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‘Ribbon-decked poverty’: costume and performance in South Midlands morris dance

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ABSTRACT

Cotswold or South Midlands morris dance is a rural proletarian dance tradition which was at its height from the 18th century to the mid-19th century in central England. This paper explores the materiality of two surviving elements of morris-dance costume – a pair of bell-pads held in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford. It emphasizes the ad hoc nature of their construction, and particularly explores the wider social significance of the use of ribbon, situating this within a wider practice of the mobilization of ribbon as a social signifier within the rural milieu in which this dance tradition was practiced.



KEYWORDS

Archaeology; dance; rural; England

One of the overriding challenges for the archaeologist, or indeed anyone concerned with understanding material culture in the past, is how to make the leap from a static material record to a dynamic reality. The study of dance through archaeology crystallises this challenge (e.g. Garfinkel 1998; McGowan 2006; Soar and Aamodt 2014). As a social phenomenon, dance is predicated on performance and movement through time and space. Yet, whilst the moment of performance is transitory, it is also an inherently material event. Dances take place at particular places, by individuals, often wearing specific costumes, to the accompaniment of music. Individual performances can be recorded in words and images, and wider dance genres and styles might be represented through art. The *UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage* recognizes that whilst the moment of a dance performance may remain intangible, dance occurs within, utilizes and leaves behind material traces (UNESCO 2003, I, Article 2). Dance is also a socially embedded phenomenon, through ritual, religion, rites of passage or simply entertainment. This paper explores a particular genre of dance – the English South Midlands (‘Cotswold’) morris dance through the lens of one element of this materiality, costume. It considers two surviving pieces of 19th century morris dance regalia, bell-pads, which are held in the *Pitt-Rivers Museum* in Oxford (UK). It considers how the costume elements relate to the dance, and also how they fit into the moral economy of the proletarian, agricultural participants of this dance in 19th century Oxfordshire at a time of rapid social change.

What is morris dance?

Dancing, song and music formed an important part of life for the agrarian proletariat of England in the post-medieval period (Chandler 1993a; Heaney 2023; Roud 2017). As far as dance is concerned, it

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is possible to identify three broad dance traditions in 18th and 19th century rural England: social country dance (in fairs and assembly rooms) (Schofield 2011; Sharp 1911), solo step dance (often competitive) (Clifton and Hulme 1981; Fisher 2021) and lastly, display dance. This latter is sometimes called 'ritual' or 'ceremonial' dance (terms that will be avoided in this paper as they bring particular connotations with them). Such dance consisted of performances by a small, defined group or team of dancers, usually distinguished from the audience by costume. Such dance could take place in a range of formal or informal social contexts and could be done competitively or for financial gain through solicitation of donations from the audience (Buckland 1983; Heaney 2023).

There are an overlapping series of such *display dance* traditions from England, including Border morris, Carnival morris, northern English longsword and rapper dances, North-Western morris, East Anglian molly-dancing and Cotswold morris dance – the latter being the particular focus for this study (e.g. Cawte 1963; Chandler 1993a; Corrsin 2021; Harrop and Roud 2021; Heaney 2023; Howison and Bentley 1986; Wright 2021).

Physically, the dance form appears to have been fairly consistent. The dance itself usually involved the dancers, almost always male, arranged in two parallel lines of three performing a series of simple synchronized moves combined into a sequence, usually with a basic 'verse/chorus' structure. Stepping and arm-movements were relatively simple, and usually the dancers would wave handkerchiefs or sticks. Originally, the music was provided by a whistle and drum, although these were increasingly replaced by the fiddle and concertina in the late 19th and early 20th century. This music was enhanced by the pulse of the small bells traditionally worn on the dancers legs. Morris teams or *sides* were usually recruited at the level of the individual village with six dancers drawn largely from amongst local agricultural labourers or those in similar proletarian employment. In addition to the six dancers, there would often be a 'fool', one or more musicians and occasionally other participants, such as a collector of donations or a bearer of ceremonial regalia.

This form of morris was confined to a limited area of the English South Midlands (Chandler 1993a, 1993b) (Figure 1). The southern edge of its distribution was largely marked by the River Thames, with the tradition's heartland in North Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire, but extending eastwards into Buckinghamshire and west to Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. Its origins are only peripheral to this study; however, chronologically, what we might broadly recognize as morris dancing had probably coalesced by the 17th century and was widely distributed across the region by the early 18th century (Forrest 1999; Heaney 2023).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the performance of morris was closely embedded within a number of specific customary contexts. The three most common of these were the range of feasts and ceremonies that took place on and around Whitsun (a church holiday occurring on the seventh Sunday after Easter, usually taking place in late May/early June), performances for local wealthy families and performances at Church Ales, which were social events to raise funds for the church. All three of these contexts could often overlap. A good example of these was the 'lamb ale' held at Kirtlington, to the north of Oxford (Manning 1897). Here on the Monday after Trinity Sunday (the first Sunday after Whitsun) a simple shed-like structure made from green boughs, known as the 'Bowery' was constructed on the village green; this acted as a focus for the celebrations, particularly drinking. A *lord* and *lady* were chosen from the villagers, and there was a procession around the village, accompanied by a man carrying a new spring lamb on his shoulders. They were followed by a *squire*, dressed as a fool or clown and carrying an inflated pigs bladder (essentially a simple balloon, used to bang on the heads of the spectators) who in turn was followed by morris dancers, adorned with pink and blue ribbons and rosettes. The dancing took place at a number of fixed points during the day; before each dance the Lord went round with a cake on his hat which was sold

