

# A Guide for Morris Side Officers

## What's this, and who's it for?

This Guide is a collection of ideas and resources to help with the running of a Morris side / team (side in what follows). Some of it is already published material, some of it may be new. It has been compiled with Morris Ring sides in mind, but many of the ideas are relevant to any Morris side.

More particularly, these notes are aimed at a Morris side's officers, whether those are simply a Squire and Bagman, or involve other titles or tasks. Officers work on behalf of the side and all its members. Some of their tasks are easily specified, others rather more nebulous, but it is on the voluntary efforts of its officers that much of a side's success and happiness depends.

This Guide is not intended to be read from end to end. All the sections are aimed at helping a Morris side function well. Some deal with the practical issues of keeping the side happy, others with recruitment, and some with obligations.

Membership of the Morris Ring brings benefits but imposes a few obligations. These may be expressed differently, but come down to expecting members to sign up to the principle of good fellowship, and to avoid doing anything which brings Morris into disrepute. This Guide is not intended to be a rule book, or to impose new rules, or to promote some imposed idea of 'best practice'. Each Morris side is different, and each is independent. What works for one side may be irrelevant to another. However, we do hope that some of the ideas will be useful to sides facing change or difficulties.

We should mention here that other sides, and your Morris Ring area rep, can be very helpful if your side needs advice or runs into trouble.

### A note on vocabulary

In general, we've used 'they' in both singular and plural senses rather a specifically gendered term. However, I have also used the traditional forms of 'Squire', 'Foreman', 'Bagman' while fully recognising that many sides will use other words ('Fore' for instance). In doing this we do not attribute gender to the office holder or imply a judgement.

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## The sections

### 1. Who are we?

Silly question? Perhaps, but if you are thinking about publicity or improving recruitment it's important to have a clear idea of what your side is about – its niche in the Morris world. All sides have things in common: aspects such as friendliness, comradeship, good exercise etc, but it's useful to think about the features which add up to giving your side a distinct identity.

These might include:

- style of dance and traditions done
- traditional or progressive approach to Morris? New dances or strictly according to the book, a new approach to traditional dances, or a mix of everything?
- week-ends away / festivals, or mostly pub dance outs, or all of these?
- gender mix, age mix, general diversity of membership?
- singing / pub sessions, or just music for dance?
- anything else which is special to the side's approach?

Knowing where you are now is a necessary starting point to marketing your side, and for reviewing options for development and change if you need or want to. If your side is flourishing it's good to pin down what makes it successful.

Of course, a side's current niche may be restricted by not having enough members – *'we used to do XYZ or we would like to do ABC but we don't have the people'*, but for a side in difficulties, knowing what you think you can offer is still an important start.

It's worth asking new members what it was that attracted them, and also to ask other sides what they think your side stands for and is good at.

### 2. Officers and tasks

A side needs people who will do the 'heavy lifting' in a number of key areas: teaching, organising programmes, managing performance, dealing with paperwork, looking after money, writing publicity etc. There is a range of tasks that need to be carried out, and someone needs to take responsibility for each of them.

Traditionally those tasks would fall to a Squire and a Bagman, with the Squire leading the side, teaching and managing performances, and the Bagman looking after money, bookings and other

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admin tasks. In practice most sides also appoint one or more Foremen to manage the teaching during practice, and many have a separate Treasurer to deal with money matters. Other officers might include a Senior Musician, a Publicity Officer, a Safeguarding Officer etc. Of course, actual titles may differ.

Although 'job descriptions' are rarely written down it is important that individuals know what they are responsible for, so that things don't fall between the gaps, and to avoid conflict. Most tasks are self-explanatory, but some are less clear cut - the Squire's role in particular.

### The Squire

needs to be a combination of leader, diplomat and counsellor. As **leader** of the side the Squire has to ensure that performances are good, and to keep an eye on how all the side's tasks are being carried out. As **diplomat** the Squire has to be aware of the mood of the side, especially of emerging conflicts, and to find ways to ease difficulties. As **counsellor** the Squire will have a concern for how others are doing, not just as members of a Morris side, but for their well-being as individuals.

The Squire will need to liaise effectively with the other officers and to deal tactfully with role overlaps, letting others get on with their tasks but supporting them where necessary.

An example of this is the **relationship between Squire and Foreman**. It's rarely as simple as saying 'Foreman teaches and Squire leads dances': they have to work together, and some things such as deciding on dances to practice are best done through discussion. There are overlaps too in the roles of **Squire and Bagman**. Both need to be involved in working out event commitments to take on, and in communicating with members.

Each Squire brings their own style to the job, whether that be highly consultative or quite directive. Somewhere in between is ideal. Morris is a voluntary activity, so an overly firm management style may not go down too well. But at the end of the day the Squire needs to have the authority to decide what happens.

### Ideas on recruiting new officers

Every side needs to plan for the day when replacements will be needed. Even people who have the time to spare may feel intimidated by the tasks involved, especially with the Squire and Foreman roles which need experience and confidence. And the last thing a side needs is having to replace several officers at the same time: succession planning is necessary.

