Morris dance terminology

The Men of Wight Morris Dancers



A guide to basic Morris terminology

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why this book?

This booklet is intended to give beginners some clues as to what Morris Dancers are talking about and some guidance on general aspects of Cotswold Morris dancing. It does not cover all Morris steps or figures by any means; it only outlines the basics, so that if the side foreman says “hooklegs” for instance, you will have a good idea of what is expected.

There is a lot of learn but be assured you don’t have to learn it all in the first session – it’s taken most of us a good number of practices to get it! This booklet only describes the most common terms, the rest will be learned through practice of the particular dance that uses them.

When it comes to learning actual steps and movements then only practice will get the terms ingrained in your mind and muscle memory.

The information below is organised roughly into categories, first are the general terms used broadly in Morris, these are followed by explanations of the positions of a set, the steps and figures, followed by some general guidance relating to public performing.

1.2 History of the terminology

The original collectors of the dances (mainly in the late Victorian and the Edwardian eras) needed terminology to explain what they had seen when they published their collections. As could be expected, each person invented their own way of describing the steps and figures.

The first people to put together a consistent notation for the Morris were The Esperance Girls Club, under the leadership of Mary Neal in about 1906. The Esperance girls were the first group to start performing Morris having been taught by various traditional sides. Gradually over the years, more standardisation of movements occurred and abbreviations for use in writing dance notation came about. Most teams now-a-days use the terminology written down in what is known as "The Black Book" - (see later). Where possible I have given the standard abbreviations in the text.

1.3 The Diagrams

Dancing is a dynamic activity, but diagrams are static, so it's difficult to show movements in a diagram. Words are almost a bad and none of these give you a clue as to how the steps, etc, fit into the music. Despite these limitations, I hope you'll find this book of some help in un-ravelling some of the mysteries of Morris.

I've represented dancers in a number of formats: a sort of 3-D form to give an idea of positions, some birds-eye views and sometimes just numbers representing the set as seen from above to show movements. With my limited skills in this area you can only tell which way an individual is facing by looking at the feet! Don't worry, it will all make sense!

2 General terms

Side	The group who make up the team, in other words, another name for the whole team. A side can comprise individuals with different roles, e.g. dancers, musicians, the Fool, the Betty, etc.
Set	The group of dancers performing a dance are collectively known as the set. This also describes the formation of the dancers, e.g. a 6-dancer set, etc.
The Black Book	"A Handbook of Morris Dancing" by Lionel Bacon is a handbook aid to Cotswold Morris dancers, originally published in 1974 and updated several time since. It is vital to realise that the Black Book is a set of notations to remind experienced dancers of each dance across a large number of traditions; it is not a tutorial on how to dance Morris. It is not possible to learn how to dance Morris from this book but it is an invaluable resource for more experienced dancers to put together performances of dances that they may wish to learn. Even the Black Book does not cover all the known Morris dances and traditions. The book is available from The Morris Ring web site.
Traditions	Dances are grouped together under the names of the villages where they were first noted down. The tradition names we use now are an accepted definition that has evolved over time. Each tradition has its own distinctive style, which we try to preserve. Thus the Fieldtown tradition is the group of dances collected from Fieldtown and they have a flowing, elegant style. Headington has a more robust, powerful style, etc. The dances from each tradition usually have a set of common figures, i.e. that are danced in every dance from that tradition, with a different distinctive figure (qv) for each particular dance.

Processionals — Some traditions have dances that can be danced in a procession, i.e. as a set that moves forward continuously. These can be used as "getting on" dances i.e. to move the side into an arena, or in processions through streets, etc.

Jigs — Jigs are dances performed by one or two dancers only and not in a standard set.

Music — Each dance has its own tune that is generally unique to each dance from each tradition. The tunes we use are a mix of traditional, adapted and sometime newly composed.
The basic rhythms used are generally 4/4 or 6/8. The basic steps used (e.g. double step, etc) are used with all the rhythms but the main difference for the dancers is that the emphasis on the footing within the steps will vary with the rhythm.
The distinction of Cotswold Morris from other Morris styles is that the dances tend to be more athletic, with great emphasis on lift and height of the dance steps and flourishing of the hankies to make a showy dance. Therefore the music has to lift the dancers by an emphasis on the up-beat, and the tempo has to be adjusted continuously to allow, for instance, for the time that dancers are in the air in capers (qv).