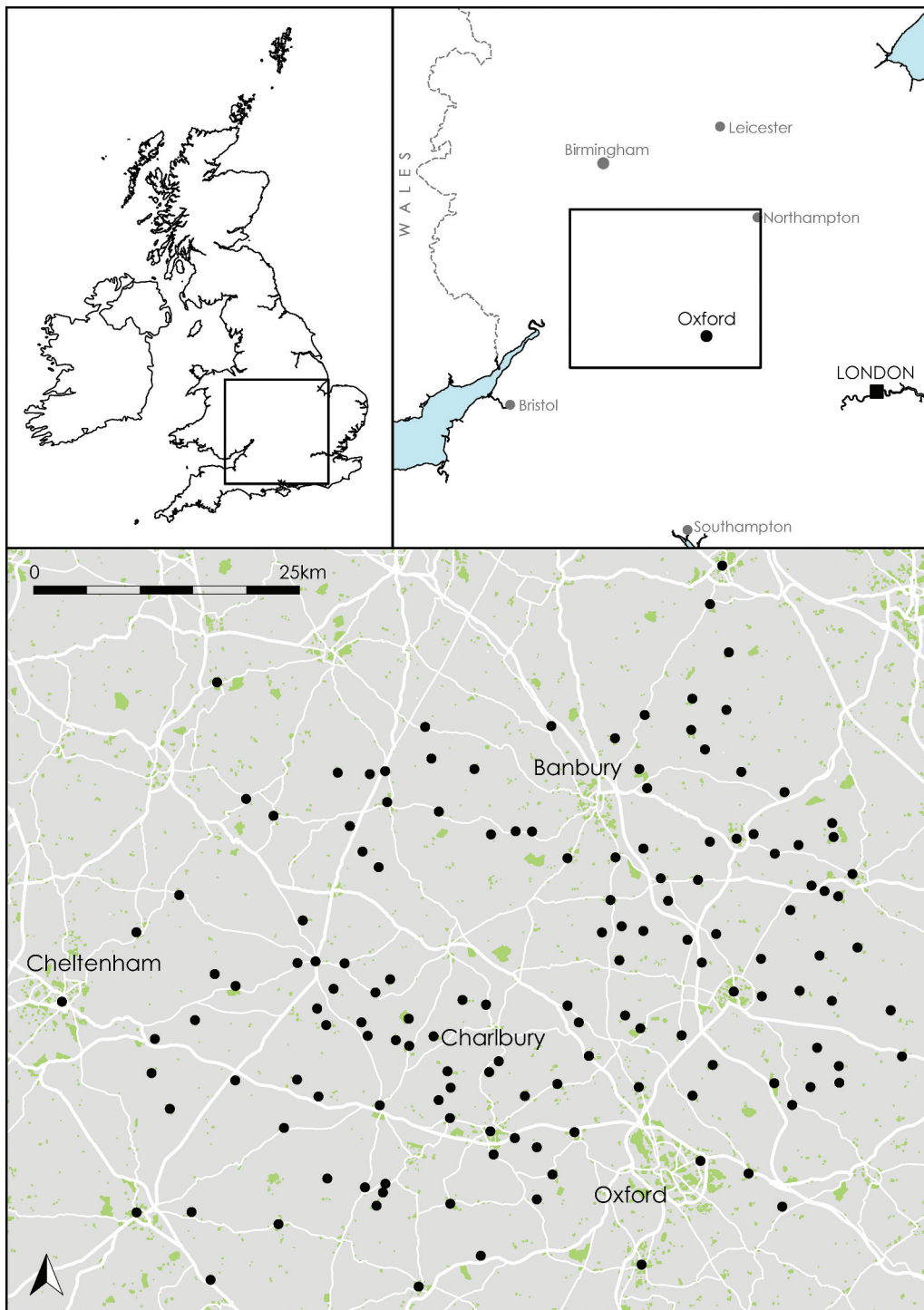


Figure 1. Distribution of recorded pre-20th century revival Cotswold morris dance teams (based on Chandler 1993b). Drawn by Janine Watson, Archaeological Services Durham University.

to the spectators. This happened for 3 days, the lamb was made into pie, and there was extensive drinking; the dancers meanwhile visited neighbouring villages to collect money. This touring of neighbouring villages was a common part of the morris tradition and also occurred frequently at Whitsun.

This was a context where a customary ceremony appears to have stressed social solidarity and enhanced relations between neighbouring villages. However, such rites could also be used to assert claims to access of common resources, particularly in contexts when such claims were underpinned by local customary traditions rather than formal legal prescription (Bushaway 1982; Seal 1988). For example, in the 16th century attempts by the villagers of Adstone (Northants) to resist enclosure of fields involved letting animals out to graze on newly enclosed arable land, accompanied by 'wild morris dancing' (McDonagh 2019).

