

How Perth Morris Men First Ruled the Waves...

Whilst there may have been a 'folk revival' in Australia in the 1970's there can hardly have been a 'Morris revival' as this was pure import stuff - however 'revival enthusiasm' was the style of the Perth Morris Men, Australia's first dancing side which started in 1973/74.

Within a few years there were several Australian teams some of whom made it across to the 1978 National Folk Festival where we had great sessions with the Sydney Morris Men including some memorable singing in the pubs between stands. It was here that we may have picked up the first whispers of Sydney thinking of applying to join the UK Morris Ring...a bit of a 'coup' someone gleefully confided...

The following year, in June 1979, I attended and danced with a scratch team of other Morris odd-bods at a Ring meet at Hull in Yorkshire and at the Ale was approached and quietly asked if I knew anything about the Sydney Morris Men who were applying for membership of the Ring. For the record I was supportive and waxed lyrical about our friendly rivals. However, only a week or two earlier when catching up with other Perth Morris members who were in the UK at the time we realised that we had enough members in and around the UK to form a side if only we could all get together in one place. After a few phone calls and further consultation with Dave & Angie Varey and then with Dave & Sophie Foster, we were able to target Saturday 7 July most symbolically at Perth Scotland...to '*meet on the South Minch at 10 am*'. The day was just meant to be a chance to dance unannounced somewhere 'because we had to' (tradition? - little did we know - read on!).

Bells, sticks and baldricks were provided by Dave Thomas, an original PMM who had subsequently returned to the UK and joined the embryonic Banchory Morris Men in Aberdeenshire. As Dave already had a PMM baldrick and the Banchory group couldn't make up its mind about colours, they ended up using the same purple and gold used by PMM. Additional baldricks were manufactured 'on the run' by Sophie as a bunch of us drove up from the south. Dave Foster bought an incredible pair of US marine bell-bottom whites especially for the occasion. Clyde Morell flew in from Dublin having somehow conned a student flight from Aer Lingus, and Dave Thomas brought down Noel Pritchard who had been a PMM while on sabbatical at UWA the year before and a couple of reserves from Banchory to boot. As luck would have it Roger Fiskin (a former PMM fiddler) was at a fiddle school at nearby Stirling and came across to join Angie Varey (accordion). The icing on the cake was provided by Phil Wilson who also brought his clogs and one man mummers play outfit and kit.

Our meeting on the Minch was slightly surreal...was this really PMM dancing in the UK? We spent about half an hour refreshing memories and oiling up the joints (Roger brought his own). We soon knew the Morris magic would work. When rehearsing Bean

Setting an unusual number of worms created suicide by surfacing in the dubbing zone of the short sticks - the dance thereafter being referred to as 'Worm Squashing'.

It was during these preliminaries that the press arrived unannounced. As the Minch is a large open grassy parkland visible to occupants of cars driving one of the main roads into Perth we had been spotted by the local tourist promotion officer. She enquired as to what this was all about and at first we thought this may be an official warning to move on but she quickly saw the twin city and promotional potential and went on to suggest suitable dancing venues. After taking a few pics she said that even though it was a Saturday she would contact the Provost (Lord Mayor) and hopefully see us later - we headed off into town with the promise of official blessing from the big man at the top...well, maybe... the proof was not yet in the pudding...

To cut a long story short, it was a fantastic day. The Provost duly turned up and watched the lunchtime stand, a Scotsman in a kilt wolf whistled at us from across the street and our adopted base, *The Twa Tams*, had a perfect beer garden fronting a busy pedestrian street like a mini amphitheatre. When the pubs shut for the afternoon (this was Scotland, 1979) the Provost invited us to the council chambers and the Beagle in all his regalia gave us the grand tour before we drank deluxe whisky with the Provost and signed the visitor's book.

There are two postscripts to this tale. The next day Dave Foster discovered a large stone plaque attached to a wall alongside the riverside pedestrian way. It referred to a 'band of 28 (?) Maurice dauncers' who danced before King James 1st (?) of Scotland' in Perth, with date. Having photographed this plaque I subsequently lost the slide. However, I returned to Perth Scotland for a mountain conference in 2005. Coincidentally, this meeting was opened by the current day Provost and at the reception I introduced myself and told him the tale. He invited me to his office after the conference and let me photograph the old visitor's book with our names in. Having searched in vain for the plaque I also discovered that massive floods had occurred when the River Tay breached its banks some years before. The plaque had either been washed away or possibly re-located to a safer point. Hopefully I'll track it down again or maybe find that missing slide one day.

So...there was a tradition of the Morris in Perth, Scotland, all along and maybe PMM can badge themselves not only as the first Australian team to dance in the UK but also as a true revival team after all...!

John Watson
Albany Western Australia
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Perth Morris Men -inaugural member 1974
Princess Royal Morris Men, Albany 1979- -founder