Ideas which could help include:

**Get newer members to take on responsibilities:** divvying up smaller tasks (looking after kit, or the side's risk assessment, or looking after a new recruit for example) introduces people to the idea that everyone can contribute, and can also uncover talent. It's good to involve other members during dance outs (talking to the audience between dances, helping collect etc), and can ease the burden on the Squire.

**Get less experienced members to call dances during practice:** being at number 1 is one of the more intimidating things to get used to. Trying it out during practice gets people used to what's involved.

**Providing support:** knowing that there's (discreet) help available to the new officer (for example with calling dances) can make a big difference.

**A culture of involvement:** Sides in which members are involved in decisions find getting people to stand for office easier than sides which are led by an autocrat.

**Letting new officers get on with it:** there's nothing worse than having former office holders disapproving from the sidelines, even if mistakes are made: hearing the old Foreman mutter '*I wouldn't do it like that*' is highly demoralising!

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**Term limits:** some sides limit how long an officer can serve. This can foster a culture where everyone knows that they have to take a turn, but what happens if no-one is willing to stand? One to get whole side agreement on beforehand.

## 3. Keeping the side happy

A happy side is a healthy side: it tends to keep its members and attracts new ones more easily. Here are some assorted thoughts on what people say keeps them happy.

- Communications are good and we all have a say in what the side does
- Our officers strike a good balance between leading and consulting
- Our repertoire includes dances ranging from simple to tough: experienced dancers and beginners are catered for
- We get on well with neighbouring Morris sides and other dance groups
- We have roots in our local community
- We put on a good show when we dance in public
- The side has a shared sense of purpose
- We're good at helping newcomers learn
- Our practices are well-led and purposeful, and we rarely have to cancel
- Practices include dances for all levels of expertise, and teachers are patient with slower learners
- We're able to commit to a decent number of outside events
- We socialise outside practice / performance
- Tensions between people rarely last
- We make an effort to include partners in social events
- Our musicians support each other well.

But conflicts can arise in any organisation, and keeping the peace is one of the Squire's key roles.

Sides rightly place a great deal of emphasis on getting on together well: and consensus is better than doing things by majority voting unless there's no alternative. A side may decide that it is better to avoid change if some members will be upset by it, even if it may affect the side's survival. So long as the issues are clear and have been fully aired, deciding to do nothing in order to avoid conflict is an understandable decision.

"I'll resign" is a potent threat, but may need to be faced if the alternatives are worse.

## 4. Documentation and Legal stuff

Most (all?) sides are simple 'associations' in the eyes of the law. They don't employ people and they don't have enough income to attract tax. However, there are still regulatory frameworks which need to be considered, as outlined below.

Some are likely to require a side to fill in forms, write documents etc, and it's one of the jobs of the officers to see that this is done. The Morris Ring website (<https://themorring.org/>) gives advice on a range of relevant topics – most are to be found under the 'For Sides' section. That can save much time, but we would caution against just adopting a Ring policy (or one from anyone else) without checking to make sure it is appropriate to your side.

You are likely to need:

**A constitution** – If you want to set up a new bank account you will be asked for your side's constitution, and drawing up a constitution ensures that you have forestalled possible conflict over matters such as who can vote in meetings, how the side's money is handled etc.

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A constitution does not need not be lengthy, legalistic or too detailed. There are a range of standard things to include (see also <https://www.morrisfed.org.uk/for-teams/constitution/> ) but it is vital that it is true to your side's own situation, and you don't need to cover all the minor details.

One word of warning, don't be more prescriptive than you have to be. You want to strike a balance between enough detail to run the side but not so much that you lose the flexibility to change in future or to deal with unexpected events.

**Risk Assessment** – You probably have this already. It is likely you will get asked for one for some gigs. Your policy needs checking from time to time to make sure it is still OK, and you should make sure that new members know about it. The Ring website provides guidance at <https://themorrisring.org/sides/risk-assessment> .

**Public liability insurance:** One of the benefits of Ring membership is that it provides sides with 'Public Liability Insurance'. The law about liability if something goes wrong is complex, but insurance is a major safeguard. It won't protect you if you do something which is clearly negligent or reckless, but forethought and common sense will help you avoid those situations. From January 2025 membership also includes Personal Accident Insurance for side members (aged between 16 and 79) for accidents whilst dancing with the side.

**Safeguarding:** As well as the protection of children and vulnerable adults (CVAs), the happiness of all a side's members is a most important part of the glue that binds a side together. The Ring's Safeguarding advice covers both aspects and is well worth checking. See [https://themorrisring.org/files/advice\\_on\\_safeguarding\\_for\\_ring\\_member-sides.pdf](https://themorrisring.org/files/advice_on_safeguarding_for_ring_member-sides.pdf) .

There's no requirement to have your own written policy (though we strongly advise you to have one if your side includes CVAs). You should however have thought about the issues, have someone in your side who keeps a watching brief on such things, and make sure that any key points (e.g. on how to deal with a concern about 'abuse') are known by all the side's members.

