



# 100 Years of Morris Dancing

## *on May Morning in Oxford*

### 1: The Dancers

First appearance: 'An appreciated innovation was made by the Oxford Branch of the English Folk Dance Society "as a free gift to the city, in gratitude for the long and lovely survival here of the May-Day celebration." '

*Oxford Times, 4 May 1923*



1 May 1923: English Folk Dance Society



1 May 1931: Oxford University Men's Morris in Broad Street, with William Kimber on concertina

In October 1926, Oxford University Men's Morris was formally recognised as a University Club responsible for May Morning, and in 1938 Oxford Morris Men (later Oxford City Morris Men) was formed. Both were supported by William Kimber of Headington Quarry as musician and teacher.

The tradition has been maintained in Oxford ever since 1923, and has given rise to a world wide enthusiasm for early-morning Morris dancing on May Day.

*Interested in joining? Contact [bagman@ocmm.org.uk](mailto:bagman@ocmm.org.uk) or [squire@am39.com](mailto:squire@am39.com)*



1 May 2017: Oxford University Morris and Oxford City Morris at the Ashmolean





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### 2: Jack in the Green

A character dressed entirely in foliage has long been part of May Day celebrations in Oxford and elsewhere. In the Victorian era Jack was associated with chimney sweeps, but this tradition died out in the early 1900s.



Oxford May Day 1886



'Bonny Green', May Morning 1957

In 1951 the Oxford University Morris Men reintroduced Jack in the Green as part of their May Morning displays, and in 1956 adopted the tradition of performing 'Bonny Green' around Jack as the first dance of the day.

There is an associated tradition of 'dressing Jack' on May Eve, when Morris dancers gather at a secret location to cover a frame with fresh green leaves. Rowland, the current Jack, has performed the role for over 20 years.



Dressing Jack, May Eve 2018





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### 3: Procession up the High

In 1948 the University's Cecil Sharp Club introduced a procession to May Morning, to lead off after the choir finished singing from Magdalen Tower at 6am. Supported by Headington Silver Prize Band, the dancers performed the Helston Furry Dance from Cowley Place along High Street to Radcliffe Square.



As the crowds at May Morning grew over the years it became increasingly difficult to organise an orderly processional dance. Early on the starting point was changed from Cowley Place to Rose Lane, and then to High Street just outside Rose Lane.

Eventually, in the mid 1970s, a formal processional dance was abandoned and the procession now comprises the musicians escorting Jack in the Green, followed by thousands of revellers.







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### 4: Women's role

Women were the principal instructors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century folk dance revival, and the main inspiration for the 1923 performance was one Marjorie Barnett. Despite this, the orthodoxy developed that Morris was a male preserve.

During WW2, Morris in Oxford was kept alive by dedicated women such as instructor and dancer Kay Barmby.



1 May 1943 (?): Percy Stuart Mills dances for Kay Barmby



1 May 1978: Alison Blake plays for Oxford City Morris

Oxford University Morris Men performed with women members for the first time at May Morning 2010. One of their number, Jo Barstow, was elected Squire in 2011. Oxford City Morris Men followed suit and both sides, now fully mixed, have dropped the 'Men' from their names.

In the 1970s women began to reject the orthodoxy and started forming their own Morris sides. Eventually in 1991 the all-women Rogue Morris were invited to May Morning in Oxford.

In the case of the Oxford teams, in 1976 Oxford City Morris Men were joined by Alison Blake (now Jewitt) as a musician.



1 May 2011: Jo Barstow in the Squire's patchy jacket





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### 5: The Sword and Cake



The cake impaled by the sword is a symbol of protection and fertility. Pieces of cake are cut and offered to onlookers to promote their luck and fertility in the ensuing year.

Oxford don Theo Chaundy was instrumental in forming the University side in 1926, and on his death in 1966 the present sword and cake holder was commissioned as a memorial. It is made of silver-plated copper and bears the inscription: 'Theo Chaundy, Most Ancient Man, 1966'.

The cake is made to a secret recipe. For the first 30 years it was made by Heather. In the 1990s it was handed over to Jill, who made it for the next 30, and recently her daughter Sally has become custodian of the recipe.



On May Morning a Sword and Cake Bearer is appointed to distribute the cake amongst the audience.

In these pictures, Keith bears the cake in 1972 and in 2022!

