

# **THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN**

Papers from a conference held at Cecil Sharp House, London,  
25 - 26 March 2017, organized in partnership by Historical  
Dance Society with English Folk Dance and Song Society and  
The Morris Ring, The Morris Federation and Open Morris.

Edited by Michael Heaney

**This Girl Can Morris Dance:  
Girls' Carnival Morris Dancing and  
the Politics of Participation**

Lucy Wright

pp. 295-312



**efdss**  
english folk dance  
and song society



**English Folk Dance and Song Society & Historical Dance Society  
London 2018**

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ISBN 978-0-85418-218-3 (EFDSS)

ISBN 978-0-9540988-3-4 (HDS)

Website for this book: [www.vwml.org/hom](http://www.vwml.org/hom)

Cover picture: Smith, W.A., ca. 1908. The Ilmington morris dancers [photograph]. Photograph collection, acc. 465. London: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

## Contents

Introduction 1

### **The History of History**

*John Forrest*  
How to Read *The History of Morris Dancing* 7

### **Morris at Court**

*Anne Daye*  
Morris and Masque at the Jacobean Court 19

*Jennifer Thorp*  
Rank Outsider or Outsider of Rank: Mr Isaac's Dance 'The Morris' 33

### **The Morris Dark Ages**

*Jameson Wooders*  
'Time to Ring some Changes': Bell Ringing and the Decline of  
Morris Dancing in the Earlier Eighteenth Century 47

*Michael Heaney*  
Morris Dancers in the Political and Civic Process 73

*Peter Bearon*  
Coconut Dances in Lancashire, Mallorca, Provence and on the  
Nineteenth-century Stage 87

## The Early Revival

*Katie Palmer Heathman*

'I Ring for the General Dance': Morris and Englishness in the Work of Conrad Noel 115

*Matt Simons*

'Pilgrimages to Holy Places': the Travelling Morrice, 1922–1939 133

*Roy Fenton*

'Destruction not Inscription': How a Pioneering Revival Side Developed 151

*Elaine Bradtke*

Morris Tunes Collected by James Madison Carpenter 161

## The Later Revival

*Sue Allan*

Merrie England, May Day and More: Morris Dances in Cumbria in the Early Twentieth Century 179

*Derek Schofield*

A Different Sort of Revival: The Life and Times of the Manley Morris Dancers 203

*Sean Goddard and Ed Bassford*

Consequences of Bringing North-west Morris to the South-east of England: The Chanctonbury Ring Effect 215

*Robert Dunlop*

Morris Dancing at Kirtlington Lamb Ale: Heyday, Decline and Revival 251

## Women in Morris

*Sally Wearing*

What to Dance? What to Wear? The Repertoire and Costume of  
Morris Women in the 1970s 267

*Val Parker*

The Women's Morris Federation – from Start to Finish 279

*Lucy Wright*

This Girl Can Morris Dance: Girls' Carnival Morris Dancing and  
the Politics of Participation 295

## Material Culture

*Chloe Metcalfe*

Why do Morris Dancers Wear White? 315

*David Petts*

Materializing Morris Dancing: Tangible Aspects of an Intangible  
Heritage 331



Lucy Wright

## **This Girl Can Morris Dance: Girls' Carnival Morris Dancing and the Politics of Participa- tion**

I come to know them first while pouring over photographs in morris dancing archives: crinkle-cornered black-and-white film blushing into Kodachrome as I flick forwards through the contents of scrapbooks, travelling in time. Some snapshots reveal a performance in action: teams of girls in matching uniforms carrying crepe paper pom-poms, marching high-kneed in street parades and dancing in formation on crowded carnival grounds. Other photographs are more formally posed: troupes cluster around a glut of trophies or a hand-painted shield, wearing waistcoats heavy with medals and grinning proudly for the camera. Later on, I attend weekly competitions hosted in out-of-town sports halls and suburban community centres, and am almost overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of dancers, the wide mix of ages, the precision and vitality of this female-led tradition, conducted largely under the radar of the English folk movement in which I came of age. As time goes on I take new photographs of my own, attend troupe practices and events, and even occasionally join in. I have spent more than three years researching and making work about girls' morris dancing and I have barely scratched the surface.