Officers — Your team has three main officers who are usually elected annually:

1. The Squire who effectively runs the team, is responsible for choosing the year's repertoire and for running performances.
2. The Bagman who performs the role of club secretary, is the main point of contact for the team, organises events, publishes the year's programme and looks after the teams finances.
3. The Foreman who is responsible for teaching the dances.

Sometimes the team will have a treasurer who takes responsibility for finances instead of the Bagman.

Characters — A lot of Morris sides are accompanied by other characters when out performing. More details about these in a later chapter.

3 Positions and directions

This chapter looks at how the dance set is organised.

Positions. In a six-dancer dance the dancers are arranged in two columns of three. In this configuration the left hand column (as seen by the dancers) is headed by No. 1, with Nos. 3 and 5 behind him. The right-hand column is headed by No. 2 with Nos. 4 and 6 behind him. The dancers in the two columns are therefore known as the 'odds' and 'evens'.
Some traditions use 8 dancers, e.g. the Litchfield tradition, and the numbering follows the same rule.
The numbers are also referred to as 'positions' e.g. a dancer might say he is dancing No. 3 position.

Tops and Bottoms The location of numbers 1 and 2 is called the top of the set, and the location of Nos 5 & 6 the bottom.
The musician(s) usually stand at the top of the set, although this will depend on the type of performance and the location of your audience.

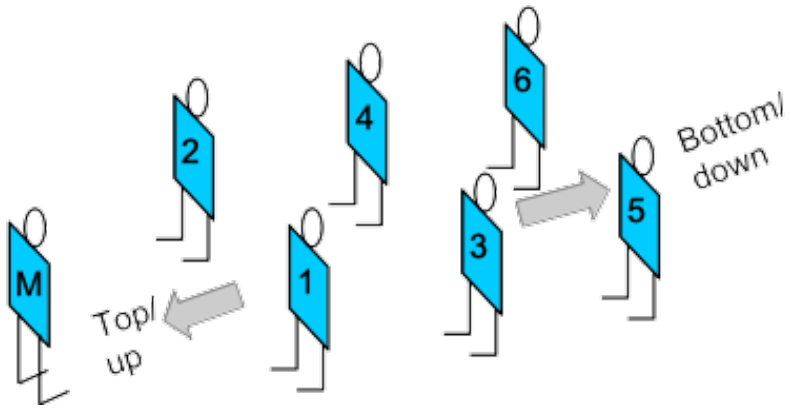


Figure 3.1: Set positions

Up and Down

Up and Down are directions of travel within the set, i.e. they are directions in which dancers move during a figure, so they have a slightly different connotation to the 'top' and 'bottom' of the set.
The direction in which the set is facing at the start of the dance is known as 'up', i.e. the end where Nos 1 and 2 are and normally where the musicians are standing. The 'up' direction is the direction of the movement, Likewise the other end of the set, where Nos 5 and 6 are, is the 'down' direction.

Face front

'Front' is one of the directions in which figures are executed. The term 'face front' is used to direct pairs of dancers to face their opposite partner other across the set, i.e. No. 1 faces No.2, etc.

