

# THE RETURN OF THE VMM

## (TO ENGLAND, THAT IS)

*A report on the 1994 England tour*

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In 1990, the Vancouver Morris Men made their first pilgrimage to the "Mecca of Morris Dancing" -England. On that trip, we toured central/southern England and the Welsh borderlands, concentrating on seeing the Cotswold and Welsh Border styles of the Morris. We were fortunate enough to be admitted to the Morris Ring at Thaxted, Essex, becoming one of only two Ring sides in North America. After a year of recuperation, two years of talking about going back again and a year of planning, we made our second pilgrimage in August, 1994.

For the second tour, we decided that we would focus our attention on northern England and on seeing the North West, Rapper and Longsword styles of the Morris - and what a trip it was! We all met in Manchester and rented the two mini-vans which would take 17 men and two female guests on a circuitous route through Uppermill, Holmfirth, Chester, Mold, Fountains Abbey, Ripon, Masham, Goathland, Whitby, Monkseaton, Hadrian's Wall, Lanercost, Carlisle, Kendal, and back to Manchester in just 10 days! However, the tour started off with a "cock-up" when two of our numbers, Ian Lyn and his girlfriend Rosemary, failed to show up on schedule.

The tour commenced at the Saddleworth Rushcart Festival. For those who don't know, Saddleworth Moor is on the Pennines just east of Oldham. The Rushcart Festival brings together several Morris sides from all over the country, performing North West, Rapper, Longsword, Border and Cotswold traditions. In the days before central heating, fresh rushes were put down on the stone floor of churches at harvest time. Rushes were gathered from the local moor, and stacked upon a cart, which was then pulled from church to church to distribute the fresh rushes. The tradition is upheld at several villages in the north of England by the local Morris sides, and the Saddleworth event, based in Uppermill, is one of the biggest.

We were escorted to our "digs" - Castleshaw Centre - a restored farmhouse on the moors, with dormitory-style bunk beds and tame chickens, ducks, horses and pot-bellied pigs in the yard. This was to be our "home" for three nights. Having settled in, we went back to the Commercial Hotel in Uppermill for a massive "social", welcoming all the other sides as they

arrived from all over England. The whole event was very boisterous and fun, and the local womens side started off the weekends dancing with a display of Garland dances in the pub yard. However, jet lag took its toll on many of the VMM, most of whom retired relatively early to the Castleshaw Centre, where we were to experience the full fury of Eric and Harry snoring, an experience which, we were to find out, would be repeated nightly!

On Saturday morning we arose at 8:00am to the first of many ripping English breakfasts, during which Art complained about the snorers. We assembled at 10:00am in front of the Commercial Hotel where beer was being served in plastic buckets through the back door! At our first sight of the Rushcart, we realized that it must have been built by a master thatcher (not Maggie!) - it was a real work of art (not Art!). At 11:00am. the 24 Saddleworth Morris Men performed their signature dance in front of the Rushcart, resplendent in their bonnets of fresh flowers, flashy waistcoats and clogs. The rushcart had two pairs of long ropes attached to it - one pair to the front and one pair to the rear. The pairs of ropes had wooden cross bars - called "stangs" - on which up to six men were assigned to control the Rushcart. About 200 men were on the stangs, both at the front (to pull the cart) and the rear (to act as a brake on the downhill sections). The whole procession was led by a massed band of 30 musicians, and a "jockey" sat atop the 20ft high rushcart, with a brass kettle full of beer and a bag of sweets to throw to the children in the streets. It is probably easier to ride an elephant! This remarkably colourful cavalcade wound its way around the streets of several local villages, with occasional stops at local hostelries for loosely organized dancing (the VMM danced Cotswold, with two sets up) and abundant refreshments. The jockey had a hard time keeping on top of the cart due to the low branches of many of the trees, and by the time the afternoon arrived (and the men had consumed several beers), cart control started to get a little shaky! At one point, the bride at a local wedding reception ascended a rickety ladder to the top of the cart for a good-luck kiss from the jockey (apparently a local tradition), although the groom looked a little disgruntled at the number of hands helping her back down to terra firma! In the evening, a buffet meal was enjoyed at the Civic Hall (graciously declined by Art, who suspected a meat conspiracy). After a quick change, we all dispersed either to a ceilidh at the Civic Hall, or the various pubs for singing and music sessions. Late on the Saturday night, Ian and Rosemary finally arrived, having turned up 24 hours late at Vancouver Airport! (Love must have damaged his memory circuits.) And they actually managed to fly business class as well!