**Equality law** came into force in 2010, and extended the law regarding discrimination to private associations, thus covering most if not all types of Morris side. The law has not been fully tested in the courts, so some of its implications are uncertain. The Ring website holds a summary of points to be aware of. The key message is to treat everyone even-handedly. It does not prevent a side from restricting its membership, provided that is clear and is done fairly.

**GDPR** If a side holds records of personal information in any form (which could be as simple as a typed list of members' addresses) the General Data Protection Regulations apply, giving certain protections and rights to the individuals whose data is kept.

[https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/general\\_data\\_protection\\_regulations\\_1.pdf](https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/general_data_protection_regulations_1.pdf) contains the Ring's own GDPR policy, and also provides a template that sides might care to use to check that each member consents to their data being held.

**Performing rights license:** If you play any music in public which is subject to copyright you need a license from the Performing Right Society (PRS). Fortunately, your membership subscription to the Ring includes PRS cover.

**Performing and collecting in public:** When dancing in public you may need to get permissions from landowner, though it is reasonable to assume this is given in circumstances such as dancing at a pub pre-arranged with the landlord.

But if you are using public spaces 'owned' by a local authority you may find it necessary to ask. Many are likely to consider on-street Morris as a form of busking and many don't require a license for that so long as you are not causing nuisance. Morris dancing and its unamplified accompanying music is exempt from regulation of entertainment in the Licensing Act 2003.

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If your event involves obstructing the public highway, as is likely with a street procession, you will definitely need to obtain permission in advance. See <https://themorrisring.org/sides/traffic-management-planning-morris-processions> .

If you are also collecting money the situation can be more complicated, **especially if you state that you are collecting for charity**. See <https://themorrisring.org/sides/public-collections-and-morris-dancing> .

## 5. Financial matters

This section looks at aspects of banking, and getting and spending the side's funds.

### Banking

There's nothing to stop a side keeping its funds in cash under the Bagman's mattress, but practically that's only feasible if they also use their own bank accounts for situations where cash won't do. That gives a real danger of muddles and mix-ups, especially if your side uses a card reader. It's better for the side to have its own bank account!

All aspects of banking have become more complex over the years, partly as a result of 'compliance' issues, and partly because some banks no longer welcome small organisations' accounts. Points to consider if reviewing banking:

- A local branch? Could be important if you need to pay in cash, see someone with a query etc
- Charges / interest. Some banks provide free banking, others will charge a small organisation for paying in
- Online banking. What's the bank's reputation like for balancing convenience and security?
- Signatories: dangerous to have only one person with access (people do fall under busses), but cumbersome to require two signatories for everything. Do new signatories have to go to the bank in person? That can be a real pain if there's no local branch.

The October 2023 Ring Newsletter (<https://themorrisring.org/files/docs/bagmans-newsletter/bagmans-newsletter-no-132-october-2023.pdf> ) explains the new need for unincorporated bodies (which includes Morris sides) to register with the **Trust Registration Service** (TRS). There are penalties for failing to do so, but the main concern is that banks will be expected to check registration in order to keep providing an account. A pain but necessary to comply.

### Getting money in:

For most sides this is a mix of paid events, collections and subs.

**Paid events:** Relatively few sides will perform for free, unless it's for a favourite charity or for their own community. How much to charge is a matter of experience, depending upon location, who's asking, travel, availability and so on - £200 is our side's starting point for a 'commercial' engagement such as a wedding.

**Collections:** Some sides don't collect while performing but most do, and sides which collect can often avoid the need for subs. Effective collecting is another skill: some members enjoy collecting and are good at it, while others hate doing it. If your side has a star collector, it is well worth getting them to talk about how they do it: the patter they use, how to deal with a moving audience, avoiding getting button-holed etc. That might encourage others to have a go. While providing a good performance is very important (see Section 7) whether you collect or not, it's certainly true that a good show generates a better collection.

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Bear in mind the warning in Section 4 about collecting for charity. If you tell people that you will give the money to charity, or even that some of the collection will go to charity you may fall foul of the rules. Safer to say that you collect to cover expenses, though you could also say that the side gives money every year to charity – just so long as you don't imply that some of the day's collection is earmarked for XYZ good cause.

Finally, if your side collects and has not yet got hold of a card reader which enables people to donate with the swipe of a card, you're missing a trick. Sides which use them report that the average donation has increased several-fold: pounds not shrapnel. For advice contact your area rep.

**Subscriptions:** Whether your side charges a subscription, annually or per practice, is up to you, knowing how much you expect to get in and how much the year will cost (practice hall hire can be a major expense). Does charging a sub affect recruitment? Probably not, though many sides make reductions for students and unwaged people.