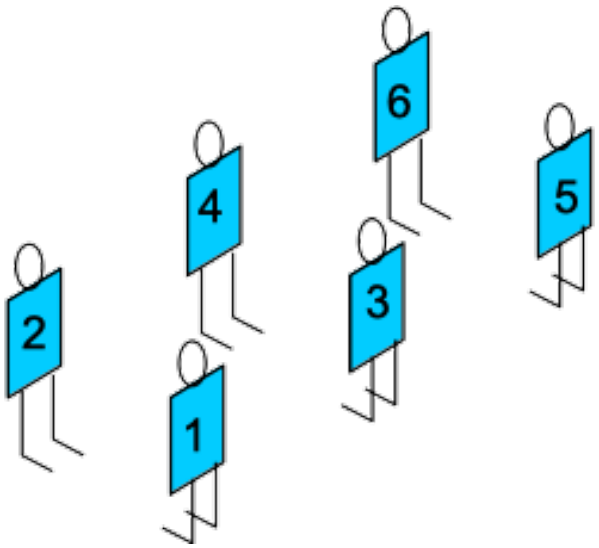


Figure 3.2: Face front

Inside and Outside foot

In all Morris figures it is vital to start on the correct foot. The reason for this is that every figure either ends in a turn of some sort or the next figure requires that you start on the correct foot. Starting a figure on the correct foot ensures that you can turn without falling over or having to put in a fudge step, which upsets your rhythm. The correct foot to start on varies according to the position in the set and the particular figure that is being performed - in other words it changes for each individual dancer throughout the dance. This sounds complex, but there are simple rules which make it easier to remember which foot is which.

One key to the correct foot is the idea of 'inside' and 'outside' feet.

In the 'foot up and down' it is relatively simple to remember: the outside foot is on the side of the body on the outside of the set. So in the foot up, the left-hand column (the odds) have their left foot on the outside and the right-hand column (evens) their right on the outside. When they turn to dance down (foot down) the opposite occurs, i.e. the odds will start on their right (new outside) foot.

Other figures need a little more thinking about. When facing front at the start of a figure where the next movement is to pass your opposite by right shoulders, you are going to move to the left. Therefore the outside foot is the left. In, for instance, a half gyp this is left for everyone in the first half of the figure, then right for everyone in the second half. If you think of yourself and opposite dancer as a separate group, then it becomes a little more obvious.

In the majority of dances, each figure will start on the outside foot.

The inside foot is clearly the one that is not the outside; there are some figures in some traditions that require inside foot start but they have to be learned specifically for that particular dance.

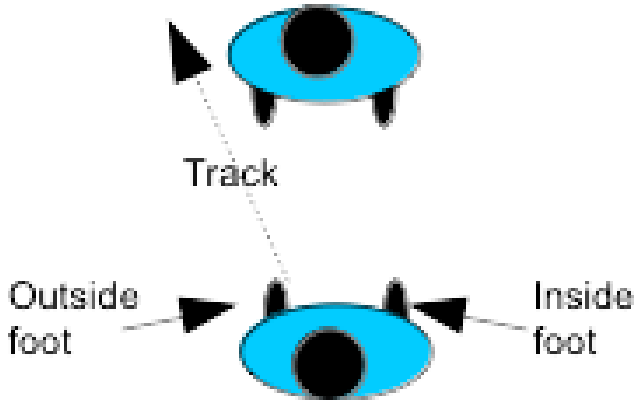
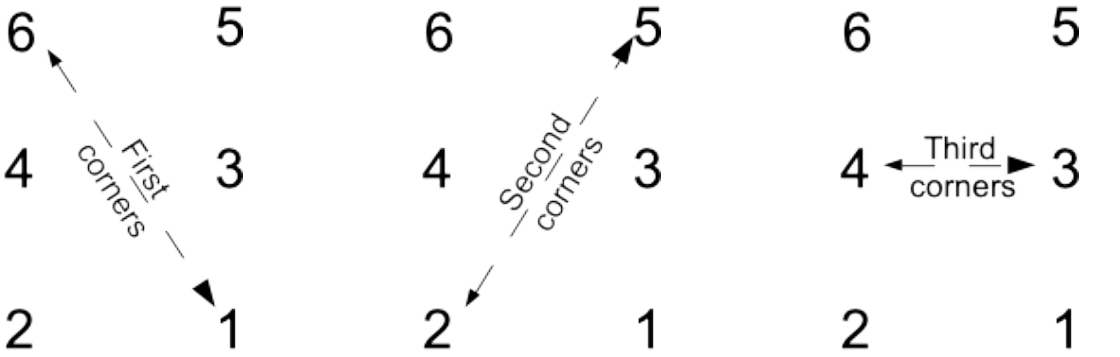


Figure 3.3: Inside and Outside foot

Corners

The distinctive figure of a dance is often danced by pairs of dancers diagonally across the set. These figures are referred to a "corners" where pairs of dancers take turns to execute the figure. So the “First corners’ are Nos. 1 and 6, Strictly speaking of course, 3 and 4 are not on a diagonal, but they are referred to as the third corner.



