

Unreliable reminiscences of Ebor Morris

1. Early Years. 1972/1973

In Oct 1972 I started on a degree course in Chemistry at the University of York. I was living in Vanbrough College and shared a room with my old school mate Tim Binns. When at school we had both been regular attendees at the Folk Clubs in Wath which operated from the Cross Keys and the Rugby Club. We had also been involved in organising folk concerts at our school. Tim was engaged and spent most weekends at home with his partner (Joan, now married for over 40 years) and I took to looking around York for things to do at weekends.

One evening late in the Christmas term I attended an event in the Lyons Concert hall at the Uni organised by the York Folk Centre. The evening had been facilitated by Andy Jackson, music undergraduate, fiddler and Northumbrian Piper. At the end of the night I was given a flyer and was asked (as I later found out, by Maureen Dobson) if I wanted to go to the pub with the performers and ended up at the Beeswing. This is how I first met John and Lo Lundie as the 'Wing was their local.

About a week later I went for the first time to the Folk Centre which was in those days held at Thomas's opposite the Museum Gardens. It was a tatty pub with a dodgy landlord but the music was good. I returned to the club many times after the Christmas vacation.

Regulars there that I recall were John and Angela(?) Barker – they tended to take money at the door, Maureen and Noel Dobson, Graham and Janice(?) Metcalfe, Chris and Maureen Brownbridge plus a policeman (also a Graham I think) whose favourite song involved a Raven on the roof, Richard Atkinson who rarely seemed to be sober, Ollie (with a penchant for daft songs) Ivor Clissold (from Swindon and a solid CAMRA Supporter) and others who I cannot remember.

I saw lots of great acts there – Silly Wizard with a <15 year old Phil Cunningham, Fred Jordon (he was almost thrown out by the landlord as a vagrant!), Bob Davenport (who I found amazing as he would sing medley of songs such as "Careless Love", followed by "The Jealous sailor" ending with "Love potion number 9"). He was the first singer I ever saw who just sang songs and made them into "Folksongs"! One day Peter Bellamy (or Elmer P. Bleaty as Frank Ignobody called him anagrammatically) was the guest. "The committee" was in the bar having a pint before the club started and one of them nodded lustfully towards a person at the bar – long blond hair, purple silk lute pants ("Blimey look at that!" or equivalent). The individual turned

around and it was – Peter Bellamy. Hence forth Richard, when singing “Yarmouth Town” would add in the last verse “ If you see a girl with long hair hanging low just be careful cos it might be Peter Bellamy”.

At around that time (Spring 1973, I was asked by someone (cannot remember who) about joining a newly formed Morris team. I think they had started practicing from October 1972. The leading lights were John Stockdale, who I think came from Cheltenham and had danced before, Pete Moore, who danced longsword with Redcar. I think Pete was the musician as he played piano accordion. Other dancers were Graham Metcalfe, John Lundie, Noel Dobson, Richard Atkinson. “Big Al” Hannington and Keith Raw turned up but didn’t dance much. Later in the Summer Tim Binns joined. Nick Parker and Bill Fry were also around but I cannot recall when they started practicing seriously with the team

At that stage the team had no name and no aspirations to be a performing team. It was a social group doing a bit of aerobics to dance tunes. We had no idea really and neither of the “Leaders” had any experience in teaching Cotswold Morris.

At that time I was a regular attendee at the Uni Folk Dance Soc and got to know a lot of other people through that. The main organiser was John Nuttal , a keen EFDSS member and also Scottish dancer (nowadays better known for his books on mountain walking! – He was also a member of the Mountaineering club). Many of the hard-core EFDSS dancers from the Uni Soc would attend the St Olave’s EFDSS dances in York. Through that association we were given a box of stuff which included all the Sharp Morris and sword books, Some Sharp country dance books (which went to UYFDS) and some and – written notes (which included the notes for Poppleton that I sent you a couple of years ago). It also enabled us to get in contact with Kathy Mitchel (more of an expert on longsword) who came a couple of times to give us guidance on dancing. She saw what we were doing and said something like “This is no good you are not even doing the right steps!” She taught us a few basics (how to do a double and a single step, what hand movements should be like etc). She was resented a bit by the lads as she was very old school, school ma’am EFDSS who shunned drink and wanted everything to be “nice” but she knew a lot. She also believed that whilst women should study and understand Morris , they should not dance it. Through the link with York EFDSS we also had a couple of visits from Derek Bellerby who worked at the scientific instrument company (name forgotten) at Wiggington (?). He also taught us some basics and with the Morris Books to study we began to make some progress.

