

# Morris media frenzy!

**Derek Schofield** reflects on the recent media interest in morris dancing and a new film.



Photos: Courtesy Twist Films

You know when folk music and dance have attracted the attention of the media, and thus the popular imagination, when work colleagues stop you on the corridor: in January, it was 'I see that morris dancing is dying out'. Then in February, the greeting was, 'Do you know they're making a film about morris dancing?' Yes, morris dancing certainly grabbed the headlines amidst the gloom and snow of the first few weeks of 2009.

The stimulus for the interest was a press release put out by the Morris Ring in Autumn 2008 as an attempt to stimulate dancer recruitment. By December, the Ring noted that, 'it seems to have sunk without trace'. Not quite. On Monday 5 January, several national newspapers ran features on morris dancing, and quoted from the press release, probably as a result of a Press Association item.

The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Independent* all ran stories on Monday, and these were followed by news items on that lunchtime's *World at One* and the evening *PM* on BBC Radio 4. Local radio also got in on the act, including Radios York, Devon and Sussex, and there was a feature on BBC TV News at ten o'clock.

The news that day simply quoted from the press release. 'Last-ditch recruitment campaign ... unless younger blood is recruited it won't survive for many more years ... the average age of most morris dancing teams is in their mid-fifties ... a distinct possibility that in 20 years time there will be nobody left ... confined to the history books.'

But when the journalists actually got out

*Derecq and Millsham Morris (L-R Andy Black, Richard Lumsden, Jasper Britton, Charles Thomas Oldham, Clive Mantle, Adam Ewan)*

and interviewed dancers, they found the situation was not so gloomy, with plenty of younger dancers. The BBC television item included morris dancers in the Gloucestershire primary school, and while the film of Chalice Morris Men generally lingered on the more mature dancers, the tide was turning!

Tuesday dawned and, although some of the papers played catch-up with the original story, others were finding new angles. The *Daily Mail* reported a 35-year-old Gloucestershire morris man with a 'blonde mohawk haircut and a host of tattoos and piercings' while its reporter, Luke Salkeld, ventured forth to learn a dance with the Bristol Morris Men, who have been quite successful in attracting young dancers. Although reporting that 'morris dancing seems to attract admiration and derision in equal measure', Luke enjoyed the 'innocent entertainment ... Long may it prosper.'

The *Times* columnist, Magnus Linklater, clearly identified himself in the 'derision' camp with his Tuesday piece: 'Good news: morris dancing is dying out'. 'Wimpish' and 'wet' were just two of his insults. But he met his match at lunchtime when he confronted Moulton Morris man Simon Care, live on Jeremy Vine's Radio 2 programme. Linklater clearly knew nothing at all about morris dancing, and Simon successfully countered every pronouncement. Listeners' comments included an eleven-year-old dancer who thought morris was 'absolutely brilliant'.

Meanwhile, *The Sun* even had a

statement from its page three girl: 'Sam, 22, from Manchester is gutted that morris dancing could be extinct in less than 20 years. "We are losing too many of our traditions. Let's hope morris men keep waving their hankies for years to come." ' By now, Morris Ring Squire, Brian Tasker, was being interviewed by Reuters, and the story was being reported as far away as China and Australia.

Barnsley poet Ian McMillan spoke out in favour of morris dancing, and offered a few recruitment tips on Radio 4's *You and Yours* on Wednesday. Not wanting to be left out, fellow poet John Hegley contributed a poem on the *Guardian's* website, while the newspaper itself provided a do-it-yourself guide to morris dancing, with David Seabourne of Westminster Morris providing the illustrations. The *Guardian* commissioned the EFDSS to provide an online guide to morris and sword dancing, written by assistant librarian Elaine Bradtke.

By the weekend, *Times* and *Telegraph* reporters were trying out the dancing. Will Pavia in *The Times* dropped in at Cecil Sharp House, where the publicity had attracted several novice morris dancers, before talking to the Hammersmith Morris – joining in would have been like 'wandering into Old Trafford and expect to play for Manchester United,' he said.

Local newspapers took up the story, with many reporting morris sides with young dancers. The general view seemed to be that if you are welcoming, willing to adapt and present a dynamic image, then you will



attract younger dancers. In the background, there was clearly some irritation by member sides of the Morris Federation and Open Morris that the Ring wasn't speaking for them, yet was being reported as the only national organisation for morris dancing.

