GO OF THE SWORD! They were a great bunch of blokes, and after practice (or a performance) we'd retire to a place called the "Hermitage" on Hong Kong Island where there was a bar in which we could sing, typically lead by one of the founding members, Jim Carter. Yes, the Hong Kong Morris Men were keen singers! And, no, I never did play the guitar for them!

My other main social/sporting activity while in Hong Kong was rugby, and I felt there was a strong similarity between rugby and morris in that they both involved physical activity, drinking and singing. Indeed, to this day, a gig and a session with the Vancouver Morris Men is very reminiscent of my rugby-playing days from 1962 to 1980.

I had been a member of the Hong Kong Morris Men for about 18 months when, in 1977, my family and I moved back to the UK, and I returned to university to study for a master's degree. I was living in St. Albans, Hertfordshire, and I used to occasionally watch the local St. Albans Morris Men, whom I admired, but didn't really have the time to join. In 1978, after earning my master's degree, I worked locally, but my work took me overseas so much that, again, work travel and family commitments meant that I didn't have the time to return to the Morris. I did, however, perform one dance – Lads a Bunchum (which I had remembered from my Hong Kong days) - with the St Alban's Morris Men at a summer fete organized by my company.

In 1980, my family and I emigrated to Canada and, as I was again ostensibly leaving English culture behind, I decided to visit Cecil Sharp House in London to find something culturally "English" to take with me to Canada. I remember being shown Lionel Bacon's "A Handbook of Morris Dances", but it all seemed gibberish to me at that time. I finally settled on the two volumes of Sharp & MacIlwaine's "The Morris Book" – THIS was at least understandable to my novice morris brain!

We arrived in Vancouver in September 1980 and, once again, my work dominated my time and I was travelling all over Western Canada. It wasn't until Christmas 1981 that the Morris again "reared its head" in my life. A group of young guys in my company were contemplating doing a skit at the company Christmas party - something unusual and entertaining. I recall we considered forming a barber shop quartet..... and then, amongst all the other suggestions, someone said "What about morris dancing?", to which I admitted that I had some (very limited) experience, a couple of books and a copy of the Ashley Hutchings LP "Morris On". This was enough to convince them all that THIS was what we should do, so I was assigned the task of formulating a 10-minute skit involving morris dance and to come up with some sort of simple kit. I still had my Hong Kong Morris baldricks (red & yellow) which I used as a base design, changing just one of the colours (from red to green). We procured some Christmas bells which we tied around our knees. And white shirts and pants were easy to come by. For sticks, we used pickaxe handles. I then came up with the following set, all performed to music from "Morris On":

- A made-up processional-on dance to "Morris Call"
- Lads a Bunchum/Young Collins – while I recalled the real Lads a Bunchum dance, I had no idea about Young Collins, so I simply made something up to fit the available music
- The Wyresdale Greensleeves Dance – learned straight from "The Morris Book" for which we all sang "Greensleeves"
- A made-up processional-off dance to the music "Morris Off".



*Figure 2: First public performance of the Vancouver Morris Men, in 1982, at Park Royal Mall, West Vancouver*

Everybody loved it! But, more importantly, the six of us who took part in the skit got such a high from the experience that we decided to "go public", and in early January 1982 we performed in a West Vancouver shopping mall.... and the Vancouver Morris Men were born!

At that time, the LP "Morris On" (copied to cassette tape and played through a boom-box) was our only source of music, and my morris knowledge was very limited, so our dances were quite a mish-mash of things. With the help of "The Morris Book", I worked out the Princess Royal (Abingdon). (Ssshhh – don't tell them! But then, at that time, I didn't know any better!)



*Figure 3: Dancing on CKVU TV, February 1982*

Someone from one of the local TV stations saw us, and in February 1982 we appeared on "The Vancouver Show" on CKVU. At this time, I didn't know that the Morris was performed anywhere in North America – I genuinely thought we were the only ones. (How wrong I was!) Pat Thompson, a morris dancer from Victoria BC, saw us on CKVU and contacted me. It turned out that there were two sides in Victoria, Hollytree Morris Dancers (probably the oldest side in Canada) and Pat's side, a break-off group from Hollytree nominally called the Other Side. She also told me of the annual NorthWest FolkLife Festival which occurs every US Memorial Day weekend in Seattle WA, with the strong

recommendation that the Vancouver Morris Men should go to it, since there would be other local US morris sides there also. So, out of the blue, I found out there were other morris sides not only in North America, but quite nearby in Victoria BC and Seattle WA! Pat and some of her colleagues visited us in Vancouver and we had a few workshops together. Unfortunately, however, the Other Side didn't last long, and Pat became involved in other non-morris activities.



