

CULTURAL OR FOLK DANCES

WELSH BORDER MORRIS DANCE

Living in the beautiful Shropshire county of England with its ranges of gentle rolling hills, fields of cattle, sheep and rotating crops of bright yellow rapeseed (now cultivated for its oil), corn, wheat and potatoes, our nearest town is Shrewsbury with its black and white Tudor houses, rich history, castle and market all nestled in an ox bow on the River Severn.

Shrewsbury is well placed for fast road links to Birmingham and Wales which it borders to the West, it is known as the gateway to Wales. To the north of the town is the old battlefield of Welsh/English battles of the past. Shrewsbury is world famous for being the birth place of Charles Darwin and where Clive of India went out from. Christians here are praying and believing for Revival to come and for Jesus to be known as Truth.

It is quite common to see "Morris Dancing" in the town square about twice a year. Both Women's group and Men's although it was originally only danced by men.

It is a very lively dance style, very colourful and usually with live music of percussion, accordion, tambourines, drums, flute and strings sometimes with singing.

Like many folk dances, the specific dances are handed down from the old men to the younger ones and although the main steps never changed much there was and still is a fluidity of not always being performed in exactly the same way. None the less the groups that meet now are aware of the roots of the dance art and in a natural way the tradition continues to evolve.

"Some of the oldest records of the Morris dance come from the Welsh Border Counties of Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire. In 1609 a side of 12 dancers performed at Hereford Horse Races. In 1614 the inhabitants of Longdon, Ledbury, entertained themselves with May games, Morrises and dancing upon the Sabbath day in the summer set aside for such purposes. A team were expected in Shrewsbury, especially at Christmas and in the Summer." "There is no doubt that it served as a useful source of income for the performers at the festive season"

"The number of performers has not seemed to be of great importance. Unlike most Cotswold Morris dances with sets of six men, most Border dances were performed in longways sets with multiples of four men often totalling twelve men in all. Most dances are performed vigorously with short sticks."

Quote in italics from "The Roots of Welsh Border Morris" by Dave Jones, 1988

The more traditional dress for men would be trousers with bells attached and jackets with colourful loops of strips of material which would enhance the energy of movement when dancing. There is historical evidence that some dancers would blacken their faces for dancing. This was said to be so the identity of the dancers would not be known when they travelled to different towns to perform as, in most cases, the performers were paid for their performance. Some groups have returned to this tradition but it has not been accepted by others and is seen as being disparaging and not sensitive. However, today the local Morris group wear white trousers with bells and white shirts with braces. The dances themselves are varied but usually consist of 4 or 6 men in a group, in opposite line formation and rotating in circles, striking their sticks together in various rhythmic beats. Steps are walking, energetic skipping, leaps and turns. Any sort of jolly music in the style of a polka seems to work well.

Without a doubt the Morris dance always pulls a large crowd of people in Shrewsbury town centre. I have to admit, a few years ago I gave them a wide berth thinking it being a pagan art form that I wanted nothing to do with - although I loved to hear the bells in rhythmic movement. To me personally it was not sitting comfortably with my faith nor did I find it relevant.

However in the spring of 2017 our “Root’s Christian Dance Company” of Shrewsbury was preparing dances for the summer outreach “Senior Moments”, a holiday at home for over 50’s. It always has a theme and this time it was “Near and Far”. So Jan, the creative director for this event, thought we should take folk on a journey of dance from different countries starting in Ireland with a soft shoe Irish dance and ending back in Shrewsbury. I suggested the Morris dance would be the obvious dance to do although I was not entirely comfortable with it, nor were the others. I said I would pray and think about it.

Sometime later I was listening to my Wild Olive CD (A Messianic Jewish Music Group) and “Praise the God of Ages” came on and straight away my mind turned to the Morris Dance. I started dancing holding a wooden spoon as my stick and the steps just came without thinking! I was somewhat amazed and believed the Lord had given me the steps in answer to prayer. I quickly wrote them down and felt somewhat excited to share them with the team.

We decided to wear white trousers (with bells) and our Jewish White blouses and being the Lavender season, which I love to grow in our garden, I made lavender crowns for us to wear as the women Morris dancers tend to wear flower crowns.

When we danced “The Morris Salvation Dance” (as the song we dance to is all about coming to God through Jesus Christ) at the summer outreach we had amazing comments, for example: “I couldn’t take my eyes off the dancers” and a church going gentleman said it had meant more to him than a sermon.

Needless to say we added this dance into our programme of dance that we presented in Shrewsbury town square the following Christmas. We started with this dance as it is clearly the gospel and I believe it is a message to the spiritual realm as much as to the folk watching.

For the Midlands West Regional Dance Day in March 2018 we had a workshop to teach the dance to others. For me I wanted other people to experience it and get their reaction as I feel the Lord would have us use it whenever we have the opportunity, to impact the spiritual atmosphere. I would really like to fill Shrewsbury Square with teams of Christian dancers all doing the “Morris Salvation Dance” for the Glory of God, and for His purpose!

LET THE LORD’S ARMY OF DANCERS GET VISIBLE AVAILABLE AND RELEVANT!

Please see below YouTube examples of Morris dancing in Shrewsbury, the first one shows Shrewsbury Town Square where we dance at Christmas:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_xRjqM6J7E

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1K_gd9CD-o

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May 2018*