Irritation was also found in the ranks of the Morris Ring, some dancers believing that the statement, 'young people are just too embarrassed to take part', was not the message that should be given out when sides are genuinely trying to attract young dancers. Criticism of the idea that morris was related to 'spring fertility' showed just how far morris sides have travelled in recent years when it comes to explaining the dances' origins.

No doubt the Morris Ring will conduct its own soul-searching in the weeks to come

and, hopefully, with the other two morris organisations, renew the recruitment campaign with more carefully worded press releases, and a greater sense of reality across the wide morris dancing spectrum.

### **Morris: A Life with Bells On!**

Just as the media frenzy was dying down, news emerged of a film about morris dancing. Not a documentary about its history, but a work of fiction, a comedy, albeit presented in a 'mockumentary' style. What *A Mighty Wind* did for the American folk revival of the 1960s, and *Spinal Tap* for rock music, *Morris: A Life with Bells On* will hopefully do for morris dancing.

Producer, director and actor Lucy Akhurst was captivated by the screenplay written by Charles (Chaz) Thomas Oldham,

That the audience enjoyed the film was never in doubt, despite its apparent niche theme, with much laughter and a rousing - and prolonged - burst of applause at the conclusion. I was buttonholed by one gentleman eager to reassure me that, even with no knowledge of possible 'in-jokes', he had thoroughly enjoyed himself that evening. Other non-insiders said the same, and at least one expressed interest in seeing it again.

We were accompanied by BBC television and radio, and the producer Lucy Akhurst and star Derecq Twist (Chaz Oldham) joined us for the main film - their first viewing with a 'real' audience - and a pint in The Ship afterwards. They chatted with TV crews, morris men, organisers and the public alike, confessing to their nerves at attending this public showing and relief at the film's warm reception. The real-life Squire of the Morris Ring, Brian Tasker, sat quietly unannounced near the front, chuckling away with the best.

Personal views - Did it damage the morris? Certainly not. Would I recommend it? Yes. Would I see it at a mainstream cinema? Yes. Would I see it again? Yes. Will there be a DVD? They couldn't say.

**Malcolm Bebb**  
Bourne River Morris

who plays the part of morris-obsessed Derecq Twist in the film. Lucy told *EDS* that Chaz had come across morris dancing after his parents emigrated to Australia, leaving the sixteen year old with a surrogate family who happened to be morris dancers.

Lucy offered to direct, and set about raising the funding, which all came from private investors, and casting the film. The quality of the screenplay and Lucy's passion for the project led to the agreement of some major actors to take part. BAFTA-winner Sir Derek Jacobi has appeared in *Dr Who*, the film *Gosford Park* and a whole series of Shakespeare productions. In the film, he plays Quentin Neeley, the urbane head of the Morris Circle, based in the unlikely setting of a City of London suite of offices. Other actors include Greg Wise (television drama *Cranford* and married to Emma Thompson), Naomie Harris (*Pirates of the Caribbean*), Ian Hart (*Harry Potter*) and Sophie Thompson (Stella in *EastEnders*).

Watching the film, it's hard not to describe it as a heart-warming, feel-good film: certainly it portrays an idyllic, rural England with a lush green rolling landscape and gentle eccentricity.

The dance music was written by Richard Lumsden and played by folk musicians John Dipper, Saul Rose and Laurel Swift, which is how Laurel (leading light in *Morris Offspring*) came to choreograph the American dance sequence. According to Lucy, Laurel's innovative choreography, grounded in the tradition, was perfect.

The biggest challenge for the film is to find a distributor, which would then make it much easier for your local cinema to show it. Showings to distributors last year resulted in great interest, but uncertainty about the potential audience. The start of 2009 has seen the film touring to packed-out small venues in the south west and south, courtesy of Moviola.

The press reports in mid January led to BBC Breakfast Television turning up at the showing in Fordingbridge, Hampshire, and the resulting news film was shown and re-shown on television during the first week in February. There's an on-line petition to persuade a distributor to take it on, and Lucy Akhurst has been inundated with emails, messages and requests to see the film.

### **Further Information**

*Morris: A Life with Bells On*: film preview, news and the petition:

[www.morrismovie.com](http://www.morrismovie.com)

A round up of links to the various media coverage of morris dancing can be seen at <http://sites.google.com/site/morrisex/Home> (this site will continue as long as the links remain).