On Sunday, we were up at 8:00am, and once again Art complained about the snorers - apparently earplugs don't work: he can still imagine them snoring! He even went around the hostel shaking offenders! At 11:00am, the rushcart was dragged up a steep hill behind the Commercial Hotel, right on top of the moors. It was totally knacker! We arrived at Saddleworth Church, flanked by two pubs - the Cross Keys and the Church Inn. Some attended the special Rushcart Service in the church, where there was a splendid rendition of "Jerusalem" sung by the massed Morris "choirs". Others retired early to the pubs. After the service, there was a fabulous afternoon of organized dancing at the two pubs and outside the church (at which the VMM danced

Border, sang "Oh Canada!" and had our team photograph taken with the local vicar - see left). A highlight here was seeing the Britannia Coconut Dancers from Bacup. Another was the massed band - a record-breaking 52 strong - for a rousing final North West dance. Later in the afternoon there were various contests, including best musician, wrestling, clogging, worst singer and "gurning" (pulling the ugliest face!). The weekend concluded with another massive jam session in the pub. It was an amazing weekend, with an abundance of Morris dancing, focusing primarily on North West and Sword. The rushcart processions and Saddleworth's precision dancing were particularly memorable.

On Monday, August 22, we set off across Saddleworth Moor for a brief pilgrimage to Holmfirth - "Last of the Summer Wine" country - and, of course, we couldn't resist the temptation to sing "The Holmfirth Anthem". Then we headed west again to Chester for another overwhelming dose of hospitality. We met the Chester City Morris Men at the local Scout Hall where they were preparing a sumptuous buffet lunch. They sent us to the pub - "Telford's Warehouse" - which sits above the canal wharf. It is also a great venue for music, called "The Electric Muse", featuring a wide range of folk, roots, reggae and alternative rock performers, and jam nights. Tours of the city in open-top, double-decker buses had been arranged, while some of us wandered around the cathedral or the ancient city walls before our official reception by the Lord Mayor in the Council Chambers and the Mayor's Parlour. Another wonderful, home-cooked meal at the Scout Hall was followed by dancing at the Cross, in Chester's city centre. Chester City (North West), Mersey Morris (Cotswold), and VMM (Border) entertained a large crowd gathered in Chester's famous rows (medieval shopping malls on two levels). It was particularly interesting to see North West garland dancing performed by men! (The only other mens side we saw performing Garland dances were the Britannia Coconut men - but then, the whole style of the Britannia men is unique.) Then it was off to the pub for a jam session which lasted until well past closing time. Finally, we were

escorted to our accommodations in Mold, just over the Welsh border, where one of the Chester men owns a 33 room farmhouse, complete with oil paintings of ancestors on the walls. We were welcomed by his wife who had prepared a large supper which we enjoyed, swilling it down with copious quantities of whisky. In the morning, after an even more impressive breakfast (including black pudding), we set off for Yorkshire.

Our arrival at Fountains Abbey, near Ripon, was met by a cloudburst. We danced Cotswold at the Visitors' Centre, and were given free admission to the Abbey ruins where we had a team photograph taken (see right). Fountains Abbey is an awesome sight. The huge arches and spires contain examples of Norman and later architecture, right up to the Perpendicular Period. At its peak, it was not only a centre of worship, but also a thriving sheep market. It was partially destroyed by Henry VIII, and its ruins



have dominated the valley in relative silence for the past 400 years. We danced in front of Fountains Hall, an impressive mansion, with the Highside Longsword Dancers, who showcased the unique double-triangle sword lock from the local village of Kirkby Malzeard. We were escorted to Squire Ted's farm in Grantley for another marvellous meal, and enjoyed the views across the rolling hills as far as York Minster. In the evening, Highside metamorphosed into a North West side - Ripon City Morris Men - complete with amazing floral hats. We set off to dance at Ripon Market Square with another visiting side, Ebor, from York, who danced Cotswold. After the dance we witnessed the nightly ritual of the Ripon Hornblower, who used to guard the city before they had a police force, and then we adjourned to the pub for a banquet and a grand session. Ebor demonstrated the "Tasmanian Hornpipe" - dancing on the ceiling - and the Ripon men metamorphosed yet again into the Wakeman Mummers, and treated us to their hilarious Mummers play. Then we dispersed to our various accommodations, meeting up again for brunch at Ted and Ruth's farm the next day. Our visit concluded with a complementary tour of Theakston's brewery in Masham - the home of "Old Peculier", a wonderful brew, the imbibing of which encouraged us all to break forth and sing its praises.

We crossed the Yorkshire Moors, impressively coloured a deep purple due to the heather, eventually arriving at the tiny village of Goathland, near Whitby, in the late afternoon. The Goathland Plough Stots are a notorious sword dancing side who now boast none other than Eliza Carthy (daughter of Martin) as their musician. She is the first woman allowed to even play for the side; women are not allowed to dance, and over 100 of the 450 menfolk in the village know the dances. Goathland is a remarkable place, with sheep roaming free all over the

lanes. (The popular British TV series, "Heartbeat", was filmed there.) After a buffet meal in the Library (which the Plough Stots have made their permanent home), we settled into our billets, kitted up in our Border gear, and headed off to Beck Hole, a nearby hamlet, where the Plough Stots host a welcome party for all the Morris sides visiting Whitby Folk week. We were definitely the "odd ones out", being the only side in kit. However, we thought that, as the overseas visitors, we should put on some kind of show for our hosts, so we showed them a set or two of our Border dances from Pershore, Worcestershire. The "lock-in" in the Goathland Hotel later was quite alarming; more like a rugby club than a Morris outing (although some of the VMM may find it hard to tell the difference!) Famous English folk "loon" Les Barker made another surprise visit (we had already met him once during the tour, at Saddleworth). He even managed to quiet the crowd for a while and deliver his brilliant monologue, "Deja Vu". Also Norman, our Mumming Foreman, had his Mumming ideas straightened out by Ron Shuttleworth. After another very short night's sleep (as they all were!), we visited Whitby Abbey on a fine, sunny day, and even caught some outdoor Morris performances (including the well-known "quasi-molly" dancers, Seven Champions) at the Whitby Folk Week before driving north towards Newcastle, for the next stop on the tour.