(a) First corners (b) Second corners (c) Third corners

Figure 3.4: Corners

4 Steps

The term "Steps" describes basically what the legs and feet of the dancer are doing - of course the body has to follow! A sequence of different steps will make up a figure (see the next chapter).

Steps are the absolute foundation to all Morris figures and dances so they are well worth practicing until they are automatic. There are plenty of videos on the web but be warned that everyone seems to have their own style which you will have to adapt to your side's style. One of the clearest is the sequence of videos at:

https://contrafusion.co.uk/MorrisTutorial.html.

Note that it is important to use the correct foot to start stepping - the starting foot starts vary with position in the set and the actual figure being performed - see 'inside and outside foot' above. However both Left and Right follow identical patterns.

Cotswold Morris has a springy nature, i.e. steps are performed on your toes as much as possible to get the Cotswold lift.

4.1 Basic Steps

The various Morris steps are the foundation that the dances are build on, so it's important to learn these first so they become automatic. There are only two types of step to learn first.

Double step or 4-step	The very basic step to learn first. This step is described as 'one, two, three, hop'. The figure being danced will dictate which foot the first step is taken on, e.g. L, R, L, hopL (followed by R, L, R, hopR).
Single step or 2-step	A less usual step used in a few traditions described as 'one, hop, two, hop'. The figure being danced will dictate which foot the first step is taken on, e.g. L, hopL, R, hopR. (See "outside and inside foot" later).

4.2 Other steps

A variety of other steps are used to make up various figures. A few of the most common are explained below. There are others specific to each tradition which will be learnt through instruction and practice.

Back steps, bs	Some figures have a short section where the dancer moves backwards and each tradition has a specific way of doing this. The basic back-step is the same as the Single Step explained above (one, hop, two hop) but the feet travel backwards. Other variations should be learnt as part of each dance.
Feet together jump, ftj	Usually follows a short sequence of double step and/or single step and is simply as described - bring both feet together with your weight on both, then jump with both feet.
Plain caper, P	The dancer simply steps from one foot to the other but doing so by springing in the air. The steps are at half the normal steeping speed since the spring takes the extra time.
Upright caper or Whole Caper, UC	Like the pain caper, the Upright Caper is stepping from one foot to the other at half speed but with the addition of each foot doing a hop as it touches the ground.
Fore Caper (Beetle Crusher), FC	the Fore (pronounced 'Forrey') starts with weight on the Left Foot and the Right Foot taps the ground. Next is a high spring from the Right Foot to the Left, followed by two plain capers. This leaves your weight on your Right foot ready for a second caper.
Right Toe Back, rtb. Left Toe Back, ltb	Right Toe Back is a bit of a mouthful, so the step is usually called rtb. rtb's are a slow step, i.e. they are danced to music which is half the normal speed. The step starts with the Right leg being extended behind the body (hence rtb) with Left knee slightly bent, then the Right foot is brought forward and lightly taps the ground next to the Left foot (weight remains on the Left foot). Next there is a hop on to the Right foot and a caper onto the Left Foot with the Right Foot lifted off the ground. If this is followed by a ltb, the the Left foot is immediately thrown back (which necessitates both feet being in the air at once!) and the sequence starts again with the Left foot leading.

Hook-leg, HL	Imagine kicking a football that is just in front of your leg and about half a metre above the ground. A hook-leg is like kicking that football with a hop as well to help things along, your free leg travels back and forward on a straight line. Step onto the Left Foot with the Right Knee raised, hop on the Left whilst swinging the Right leg as though taking a practice at kicking the ball. Hop on the left again whilst taking a complete kick at the ball. This step is often used to turn the body in which case the hops are used to turn and the swinging leg gives momentum to the turn.
Galley, G (left or right)	For a Galley Left, step onto the Left Foot with the Right knee raised so that the knee joint is at right-angles. Point the Right toe down slightly and describe two circles with the Right Foot whilst hopping twice on the Left. Galley Right is a mirror image.
Side steps - open and closed, oss & css	In side-steps the dancer only moves a short distance sideways. The basic form of this step performed using the standard 4-step. An open side-step Right involves performing a 4-step but stepping out sideways on the Right Foot. A closed-sidestep Right is again a 4-step but this time the Right Foot steps across in front of the Left then back to it's normal position for the hop.