Morris dance costume

The basic morris dancing costume was relatively well defined by the later 18th century. The antiquary, Joseph Haslewood, published an account of Whitsun celebrations in the Wychwood area of Oxfordshire in 1812 (but describing events from c.1774) (Heaney 2023, 145) and described the costume:

They usually wore a shirt closely pleated, buckskins, or white linen breeches, cotton stockings, and pumps. Six bells, fixed upon the outside of each leg, the whole dress tastefully adorned with ribbons and white handkerchiefs, or napkins, to use in dancing. (Brydges and Haslewood 1810–1814)

Not surprisingly, there was variation within this broad pattern. From the early 19th century trousers replaced breeches and were not always white. Haslewood's description does not mention headgear, but later photographs and descriptions show that it could vary considerably. Nonetheless, there are three consistent features of the ensemble: the predominance of white, the use of ribbons, rosettes and cockades to adorn the relatively simple attire and the importance of the bells (Figure 2). The latter, consisted of sets of anything from 6 to 30 small bells, usually described as latten bells (i.e. the same type of bell used on horse harness) attached to a cloth or leather base and tied to the lower leg. These composed a major element of the sonic experience of the dance. The bells would have accentuated the rhythm of the dance through enhancing the pulse of the stepping. However, bells have a wider symbolism and actively flagged up the wearer as a morris dancer. For example, at the Kirtlington 'lamb ale' any man wearing morris bells was admitted to the barns, which were used for socializing, for 1 shilling and got a plate of cake and a quart of ale (Manning 1897).

Morris bells in the Pitt-Rivers Museum

Little survives of the regalia and costume associated with the Morris dance tradition before its early 20th century revival (Petts 2018); however, a number of sets of bell-pads, worn on the lower legs, are still held in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, along with a selection other related morris material (Heaney 2008a, 2008b). This paper looks two sets of bell-pads coming from the adjacent villages of Finstock and Ramsden in West Oxfordshire. They were collected at different times and entered the museum collection through different routes. The Finstock bells were acquired by the Pitt-Rivers Museum from an antique dealer named J Bateman at Gloucester Green in Oxford in 1897, whilst the Ramsden bells were purchased by the Pitt-Rivers Museum curator, Henry Balfour in 1896 and donated to the museum in the 1930s (Heaney 2008a). Based on a contextual understanding of



Figure 2. Chipping Campden (Gloucestershire) morris side, photographed in 1896 by Henry Taunt, © the Morris Ring photo archive.

the morris dance history of the two villages, they can both be dated with some confidence to the mid-19th century, based on early informants and census data (Chandler 1993b, 166–68, 196; see Heaney for 1985 for full analysis of the evidence for the various morris sides in the locality of Wychwood).

Superficially, they are similar in appearance (Figures 3(a,b)); they are around 20 cm high and 18 cm wide and bear small pressed-brass bells in vertical rows of five and are decorated with ribbon and simple rosettes. However, despite this broad similarity, a closer scrutiny of the pad reveals a complexity in their construction and key differences between the two sets.

The first set, from Ramsden (*PRM* 1938.35.5.1–2), have as their base, thin dyed red leather. The use of leather as a base can also be seen in the now-lost pads from Taston (Oxon) made c.1840 and photographed by Percy Manning (Manning 1897, Plate IV). The pads are still mounted as they were when they were initially donated to the museum, with one pad facing out and one pad facing, meaning it is only possible to see the outside of one pad. The decoration consists of two ribbons crossed in a saltire pattern from corner to corner, with a series of very simple rosettes along the top and bottom of the pad. Although superficially looking very similar, close inspection shows these rosettes to have been constructed from a range of different textiles. The top left rosette is made from fragments of white ribbon and blue ribbon – the ribbons of each colour being different widths. The middle top rosette consists of two blue ribbons, whilst the top right rosette appears to be cut from a fragment of plain white brocade with one frayed edge and one selvage. Given this, it is possible that this is brocade ribbon cut down to size, alternatively it might be a scrap of a larger

(a)



(b)



Figure 3. Photographs of historic morris dance bell-pads held in Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford (a) bell-pads from Finstock (Oxon) (b) bell-pads from Ramsden (Oxon) © Pitt Rivers Museum.

brocade item. The crossing ribbons, although both the same colour are of different widths; one is clearly a length of ribbon but the other again whilst hemmed on one edge is fraying on the other suggesting its cut from a larger object. Of the bottom row of rosettes, two are made from a combination of white folded ribbon and a narrow blue ribbon, whilst the other is from a fragment of blue striped ticking, probably cotton. Ticking is primarily a fabric used for mattresses and pillows, emphasizing the range of sources from which material for this bell-pad was derived (Wingate 1979, 618). The bells themselves are small stamped brass bells of two parts, rather than cast horse bells. Their shanks pierce the leather and on the other pad, for which the reverse is visible, it is possible to see that they are attached by cord laced through the shanks. The top and the bottom of the pads are edged with red cotton twill tape of a type used for functional rather than display purposes, such as dress-making, apron ties and even in saddlery or upholstery (636). On the pad for which the reverse is visible, it is possible to identify fragments of simple blue cotton twill tape which may have been used to tie the pad to the leg.