*Figure 4: We finally get a "live" musician (1982)!*

Marty Waldman, a local fiddler, also saw us on CKVU and became our first musician, releasing us from the tie of pre-recorded music. This was also the time when Steve Cleary, a man who had been dancing the Morris in England in the early 70s, joined the side. Steve has been a stalwart member of the VMM ever since, and a great overall positive influence on the side.

In May 1982, we followed Pat's recommendation and went down to Seattle WA to the NorthWest FolkLife Festival, where we met the MossyBack Morris Men for the first time. They had been formed a year or two earlier by Bob Greco, who learned his Morris with Binghamton Morris Men in upstate New York. And so began a long friendship between the Vancouver Morris Men and the MossyBack Morris Men which exists to this day! From 1982 through to 1985, we performed a lot with, and learned a lot from, the MossyBacks and had some wonderful times with them. Indeed, our styles of Bledington and Ducklington were learned directly from them.



*Figure 5: With the MossyBack Morris Men, running the "Morris Stage" at the Vancouver Folk Festival, 1983*

By 1983, I had taken up the piano accordion and started playing for the Morris in addition to dancing. In the summer of 1983, the Vancouver Morris Men and the MossyBack Morris Men were booked to perform at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival where we were put in charge of a morris dance stage with Blowzabella and Dave Swarbrick & Simon Nicol from Fairport Convention. This was quite an experience for us all!

The next big morris knowledge surge came in the mid-80s when we had a visitor to Vancouver from the USA who had a six-month assignment at the local University of British Columbia. This was Roger Cartwright, a man well-known in New England for his extensive morris knowledge. Roger introduced us to the Bampton tradition and smartened up our dancing style immensely. He was also a fountain of knowledge about the Morris throughout North America, and

particularly New England, which seems to have been the source of many North American sides. Roger's input to the VMM ensured that we developed independently of the MossyBacks who had, up to that time, been our primary source.



*Figure 6: Performing at the World Fair (Expo 86), 1986*

1986 was a transformative year for us, primarily due to Expo86 – the World Fair – held in Vancouver. It was at Expo86 that we came across Norman Stanfield, a Canadian pipe & taborer, performing a Will Kemp show. Norman joined us and, during the following years, became a significant influence on the side. Indeed, we have Norman to thank for introducing us to mumming. (He eventually earned a Ph.D. in the Morris from UBC.) During Expo86, we also danced with Bow Street Rapper (the morris side formed within the Royal Ballet) and the Foggy Bottom Morris Men (from Washington DC). I must admit that Bow Street Rapper's youth and energetic style (well, they are ballet dancers, after all!) made us all feel like a bunch of cart-horses, and we were hoping to get our own back by drinking them under the table in the evening... but no such luck... they drunk US under the table!

Throughout the 80s, the side evolved, and many of the original men from the company side moved on, to be replaced by others. However, our numbers continued to hover around 10. But more big influences were on the horizon. I had made initial contact with the Morris Ring (in the UK), and we had become associate members. As such, we were on the Ring's club list, and we were visited by a couple of very influential men in 1987/88. Michael Blanford, an English morris dancer and musician with years of experience in a number of English sides, passed through Vancouver fairly frequently on business – he provided us with considerable guidance on a number of traditions. And John Dibdin, another English dancer, came to visit his daughter, and taught us quite a few dances. Both Michael and John were originally with the Cambridge Morris Men, so we became steeped in the morris history from the 1930s, the formation of the Ring and the ongoing, annual Travelling Morrice around the villages of southern England.



*Figure 7: Dancing the Longborough tradition at the NorthWest FolkLife Festival, Seattle WA, in 1987*

So, by the late 80s, the VMM had changed significantly, both in personnel and repertoire. We were, by that time, dancing a variety of South Midlands traditions: Bampton, Bledington, Ducklington, Stanton Harcourt & Longborough. Gone were the days of performing made-up dances to a boom-box – we were now the “real thing” – well, at least we thought so! And we had started to develop a more social aspect to the side, with numerous pub singing sessions lead by Steve Cleary.