5 Hands, Hankies and Sticks

5.1 Hands and Hankies

Hands	The hands in a Cotswold Morris dance are used very expressively, especially when using hankies. It is important to get hands to look right, as they are actually the things that audiences will notice most. Good, well-synchronised and bold hand movements can make the difference between a good performance and an indifferent one.
Hankies	Generally, when hankies are used, they should be used to emphasis the hand movements by allowing the hankie to flow outward from the hand as the arm is swung out or up. There are variations between traditions as to how the hankies are held and displayed, the most common is to hold the hankie by one corner.
Clapping	In clapping dances, hankies are not the norm but the hands movements are similar to those used with hankies but maybe not quite so extravagant.

There are wide variations of hand movement between different traditions and these give each tradition a distinctive style.



Figure 5.1: Hankies

5.2 Sticks

Sticks

In stick dances, it is usual for the distinctive figure to comprise clashing of sticks to a particular pattern. Sticks come in a variety – long, short and pairs.

When one stick is used, then one hand will be free most of the time, and is moved to balance the body. When not clashing, the sticks are held by the side, the position of the stick depends on the tradition being danced: either near vertical (tip at top) or near horizontal (tip forward) or sometimes tip down depending on the tradition.

To achieve good, consistent clashing, sticks must meet at near to right-angles, i.e. each stick is 45 degrees from vertical. This means that each dancer has to incline their stick towards their partner. This seems obvious, but if dancers hold their sticks nearly vertically or to one side and then their partner has to over-reach to achieve a clash and this leads to mis-timing with the music. Getting clashes to sound right need two things to happen, first to keep in time with the music and second, to synchronise with the other dancers. This requires a lot of practice and attention.

If there is one message to dancers using sticks, it is to listen to the beats of the music – dancers always seem to race the music when clashing sticks, which leads to a disconcerting change of pace when the dance figures resume.



Figure 5.2: Stick clashing

Tips	The end of a stick that is uppermost or forward when held in the normal "rest" position.
Butts	The end of a stick that is lowermost or backward when held in the normal "rest" position.
Shooting	A movement of a stick in which the dancer emulates shooting a gun. The movement comprises bringing the butt of the stick up to the right shoulder, pointing the tip at the opposite dancer and at the same time stamping one foot on the ground to make a noise.

6 Figures

By "figure" we mean a short sequence of steps and moves, usually 8 bars of music long, mostly the dancer will changes position but some figures may be danced on the spot.

The figures that make up a dance can be divided into two types, common figures and distinctive figures.

Common figures, CF: Each tradition has a set of figures that are used in most of its dances. These common figures usually alternate with a repeated figure known as the 'distinctive figure'.

Distinctive figure, DF: The figure which is unique to one particular dance and is repeated several times during the dance. This is the equivalent of the chorus in a song. You just have to learn the sequences!

Below are the most usual common figures; there are many more specific to each tradition.

Once to yourself, OY	Each dance starts with a musical introduction. The idea of this is to give the dancers a chance to tune into the rhythm and pace of the dance. During this introduction the dancers face up. The exception to this start is dances that start with a walk round – when the music starts with two notes at half tempo.
Foot up and down, FU and FD	The dancers perform steps moving forward (in the 'up' direction) as a set. After 4 steps the dancers step backwards to place (there are different ways of doing this for particular traditions). They then turn and repeat the movements facing down.



Figure 6.1: Foot up

Walk round, WkR
: At the start of a few dances, the set walks in a clock-wise circle as the first figure. This is often done while the dancers are singing. and these dances almost always start with just two notes of music.

Half Gip or Half Gypsy, HG
: A figure where columns face each other (i.e. face front), dance across the set to the opposite dancer position passing opposite dancer by the right shoulder and dance backward along the same track to original place. The diagram shows the track that No 1 would follow for the first half of the figure, and they follow the same track backwards for the second half.
Repeat passing by left shoulders.