The second set of pads, from Finstock, are different. Rather than having a square of red leather as the base for the pad, in this case, the entire item is comprised of strips of red cotton twill tape, which forms the vertical and horizontal frame of the pad, as well as the fastening ties. In total, each pad would have used c.2.10 m of tape. Like the Ramsden bell pad, the Finstock set had 20 bells on each pad. However, whereas all the Ramsden bells were identical, there were at least three differing designs of bell on the Finstock pad, although all were cheap pressed brass. One of these bell types was identical to that used on the Ramsden sets. The Finstock pads did not have crossing ribbons as decoration, but they did have three rows of simple rosettes. Unlike the Ramsden rosettes, which were made by crossing two strips of fabric, these were made from a single scrap of scrunched fabric.

The outside pair on the top row were made from scraps of blue, red and white cotton, probably roller printed whilst the central pair were made from plain white cotton. Three of the middle row of rosettes were made from what appeared to be scraps of white (possibly silk or satin) ribbon, whereas one used a scrap of blue patterned cotton. The same blue cotton was used in one of the rosettes in the bottom row; the other three were made from cloth decorated with pink embroidered flowers. In total, there are six different textile types on this small object, three different types of bell, whilst an inspection of the reverse shows the use of three different types of cord and two types of thread holding the item together.

It is clear then that these items are assemblages of re-used and re-purposed material. The majority of decorative components appear to be taken from materials that have either been recycled from clothing or from material left over as cuttings from bolts of cloth or ribbon used for other purposes. The leather base for the Ramsden bells is likely to have been a by-product of the glove-making industry that was so important for household economies in West Oxfordshire, and was carried out by women as home-based piecework (Leyland and Thoughton 1974). Indeed, the wife of the only recorded member of the Ramsden morris team was working as a glove maker in 1871 (1871 *Census*).

Only two components are likely to have been deliberately purchased. First, the red tape that formed the base of the Finstock bells and edged the Ramsden bells. Extrapolating from the measurements taken for the surviving Finstock pad, to provide the full morris side from Finstock with two pads each, the team would have had to purchase c.25 m of tape. However, this tape was relatively cheap; it was coarsely woven and never intended to be seen on the outer part of home-made garments or dresses. As such, its use was different from ribbon used for trimming hats, decorating dresses and putting in the hair. The other item that would probably have been purchased deliberately would have been the bells themselves. Even in this case, the presence of three different types of bell on the Finstock pads imply they were being drawn from diverse sources, and there may have been recycling from earlier bell sets.

Ramsden and Finstock

The neighbouring villages of Ramsden and Finstock, from which these bell-pads came, were just two of a series of settlements that stood round the edges of the Wychwood Forest in West Oxfordshire (Figure 4). Ramsden, the larger of the two villages, was conspicuously poor in the 19th century (Townley 2019, 215–48). The impoverished inhabitants were a mix of smallholders and landless workers. In the medieval period, Wychwood was a royal resource, although some of the fringes were owned by local lords, a process that increased from the 17th century (Townley 2019, 249–93). It was utilized primarily for hunting and a source of timber for the king and other owners. In addition to its formal management, the forest provided an important resource for the local population, who used it as a source of bird's eggs, nuts and berries, as well as firewood and sometimes construction timber. It also offered controlled grazing. Poaching (particularly deer) was also a source of income, with Ramsden being a particular hotspot for poaching in the later 18th and early 19th century (Freeman 1996). These formal and informal rights were regularly asserted through a series of customary events. Whitsuntide 'hunts' took place at nearby Burford and Witney, involving hunting deer alongside other activities, such as sports, including cock-fighting, backswording (a simple fighting game in which combatants try to draw blood using a wooden sword) and inevitably drinking (Howkins 1973; Manning 1897). Morris dancing also clearly took place in the context of these events (Heaney 2023, 227). Local Methodists attempted