By the Summer of 1973 we were beginning to have the makings of a dance team and then the post grad students (John Stockdale, Pete Moore) left.

2. Next Phase. 1973/74

I spent a lot of the summer vacation at festivals and dance outs going to workshops and watching Morris as much as I could. I also started to practice with Wath Morris. When October came round again I was back in York and the practices started up again. As the only person who could remember what order the figures came in I was given the job of teaching and calling dances- it was really the blind leading the blind!

Noel and Big Al pretty much stopped dancing but we were joined by a guy who had graduated in Northern Ireland (cannot remember his name) and was an experienced dancer with (I think) Red Hand Morris (do they still exist?). John Harper expressed a keen interest in joining but was working in Leicester making glacier mints.

We had a couple of visits from a Post Doc Biochemist (Dave Smith?) who had done a PhD in Baton Rouge (or similar) and played a big 3 row sparkling box which he tried to play zydeco on. He never got very far with Morris tunes. At some point Jim Sharpe arrived having been spotted at the Folk Centre which I think by this stage had moved to Gillygate to the Bay Horse pub. I recall the first practice with Jim very well- he knew loads of country dance tunes but only one Morris tune – Shepherd's Hey, which we danced interminably for a couple of weeks until he learned some other tunes!

We continued to practice and found that, at some point, someone (don't know who!) had got hold of a load of carpet braid in a kind of orange/ gold colour with a view to making baldricks and some bell pad blanks. At this stage (around Christmas 1973) someone suggested that we should have a name and do some dance-outs , given that we had the materials to make kit. The name chosen was "Ebor Morris" and some bright spark came up with using a school blazer badge for the centre of the baldrick. I think Lo lundie sewed the first one and the "old" narrow baldricks were born. The consensus was that we should wear whites and black shoes for dancing.

Our first dance out was, I believe , 1st May 1974 at the Lord Collingwood in Poppleton, Favourite of Mr Metcalfe! I recall very little in the way of an audience and music was provided by Jim Sharp (melodeon) , Andy Jackson (whistle) although most of the time he could not play because he was laughing too much and me (I think I attempted to play accordion very badly and succeeded). Jim Sharp danced (yes!)one dance.

At around that time Graeme (?spelling) Moor started to practice but never really got into dancing. He did, however, take many photos of the early years and even a video of the first dance out using one of the early video recorders with a huge heavy camera and a recorder the size of a suitcase that hung over the camera operator's shoulder.

I cannot remember much about other dance- outs that we did that summer – not sure that there were very many.

I do recall one occasion from about that time – it was Sunday lunchtime we had been dancing somewhere (Tadcaster, Wetherby perhaps?) and dropped into a pub on the way home for a pint and a sing. (It could have been Tankard at Rufforth or the Sun at Colton – my bet is “The Sun”). Lundie approached the bar and said to the barman “ I’ll have a pint of what comes out of those hand pumps” and got the reply “ A pint of Air then!” the barman was a Scot so it sounded like the seaside town of Ayer! Anyway we had a beer and a sing and an elderly woman at the bar asked if anyone knew the “Holmfirth anthem” as she had grown up in Holmfirth and hadn’t hear it sung for donkey’s years. Metcalfe duly obliged and by the end of the song the requester was visibly tearful and everyone was becoming quite tired and emotional – it was a very memorable moment.

It was about that time that I met Dot Chambers (Mrs Fuller – we were married in 1982) at the YUFDS. At that time I was a committee member and ran evening daces once a week in term time so I got used to calling dances, most of which were from the Community Dance Manuals and performed to 45 rpm discs. The music on the EFDSS records was played by classically trained players, most of whom would have never seen a “traditional” musician and were very piano accordion and violin dominated (I say Violin deliberately rather than “Fiddle”). It was all a bit safe and “nice”. We did put on a few Ceilidhs and had Anne Truman’s trio (more EFDSS Walking Music) and on one occasion “The Cheviot Ranters” with Graeme Binless calling. It was noticeable that whilst the audience was at the bar during the interval, the bands were drinking tea and eating cakes. Ebor dances at several of these Celidhs , including one where a badly timed change of direction caused our lock to disintegrate during a performance of Escrick...