### Spending money:

Sides differ considerably in how much they spend each year, and what they spend money on. That's for the side to agree on, and is a good thing to talk through so that everyone understands how the side's finances work. Some spending is mainly fixed, such as the hall hire, membership of the Ring, but much is 'voluntary'. For example:

**Refreshments.** Buying food and drink for members. Some sides do this quite a lot, others not at all.

**Subsidising events** E.g. events organised by the side, but can include attending outside events, paying towards travel. This could be particularly true if the event is earning money for the side as a whole.

**Subsidising students / unwaged members** Many sides think it right to meet some costs of attending events for members who are less able to afford it.

**Subsidising kit** Buying new sticks, supplies of ribbon and bells, side badges etc all cost money. Some sides charge members full cost, others subsidise, but all have to underwrite bulk purchases of the necessary kit.

**Charity donations** For many sides donating some / all of their annual 'surplus' to charity is important. Agreeing on a suitable recipient needs discussion of course.

**Reserves** It is good to have a policy on how much money the side aims to retain from one year to the next. Some sides keep none, others keep more than they need. The old charity commission guidelines were that a year's worth of expenditure was about right, but it's your decision of course. If you don't have a general reserves policy it is harder to resolve discussions about what a surplus consists of, how much to give to charity, and how much to budget for the next year.

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## 6. Getting the best out of practice

Regular and positive practices are a crucial part of what makes a side effective. They are where members learn the side's repertoire, refresh their knowledge, work on the finer points of each dance and keep fit. They also play an important part in generating the camaraderie which helps bind the side together, especially during times when there are few opportunities for dancing out.

This is important for all members but particularly for new recruits, who are unlikely to be able to dance in public for quite some while. If they enjoy practice they are likely to stay, but if they don't they may well stop turning up.

So, what makes for good practices?

**Regularity:** whether a side practices weekly or less often, it is important to maintain a reliable pattern, so that members incorporate it into their routine life – 'Wednesday night is practice night'. A key sign that a side is in trouble is not being able to hold regular practices. People drift away, new recruits lose interest etc.

**Planning:** the person or people leading practice (Foremen, Squire etc) need a general plan for the practice season 'which traditions / dances, something new?' and a plan for the evening, even if that gets derailed by circumstances and attendance. This avoids the 'oh what shall we do now?' moment which saps momentum. Having a 'dancers' choice' evening, where everyone gets to choose a dance can make a nice change however.

**Leadership:** traditionally the Foreman is in charge, while the Squire leads dances (or some of them), and provides back-up especially if 'calling to order' is necessary. Of course, your side may do things differently, but it is best to avoid having too many people chipping in and potentially confusing the clarity of teaching. Asking someone else to teach a dance (with due warning) is a different matter – the baton has passed to them – and it can be an excellent learning experience.

The Foreman's job can be frustrating at times, especially when dancers don't seem to be listening or improving, so the Squire's backup and support can make a real difference.

**Discipline:** practices have to be reasonably disciplined affairs in order to make them purposeful, and for the Foreman to teach effectively. However, attendance is voluntary, and people want to relax and enjoy themselves: they don't want strictness or disapproval. Getting the balance right comes down to the side's 'culture' – an acceptance of the need to work together and a desire to dance as well as possible. It can be very helpful to discuss aspects such as:

- helping newcomers (well-meaning advice from all directions may confuse rather than help)
- listening when the Foreman is talking (so people can focus, and things don't need to be repeated)
- to agree key dancing disciplines for all abilities, such as keeping in line, differentiating Cotswold traditions etc.

It also helps if Foreman and Squire make time every now and then to ask for suggestions on how to improve practice.

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**Some general points:** in common with any teaching task, it's best to make sure that everyone is involved and to find ways of communicating that avoid direct criticism. Other aspects...