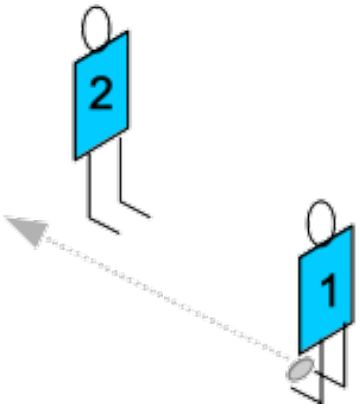
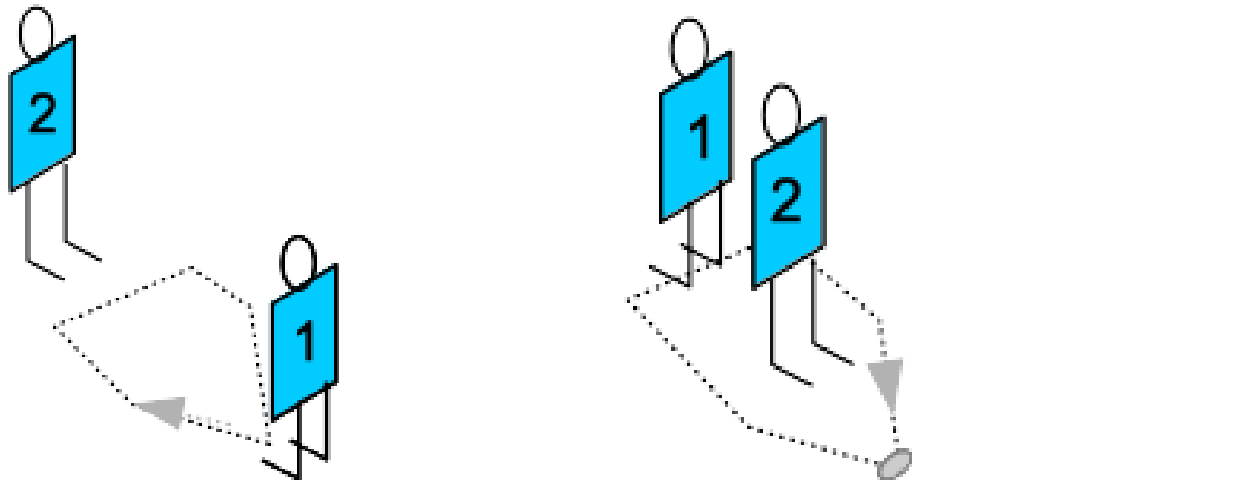


Figure 6.2: Half Gip - start and track

Back-to-back, BB	A figure where columns face each other, all dancer cross the set passing the opposite dancer by right shoulders, cross behind back to back (i.e. still facing in the initial direction) and return back to original place by dancing backwards. The first diagram shows the starting position with the track that No 1 will follow. The second figure is the half-way point as the dancers are passing back-to-back. Repeat passing by left shoulders.

