

[A Brief History of Morris Dancing in Grimsby \[1\]](#)

Although the Grimsby Morris Men of today stem from an idea in July 1967, with the first official dance-out later that year in December, the history of morris dancing in Grimsby started many centuries before. The first record to be found was written by the Rev. George Shaw in his 1897 publication the "History of Old Grimsby" when he quotes Washington Irvine remarking on a period before Evil May Day of 1517 saying :- "One can easily imagine what a gay scene it must have been, when the doors were decorated with flowing branches; when every hat was decorated with hawthorn; and Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, Maid Marion, the Morris dancers and all the other fantastic masks and revellers were performing their antics about the Maypole." On May Day at the turn of the 15th to 16th Century the Corporation possessed the privilege of cutting down a tree in Bradley Woods for the Maypole which would be carried by the crowd into the Bull Ring with great ceremony, decorated from top to bottom in the early morning for the day's activities.

At St. Mary's Church, in the very heart of Grimsby mid-way between the church of St. James and the harbour (now the River-head) known as the fishermen's Church, the churchwardens commissioned to be built a ship to stand in the church before the light belonging to the plough. This was in the year 1507, and the ship was to be used as a pageant on which the Guild of Seamen could perform their Mystery Play "Noah's Fludde" depicting the story of Noah's Ark. Each year the burgesses were required to go with the ship as a vehicle around the streets of the town in January on Plough Monday as the religious play was performed to much merriment, song and dance.

The 'Plough Ship' as it was known only appears in the histories of the two Humber estuary towns of Grimsby and Kingston-upon-Hull, where, in The Guildhall, there is a tapestry depicting the event. Although "Noah's Fludde" mystery plays were acted in more major townships like Chester and York the phenomena known as the 'Plough Ship' remains peculiar to the fishing ports of Hull & Grimsby. The Rev. George Oliver in his publication "Ye Byrde of Gryme" which follows a raven around the streets and times of Grimsby describes the pageant in greater detail including the paragraph

"The Plough Ship, if I remember rightly, was a combination of the ancient pageant and the morris dance; and Maid Marion and the Fool were considered indispensable appendages to the dramatis personae."

In 1527 Grimsby had its own town play "Holy John of Bower" and if investigations prove correct* it was a Mystery Play on the lines of John the Baptist with his feast day being 23rd June. At this time of the year it conveniently coincided with the Midsummer Watch of which details are not fully clear but with speculation were noisy, raucous affairs heralded by the local Drapers' with a procession in linear sequence consisting of a dramatic opening - a drummer, a giant, gunners, the Draper's banner, followed by local dignitaries, constables, sergeants, waits, and mace bearers all lead by the morris dancers to an area where the play would be performed.

When King Henry VIII and his new Queen, Catherine Howard, ventured on the king's only progress north during the winter of 1541/2 of parties, joustings and feasts he was magnificently entertained for three days and nights in Grimsby. Bob Lincoln, in his book "The Rise of Grimsby" Vol.I, describes the royal retinue's arrival in town, the formation of the procession which included the king's morris men, the welcome, the hospitality complete with the sumptuous banquet.

The next time morris is mentioned is to fast-forward 200 years to an horrific local earthquake. In his book "The Byrde of Gryme" the Rev. Oliver writes

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"in the year 1724 an earthquake, accompanied by a storm of wind and rain occurred between the villages of Laceby and Aylesby, which so frightened the Grimsby Morris dancers"

That year has been corrected to 1749 by an article in the newspaper the Lincoln, Rutland & Stamford Mercury dated 6th January 1750 where it states

"At Laceby in Lincolnshire and in several other parts of the county as well as of the counties of York and Nottingham the earthquake was felt very sensibly. And at Laceby aforesaid there happened this remarkable story: On Innocents Day in the afternoon several Morris Dancers came thither from Grimsby; and after they had danced and played their tricks, they went towards Alesby, a little town not far off; but, as they were going about five o'clock they felt two such terrible shocks of the Earth, that they had much ado to hold their feet, and thought the ground was ready to swallow them up whereupon thinking that God was angry with them for playing the fool, they returned immediately to Laceby in a great fright, and the next day home not daring to pursue their intended Circuit and Dancing."

(Holy Innocents Day falls on the 28th December each year and the confusion year is because the last Pope Innocent, ie. Innocent XIII occupied the post between 1721 and 1724)

Another two centuries passed before a morris team in Grimsby would be mentioned again. A founding member of the folk club which was becoming a successful venue and meeting place thought the next step would be to introduce a morris dancing side for a bit of fun. Enthusiastically several lads from the Grimsby Folk Song Club had a meeting, learned a couple of dances, visited pet shops for dog collars and cat bells, added braces and then arranged the first public morris dance performance for many years.

The Grimsby Evening Telegraph newspaper were there on that very first, but possibly only, night, and included a photograph and editorial in the 22nd December 1967 edition stating "Last night saw the first side for many years ". The Lifeboat Hotel (sadly now gone but not forgotten) on the Kingsway, Cleethorpes was the venue to welcome in the new era of morris dancers to the district. It was supposed to have been a one-off performance but such was the reception that after a couple of months and a slight change of personnel the Grimsby Morris Men were photographed in action, again by the Grimsby Evening Telegraph, performing at the south end of the Boating Lake, Cleethorpes. Since those early days, the side has danced around the country, starting with Sidmouth in 1968, followed by Thaxted, Warwick, York, Derby, etc.

From the mid-1970's a reciprocal European exchanges have been enjoy and a special relationship established between Grimsby Morris Men and Seelze in Germany who have just celebrated their 60th Anniversary. Over the 42 years - 1967 to 2009 - there have been 108 members of the Grimsby Morris Men, sometimes enough men to field two teams, at other times hardly enough to continue, but always cheery, committed and optimistic that the spirit has shown us through the decades.

For more and fuller information there are now booklets available, for information and research only, at Grimsby Central Library, North East Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln Archives, and deposited with the English Folk Dance & Song Society.

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