- **Starting on time:** practice should start within 5 minutes of the advertised time. If there aren't enough people there don't wait: start with warm ups, practice a jig etc. Otherwise people get used to being late without missing anything.
- **Wind down after practice:** at the pub, in the café etc. That makes it easier to ask people to pay attention throughout practice because there will be plenty of opportunity to chat later.
- **Make sure people don't spend too long just watching others:** vary the programme so that most people are dancing most of the time, even if it is just practicing stepping while others run through the dance. Keeping new members engaged is very important, as is doing work with less able dancers.
- **Learning styles, talking and doing:** some people prefer to know exactly what they are supposed to do before trying a dance, others like to dive straight in. The cautious need gentle encouragement and don't like being pushed, while the bold just want to have a go. Accommodating both types can be a challenge for the Foreman. If in doubt, it is better not to spend too long talking about the dance: most people start to chafe after a minute or two of just listening.
- **Discussion when everyone is relaxed:** if something comes up and people get cross, it's better to address any underlying issues later on, when everyone has calmed down.
- **A quiet word from the Squire:** if someone's attitude or behaviour is making productive practice difficult, the Squire can make a big difference by having a quiet word later on.
- **Accepting fair questions and suggestions:** Foreman and Squire need to be comfortable dealing with sensible questions. It's easy to want to press on during practice, but people become demotivated if they feel that they can't ask questions or make suggestions.
- **Coping with late joiners:** adds another dimension to the need to cater for differing expertise. Nobody wants to discourage someone who might become a vital new member, so the disruption is worth coping with, so long as practices don't revert back to day one for everybody, and the newcomer appreciates that they may be watching more than dancing, to start with. If the practice hall has a second room and an experienced member can be spared, it should be possible to give some separate tuition.
- **Dealing with the sporadic attender:** it can take a while for the Morris-bug to bite, and for a newcomer to give priority to coming along regularly, so one needs to cut them some slack. However, after a few weeks that becomes increasingly difficult for the Foreman and for the side, and it may be necessary for the Squire to have that 'quiet word'. If an experienced member doesn't attend regularly that may just be something to put up with, at least until they start losing touch with the side and its repertoire.
- **Practice for public performance:** see section 7. Things like walking on smartly need to become second nature, so the side should incorporate them somehow into practice sessions. Insisting on walking on / off properly at every practice may not be practical, but perhaps toward the end of the practice season?
- **'A team' / 'B team' risk:** unless the side is very short of dancers, or has a very limited repertoire, it is likely that 'difficult' dances will be restricted to the better dancers. That's inevitable, and if handled well gives new dancers something to aspire to. But there are dangers in developing an A team / B team mentality. In public, using the best dancers for an 'A-level dance' makes sense, but during practice it is good to let newer dancers who show talent have a go.
- **Dance notes:** notes on how the side's dances are done can be very useful for everybody: not only as a resource for new dancers, but in helping to consolidate the side's approach to each dance. The Bacon 'Black Book' is invaluable, but it doesn't cover all aspects of how Cotswold dances are done, and sides do interpret things differently. Outside the Cotswold how-to books, there's less

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available in print on other dance styles such as North-West and Rapper, and so side-notes become even more useful.

- **Video:** watching the dance done competently can be very helpful, and if the side can compile its own online video collection so much the better. Of course, if relying on YouTube generally, new dancers need to be warned that other sides may do the same dance differently. Finally, videoing practice can be very helpful to dancers of all experiences in reviewing their own dancing: there's nothing like video evidence to make one realise one's galleys look like hook-legs!

**And not least: music at practice:** dancers need to practice to music, and musicians need to practice playing for dance, especially if they have not done so before. If the side has a senior musician one can expect them to arrange the best way to do that, but if not the Squire may need to hold discussions with the music team.

### 7. Public performance and events

For many, performing in public is what Morris is all about. Some sides do it extremely well, providing a show equal to any street theatre, holding their audience, earning their applause, and taking a goodly collection.

Others are less effective, and a few seem to dance only for themselves without any effort to entertain. That's not good, especially if the audience is 'captive', as they may well be at a pub. It's not good for the side, and it's not good for Morris either, confirming for onlookers the worst media stereotypes. We would go so far as to say that if you expect people to watch you 'because it's Morris and traditional' then you owe it to the Morris world to give your best.

As the section on recruitment mentions, sides report that good public performances are the best source of new members.

#### What makes a good show?

First, it's worth having a look at three articles on the Ring Website, all written by Squires of the Ring at various times, and each with something different to add.

1. [https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/morris\\_presentation\\_0.pdf](https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/morris_presentation_0.pdf) and
2. [https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/putting\\_on\\_a\\_show.pdf](https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/putting_on_a_show.pdf) and
3. <https://themorrisring.org/files/docs/bagmans-newsletter/bagmans-newsletter-no-131-july-2023.pdf> (pages 6 and 7)

Planning for a pub evening or a day of dance organised by another side will be significantly less than preparing for a paid-for show at an event, but ideas to take on board generally include:

#### In advance:

**Venue and audience** Knowing where will you be dancing, what sort of event and what sort of audience will help you plan a good show. Where you will dance includes the sort of surface, where the audience will be, and any traffic issues. If you can avoid having to dance on wet grass so much the better, likewise Morris works best when the audience is close: performing in the centre of a big arena is to be avoided if possible. Dealing with traffic (as in dancing in the road) poses another set of problems and you should plan for someone to stop traffic in either direction to avoid motorists trying to squeeze past during a half gyp.

Knowing something about your audience helps too: are they a general cross section of the public, or young, or old? That may help you choose dances, and decide whether to include a joining-in dance if you do one.

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**What's the expectation? (timings, compensation / collection etc)** To be confirmed before you start, just in case of misunderstandings, or slippage in timings on the day. Likewise payment (good to get cash or a cheque before you leave the venue to save chasing later), whether you can collect, and how any other 'compensation' (free food, drink) will work.

**Who's available to dance and play, and choosing dances for the event.** Most sides nowadays use online means – GoogleDoc spreadsheet for instance or the relatively new MorrisBook (<https://morrisbook.co.uk/> - an organiser specifically for Morris sides, and worth checking out) – coupled with frequent reminders, to keep track of who is available for events, dance-outs etc. This helps at all stages from deciding whether to commit to an event to planning the day. The only problem with such an approach is that members have to be prepared to fill out the relevant bits, and lack of this can drive a Bagman to drink!