Girls' morris dancing—sometimes called 'carnival' or 'fluffy' morris—is a highly competitive team formation dance, performed in the North-west of England and parts of North Wales. Its predominant participants are primary- and secondary-school-aged girls and young women, organized into 'lines' by age and ability, as part of troupes that compete weekly as members of dedicated local and cross-county organizations. Distinguished by short, embellished dresses with wide bell sleeves, white lace socks, pom-poms ('shakers'), and precise, synchronous footwork to recorded pop music, the performance might appear at first glance to be incongruous in relation to, if not wholly unconnected with, the morris performances of the English folk revival.

However, look again and you begin to see the similarities. For those of you who haven't seen it before—or perhaps not recently—there is a short excerpt of a video I took at the 2016 End of Season championships, for the English Town and Country Carnival Organisation, held at Pontin's in Southport (Figure 1). The dancers are members of Orcadia Morris Dancers from Skelmersdale in West Lancashire, who were named Troupe of the Year in 2017.



Figure 1: From a video recording of Orcadia Juniors' performing at ETACCO championships, Southport, 2016 (photograph by Lucy Wright, reproduced with permission of Orcadia Morris Dancers).

Girls' morris dancing holds a curious status in the canon of English morris-dancing history. On the one hand, it operates at a fundamental remove from the conventional spaces and narratives of the English folk revivals. More closely linked to the popular 'town carnival movement' of the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, today girls' morris is performed almost exclusively indoors following a community-wide shift away from the street parade and the carnival field in the 1990s. It has, as Mike Heaney states, 'almost no literature' and its performers rarely self-identify, nor are straightforwardly



identified as ‘folk’ dancers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, most performers don’t relate to the qualifier ‘carnival’ morris: instead, it is simply morris dancing, often the only form of morris dancing that many people in the girls’ morris heartlands of Wigan, Oldham and Prestatyn are really familiar with. I remember a group of secondary-school-aged dancers from a troupe near Liverpool dissolving into giggles at my ‘ridiculous’ suggestion that men engaged in morris dancing at all. ‘Do they wear lace socks like ours?’ they snorted, imitating men clumsily lifting their knees and pointing their feet. However, the lack of awareness perhaps runs in both directions, potentially reflecting something of the continued hermeneutic disconnect between scholarly and popular interpretations of ‘folk’. Girls’ morris is acknowledged by most contemporary scholars as coherent with any ‘defensible definition’ of folk dancing, and was described by Roy Dommett as ‘heir to the richest of the English dance traditions’<sup>2</sup> — why then has girls’ morris dancing become, to borrow Ruth Finnegan’s phrase, such a ‘hidden’ dance?<sup>3</sup>

There are, perhaps, three broad areas for interrogation. Firstly, and in relation to the history of the morris-dancing revival there is the question of whether girls’ carnival morris can or should be considered as part of the English morris tradition—or even as a ‘folk’ dance at all. This is not just about dealing with hierarchies of authenticity still at play within some areas of folkloric discourse, but also about considering whether or not the girls’ morris dancing community would welcome enfranchisement of this nature, because it is perhaps possible to suggest that girls’ morris dancing has evolved the way that it has precisely *because* it has avoided too much outside attention. Secondly, the participation of women and girls in morris dancing needs to be examined with reference to the changing role of women in social and public life— including changing attitudes toward women’s physical activity more broadly. We know now, as

<sup>1</sup> Mike Heaney, *An Introductory Bibliography on Morris Dancing*, 3rd ed., Vaughan Williams Memorial Library Leaflet No. 19, (London: EFDSS, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Dommett, ‘Carnival Morris’, *Roy Dommett’s Morris Notes*, edited by Anthony G. Barrand, 2nd ed., 5 vols (n.pl.: CDSS, 1986), II, 3-7 (p.5).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

Georgina Boyes notes, that ‘as individuals and as a constituent part of the Revival, women are at best marginalized, at worst trivialized or ignored’<sup>4</sup> so it is perhaps unsurprising that a distinctly female dancing tradition might find itself overlooked and disregarded. Thirdly and finally, we might note the omission of carnival morris dancing from recent surveys of cultural participation, such as *Taking Part* from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport,<sup>5</sup> which suggests that even now, activities which take place quietly and under the radar of institutional frameworks may simply go unnoticed. This short paper can’t possibly hope to cover all the factors contributing to the insularity of girls’ morris, nor its development outside of a ‘folk dance’ narrative, however I do want to reflect on some of the ways in which its predominantly young, female participants have historically found themselves on the wrong end of public opinion, potentially contributing to their reduced status in morris-dancing history.