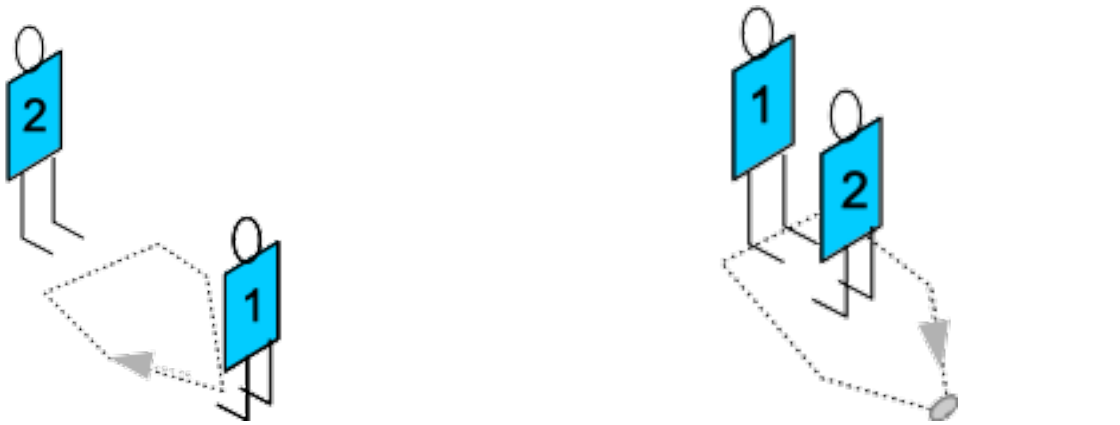


(a) Back-to-back - start

(b) Back-to-back - half way

Figure 6.3: Back-to-back

Whole Gip or Whole Gypsy, WG	A figure where columns face each other, dance across the set, round the opposite dancer passing by right shoulders (turning to face them throughout the move) and back to your own original place facing front. The first diagram shows the starting position with the track that No 1 will follow. The second figure is the half-way point as the dancers are passing face-to-face. Repeat passing by left shoulders. There are variations on body position and steps across the traditions.



(a) Whole Gip - start

(b) Whole Gip - half way

Figure 6.4: Whole Gip

Whole and half rounds, WhR, HR

Figures in which the whole set forms a circle and dances round. To start the figure, each member of the set has to turn to face the correct direction and the centre dancers (Nos. 3 and 4) move outward slightly to form the circle. Each position turns by a different amount to face the correct direction.
Each tradition dictates the direction of turn; in some it is the obvious, easy, direction, others require a more complex turn.
A 'whole rounds' is performed clockwise in one movement, i.e. without changing direction.
A half-rounds is really a whole rounds but the set stops half way round to perform a distinctive figure. The first half ends when the set is reversed (Nos. 1 and 3 at the bottom) and the set lines up in columns. After the figure, the rounds is completed in the same clockwise direction.

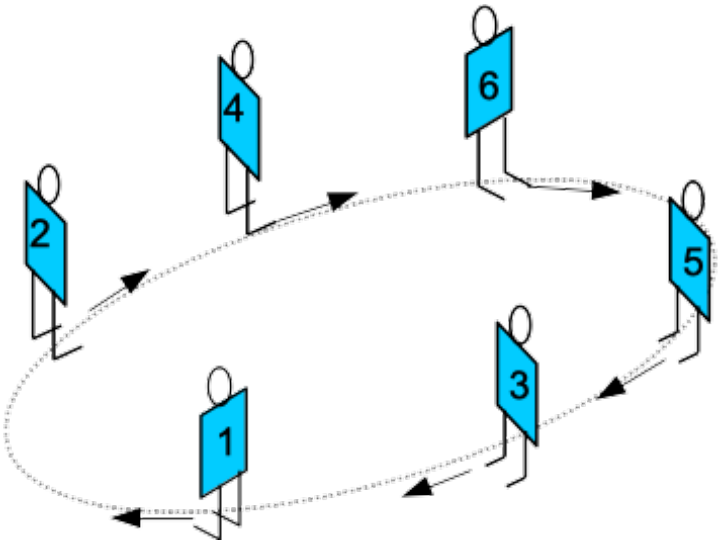


Figure 6.5: Rounds

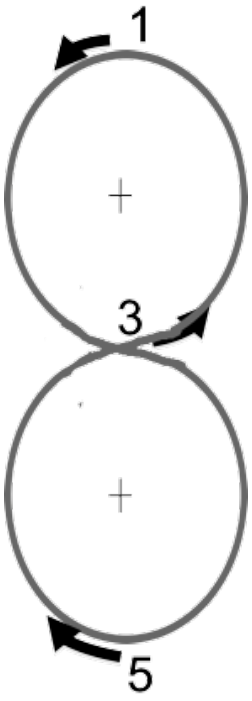
Whole hey and half-hey, WH, HH

Basically a figure-of-8 movement by the three dancers on each side of the set.

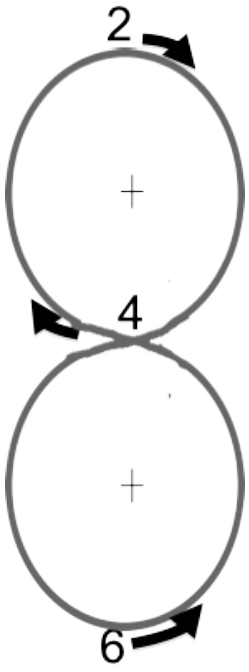
Imagine two points in the ground positioned in the space between dancers as in the diagram below: on the odds side between 1 and 3, 3 and 5 and on the evens side between 2 and 4, 4 and 6. The dancers move along a figure of eight shaped track that takes them round each point. In the figure below I have indicated the initial direction that each dancer takes (odds side only shown).