Some (?most) sides don't draw up a dance list in advance. However, choosing dances 'on the hoof' makes it harder for the Squire, harder to keep the show moving, harder for dancers to decide which dances to do and harder to ensure a well-balanced programme. Of course, any list needs to be flexible in case dancers don't show up, injure themselves, or you find you are dealing with a restless audience.

A well-balanced programme includes:

- variety, to hold interest: if Cotswold, vary the traditions, mood, hankie Vs stick etc;
- something showy to grab the audience at the start;
- dances to suit the dancers / musicians, so that everyone has something they can do;
- appropriate length: if the audience is moving rather than static it's probably better to do several short shows rather than one lengthy one.

Your side may well already have a policy on singing and whether to adapt songs to suit modern audiences, but if not, do be aware that some traditional lyrics may give offense.

### Clear roles:

**Managing the show** That's generally down to the Squire. If the Squire can't be there, someone else needs to take on the role. Ideally, the Squire should make that delegation, but the unexpected can always happen.

**Who chooses the dances, and dancers** To reduce delays and milling around, it should be clear who has this responsibility, if not the Squire, and it helps to write the dance list down so that everyone in the side can see what's coming and choose which dances to do. Another job for the Squire is keeping an eye on whether shy / less experienced dancers are getting in to the dances they can do, and if necessary, to ask other dancers to stand out. Be prepared also to ask insufficiently capable dancers not to do a tricky dance they are likely to mess up.

**Who leads dances** Either the Squire or someone else the Squire has asked to lead that dance. Uncertainty as the set is forming up reduces the impact of the performance.

**Who announces** Someone, usually number one, should tell the audience the name / tradition of the dance they are about to see.

**Who chats to the audience** This might be the Squire or number one, but doesn't have to be. Chatting to an audience is a real skill that many of us don't find easy, so if someone is good at it, give them the go-ahead. There's a fine line between effective chat, especially between dances or during a delay, and holding up a set ready to perform. It's easy to forget, but do make sure someone mentions how to find out more about Morris, and about learning to dance with your side.

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**Collecting** If you have a star collector, wonderful, but it's easy to forget to keep the hat going round, especially if the audience is moving. Another thing for Squire / Bagman to be aware of.

**The music** As with the dancing, agree who will lead the music for each dance. And having the music 'beat up' with an engaging tune before the dancing starts is a traditional and effective way of letting the audience know that the show is about to begin (and letting the dancers know that too!).

### **Be positive and brisk:**

Well-described in the Ring website articles mentioned earlier. Keep the show moving. For each dance form up the side quickly, walk on briskly and ready to start, then dance, pause for a moment at the end then walk off following No 1. Be sure to announce each dance, don't chat for too long, and smile!

And a note for those not dancing: don't block the audience's view of the performance!

### **Planning and publicising your own events:**

Much of the above applies, but if you are organising your own outing, whether it is just to visit a couple of pubs, or to arrange a day of dance you will of course have to organise your own publicity, permissions (if any) etc.

Planning ahead as much as you can will help, not least by getting side members to commit well in advance, and for your publicity. Planning ahead enables you to contact other sides to avoid dancing the same venue within days of each other. Sharing a dancing spot is good for friendly relations.

Contact with other sides is doubly important if you are dancing in an area you don't know. The old courtesy of asking permission to dance in 'their patch' is largely ignored nowadays, but there are good reasons to get in touch anyway: their local knowledge will help you find the best dance spots and to avoid unfriendly pubs.

When contacting pubs to dance at (most but not all will be welcoming), promise to send posters a fortnight or so before the visit for them to display. That will also remind them that you are coming (and landlords do change without passing on diaries).

Please don't just show up to dance at a pub unannounced. Not only are you less likely to be welcomed but you risk clashing with their Quiz night etc.

Put details of your programme on your website or Facebook page and, time permitting, get a leaflet printed with dates and your contact details. Encourage the pubs you dance at to publicise you via their own Facebook page (a surprising number forget). Finally, while Facebook may be a bit passé for many, a lot of people use it to keep an eye out for events in their community, so it's worth posting on local sites if you can.

## **8. Recruiting and keeping new members**

Recruiting new dancers and musicians is a continual need, even for sides with plenty of members, and so is retaining them once they have come along to a practice or two.

The Ring website holds several useful resources.

[https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/recruitment - peter\\_halfpenney\\_0.pdf](https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/recruitment_-_peter_halfpenney_0.pdf), contains 11 pages of ideas and comments from individual sides, written mostly from a pre-Facebook perspective (and a good reminder that social media expertise is not the only avenue to successful recruitment).

There is also a JMO-sponsored YouTube video ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp9ldwx6dtY> ) in which 4 speakers discuss their experience of effective approaches, summarised at

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<https://themorrisring.org/files/attachments/jmo-recruitment-workshop-summary-2023.pdf> . That video (and others produced by The Morris Federation – see <https://www.morrisfed.org.uk/?s=recruitment> ) go into considerable detail on making good use of social media.