Figure 2: Greenfield Morris Dancers, date unknown (reproduced with permission from the Morris Ring Archive).

<sup>4</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Normanton: No Masters Cooperative, 1993), p. xii.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, ‘Guidance: Taking Part Survey’ (2016) <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/taking-part-survey>> [accessed 28 November 2017].

## Girls' Morris History: What Do We Know?

The short answer is not an enormous amount. Further archival and oral testimonial research is required to develop a fully comprehensive history of the girls' morris community and to determine the boundaries, landmarks and protagonists of the town carnival movement. The overwhelming majority of knowledge about carnival morris dancing still remains in domestic collections and community memory, and my research is still under way to unpick the performance's entangled relationships with other North-west morris traditions. This is perhaps hampered by the fact that as an ethnomusicologist my focus has primarily tended towards documenting the contemporary performance; conducting ethnographic fieldwork with current girls' morris troupes. However, with a little help from morris historian Duncan Broomhead, I've gathered a handful of important things that we already know about girls' morris dancing, glimpsed through the cracks in extant scholarship.

Firstly—and no surprises here—we know that women took part in something termed 'morris dancing' long before the revival of women's morris in the mid 1970s (Figure 2), and that former notions of a male, priestly rite are fanciful in the extreme. We know that mentions of all-female morris troupes can be found as early as the 1860s, and by the 1890s such references were commonplace. See, for example, this description of morris dancing at Buxton Well Dressing, included in Robert Chambers's *Book of Days*, published in 1869:<sup>6</sup>

*Formerly they were little girls dressed in muslin; but as this was considered objectionable, they have been replaced by young men gaily decorated with ribbons, who come dancing down the hill.*

This, in itself, dispels one of the popular myths about girls' morris dancing—that it can be viewed as a straightforward borrowing from

<sup>6</sup> Robert Chambers, *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar, Including Anecdote, Biography, & History, Curiosities of Literature and Oddities of Human Life and Character* (Edinburgh and London: W.R Chambers, 1869), p. 819.

the men's dance, perhaps a result of the loss of male dancers during the two world wars. This rather convenient theory, laid out in Bernard Bentley's article in 1959, also repeated in his later works with Dan Howison, appears to have been borne from information supplied by a single informant: Mr E. Benson of Timperley, a member of a carnival acrobatic troupe during the mid to late 1920s —although there are similar recorded instances in the Oldham and Royton areas.

Bentley writes:<sup>7</sup>

*At that time there were two surviving Morris teams, a men's team at Mobberley and the Cranford team at Knutsford which consisted of both boys and girls. The acrobats decided that the Morris dance would fit into their repertoire and arranged for one of the Mobberley dancers to come over and teach them. By 1929 there were half a dozen teams in Altrincham, mostly girls, all dancing the Mobberley dance and all taught by members of the acrobatic group.*



Figure 3: St Anne's R.C. Morris Dancers, Ormskirk, 1905 (reproduced with permission from the Morris Ring Archive).

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Bentley, 'Collectors' Corner: The Lancashire and Cheshire Carnival "Morris"', *English Dance and Song*, 23.3 (1959), 65.

For Bentley, this anecdote alone was enough to explain the proliferation of girls' morris troupes across the North-west from the 1920s onwards. He continues: 'Deriving from the original 1925 acrobatic troupe and a small group of Altrincham teams in 1929, there must now be hundreds of troupes all over South Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales.'<sup>8</sup> While I don't doubt for a moment the veracity of Mr Benson's personal account, it's a big jump from half a dozen teams in Altrincham to the whole carnival morris dancing movement. And of course, the theory does not account for the existence of troupes of girls and young women in the region at least thirty years earlier, including a troupe from Ormskirk in West Lancashire (Figure 3).

Indeed, when Janet Chart and Lesley Edwards conducted their thorough investigation of women's morris dancing in Cheshire they found no evidence to support the view that girls' participation in morris dancing was a purely post-World War I phenomenon, also noting that competition had long been a feature of morris dancing in the North-west. They write, 'we cannot concur with the widespread view that competitive morris dancing is a modern invention of the "fluffy" carnival morris troupes of the post-Second World War period. As far as Cheshire was concerned, the competitions certainly existed at the turn of the century'.<sup>9</sup> Is it possible that at a time when it was regularly suggested that no 'essentially female' dances existed, scholars and commentators felt more comfortable with dismissing carnival morris dancing as a derivation, a second-rate pastiche of the superior male dance? As Stanley Gee argued in the letters page of *English Dance and Song* in 1979, 'it is inconceivable that no women's dances should exist within the British Isles...if this is fact, then we are a race that is completely different from every other race in the world'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bentley, 'Collectors' Corner.'

