

## Morris Dancing – *Richard Death*



The Guild was treated to a spirited, informative and entertaining talk by Richard Death on Morris Dancing, a subject on which he has been a practising expert for years.

Unfortunately there is no written independent account of Morris dancing in medieval times though it must surely have been practised for centuries. Morris dancing is a traditional form of English folk dancing performed by groups of men or women. It has been danced for hundreds of years and passed down through the generations in the villages of rural England. The dances were usually performed at festivals such as May Day, Whitsun and Christmas. There are several theories as to the origin of Morris dancing. The name may refer to the possibility of the form of dancing coming to England from the Moors of north Africa; or it may have been called 'Moor-ish' because sometimes the dancers painted their faces black and people compared this to the dark skinned Moors. However there is not really

an accepted explanation of the word 'Morris'. It is most usually accepted that there is a north African connection via the French language, that being the dominant language for colonial reasons. In the wars of that era socialising was frequent among opposing sides. 'Courtly dances' were brought back by the forces of Henry V in the Hundred Years War. However the Portuguese word 'morisco' suggests another, maybe linked, source.

The dancers hold handkerchiefs in their hands, or sticks, and have bell-pads tied to their knees which make a loud cheerful rhythm as they dance.

In Salisbury in Whitsun week in 1477, there were Dancing Days on Thursday (Procession Day) and Friday (Frick Friday), at St Edmund's, St Thomas's and St Martin's churches (in groups of four teams), but no

special documentation. The dancing was not limited to men but included married women, servants, girls and boys. In 1497 there were similar mentions of Giant, HobNob and Morris Dances. The accounts for Winterslow church in 1563 include 'for the morys gere'.

Victorian puritanical taste, which gave no priority to enjoyment especially on Sundays, produced a slow decline. However in the list of dignitaries and societies taking part in a procession in Salisbury to celebrate the end of the Crimean War in 1856 Morris Dancers are shown in the list of participants.

Nowadays most Morris Dancing is performed by women and Richard showed us some nice clips of dancing in Bakewell, at the Brunswick Derby, by the women of Whitby and as a 'Skirmish' by Jools Holland.

Finally the various steps and footwork were demonstrated by Richard in person with audience participation, seated with consideration for the elderly producing great hilarity, a suitable ending to an enjoyable evening.

*Charles Villiers.*