Each dancer follows the track all the way round back to their place, making sure you cross between the other two dancers each time you reach the middle. In some dances the hey is danced in two halves – the half-hey – where the dancers stop at their opposite positions to perform another figure (for No. 3 and 4 this is their original position).

The start of this figure varies slightly between traditions, sometimes turning in the obvious, easy direction, sometimes making a turn on the spot before moving.



(a) Hey - odds side



(b) Hey - evens side

Figure 6.6: Hey

7 Characters

Morris dancers are often accompanied by special characters, they play an important role in a performance when an audience must be kept amused between dances especially when the dancers are trying to get their breath back.

The characters no doubt have historical significances, but like the Morris itself, much of this is lost in the mists of time. To quote the Morris Ring: "Fools and Beasts have separate, and certainly older, origins than the Cotswold Morris they are more often associated with today. The medieval Feast of Fools celebrated the fools' status and tournaments and pageants of the time featured hobby or tourney horses as well as mythical beasts and they were thought ancient then! Not every side is blessed with these carefree characters, but many are fortunate enough to have provided a home for both and some exceptionally lucky sides have more than one of each."

These characters even have their own organisation and web site: The Illustrious Order of Fools and Beasts has been in existence in various guises since 1980 to encourage excellence in these ancient arts and provide a forum to develop the characters' skills.

Fool	A character typically carrying a bladder on a stick (although genuine bladders are impossible to get hold of now-a-days courtesy of the EU). Traditionally dressed in a smock, but many other costumes are used including clowns, etc. The role of the fool is to entertain the audience between dances as well as generally causing mayhem.
Beast	The beast figure is generally unique to the team, traditionally a hobbyhorse, but today everything from Seahorses (Men of Wight) to Dragons and Unicorns.
Betty	The Betty figure is traditionally a man dressed as a woman and usually outrageously so.



(a) Sea Horse



(b) Fool

Figure 7.1: Characters

8 Performing

There will be many different occasions when you are performing the Morris. The main occasions are likely to be the regular evenings during the summer season when the side is dancing for the public. Other occasions might be special performances at private functions when the side will be paid to perform, and occasions when you are performing with other Morris teams, such as Days of Dance or Ring Meetings.

The main point to remember is to present your side in the best way possible. Each situation needs a slightly different approach to the performance, as described below.

When performing to the general public the officers of the side are responsible for organising the display so that it appears entertaining, has variations in style to keep the audience interested and to ensure that the performance does not have too many embarrassing periods when nothing happens. As explained above, the characters that the side brings along have a special role in the entertainment of the audience and can fill the gaps. However, as a dancer, you will be required to follow some simple rules especially when you are not performing. These rule ensure that the audience can enjoy the performances without being distracted by unwanted behaviour of the team. There are only three simple rules:

1. Don't block the audiences view - think about the audience; where are they? If you are not dancing then don't stand in front of them and don't do things that distract.

   If you are not dancing, you are still part of the performance so behave as part of the team. Stay there for the whole performance and don't wander off to the pub and leave the Squire trying to assemble a set. Don't wander off to talk to your wife/husband/partner/next-door neighbour.

2. Look as though you are enjoying yourself, and when things go wrong (as they always will) just smile and make a joke of it.

3. Be ready to step up for the next dance, for which hopefully the Squire would have given some advance warning.

When performing at a paid gig, the officers will usually formulate a programme of dances in advance or at least check who is capable of doing which dances immediately before the performance. In these situations the rules above still apply, and often there will be a chosen location where you should stand whilst not dancing. Importantly you should be ready to move into your set without any delay when your turn comes.

When dancing at events involving other Morris teams, then the rules can be relaxed as long as you remember that you are representing your team. These occasions are great for learning new dances and seeing how everyone else performs the ones you know.

I hope these notes help you get started and that you enjoy the Morris as countless other people have done before.

========== END ==========