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Edwards and Janet Chart. 'Aspects of Morris Dancing in Cheshire 1880-1914,' *English Dance and Song*, 43.1 (1981), 5-10 (p. 9).

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Gee, Letter to *English Dance and Song*, 41.3 (1979), 20.





Figure 4: Mobberley Morris Dancers, mid-1920s (reproduced with permission from the Morris Ring Archive).

At the same time, the use of pom-poms or ‘shakers’ by Mobberley Morris Men (Figure 4), also provides counter-evidence to the frequent suggestion that girls’ morris dancing is an American import, more closely associated with cheerleading than the traditional dances of the English folk revival. In actuality, cheerleading with pom-poms developed several decades later, in the late 1940s and 1950s, generally attributed to Lawrence ‘Herkie’ Herkimer who passed away in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this, cheerleading had been a men only activity, involving clapping and rhythmic chants. If anything, we might be tempted to speculate that cheerleading developed out of carnival morris dancing—and not the other way round, but perhaps that’s a subject for another day!

Returning to what we know. We know that Howison and Bentley identified two primary strands of North-west morris dancing; the Pennine and the Cheshire (Plain).<sup>12</sup> The Pennine tradition was pri-

<sup>11</sup> Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis, *Cheerleader: An American Icon*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Howison and Bernard Bentley, ‘The North-west Morris: A General Survey’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 9.1 (1960), 42–55.

marily associated with rushbearing celebrations, and can be traced in written records back to the 1790s. The Cheshire tradition reveals itself in the 1880s and 1890s, as part of May Day celebrations. While the Pennine tradition was predominantly associated with men and teenage boys, the Cheshire tradition was composed almost entirely of young boys and girls. In her study of the institutions and ideologies of morris-dance dissemination in the North-west, Theresa Buckland interrogates the process by which a 'dance form previously regarded as a vehicle to display the number and vigour of a community's menfolk...became increasingly viewed as an activity more appropriate for children and young women'.<sup>13</sup>

However, at different times, the translation process also appears to have taken place in the opposite direction. In her 1996 presentation at the Morris: Legacy of the Past conference at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, Pruw Boswell noted how the ultra-masculine revival of North-west morris dancing from 1966 onwards began with dances previously performed by teams of children. She writes of John O'Gaunt Morris Men's decision to revive the old Lancaster Processional and Lancaster Garland dances: 'it is worth noting here that both the dances from Lancaster were originally danced by a team of children, boys and girls, and both had to be re-choreographed and re-named before they became suitable for performance by the men'.<sup>14</sup>

When thinking about the development of modern carnival morris dancing, my own speculation is that we may actually be dealing with three loose historical traditions, with Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria each having their own variations of carnival morris performance. It's unlikely that these represented three wholly distinct traditions – even in the early days, troupes travelled widely, intersecting in the context of the town carnival parade – but, as recent conversations with former members of the Lower Withington Junior Morris troupe highlight, at least two different models of carnival

<sup>13</sup> Theresa Buckland. 'Institutions and Ideology in the Dissemination of Morris Dances in the Northwest of England,' *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 23.1 (1991), 53–67 (p. 57).

<sup>14</sup> Pruw Boswell, 'The Lancashire Legacy', in *Morris: The Legacy of the Past: Proceedings of a One Day Conference on Morris Dancing, Birmingham, 20th April, 1996*. (London: Morris Ring; Morris Federation; Open Morris, 1996) pp. 111-15 (p. 111).

morris dancing appear to have been in action during the same historical period.



Figure 5. Lower Withington Juniors, mid-1960s (reproduced with thanks to Sheila Gregory).