But more evolutionary change was to come. In 1988, while visiting my parents in the West Midlands, I attended the Bodmin Ring Meeting as a guest of the Silurian Morris Men, to whom I was introduced by the Ring Bagman at that time, Keith Francis (himself a Silurian man). Personally, this turned out to be probably the most transformative weekend of my morris life, as, for the first time, I was exposed to, and was an integral part of, the traditional Welsh Border morris experience. The Silurian style and presence at that time was, to me, mind-blowing, and I returned to Canada with two objectives in mind: firstly, to expose the VMM to Welsh Border morris, and secondly, to

learn the melodeon. Indeed, ever since that weekend, Silurian has been my UK side - I have performed with them numerous times and continue to do so to this day.

Introducing Welsh Border morris to the Vancouver Morris Men turned out to be a two-year process, which was only completed following the VMM's first England tour in 1990, when the rest of the VMM were able to see, first-hand (at a night out with Silurian), what Welsh Border morris was and how it should be presented. However, that first England tour was, in itself, a transformative experience for the Vancouver Morris Men. Following recommendations from Michael Blanford and John Dibdin, we "danced in" at the Thaxted Ring Meeting and were awarded our Staff of Office. This was, for me, the ultimate recognition that we had finally made it as a bona fide morris side. But, during the week prior to the Ring Meeting, Steve Cleary and myself were fortunate enough to experience Whit Monday at Bampton, with Michael Blanford as our knowledgeable guide. This proved to be yet another a transformative experience as we were able to observe first-hand the unique Bampton styles (all three of them) and decide how we would interpret this tradition in future.

Having started our first England tour at Thaxted, we moved on to the Cotswolds for some R&R and met up with Francis Shergold (Squire of the Bampton Traditional Morris Men) for a pint and a chat at the "Eagle" pub, thereby cementing the VMM's association with the Bampton tradition. That evening we danced out with Silurian Border Morris Men outside the "Three Kings" pub in Hanley Castle, where the VMM finally "got" what Welsh Border Morris was all about! The next evening we met up with Dave Jones (the "father" of Welsh Border Morris, and a founder of the Silurian men) and his then-current side, Old Wonder Not-for-Joes, at the "Butcher's Arms" pub in Woolhope, Herefordshire. Here we were treated to the full range of Pershore dances that had been researched by Dave, thereby cementing further our understanding of Welsh Border Morris, and the Pershore tradition in particular.



*Figure 8: In 1990, we start performing Welsh Border Morris during the Autumn & Winter*

The remainder of the tour was equally enjoyable, with visits to sides in Bristol, Bathampton, Southampton and Kent. However, it was the Bampton weekend (prior to the actual tour) and the Welsh Border Morris connections (Silurian and Old Wonder) that proved the most formative for the future dancing direction of the VMM. Indeed, on our return to Canada we decided to become a two-style side performing South Midlands Morris during the Spring/Summer, and Welsh Border Morris during the Autumn/Winter. Adopting Welsh Border Morris proved to be very attractive, and our membership shot up in the early 90s to 20+. The development of our Welsh Border Morris band lead to a lot more musical involvement (and

even the spin-off of a folk band, a derivative of which is still performing today). We'd also become much more of a singing side following our UK experiences. The fact that we'd also taken up mumming added yet another "arrow to the quiver" of our morris activities.

The early 90s was very much an expansive phase for the VMM. This was further expanded in 1992 when we took up yet another morris style: Molly dancing. This came about following my participation in the Saddleworth Rushcart celebrations as a member of Silurian. At that festival, I saw the Belchamp Ploughboys (the Molly dancing component of the Belchamp Morris Men) perform and was so taken with what I saw that I began researching Molly. Acquiring documentation from (and an audio tape of) noted



Figure 9: Our first Molly dance performance, on Plough Sunday 1991

Cambridgeshire Molly dancer Cyril Papworth, coupled with research into the Morris Ring archives, provided me with the foundational resources to recommend that the VMM expand its repertoire further to include traditional Molly dancing, which we first performed on Plough Sunday 1992. So now we were a three-style side!