Monkseaton Morris Men are a world-renowned sword dancing side, and their Squire, Peter Brown, is also an expert clogger. We arrived in time for a sumptuous buffet dinner in Peter's back garden and were then taken to the local Scout Hall, where we unloaded our sleeping bags. Then it was off for a dance at the Monkseaton Arms. A P.A. system was set up in the car park, and a large crowd of informed observers had gathered to see their local heroes and our motley crew of "colonial upstarts". High Spen Blue Diamonds (Rapper, danced to solo Northumbrian pipes) and Wesleyan Morris (Border) also took part in the proceedings, with Monkseaton and High Spen particularly impressive. We danced Cotswold, and joined Wesleyan for a mass "Dilwyn" (Welsh Border) before retiring to the pub for more music, dancing and revelry. The landlord got things off to a grand start by donating six bottles of Bells scotch whisky! Sleeping in the Scout Hall wasn't easy, primarily due to the side's principal snorers, who were once again in stunning form!

The morning of August 26th saw us driving along the military road adjacent to Hadrian's Wall, stopping at Housesteads Fort to walk on the wall and sampling the delights of the exposed countryside. The rain soon dissipated, and we enjoyed some sunshine and blustery conditions as we surveyed the fells and the Roman wall as it snaked its way along the escarpment of the Whin Sill. A pub stop at the delightfully named "Twice Brewed Inn", and a further stop at Birdoswald Fort were followed by another dance-out, this time with Carlisle Morris Sword & Clog, at the Abbey Bridge Hotel Pub, Lanercost.

The Carlisle men dance longsword, rapper and Bedlam-style Border, and the women perform excellent clog and garland dances from the Hebrides (Scotland), Isle of Man, and northern

England. It was very refreshing to see women dance for a change, and they did a grand job! The VMM performed a traditional Welsh Border set. The inevitable session in the pub proved to be one of the most enjoyable of the tour, and we were scattered amongst our hosts' cosy homesteads for the night.

On Saturday, one van took "the slow road" to Kendal via one or two lakes and tourist spots in the Lake District, while the other vehicle took "the fast road" (the M6) directly to the Kendal Folk Festival. We checked into the local Scout Hall, which we discovered we were sharing with the famous Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhoden's Tuppy Dish (the sides formed by John Kirkpatrick and Sue Harris to initiate men's Bedlam Border Morris and give a vigorous swagger to women's dances, too). Both sides danced at the festival that day, and the combination of nine days on the road with a bunch of guys, the gusting wind, and some very interesting lingerie made Martha Rhoden's a big hit with us all - Eric had to be physically restrained! In the evening, some of us went to the evening concert, which featured Chris Wood & Andy Cutting and Christine Collister, while others went direct to the ceilidh, with band "All Blacked Up" and caller John Kirkpatrick. At the concert, Chris & Andy delivered an exemplary set of songs, waltzes, and other tasteful stuff, but they didn't crank out any fast Quebecois reels to wake up our Squire. The late night "variety show" at the Scout Hall with Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rodens featured the worst rendition of "House of the Rising Sun" ever; it was so bad it was brilliant! Somehow, Art ended up wearing Martha Rhodens kit complete with underwear, and Eric had to be restrained again! We taught the Bedlams a Molly dance, and they tried to teach us one of theirs - but unfortunately they forgot it half way through! Time for bed.

On Sunday, August 28th, the last day of the tour, we danced three times, sharing the spotlight with the Bedlams, Martha Rhoden's, and our good friends from Carlisle. We did just enough to keep the rain at bay, and the Carlisle women were even more impressive in the daylight. After the dancing, the Vancouver Morris Mens "unofficial" band, Jiggery Pokery, delivered an impromptu set on the garden steps, and we drank the last of the Old Peculier in the Real Ale Bar. The evening concert starred John Kirkpatrick and Whippersnapper. What a show! A great way to end a memorable tour!

While some of the side made a quick exit on the Sunday evening, most departed on the Monday morning, some by train (to London) and some by car North and East to visit friends and family. However, after dropping off the rental mini-buses back in Manchester, a hardy "core" of four men made a bee-line for Ledbury, Herefordshire, to dance with our old friends, the Silurian Welsh Border Morris Men at Ledbury Fair. Needless to say, much beer was consumed and a great time was had by all.

Many thanks to the VMM Tour Committee and, above all, to our gracious hosts in "Blighty".

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