Sheila Gregory and Angela Snelson performed with Lower Withington Juniors during the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s (Figure 5). During an interview last September the ex-dancers reported that while coach loads of Lancashire troupes attended the Lower Withington Rose Day to take part in competitions, the Lower Withington troupe performed in the parade only. They admitted to being a little afraid of the carnival morris dancers coming from the nearby towns: 'we were country girls and...they were more town people that were doing...what you're calling more the carnival morris dancing... they were so much more advanced'. The visiting Lancashire troupes wore different kinds of costume - 'I remember a lot of black, different colours,' said Angela - and different movements - 'I can remember the slapping of the legs...their thighs used to be red raw'. Sheila and Angela suggested that this tension between dancers of the more genteel *mores* of rural Cheshire villages and the working-class girls attending from the towns might have been a factor in the later decision to ban carnival troupes from attending the local Goostrey Rose Day...



‘somebody objected to the short skirts...it wasn’t the done thing in Goostrey’.<sup>15</sup>

Angela Snelson’s mention of the ‘slapping of thighs’ – a choreography more associated with entertaining troupes – emphasises that it is also worth remembering that girls’ morris dancing was not the only form of performance common within the town carnival movement, and that troupes of ‘entertainers,’ majorette baton-twirlers and ‘jazz’ (kazoo) marching bands continue to perform within their own parallel organizations in different parts of the UK. We know that following the success of Knutsford Royal May Day – beginning in 1864 and aided by the development of the rail network and the rise of leisure time for the English working classes – carnivals became a popular context for community performance. As Vanessa Toulmin writes in her study of Mitchell and Kenyon, the Victorian era saw a growing demand for entertainments ‘created by amateurs and performed largely within the context of the local parades. These “amateur” performers, including morris dancers and participants in fancy-dress carnival processions, drew on both the traditions of folk amusements and trends in popular entertainment.’<sup>16</sup> And there was a significant monetary incentive to putting in a successful performance on the carnival field. Duncan Broomhead recently calculated that when converted and adjusted for contemporary pricing, the prize money awarded for morris dancing at the 1897 Knutsford Royal May was anywhere between £1,300 and £1,800 in modern value.

However, beyond the carnival circuit, girls’ morris dancing was broadly derogated. In an article in *Traditional Music* magazine, published in 1975, the Lancashire concertina player Fred Kilroy, who accompanied Miss Taylor’s Dancers in Royton in the 1920s, recounted in an interview how girls’ morris was denigrated by folk-dance specialists, even going so far as to actively prevent them from performing at a high profile event:<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sheila Gregory and Angela Snelson, interview with the author, September 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Vanessa Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection* (London: British Film Institute, 2006), p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Ward, ‘Fred Kilroy: Lancashire Concertina Player, (Part 1): The Career of a Master Musician Based on his own Reminiscences, *Traditional Music*, 1(1975), 15-19 (p. 17).

*The Westwood girls and we'd a gone to London. We were booked at Albert Hall, but when they found out they were girls they wouldn't accept them - they said it was only men. But strangely enough, before the wife's mother died...she showed me a photograph but she wouldn't give it to me...and I'm sure that on that - I wanted it for the reason there were men and women dancing and I could have broke this myth. It's natural for men and women to dance together and it's been done.*

Indeed, it is possible to discern a broadly dismissive tone in much scholarly reportage of girls' morris from the twentieth century. Howison and Bentley describe the girls' dance as 'stilted and very slow', in which dancers have 'a minimum of skills to master,' showing 'little trace of the older Morris'.<sup>18</sup> Maud Karpeles deemed its very popularity key to its 'undoing', opining that '[u]nlike the traditional morris of the midlands, the Lancashire morris dance has attracted the attention of a very wide public...they have in fact, little or no knowledge of the traditional dance'.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the colloquial term 'fluffy' morris, sometimes associated with girls' morris dancing, is thought to have begun as a 'semi-derogatory' attribution by male morris dancers. Ian McKinnon, current principal of the Silverdale Sapphires Morris troupe from Newcastle-under-Lyme and an adjudicator with the English Town and Country Carnival Organisation (ETACCO), suggests its etymology pertains to the shakers and 'frothy' skirts worn by the performers. It is notable that usage is rare in the girls' morris community.

In a similar way, perhaps, it seems that dancing in shoes rather than clogs, as carnival morris dancers do, became associated with a more feminized form of morris dancing, in spite of the fact that most of the traditional Lancashire teams from whom the dances had been collected wore soft shoes to perform. Returning to Pruw Boswell's paper again, it seems that during the 1960s, the only revival North-west morris side to dance in shoes was Leyland Morris Dancers, who

<sup>18</sup> Howison and Bentley, 'The North-west Morris', p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Maud Karpeles, *The Lancashire Morris Dance: Containing a Description of the Royton Morris Dance* (London: Novello, 1930), p.30.