The first England tour had proven to be such a shot in the arm for the VMM that there was considerable interest in another tour. My trips to the annual Saddleworth Rushcart with Silurian had exposed me to a lot of northern Morris styles – NorthWest, rapper and longsword - and the VMM decided that our second tour would focus on seeing these styles. So, in 1994, the VMM returned to

the UK on our second tour, starting at Saddleworth and touring northern England, visiting sides in Chester, Ripon, Goathland, Newcastle & Carlisle, and ending up at the Kendal Folk Festival where we were billeted with Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhoden's Tuppenny Dish.



Figure 10: Dancing NorthWest Morris at the Lammas Ale in Vancouver BC, August 1997

Once again, the VMM were so inspired by what we saw during this tour that, in the summer of 1996, we decided to add NorthWest Morris to our dance repertoire, thus making us a four-style side, performing South Midlands in the Spring, NorthWest in the Summer, Welsh Border in the Autumn/Winter and Molly in January. Even though there were over 20 of us, by 1998 we acknowledged the fact that dancing four different seasonal styles was just too much for us, so we decided to drop South Midlands from our repertoire and dance NorthWest in both the Spring & Summer. However, the lure of South Midlands Morris was felt so strongly by the majority of the side that, ultimately, the decision was

made to drop NorthWest from our repertoire, returning us to a three-style side. Our infatuation with NorthWest morris had lasted just three years.

In 2001, we returned to the UK for our third tour, yet another inspirational trip. We danced with Hammersmith Morris Men and New Esperance Morris (in London), Eynsham Morris (in Eynsham), the Traditional Bampton Morris Dancers (in Bampton), Shropshire Bedlams & Martha Rhoden's Tuppenny Dish (in Shropshire), Rivington Morris (in Lancashire) and Ripon City Morris, Betty Lupton's Ladle Laikers & the Flag & Bone Gang (in Yorkshire). We ended the tour by returning to the Thaxted Ring Meeting where we danced some mixed sets with Silurian. However, perhaps the highlight of the tour was performing our suite of Pershore dances in the



Figure 11: Taking the Pershore dances back to Pershore, Worcestershire, in 2001, with two old Pershore men, George Collins & Sam Dufty, and Annie Jones (Dave Jones's widow)

town of Pershore, Worcestershire, where we were watched by two old local men who remembered the Pershore Not-for-Joes (from the 1920s) and gave us the ultimate compliment: "Yes, that's what the Not-for-Joes looked like back in the 20s!".



Figure 12 : Performing the Bassingham Wooing Play, Granville Island, Vancouver, Plough Sunday 2002



Figure 13: The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, Langley BC, 2015



Figure 14: The Vancouver Morris Men at the Princeton Folk Music Festival, August 2019

The 2000s were busy years for the VMM as we consolidated our South Midlands, Welsh Border and Molly dances and expanded our mummer's plays. We had become a strong, seasonally-inspired side performing dances, plays and songs appropriate to the Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter seasons and celebrating specific seasonal dates in the calendar. And being on the overseas folk club circuit, we found ourselves performing & partying with, and learning from, many visiting English folk artists. For example, at different events during the decade we danced the Morris to the Albion Band, Martin Carthy, and Bellowhead, had a great singing session with the Watsons, and had a really informative Welsh Border workshop with John Kirkpatrick. We also became central to a stage show celebrating English mid-winter rituals – a local version, if you like, of the popular Christmas Revels in the USA. We were also fortunate to be able to host a number of visiting English sides - Hammersmith Morris Men, Chiltern 100s, the Flag & Bone Gang, Betty Luton's Ladle Laikers and Kettlebridge Clog – as well as a number of visiting UK morris experts (such as Bert Cleaver, who gave us a fabulous workshop on the Sherborne tradition).

The next major change came in 2014 when we were inspired to take up the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, again performing seasonally (and to the Robinson tune). However, age (and other circumstances) was starting to take its toll on many members of the side and our numbers have since declined to a core of just 10 men. Nevertheless, we continue to maintain our seasonal repertoire, though the number of performances per year has now also declined somewhat.

Personally, at the ripe old age of 72, I'm starting to suffer from chronic knee issues so, despite the fact that I have some special knee braces, my dancing days (specifically of the more energetic dances) may be limited. But I have had a great time over my 45-year association with the Morris and, even though my knees

may restrict which dances I can now perform, fortunately I can still play (melodeon) for the dances.

(For those interested, the VMM's website – [www.vancouvermorrismen.org](http://www.vancouvermorrismen.org) – contains more photos, videos and stories of the side going back to the early 80s. Specifically, check out the "Media Archive" and "Links" tabs.)