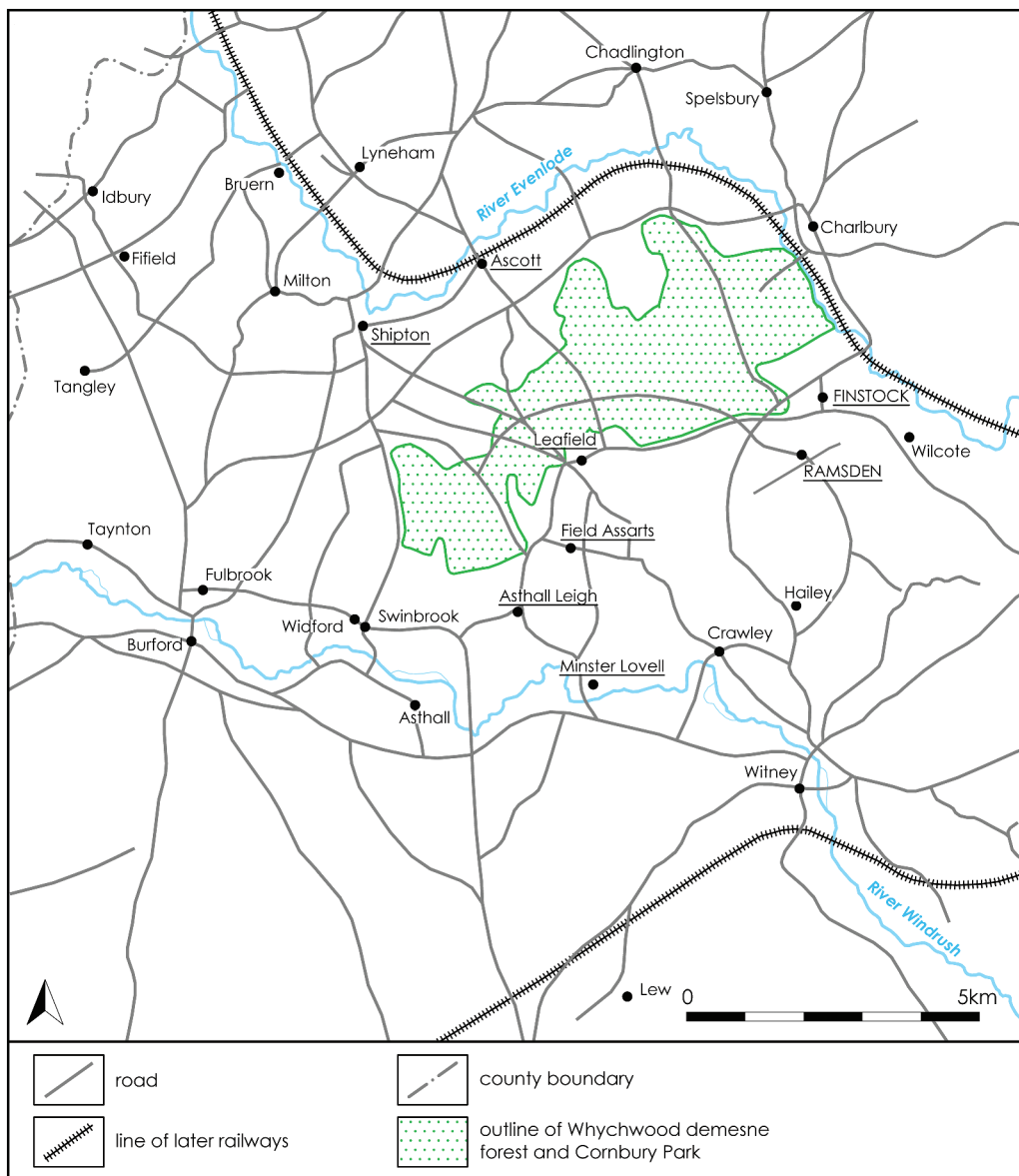


Figure 4. Wychwood Forest area in the 19th century. Placenames that are underlined had active morris-dance teams in the early/mid-19th century drawn by Janine Watson, Archaeological Services Durham University.

to replace such riotous revelry by setting up an alternative fair in the late 18th century, but this itself became notorious for disorder, leading to its suppression in 1855 (Townley 2019, 284). It too included morris dancing (Heaney 2023, 227).

For the rural inhabitants of early 19th century Wychwood their household economies could be characterized as an *economy of the makeshift* described as ‘the patchy, desperate and sometimes failing strategies of the poor for material survival’ (Tomkins and King 2003, 1). For many, selling their labour would have provided one form of income, but

financial and material support would have also been derived through Poor Law support. This supplemented wages and also served to provide clothing and other in kind contributions to rural family (Jones 2006). Resources derived legally and illegally from the exploitation of the forest would have provided a further way to support families and individuals. Many parishes also had formal charities, and there was a subaltern economy of mutual aid between families.

Yet, this complex and often *ad hoc* rural economy became increasingly threatened from the 1830s. The 1834 *Poor Law Amendment Act* restructured local support for the poor on a more punitive mode, particularly through the reduction of eligibility for relief and the funnelling of support through workhouses, although there was a corresponding emergence of network of mutual aid and Friendly Societies taking up some of the slack (Blaug 1963; Morely 2011). By the 1850s, another key plank of the informal local rural economy was threatened. The illegal dimensions of the exploitation of forest resources in Wychwood (poaching; damaging trees to cause windfalls, breaking down of fences) meant that there were increased pressures to clear the forest. A clear connection was made between the need to encourage a more 'economic' exploitation of the land and the problems caused by local informal use of woodland resources. Local commissioners noted the challenge of 'those forestall customs and casualties which present a ban to improved cultivation' (TNA IR 18/7776). The bulk of Wychwood was disafforested in the mid-19th century (1857) and largely converted into arable farmland (Belcher 1863; Townley 2019, 284). Local inhabitants were notionally recompensed for the enclosure of the forest by new common land, but this itself was rapidly enclosed. Combined with the arrival of the railways and the earlier impact of Poor Law reform, the 1850s saw a radical restructuring of the moral economy of the area, then exacerbated by the agricultural depression from the 1870s. On the ground, these social and economic stressors resulted in both a rise of rural emigration (particularly to Australasia) and an emergence of industrial agitation. Economically, the area was dominated by mixed arable farming, but there were a range of other industries, including quarrying, clothwork, and a burgeoning glove making industry, primarily structured through piecework and employed women and girls (23% in 1851: 31% in 1831) (Leyland and Thoughton 1974).