'were not at that time held in very high esteem among the morris fraternity. The team had been taught by a woman, resulting in a rather feminine style of dance and they were not considered to be a role model by many of the other dance teams.'<sup>20</sup> As such, the newly revived North-west men's morris sides made the conscious decision to dance in clogs, perhaps to differentiate themselves from the carnival teams and from the perceivedly emasculated dancing of Leyland Morris.

As we also know, women's involvement in morris dancing more generally was a highly contested issue, even as late as the 1970s and 80s. My recent interview with Sue Allan, a founding member of the all-female Throstles Nest Morris from Wigton in Cumbria, highlighted for me some of the real antagonism and resistance experienced by some of the early women's dance groups at the hands of their male counterparts in the morris-dancing revival. Sue described how as a scholar, interested in researching carnival dances in Cumbria – an historically female-led tradition – certain resources and materials were withheld from her by their erstwhile gatekeepers in the men's morris community. She recalled in particular, a very curt reply from the founder of Colne Royal Morris, Julian Pilling, in response to her request for details of the Ulverston dance, formerly danced by children, both male and female, in South Cumbria.<sup>21</sup>

Pilling wrote, 'I have no knowledge that I am prepared to pass on to instigators of women's morris', before signing his name, on a small headed postcard.

Pilling was also a regular correspondent to *English Dance and Song* magazine, whose letters pages present a fascinating, if slightly perturbing, warts-and-all document of the social history of the women's morris revival. For example, in a single issue of the magazine from 1974, Frank Masters wrote that morris dancing is 'an intrinsically masculine activity', while Celia Smith described women's participation as 'cultural anarchy', suggesting that while women might 'join in at workshops' taking part in 'public spectacle is another matter'. At

<sup>20</sup> Boswell, 'The Lancashire Legacy', p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> See Sue Allan's contribution to this volume.

the same time, Eddie Dunsmore demonstrates a level of discomfort with women's physicality in relation to morris dancing: 'men have their weight distributed differently from women. In a dynamic situation, such as dancing, the kinetics must necessarily reflect this difference. [A woman] may start from the same instructions as I do...but you can't help dancing something that looks different from what I call Morris.'<sup>22</sup>

Similar attitudes do still persist. The organization 'This Girl Can' (from whom I borrowed the title of my recent travelling exhibition at Cecil Sharp House) (Figure 6) recently revealed that there are 2 million fewer women involved in regular physical activity than men, with barriers to women's participation in sport including poor body confidence, perceptions of physical exercise as 'unfeminine' and the gender gap in sports provision and media coverage.



Figure 6: Promotional materials for 'This Girl Can' Morris Dance exhibition by Lucy Wright, 2017.

However, this kind of gender gap is arguably less present in the contemporary morris-dancing world. A couple of months ago *The Telegraph* ran a news story highlighting the participation of women in

<sup>22</sup> 'Points from Readers' Letters', *English Dance and Song*, 36.4 (1974), 150.

morris dancing. Morris, the headline claimed, was ‘undergoing [a] radical change with [the] influx of women’.<sup>23</sup> ‘It has long been regarded as the preserve of elderly bearded men with bells on their ankles loudly banging sticks outside country pubs,’ the article continued, but ‘[s]tatistics from the latest census of Morris dancers have revealed that more than half of the 2,000 people who have joined dance troupes in the past two years have been women... Now Morris leaders predict that if the current trend continues, the hobby will become overwhelmingly female within the next two years.’ Leaving aside for a moment the arcane image of a ‘Morris leader’, what is most intriguing about this article, for me, is its suggestion that this is somehow new; something newsworthy.

Indeed Melanie Barber, of the Morris Federation gently refuted this presumption with the same article; ‘I think what we are now seeing is a balancing out of men and women dancing Morris,’ she says, ‘Women were frowned upon for dancing Morris in the 50s and 60s, despite their having been instrumental in popularising Morris in the early 20th century’. That part is important; women’s role in popularizing morris, often teaching it to the male dancers, remains pointedly overlooked in many accounts of the men’s tradition. At the same time, if more women are now getting involved, it is perhaps most notable because it demonstrates the resilience of female performers and scholars in the face of systemic prejudice and widespread resistance during the morris revival in the 1970s.

