**Fieldtown Morris**

Like many other local villages, Leafield had a flourishing Morris Dancing side by the nineteenth century. Much of what we know of it is taken from the notes collected by Percy Manning, a local historian, in the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. The Field Town Morris had ceased long before then, but Mr Manning went round talking to men who had been in the Morris side and recorded their reminiscences. Slightly later Cecil Sharp recorded many of the Field Town dances.

**Dress and accessories**

The Field Town side dressed in box hats with single blue and red ribbons at the top and bottom, white cord knee breeches, white waistcoats, pleated Irish fronted shirts dressed with blue and red ribbons at the elbow and wrist and white stockings. Round their calves they wore bells; these were mounted on leather covered with red braid, 4 strips, each with 5 bells. On their heads they wore brown billy hats with single blue and red ribbons at the top and bottom. They carried handkerchiefs and sticks, about 2ft to 2ft 6ins long and nearly as thick as a broom stick, painted red, white and blue like a barber's pole, but the place in the middle left unpainted where it was usually held.

**The 1860's side**

There were six dancers; around 1860 they were George Steptoe (the Foreman), Jason Eeles, Thomas Pratley, Henry Franklin, Stephen Eeles, and Fred Shayler. John Williams was the fiddler. Originally the tunes had been played on a pipe and tabor. There were three additional members of the side: a sword bearer, a squire or Tom-fool and a ragman. Jonathan Williams, then nearly 70 years old, was the sword bearer in 1860; he carried a cake impaled on a sword and the treasury box. Another Field Town sword bearer was named Preston; he used to carry round the cake with a pen-knife stuck in it, ready to cut slices out, and he used to get people to pay so much for a slice. In 1860 the Fool was Richard Eeles; he carried a stick with a bladder tied to a calf's tail. He kept the ring for the dancers by banging people over the head. He was said to be very funny and used to run about and sing:

**"I wish my love was a field of 'taters And I myself a long-nosed pig**

**Then I'd rout from night to morn The devil of a bit I'd have to dig."**

**The Whitsuntide Festival**

The side practised on the village green every year for a few months before the Whitsuntide Festival. They went travelling round for a week or so and made lots of money. They danced at the Inn on Whit Friday, which was the club day and on Saturday they went round to all the principal houses in the village. On Whit Wednesday they went to Minster Lovell club-day and they also visited the keeper's lodge in Wychwood Forest. In the course of the week they also danced at Swinbrook, Asthall Leigh, Ascott-under Wychwood, Shipton-under-Wychwood, Charlbury and Lineham. Like other Morris sides, Leafield were antagonistic towards other sides who danced in what they considered "their area". On one occasion they came to blows with the Longborough side when the latter danced at Ascott-under-Wychwood, accusing them of poaching on Field Town territory.

**Other performances**

In addition to the Whitsuntide Festival, dance performances were held on other occasions. In 1847 at least the Field Town side danced at the Forest Fair held near Charlbury and in May 1849 they danced at festivities held in Leafield to celebrate the wedding of Lord Churchill.

Often Leafield met other sides in competition. They were regarded as one of the best sides in Oxfordshire. In about 1855 there was a challenge dance at the Pike Public House at Minster Lovell between the Morris Sides of Standlake, Ducklington, Brize Norton, Bampton and Leafield, when Leafield was victorious. They were not always as successful, however. Once they went to Eynsham to dance against the Eynsham side. They were much better dancers than the Eynsham men but they lost the contest because one of the men started off on the wrong foot! As a result they had to buy dinner for both teams.

**The dances**

The Field Town Morris dancers were noted for their vigorous and expressive dancing. They particularly valued the ability to get height off the ground. Henry Franklin reminisced that "They capered as high off the ground as that table, always as high as they could. Then the sweat ran down their faces; then they'd drink again, and the sweat ran down again!"

The local dances included Princess Royal and None so Pretty. There was also a dance called Jug by the Ear in which in Rounds each man caught hold of the right ear of the man in front of him. Other dances performed by the Field Town Morris included Step Back, Highland Mary, Banks of the Dee, Galley Out, the Country Garden, Shepherd's Hey, Truckles, Old Woman Tossed Up and Dicky Dear. Some of the side used to dance jigs to please the farmers, over two tobacco pipes crossed on the ground; one of the Syphers family was said to be particularly good at this.

**Decline of the tradition**

Morris dancing flourished in Leafield until the 1860's, after which it fell into rapid decline, as in other villages. The main reason for this seems to be the unwillingness of young men to participate in a cultural form increasingly regarded as rowdy, uncouth and lacking social respectability. Attempts were made to revive the tradition by training sets of boys picture dressed in white trousers and shirts. Sadly, they were taught the Headington tradition rather than the Field Town dances. After the First World War this tradition continued to be taught at school, but Morris dancing in Leafield never regained the heights of the mid nineteenth century. As George Steptoe, former foreman of the Leafield side, summed it up "the lads arter we gin out never seemed to get on with it".

A full list of known Field Town Morris men is in K. Chandler, Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands: A Chronological Gazetteer (1993), pp. 186-90.

**The Field Town Tradition today**

These days Morris dancing is no longer carried out in Leafield itself. Instead we have to rely on other local Morris sides, notably the Ducklington Morris who regularly perform at Leafield fetes, to keep the Field Town dances alive. Further afield, however, the Field Town dances are still learnt. In the Bay area of California, Field Town is the primary tradition danced by the Berkeley Morris, which is the oldest and largest team in the area.

For detailed information on the Field Town Morris, particularly the steps and dances, see web site Fieldtown at :  <http://www.opread.f9.co.uk/RoyDommet/Cotswold/Fieldtown1.htm>