At around this time York Folk |Centre began to organise days of Folk and Celidhs. I remember a couple of evening dances at the Kings Manor Cellars although I don’t think Ebor danced at them as “the committee” didn’t think Ebor were very good (probably correct but not very supportive.)

Around this time I started to play Anglo concertina having had a brief (and rubbish) attempt at playing piano box. I think it was the time a youthful Mr Holland appeared and he quickly became known as “Pikey” after the “Stupid Boy” in Dad’s Army (At Richard’s suggestion)

3. Later on 74/75

I recall around this time John Harper joined and we continued to dance out sporadically.

Possibly around this time we did Wiggington (?) carnival which, from memory involved huge numbers of marching bands and majorettes with kazoos. We were subsequently invited to Hartlepool headland to an event with hundreds of marching bands and gracefully declined. I recall this was also the occasion when one team member offered to buy the bobby on duty a pint only to have a full pint revealed to him when the Policeman lifted his helmet off the floor of the panda car.

I would have been about this time that Ian (Besford? , he became a solicitor I think) joined the team (he is on the photo outside Selby abbey opposite Lundie). The Selby dance out was a strange one. We had been asked to dance there and were greeted by a Parson who basically said "Thanks for coming, If you take a collection make the cheque payable to Selby Abbey" and then he buggered off. Ian turned up on his motor bike and it must have been end of term as he had his worldly possessions strapped to it and himself. Once the dancing was complete Ian roared off into the Sunset – not sure how he got on as the bike's headset bearings were a bit worn and the bike did seem to be a bit jumpy under all the weight.

I completed my degree and graduated in July 1975 but stayed in York to do a D Phil. Tim Binns returned to Wath and left the team but joined Wath Morris (he remains a member of that team). About that time Mark Pollard, John Altringham joined the team.

4. Even Later

On Sat May 1st 1976 , Ebor did their first and (I suspect) only early morning dance out. We started at the gardens next to the river opposite Cliffords tower then moved on to dance elsewhere ending at the train station because the buffet was open early. We had no audience but later got a complaint from someone that they had been woken by "You noisey buggars" dancing outside their window! Ebor also held a day of dance that day which centred on St Samson's Square. We had various teams (Green Ginger, Boars head I recall but there were others as well) and were joined by Pomfret and their Guests Shropshire Bedlam and Martha Rhodens Tuppenny dish. I recall certain dancers from Hull being very alarmed by these teams." They only dance Bucknell?" What is all this shrieking and black face stuff about?" Women dancing?" etc. The Green Ginger lot seemed to think that Morris was some sort of Illustrated WEA lecture or a game of "Jeux sans Frontier" for the dancers where remembering what they were doing was the main objective. I rather

enjoyed Pomfret and their excellent kit (not a crimplene tabard in sight!) and even more their uncompromising dancing. I thought the Shropshire lot were just mad and wildly entertaining. I recall that the crowds around the square were huge – 4 or 5 deep all round and we collected a lot of money (over £200, which was a lot in 1976!) but the dancing ceased shortly after the pubs closed at 3 O clock.

Sometime in Spring 1976 (or maybe 1977? I think Late My Bank holiday) Myself, Dot, Mark Pollard and Lindy Stone (Mark's girlfriend) travelled to Lindy's parent's house in Trowbridge Wilts and attended the Chippenham Festival. That was the first time I saw Bampton (Francis Shergold's team) who I found delightfully shambolic. They were in the procession but didn't have a processional dance so they walked along then stopped, did one figure from a set dance (they were at the back of the procession so did not hold anyone else up) then ran to catch up! They also did a set of 4 dances which comprised Shepherd's Hey, Rose tree Highland Mary and Banbury Bill – or, to put it another way, the same dance 3 times to 3 different tunes. This phenomenon has been observed by many people over the years.

It was also my first exposure to Gloucester Old Spot Morris. It is the only time I have heard an amazed gasp from an audience when they danced on. They were magnificent. They all appeared to be 7 feet tall and moved in a very distinctive way with a style and grace I had never seen in a Morris team. Their movements were large and precisely executed with a clear idea of how the team should look to an audience. It was about performance for an audience rather than amusement for the dancers. They also danced slower than any team I had seen before and used the music to get off the ground and make all their moves better defined and un-hurried.

