

The eccentric English tradition that refuses to go quietly



[Kirsten Robertson](#) Published Jun 23, 2024, 2:00pm | Updated Jun 23, 2024, 2:54pm
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Morris dancing got a modern makeover after the war (Picture: Getty Images/Kirsten Robertson)

By day, Ant McKay was once the stereotypical image of an English businessman.

In 1991, he'd founded a telecoms business in the commuter town of Hemel Hempstead and the venture kept him extremely busy. Ant was CEO, worked long hours and, as a result, felt very stressed out.

That was until he found an unlikely antidote to his burn-out: swapping his suit and tie [for the bright bells and face-paint of Morris dancing](#).

'I had an incredibly stressful job and managed a lot of people,' Ant, 61, tells Metro. 'But every Tuesday night, come hell or high water, I'd tell myself "it's Morris dancing night, you're not staying late at work."' It was, and still is, the best stress reliever. If you're worrying about anything in life or work, it's all forgotten when you start dancing.'

One of England's oldest traditions, [dating back](#) to 1448, its name is thought to have been inspired by the French word morisque – meaning a dance. While the pastime has featured in plays, paintings and poems throughout history, it's also been a feature at Glastonbury, the 2012 Olympics, and more recently, at the 2023 Brit Awards, where Morris dancers [shared the stage with indie group Wet Leg](#).

Today, there are mixed, single-sex and [LGBTQ+](#) groups, based not only in rural England but in towns and cities as well.



Morris dance is believed to have started life as a form of Royal court entertainment (Picture: Getty Images/Linda Steward)



Ant McKay (left) and Mike Stimpson (right) spoke to Metro about their love for all things Morris (Picture: Kirsten Robertson)



Dancers from Datchet Border Morris, who paint their faces half red and half black, celebrate May Day on Windsor Bridge on 1 May 2023 (Picture: Mark Kerrison/In Pictures via Getty Images)

Ant explains that his introduction to Morris dancing began at the Herts County Show in 2002. A side [the technical term for a Morris dancing group] had performed in torrential [rain](#) but, despite the mud beneath their feet, Ant could see they were having ‘so much fun’, he was determined to get involved.

Fast forward 20 years and he’s now bandmaster at [Wicket Brood](#) – a ‘side’ based in Bricket Wood, Hertfordshire. Members may look intimidating with their purple, black and green outfits and large sticks, but they’re all smiles beneath the unusual costumes. There’s a ten-year-old and a 70-year-old among the group.

Ant adds: ‘The people who founded Wicket Brood wanted a side who didn’t take themselves too seriously. We don’t worry about precision or being perfect, because we know we aren’t. We get all sorts of reactions when we perform, but it generally brings happiness. I think people like to see traditions being kept up even if they’d never do themselves.’

Now retired, Ant spoke to Metro from Church Square in the pretty market town of Tring in Buckinghamshire, where Morris dancing sides from across England had gathered to mark 30 years of the Wicket Brood side. It’s a birthday party, of sorts, but also a celebration of [Morris dancing as a whole](#).

Morris dancing terms



Miserden Morris perform at sunrise on Rodborough Common in Stroud, on May 1, 2024 (Picture: Ben Stansall/AFP)

Like many activities, Morris dancing has a range of words and phrases that it uses in special ways. Here are just a couple

‘Side’ or ‘team’: the name for a Morris dancing group

‘Squire’: the leader of the group, who may call the dances or speak in public

‘Foreman’: the member who teaches and trains the dancers

‘Bagman’: used to be quite literally a person who carried a bag of kit and money, now typically translates to ‘secretary’

‘Ragman’: who organises or designs the side’s costumes, sewing sashes, making badges or attaching bells to boots

‘Ale’: the name for a private party where sides come together to dance

For generations, the pastime has adapted to changing times. Even after populations dwindled through the loss of men in Two World Wars, small sides still continued and weathered the storm, despite the very real risk of extinction.

These are stories Mike Stimpson, 74, knows inside out. The history buff performs with [Phoenix Morris](#), a side founded in 1952 at the Phoenix Folk Club in Finchley, North London. It has since relocated to the town of Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire.

