



● The Rumworth morris team in costume.

**Barry Bradshaw presents
the last in the series**

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF



A MORRIS DANCER

(or how I kept my mollies swinging)

A DAY IN THE LIFE of a Morris dancer is a day when you have to "shake a leg" — in more ways than one.

Because if you're not on your toes then not only is there a good chance that somebody else will be on them but the whole performance becomes pandemonium.

And I should know. Because on my day with the Rumworth Morris team I led them a merry dance. The result was often chaotic as I well and truly put my foot in it.

I felt like some leaping lunatic let loose from "The Generation Game" as I cavorted about Deane Church Memorial Hall in Junction Road, Deane. I don't know if there was a full moon outside but inside it was like a cross between a decathlon for the demented and a gathering of Contortionists' Anonymous.

It's hard not to get carried away (particularly by men in white coats) and indeed you're not supposed to keep your feet firmly on the ground. The idea is to relax

and let your limbs move freely to the music.

My limbs were receiving confused signals from my brain which suddenly found difficulty in differentiating between my left foot and my right foot. Whereas with social dancing it may be a case of slow, slow, quick, quick, slow, my experience of Morris dancing was hop, hop, help, help, hop.

Apart from five minutes' tuition on the polka step — the basic step of North-west Morris dancing — I had been left to play it by ear, or was it fear? So you can imagine my anxiety when faced with the countless other steps going under such quaint names as the Nancy Dawson and the Tickle Our Martha. The latter consists of a leaping across to the other side of the hall and it could also be aptly called the Eureka because that's how I felt when it brought to an

end the particular dance we were doing.

The Rumworth team have five dances in all — the Polka Dance, the Garland Dance, the Royton Morris Dance, Holme Chapel Morris Dance and the Deane Memorial Morris Dance.

Each dance will require a different Molly or sling, and this is where it gets technical so let me explain. A Molly is made of cotton rope and is not as flexible as a sling which is made of cotton waste and is twirled around with both hands. I find it difficult to describe them any better (and because this is a family newspaper I don't intend to) and suffice it to say that they look just the thing for a fertility dance.

Which is why, I suppose, dancer Ian Lomas got a telegram on his wedding day which read: "Keep your mollies swinging and may all your little ones be Morris men."

As well as the mollies and slings you have the short sticks which are decorated and the garlands which are cane hoops decorated with ribbons and which can, as happened with me, land you a self-inflicted whack across the

teeth.

For the purpose of rehearsals, which take place every Thursday night in the church hall, the members stay in their ordinary clothes. But when they perform in public, of course, the full kit comes out. And that means blue breeches, white socks, white collarless shirt, red sash, gold cumberband, bead necklaces, and hat decorated with flowers. On the feet are clogs (with irons on if they're performing outside or rubbers if it's indoors) and these can cost £25 a pair. The club is self-financed with money coming from engagements either through a set fee or a collection.

the summer in the Bolton, Bury, Wigan and Leigh areas as well as on the occasional trip to other areas of Britain. Their favourite performance is the one they put on in Bolton's Victoria Square three times a year, although their biggest audience must have been the 8,000 who saw them at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

They also perform once a year outside the King's Head pub which is just down the road from the rehearsal room. The King's Head is their adopted "home" and has a clog behind the bar to illustrate that fact.

It was to the King's Head that we retired after rehearsals and there that I spoke to the team's conductor, Geoff Hughes, who comes from Platt Bridge. Geoff, aged 33, is a teacher by profession and certainly keeps his team in line — with the aid of a whistle. He started dancing 23 years ago — "because it seemed like fun at the time" — and views it much more seriously than a hobby.

When the Rumworth group started in 1976, he says, the founder members were all good dancers but it still took



The preparation of the kit and the polishing of the clogs is done the night before an engagement and on the day itself they meet on the outskirts of town and proceed together to the venue. They perform regularly throughout



The polka step (which I attempt in the picture below right, with a sling in each hand) may be the basic step, but in this picture I introduce one even more basic — the out-of-step.

18 months before they were proficient enough to perform in public. That is a measure of the time and effort required of a Morris dancer to get everything absolutely right.



A novice will take six months to perfect one dance which would only last about five minutes. The group's very first rehearsal lasted less than that — in fact, it had only been going on for one minute in the upstairs room of a pub when the landlord complained that the ceiling was falling in and that they had to go!

It was then that they moved to the church hall. Membership, at an average age of late 20s, now numbers 14 and in addition there are the musicians — Alison on the drum, Charles on the fiddle and Alan on accordion.

Because of the effeminate image attached to the pastime — an image which even

Wigan miners abandon when seeing what discipline goes into performances — new members are slow in coming forward. The latest recruit had had a secret hankering to be a Morris dancer for the past five years.

So what does it take to be a Morris dancer? Says Geoff Hughes: "I suppose you have to be a bit of a show-off to perform in the costumes. But after that, you need a sense of rhythm and a certain amount of dexterity."

"The fun bits," he adds, "are that you can go on a procession and dance around policemen directing traffic. They don't know how to react."

When you get in the company of the Morris dancer you are soon in the grip of their enthusiasm and it's not long before they've convinced you that heaven is but a polka step away. Take Jim Fox, for example.

Jim, of Ashford Close, Harwood, enthuses: "Once I got involved, I found it took me over. It's family entertainment full of colour and sound. It does people good to be able to bang the floor and sweat a bit."

They certainly do that, which is why (they say!) they are regularly seen in a pub replenishing liquid that the body has lost. It's as good an excuse as any and after a day in the life of a Morris dancer

you need every excuse you can get.

It's a day of teamwork and of discipline, a day of perfect timing. In fact, you could say it all has to go like clogwork!



you

a feature for all
the family

Angela Kelly