On returning to York Mark and I demonstrated the Longborough style at practice. There was a bit of a silence then Metcalfe remarked "That's Longborough is it? It's nobbut a lot of jumping about!" Graeme was always a bit down on handkerchief dances and liked a good thwack with the sticks which he regarded as more manly (but not quite so manly as Longsword).

It was around that time that I came to the conclusion that "good" Morris was, for me, about a clear, consistent and coherent style of dance. As such it would be very difficult to achieve that style when dancing 37 dances in 20 different traditions so that the differences between the traditions disappears and the dancing becomes an intellectual game for dancers in which simply remembering which foot to start on, which hand movements, which way to

turn into the hey etc. overtakes any consideration of performance. As a result the Ebor repertoire shrank a little and focussed on fewer traditions, including Longborough.

Around that time we were joined by Pete Servini, Eddy Griggs and Fran Edwards (who acted mainly a whipper in rather than a dancer).

In 1977 we organised another day of Dance with some visiting teams staying over with an evening "Do" in the Spread Eagle". This may have been the occasion that a well –known organiser of Shropshire Bedlam and British Chromatic accordionist, became so fed up at trying to get to the bar in the Spread Eagle that he went outside and mooned through the window at the assembled throng. There are no reliable witnesses to this as everyone was rather tired and emotional at such a late hour. It is also alleged that one member of Grimsby Morris, lost his host on the way home and had to sleep in the doorway of a substation ..

More Random Recollections.

Manchester Ring Meeting.

April 23rd 1977. Our first (only?) Ring Meeting. It felt a bit like a Gentleman's club with too many small country town Solicitors and accountants gathered together! John Harper was flown from Scotland (?) to Manchester by Rowntrees as he had been ordered up North for the week and only went on the proviso that he could get to Manchester on Friday evening so they paid to fly him there (John will remember if I am mistaken).

John Altringham got a stick in the mouth during a late night massed dance of "Vandals". It broke off half a front tooth. A medic in attendance said something like " Take some pain killers and see a dentist asap. It was a good job you were smiling otherwise you would have needed stitches in your gob!".

Day of dance with Blackheath Morris.

It was a long journey down and we arrived at a very packed student bar. Our accommodation was some dressing rooms above a stage in the main hall. The tour involved a long bus ride out into Hampshire and I recall we were joined by Francis Shergold and his Bampton dancers. When we got back there was not much food left at the refectory but there was plenty of beer!

We were woken early on Sunday by a disgruntled jobsworth who told us "You shouldn't be sleeping in here" (or words to that effect). But it was all worked out somehow. More beer was taken by some of our company at breakfast

before we set off back to York. This caused something of a commotion a little when Geordie John exclaimed “ Bugger, he’s pissed on my camera” as someone failed to wake from an alcohol infused slumber and got a bit damp.

Wath Festival.

Ebor danced at Wath several times. I think the first time was 1975 as we had the old gold baldricks. The event was quite small mainly held at the rugby club in Moor road. We disgraced ourselves (although we did not know at the time) by leaving the procession and going into the George and Dragon for a last pint of Barnsley Bitter.

We returned the next year and were slightly better behaved!

I recall that the South Yorks magazine “Stirring” described us as “The excellent Ebor Morris”. That was during our early Longborough days.

Alford Weekends.

Ebor attended several Alford Weekends as organised by Grimsby Morris. The first one was in 1976 but only GMM danced at the August Holiday craft market. The first “proper” Morris weekend was Aug 1977 and based around the Half Moon Pub and craft Market. I recall that all the dancers had a feast upstairs in the Windmill Hotel before the Sunday evening flood lit dance display . It was quite daunting to see crowd 8 to 10 deep around the market place waiting to see the dancing! Morris (at Alford and elsewhere) doesn’t draw the crowds in such numbers these days.

This was also my first introduction to the produce from Bateman’s brewery as well!

I cannot remember the last occasion that Ebor were at Alford but I do recall that the side regularly participated in the cricket match on the Sunday afternoon (in the days when pubs closed at 2 O clock)!

Disclaimer.

Memory is a funny thing and events and dates can get confused. I am certain about the dates I was living in York and when I started with the Morris team. Other stuff probably happened but dates times and people could be flexible!