There are plenty of good ideas out there, but in order to find the right strategy for your side you need to consider:

**Planning, commitment and time** A decent campaign needs to be sorted out well in advance, and is likely to take significant time to implement. While the burden is likely to fall upon a few people, it needs the involvement of the whole side to make a campaign happen and to make it effective.

Squire and Bagman may be willing to coordinate recruitment activity, but probably don't have the time and may not have the necessary expertise. Sorting out roles and targets is a crucial start and is better done months rather than weeks before any key recruitment event. The work needs to feature regularly and high on the agenda for side bagging to keep everyone aware.

Failure to get the planning done is the main reason campaigns fail.

There's plenty of advice out there on using social media, but one of the key differences from 'traditional' media is that good social media presence needs regular input: one-off campaigns are less effective than keeping a steady and year-round trickle of news, pictures, video clips. The side needs to have someone specifically tasked (and supported) in this.

**What can we offer?** Getting your 'offer' clear is vital to working out how best to market the side. That is likely to consist of a mix of side-specific points and general 'benefits of Morris' ones (such as 'camaraderie', 'good exercise', 'live music', 'traditional roots').

It helps to start with the questions posed in Section 1 'who are we?'. The answers are likely to point to your strengths as a side, your 'core' identity. It's easier to mount a campaign which builds on what your side does well, but the answers can also highlight areas which may need change in order to expand away from an over-narrow core.

To take an example, your side may be based on the 'traditional Cotswold male dancer'. Either you recruit on this basis, and make a strength of that identity, or you need to think very carefully about how that identity might change, and how to convincingly bring about that change. If you want to be 'edgier', ask what that will involve in practical terms: if you want to go mixed, how do you make sure that that works in practice, and does not come across as a condescension?

Have a look at the latest Morris census (see <https://www.morriscensus.uk/> ). Part of the survey deals with recruitment, and the results are thought-provoking. In particular, that the most effective recruitment 'channel' is via word of mouth – conversation with friends and with people watching Morris performance.

**Who should we aim at?** Who might you focus your efforts on? You can't aim your publicity at everyone at once: to be effective it needs to emphasise the points which you think will appeal to your target 'market', whatever that might be. There are decisions to make about the age-range and anticipated interests of the people you target, and of course there are no 'right' answers.

The 2023 Morris census found that the average age of new recruits was lower than that of the side they joined, but not by a great deal: the average age for new recruits across all sides surveyed was 45.

16 to 25 year olds will inject vigour, and they may be dancing for many years to come, but is what you offer going to ring their bells? Younger people tend to move around, and to change their priorities as they move from student to worker – will they stay?

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Is it time to look outside your traditional sort of member in order to ‘refresh’ the side and introduce Morris to a wider range of people? That may require creative outreach, and involve taking direct steps to involve the side in the local community. There’s potentially a tension between advertising Morris as ‘traditional’ and getting a more diverse range of people to consider that Morris might be for them as well as for the ‘traditional folkie’.

Anticipating how best to attract and retain members who are significantly different from your side’s current profile needs extra effort. If your existing members are mostly the same sort of age / outlook, how do you appeal to people who are younger, from a different background etc? The best way to find out is by asking people from your potential target group about what might appeal to them.

You could also ask about what turns them off the idea. Some things you can’t do anything about (public performance, hankies and bells etc), but you might be surprised at what they mention. Things we think are essential or loveable might be seen as quite the reverse (the recent survey on Morris songs showed that some folk find some lyrics out of synch with modern times for example).

You might also be able to use ‘objections’ positively. For example, if you are a single-sex side, there’s plenty of positive things to be said about safe spaces which apply equally to both genders.

**Good performance is vital!** Most new recruits come as a result of seeing the side perform (or seeing good video of the side), so treating all performances as an occasion to talk to the public, project enthusiasm etc is a vital start, and one that each side member can play a part in.

While many people enjoy watching Morris, and some are open to the idea trying it, most would laugh at the thought of actually dancing themselves, and that’s a difficult obstacle to overcome – ‘it’s nice, and it’s traditional, but I can’t see me doing that!’.

Your best advertising is the vibe surrounding your public performance: if people see something effective, and people having a lot of fun, they are much more likely to be receptive, and might even think of having a go themselves.

**Handouts and tracking interest** It’s a good idea to have a handout available to give people when you dance out: a tri-fold A4 leaflet in colour is inexpensive, a handy size, and gives space for you to say something about the side, with decent images, details of your programme and how to get in touch.

If someone expresses an interest, get an email address from them, keep it in a safe place, and keep in contact with them: not too often (spammy) but certainly a few weeks before your practice season starts up.

**Taster sessions and retention** Although ‘taster’ sessions aren’t top of the list of effective ways to recruit, they have their place, not least as a focus for your campaigns before the autumn practice season starts. You won’t win them all, but it’s worth planning in detail how to make those sessions enjoyable, for your guests to learn and get through a dance (simplified if need be) and to experience some of the social side of belonging to a Morris side. Offering a newbie a lift to practice can reassure.