It is in this context that morris dancing took place in Ramsden and Finstock; they were just two of series of morris teams that were based in the villages and hamlets around the woodland fringe. The performers were exclusively drawn from a rural proletariat of agricultural labourers, artisans and tradesmen, and there was considerable overlap in membership of teams, with dancers and musicians often appearing in different teams at various points (Heaney 1985). Analysis of census data for individuals recorded as dancing at Finstock point to the side dancing until the early 1850s, with the Ramsden team probably having a similar chronology (Heaney 1985, 56). At least one description of the side from Finstock survives; Jesse Clifford of Charlbury (born. 1816) remembered seeing sides from Finstock and Leafeld dancing at Whitsun (probably in the 1840s) 'dressed in knee-breeches and white stockings; and six rows of little goggle bells ... tacked on red braid, from knee to ankle, adorned each leg; a white wand and a large silk handkerchief formed the equipment of the dancer' (Clifford 1892, 17). Trousers had more or less entirely replaced breeches by the 1830s, so the reference to knee-breeches by Clifford suggests that their use by morris dancers was slightly archaic. The reference to 'red braid' appears to correlate to the use of red twill tape on the surviving pad from Finstock. As well as performing locally, it is also clear that the side at least travelled to London to dance (Chandler 1993b, 166).

The connection of morris dance in Finstock with asserting rights to forest produce was certainly explicit in the early 19th century:

... the Morris is held by prescription, with a right of common, of a considerable extent, by the forest of Whichwood [sic]. The young men and maidens claim the right of procuring from the forest as much materials for the bower. (Brydges and Haslewood 1810–1814, 4, 335–38)

Later, newspaper records suggest that at least one of the known Finstock dancers was clearly contesting access to forest resources, both pre- and post-enclosure; Edwin Turner (b.1831) was convicted for both illegal cutting of underwood (*Banbury Guardian* 12/1/1854) and poaching (*Oxfordshire Weekly News* 18/1/88). Overall, these records of morris dance in Ramsden and Finstock point to a close connection with customary claims to forest resources, and the sides appear to disappear from the record precisely around the time that these claims are rendered redundant in the face of the enclosure of Wychwood and against a background of wider shifts in the rural economy.

Ribbons in context

In contemporary descriptions of morris dance, the presence of ribbon is noted repeatedly; and the bell-pads from Finstock and Ramsden, although simple, are decorated with ribbon and snippets of textile. But the use of ribbon to decorate and adorn was not unique to morris dance regalia. Indeed, ribbon was central to the ‘textilesapes’ of the 18th and 19th century. Rural England was a world replete with ribbon – it could be used purely for stylistic reasons, as an easy and economical way of dressing a bonnet or refreshing a dress. For poorer communities, even if purchased new, it was cheaper to decorate and adorn existing items of clothing with ribbons in various forms, than to purchase entirely new costumes. The key components of morris dance costume, ribbon rosettes and bell-pads, also had the advantage of being detachable and thus not permanently transforming clothing; one of the virtues of such decoration and adornment is that it was reversible.

The cheapness and ubiquity of ribbon also meant that its use became incorporated into the wider repertoire of festive and celebratory adornment in social contexts. Agricultural labourers would use ribbons to adorn their work clothes at fairs and other celebrations. Thomas Hughes’ account of a fair at Uffington (North Berkshire) in 1857 records a young carter ‘with his hat full of ribbons’ and others ‘in their white smock-frocks, with the brims of their break-of-days [hats] turned up in front, and a bunch of ribbons fluttering from the side’ (Hughes 1859, 163, 176). Ribbons were also worn by farm workers at hiring fairs to indicate that they had been hired by an employer: ‘When a lad was engaged, he used to deck himself out in all kinds of various coloured ribbons, to show that he had a place’ (Gooch 1940, *). Ribbons were also used to enhance and augment costumes for a mumming plays and related ‘visiting’ customs, as well as events such as May Queens. Flora Thompson’s fictionalized semi-autobiographical account of life in rural Northamptonshire in the 1880s writes of the May Queen celebrations comprising ‘girls and boys alike decked out with bright ribbon knots and bows and sashes’ (Thompson 1954, 220). In Bampton (Oxon), another centre of morris dancing, Percy Manning also recorded children being decked out with ribbons on May Day in the 1850s (Manning 1897, 308).

Ribbon could also carry very specific semantic messages, most obviously, the addition of black ribbon to clothing could be used as a sign of mourning (Taylor 1983). But ribbons were also often used as favours or markers of political affiliation, and expenditure on ribbons often formed an important expense in 18th and 19th century electoral campaigns, and they were

part of the vocabulary of early trade union activity (Navickas 2010). In the context of rural Oxfordshire, this can be seen clearly in the activities of the emerging Agricultural Labourers Union (ALU), one of the first labour organizations that engaged with the rural proletariat. For example, in 1874 a report from the *Oxford and Reading Gazette* on an ALU meeting in Steeple Barton (Oxon.) noted 'the men appearing in their best array adorned more or less with bits of blue ribbon, some of them wearing neatly constructed rosettes of that colour'. A report of the hiring fair at Banbury in 1872 mentioned the presence of 'sons the soil [who] wore the badge of the Labourers' Union – a blue band round their hats with the words in gold letters National Agricultural Labourers' Union – some had simply a bit of blue ribbon in their button hole whilst others sported blue rosette' (*Banbury Advertiser* - Thursday 24 October 1872). Another report of an ALU meeting refers to 'the badge of Unionism, a bit of blue ribbon' (*Banbury Guardian* - Thursday 12 September 1872, 2). Ribbon can thus be seen to have been part of the material vocabulary of rural costume. It had a practical utility but could also clearly be deployed in a semantically loaded way, with a particular association with celebration, festivity and protest.