However, what is also telling is that we run the risk of continuing to overlook women’s role in popularising morris in the later twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Despite the article’s reference to morris ‘troupes’, a term generally resisted by most folk-revival morris dancers, the 2014 morris census upon which the article is based does not include data from or about girls’ morris dancing. In total, 12 styles of dancing are recorded, including the American import, Appalachian step dancing, and a zero percent response rate for ‘stave’

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Sawyer, ‘Morris Dancing Undergoing Radical Change with Influx of Women’, *The Telegraph*, 6 May 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/06/morris-dancing-undergoing-radical-change-with-influx-of-women/>> [accessed 30 October 2017].

dancing; but information regarding participation in ‘carnival’ morris dancing was not solicited.

I don’t say this to criticize the important research conducted by Jack Worth, and it is not my intention to undermine the wider corpus of scholarship on morris-dancing history which fails to acknowledge ‘carnival’ morris as part of the bigger picture. However, I do want to draw attention to the fact that the term ‘morris dancing’ was once broad and flexible enough to encompass a whole range of performances, demographics and geographies. In *Performing English*, Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps suggest that ‘folk’ is ‘a cultural construct undergoing constant discursive renegotiation by participants of that culture, however, perhaps inevitably, it has become the institutions and participants associated with the English folk movement and not all of ‘those who identify most closely with’ morris dancing that have now become the arbiters of what ‘morris’ does and does not include.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting that had girls’ morris dancing been surveyed, the morris census results would have looked very different. A rough calculation of the numbers involved in carnival organizations across Cheshire, Lancashire and parts of the Midlands and North Wales suggests that there are more than 8,000 current participants, more than doubling the morris census’s estimated total number of morris dancers nationwide.

## Conclusion

So what can we conclude? While the folk scene represents, for many, a democratizing, egalitarian space, evidenced so strongly by the predominantly sensitive responses to recent community debates about gender-free calling, and the issue of ‘black-face’, it is not unfair to suggest that there may remain a handful of unresolved, grey areas. Those who feel that the gender question has been resolved may need to question why girls’ morris dancing has until relatively recently been rarely considered, mentioned or addressed. This is why it was

<sup>24</sup> Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps, *Performing Englishness: Identity and Politics in a Contemporary Folk Resurgence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p.8.

so great to see Platt Bridge Morris Dancers performing at Dancing England in Sheffield in February 2017— not least because the dancers were so delighted and proud to be included in the national showcase.<sup>25</sup>

Having said that, I am also acutely aware that describing girls' morris as a folk dance may in itself be problematic, not least because to date nobody I have encountered in the girls' morris dancing community has expressed any specific wish to be acknowledged in this way. As such, it could be argued that my persistent pushing for the re-evaluation of girls' morris dancing in the context of the English folk movement imposes upon girls' morris dancing an interpretation and even sense of enfranchisement that it *does not actively want*. However, it is not my intention to demand of the girls' morris dancing community any expression of kinship with the wider folk movement that it does not feel, nor is it my goal to promote the appropriation of girls' morris performance via programmes of folk education throughout the rest of the country. Perhaps this is one of the primary differences between contemporary scholars and collectors and those of the first two folk revivals – I trust wholeheartedly in the ability of girls' morris dancers to safeguard their own continuation processes. Instead, my goals are perhaps more selfish: it is not primarily for the benefit of girls' morris dancing that I seek to redress the neglect of girls' morris dancing in folk dance scholarship, but for my own, as a morris-dancing scholar and member of a revival morris-dancing side.

That girls' morris dancing has evolved outside of a 'folk revival' morris-dancing discourse is arguably constitutive of its most valuable contribution to contemporary morris dancing scholarship. Functioning without self-conscious attempts towards preservation and not subject to the perpetual cycles of decline and renewal common to many other 'folk dance' practices, it offers us a unique opportunity to observe a living morris tradition in action. Imagine if we had the opportunity to go back in time and speak to the grand old men of Headington Quarry and Bampton, to ask about their daily lives, their ex-

<sup>25</sup> Platt Bridge had first appeared at Dancing England in 1984.

periences and their understandings of the morris tradition. How would such knowledge effect how we dance today? Much of the history of girls' morris dancing is still out there, stored in living memory. Key figures in the community's recent history are still alive, or well remembered. Recording these stories is my current task. And I have barely scratched the surface.