Mike, originally from Shepherds Bush, tells Metro: ‘We’re keeping alive a tradition that’s been going in England for centuries. Ahead of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887, Morris dancers were in demand and loads of children were told to practice in school.

‘The sides went mixed [gender] in the eighties, before then there were people who didn’t think women should be doing it. We saw great numbers after that.

‘Morris dancing nearly died out during the Great War, but it managed to carry on. And we’re still all dancing today.’

It’s a tradition that has managed to find it’s way throughout the world, wherever the English have set foot. Countries such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia all boast their own sides. At village fetes, country fairs or even Pride events across the UK, you can still spot bells on shoes, sticks being brandished, handkerchiefs being waved or even swords being swung [in each kind of dance.](#)



A Morris parade through the streets at the Swanage Folk Festival on September 11, 2021 (Picture: Finnbar Webster/Getty Images)

Of course, it’s not been without controversy. A number of Morris sides had been known to [use ‘blackface’ as part of their outfits.](#)

However, after huge backlash from the public, membership has been blocked for any side continuing to use whole-face black makeup since 2020. In a statement from the Joint Morris Organisation, representing the Morris Federation, the Morris Ring and Open Morris, the group said: ‘We must recognise that full face black or other skin tone makeup is a practice that has the potential to cause deep hurt.

‘Morris is a unique cultural tradition of which we should be rightly proud. We want people from all races and backgrounds to share in this pride and not be made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable by any element of a performance.’

With around 770 teams in the UK, there are currently around 12,600 active members of the Morris community – and in 2023, for the first time in history, there were more women morris dancers in the UK than men.

Each region of England inspired its own style. For example Border Morris, from the English-Welsh border, is a style that is vigorous and looser compared to others. Whereas North West Morris is more military and processional in style. Costumes vary between sides with hats, jackets and face-paint all used to express each member's personality.

Would you try Morris dancing?

- Yes, it looks fun!
- No, it's not for me

At the Wicket Brood birthday event in Tring, cars slow down and cyclists stop in their tracks to watch the spectacle. One local leaves bags of Marks and Spencer shopping on the ground as she takes pictures, entranced on her walk home.

'It's nice when people clap,' Margaret Darby, a dancer with the [Jigs O'Marlowe](#) side, tells Metro after performing. She first came across Morris dancing at freshers week during her time at the University of East Anglia and now performs with her friend, Megan Taylor, and both their husbands.

Margaret continues: 'Sometimes people will look at us dancing and maybe think it's a bit weird. But then they end up watching a bit more, asking questions and enjoying it. It's a living tradition and people do find that interesting.'

'We like to describe Morris as "the family we choose". We have friends across the county, across the world. There's that thing at school, where you might have the sporty people, the smart people, the music people, and the people who are a bit leftover, who don't fit into a regular group. I'd say that's us, that's Morris dancers. We've all found each other.'



Neil and Megan Taylor (left) and Margaret and Pete Darby (right) in Tring (Picture: Kirsten Robertson)



The Handsworth Sword Dancers, performing their Yorkshire 'longsword' dance at Sidmouth Folk Festival 2023 (Picture: James Merryclough)



New Moon Morris describe themselves as ‘a joyful tribe’ of dancers (Picture: Kirsten Robertson)

Meanwhile, retired teacher Cath Fincher was introduced to Morris dancing by her former colleagues. She’s now been taking part for ten years and is squire [leader] at [New Moon Morris](#), a group based in Ivinghoe, Buckinghamshire. The group ‘dance out’ anywhere from festivals to pubs to museums and refer to themselves as a ‘joyful tribe.’

‘If you’ve got the right attitude and your side is friendly, you’ll be surrounded by loads of good people,’ says Cath. ‘There’s been a lot more in the media about Morris dancing recently as well, which makes it seem “cool”.’

Cath adds: ‘I have had some friends in the past who would tell me “isn’t Morris dancing a bit weird?” To that, I didn’t really care. Morris dancing is huge fun and hugely sociable.

‘And, besides, we all think it’s pretty cool already.’

Find your local Morris Dancing side by [clicking here](#)