Ribbon could be obtained in a variety of ways. Where morris dance was being actively commissioned by local landowners, there could be some considerable investment in the provision of ribbon and bell. Michael Heaney has unpicked some of the economics of 18th century morris dancing through analysing the accounts of several such festivities organized by local gentry (Heaney 1993, 2023). The accounts for a Whitsun ale at Churchill (Oxon) held in 1721 suggest a set of bells for a single pair of pads could cost 6d, a relatively modest cost (Heaney 2023, 179). The same accounts record that ribbon was purchased in advance on a sale-and-return basis. Later in the 18th century, records from Bicester (Oxon) record that the bells cost 19s 9d – a more substantial sum, but the expense was born by a donation, and the overall income from the Whitsun Ale record that a total of over £68 was raised. In 18th century, ribbon could be purchased in advance – for use as favours (badges indicating permission had been paid for to take part) (Heaney 1993).

In the mid-19th century, morris dancing was arranged as part of a set of spectacular celebrations for the coming of age of the heir to Richard Grenville, 2nd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos in 1844. A complete set of dance costumes (including new shoes) was commissioned from a range of local suppliers, with the bells coming from a nearby ironmonger and costing £10 10s (ten guineas) (Heaney 1993). Overall, the costumes for each team of six dancers came to c. £17 – a not inconsiderable sum, but a relatively small sum compared with the £100 spent on fireworks or the £164 spent on meat for the same even (Heaney 1993).

In these documented cases, ribbon was clearly being acquired in bulk, and in the latter case, it is known to have been supplied by a local drapers (Heaney 1993, 495). Yet, there were many other ways in which ribbon could be acquired, even for the rural poor. Fairs were also places where ribbons could be easily and cheaply acquired. Hughes' description of the fair makes reference to the stalls selling 'cheap ribbon' (Hughes 1859, 158). Cheap gifts, given and bought, at fairs were known as 'fairings' and the purchase of ribbon in such contexts 'could become steps on the way to a customary binding or promise of marriage' (Styles 2007, 315). An engraving of a fair in Newbury (Berkshire) dating to 1811 shows hats with ribbon cockades as prizes for a 'greasy pole' competition, and clothing, often adorned with ribbon, was also commonly put up as prizes at fairs (Styles 2007, 315–19).

Flora Thompson, also recounts visits from a pedlar visiting her Oxfordshire village selling 'coloured scarves and ribbons for Sunday wear' (Thompson 1954, 131). More unconventional ways of acquiring new ribbon are also recorded. In 1826 two days before Whitsun, a William Rolph, an attested dancer with a morris side in Bucknell stole 12 yards of ribbon, presumably for

his costume (*Jackson's Oxford Journal* 20 May 1826, p.3). It is also clear that ribbon, particularly that used by men for dance and performative purposes, could have been originally intended for other uses. Mummers from Lincolnshire co-opted ribbons intended for adorning work horses (Howkins and Merricks 1991, 188). There are also records of mummers and dancers borrowing ribbons from female family and friends (Wakeman 1884; Young 1817, vol. 2, 880–1).

It is also clear from the Ramsden and Finstock bell-pads that scraps of fabric and cloth could be recycled to act as ribbons, with many clearly being repurposed from printed and embroidered fabric that would have been used originally for women's clothing. The use of ticking (from bedding) and brocade (possibly from table clothes) indicates that not all of this fabric was derived from clothing. This kind of repurposing of textile was common. In 19th century, Britain rag-rugs were commonly made from snippets of older fabrics, as were patchwork quilts. Whilst patchwork using silk, velvet or satin was seen as a genteel activity, the same craft was seen as socially low status, when using cotton, calico, with a popular expert on textile crafts in the mid-19th century writing 'Valueless indeed must be the time of that person who can find no better use for it than to make ugly counterpanes and quilts of pieces of cotton' (Pullan 1859, 95). Nonetheless, it was a common craft amongst rural workers. A particularly fine example is a quilt made in Ascott-under-Wychwood (Oxon) (close to Finstock and Ramsden) by women connected to the 'Ascott martyrs', a group of women imprisoned in 1873 for engaging in strikebreaking activities aimed at labourers from Ramsden (People's History Museum, Manchester, NMLH.1993.495). Many of these women were closely related to men who belonged to the Ascott morris team (Chandler 1993b, 128–30; McCombs 2019, 89–121). Coming from precisely the same geographic area and social background as the Ramsden and Finstock dancers, this serves to emphasize the way in which textiles were repurposed and recycled in this particular social milieu, with people living lives of 'ribbon-decked poverty' (phrase from Thompson 1954, 225).

Our understanding of the processes of bell acquisition is less clear although they could also be acquired in ways other than purchase. Henry Radband, a dancer for the Bampton side, claimed that the bells he used had belonged to his father and grandfather, presumably implying they were at least 50-years old (Chandler 1993a, 131; Heaney 2023, 148). Some of the bells collected from dancers by Manning in the late 1890s reputedly dated to c.1830 and 1840; meaning they were believed to be 60–70 years old when acquired (Manning 1897, Plate IV, 4–7). Bells could also be passed between sides; a set of bells seen by folk song and dance collector Cecil Sharp at Ilmington (Warwickshire) had been bought by one of the dancers from a man named Hartwell one of the dancers from nearby Blackwell and were said to be 100 years old in 1912 (Chandler 1993b, 221). It is clear that bell-pads and bells could be held privately and passed on between dancers.

Back to the bell-pads

The bell-pads from Finstock and Ramsden clearly reflect this wider practice of deploying ribbon for decoration and adornment in social celebratory contexts, including morris dance. The pairing of bell and ribbon was a sensory combination that served to frame the dance as part of a wider realm of social customary practice in 18th and 19th century England (Seal 1988; Navickas 2010). However, they also present a challenge to the picture painted by Heaney's work on the economics of morris dance, which argues that equipping a morris team could require considerable investment and that the necessary materials would be purchased in one go to ensure a team turned out in costume that was both new and relatively uniform in appearance (Heaney 1993, 2023). It is clear, from the documentary

evidence he explores, that costs could be significant, and that these might be met either via patronage by local gentry or through covering costs via funds raised as part of the feast days and ales where the dance took place. Yet, these bell-pads provide an alternative narrative. The materials are eclectic and seemingly largely recycled. Some ribbon is used, but largely only in snippets, whilst other textile components, such as those used for rosettes, are clearly made from off cuts of re-used clothing and other textiles. When material has been purchased, such as the red cotton twill tape that forms the base for the Ramsden pads, it is cheap and functional rather than primarily decorative. The diversity of bell-forms on the Finstock pads imply they were acquired at different times, or at least through different channels, possibly even taken from one or more older bell-pads. The records of passing on and inheriting bell-pads also imply that there were a range of ways by which they might be acquired. Overall, these items are constructed through a process of ad hoc *bricolage* using what was available to hand, recycling textiles and other materials (Soar and Tremlett 2017), a contrast with the vision of new materials and consistent appearance implied by the textual sources. What might explain this seeming tension between these surviving objects and the documentary record?

There are perhaps two explanations here. First, is the question of how representative the surviving financial accounts for morris dance are. Are they reflective of typical patterns of costume acquisition or are they outliers? It is certainly possible that the investment in morris costume by a wealthy landed family for a special occasion may not represent normal strategies for funding dance costume. However, the evidence adduced from 18th century contexts connected to ales and feasts, perhaps a more typical context for morris dance in this period, still shows that acquiring equipment could lead to not insignificant financial outlay. It is quite possible that there was a dual economy, with new equipment being purchased for particularly important or significant events where dancing might take place, whilst in other situations dancers were acquiring or creating regalia in a more informal way. The latter, for obvious reasons, being far less likely to leave a documentary record.

An alternative perspective is that the heterogeneity of surviving bell-pads instead reflects a shift in the social context of morris dance and the changing moral economy within which the practice operated. The 1857 enclosure of Wychwood would have marked a particular rupture in the social fabric of the communities living on the forest fringe, dealing a profound blow to the bundle of communal formal and informal rights to forest resources and ending the associated customary practices, particularly the Whit hunts and Forest Fair, which would have provided a context for morris dance. This period also marks a wider push against a range of traditions and practices that had formed part of the social landscape in rural society. This could be a contested process, but increasingly local authority figures, particularly squires and churchmen, opposed the perceived social disruption, violence and drinking associated with such events (Howkins 1981). This often went hand-in-hand with the rise of the temperance movement, and the social events that did survive were often transformed. Increasingly, Whitsun and related celebrations were replaced by club feasts organized by village Friendly Societies (mutual aid organizations). These often took place on the traditional dates for the customary celebrations they replace, the Kirtlington club feast taking place on Trinity Sunday and the Finstock club feast occurring at Whitsun (Morely 2011, 86).

These club feasts were often strongly freighted with notions of 'respectability' antagonistic to the more vibrant and hedonistic aspects of earlier customary events. Whilst morris dance did take place at Club Feasts, it was increasingly moved to the margins, with sports and brass bands becoming more important (e.g. *Oxford Journal* 7 June 1856, 7). Friendly Societies certainly incorporated

ribbons and rosettes into their material vocabulary – and in least one case, ribbons in club colours were used for May Day customs (Manning 1897, 308), but new suites of material culture were also adopted, particularly painted banners and sashes (Morely 2011, 71, 141; Weinbren 2006a, 2006b). This served to distance such events from the traditional practices incorporating morris dance.

These local and national trends had a material impact on morris dance. It removed the social context in which such dance was generally performed. A corollary of this is that the moral economy within the morris teams operated was challenged. With the decline of local patronage by wealthy families and the ending of social fraternal contexts and structured opportunities for mutual solidarity, the economic underpinnings of the tradition was also restructured. It is perhaps in this context that we can situate the materiality of the Finstock and Ramsden bell-pads; the creations of a tradition that was seeing a profound shift in its social context and becoming increasingly reliant on a more erratic and inconsistent strategy for sourcing the material components of dance costume and regalia. Ultimately, by using these items of dance costume as a focus for discussion, it is possible to not only explore the social function of display dance in rural 19th century England but also contextualize the material strategies and moral economy that underpinned the creation of these unusual objects.

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