The first few practices thereafter are just as important. People take while to decide to commit fully and can simply stop coming for no reason other than that their life is busy. Get early engagement with dance and camaraderie. Keep in good contact with new people. If someone stops coming, contact them to find out why.

After someone has come along to a number of practices it’s a good idea for the Squire to talk to them one-to-one about how they are finding things, and whether practices are working for them: adapting to suit someone’s learning style can make all the difference to whether they stay. On the other hand, it can be awkward for all if a new person just turns up every now and then and can’t make progress. That’s not easy to deal with: one can’t keep going back to basics, but nor do you want to push away someone whose commitment may grow - the Morris bug can take quite a while to bite.

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## 9. Dealing with the media

There are a range of scenarios which might bring you into contact with ‘the media’ (= print, radio/podcast, TV/video/film, online and social media).

- You’ve contacted local media to publicise an event
- Media have contacted you for comment
- Media have asked you to participate in something
- Posting and dealing with comment on social media

Whatever the starting point, your attitude should be a mix of upbeat and cautious. Upbeat to give a positive view of your side and of Morris, but cautious because a media-professional’s first interest is their story rather than your side’s welfare. That’s particularly true if you are being interviewed.

Whether it’s local or national, what you say affects not only your side but the Morris world in general.

**Contacting local media to publicise an event** This might be as simple as finding out which local media provide event listings and sending them a list of places and dates, but if you have a more major event you’ll want to send out a proper Press Release. What makes a good Press Release?

- Start with a short ‘what, where and when’ statement. Follow with the best text you can rustle up – engaging and written as though you are the journalist.
- Include some pictures (with a note about copyright as necessary). Offer higher res images if available (that way you’ll know if the images are to be used).
- Offer clarification and an interview (if relevant), and provide phone numbers and email address
- Send by email (easy enough to find news-desk addresses online), around 3 weeks before the event, with a header saying Press Release, date and event.

**Media have contacted you for comment / interview** That can be really good, but do be cautious, even if the interview is one you’ve asked for. Be doubly cautious if you are being contacted to provide comment for a general article or interview. Be very very cautious if you get the impression that the topic is potentially contentious or damaging to your side or / and Morris as a whole. Some thoughts if you find yourself in this position:

- Before agreeing to talk ‘live’ find out what the reporter wants to talk about, and if necessary ask to get back to them – that gives you chance to think and prepare.
- Even if you know the interview is likely to be friendly, prepare for it and think about how you might deal with predictable awkward questions – for example if yours is an all-male side, there are decent answers to a question about equality, but you might find yourself on the back foot if you’ve not thought about it.
- It’s worth checking items such as the latest Morris census to provide handy facts and statistics. It’s also useful to read up on some of the history of Morris, so that you get the facts right.
- Don’t make critical comments, and look for positives (again forethought will help)
- If you know that the interview could be difficult (e.g. about some controversy) talk to the Ring about it. They may well have useful suggestions and will certainly need forewarning if a major problem is about to erupt.
- ‘No comment’ is really a last resort.

**Media have asked your side to participate in something** Being asked to participate in broadcast film or video is a major opportunity, **but** assess the opportunity just as you would an event booking. A few years back some nationalistic groups were clearly trying to use traditional imagery to push their political agendas.

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- Find out what, when, where, and the purpose of the engagement, so that you can check whether you will have enough dancers and music and whether it's right for your side.
- If the occasion is anything other than news cameras turning up to an event you are dancing at anyway, you should sort out a fee for the side's participation. Do not accept 'payment in exposure'! You are providing a service for which you give up time to train for with no reward. Media pieces are mostly put together by professionals who are being paid for their work.
- And check other expenses: travel, food and drink, and cancellation fees if necessary.

**Posting and dealing with comment on social media** Section 8 on Recruitment links to several guides to using social media. As advised, social media works by building up a cumulative presence, and that's done by posting regularly. Just putting occasional notices about forthcoming events isn't all that effective: someone in your side needs to be adding news weekly or fortnightly.

**Which social media platform(s) to use?** Facebook? Twitter? Instagram? Tik-tok? YouTube? Each has its strengths and general type of viewer / user. Your target audience and the sort of material you want to post will help decide which ones to use, and there's advice out there on who uses each and what sort of material is effective.

**What to post?** That depends a bit on the platform, but as ever, keeping the message positive is important, and it helps if someone in the side takes good photos - even better if photos you use are cropped and improved. And keep text reasonably short.

The impression you want to give is that members of the side are welcoming and have a lot of fun together.

**Responding to comment** Hopefully people will respond to your posts. Do make sure you reply promptly where the comment seems to require it. And if you get negative comment don't be tempted to fire back. Keep responses courteous and positive, and if that's not possible, best not to respond than to start a flame war.

**An NB** If you are on social media like Facebook, where the difference between your own personal page and a side's page isn't always immediately obvious, check which identity you are using to avoid saying anything controversial which will appear on your side's page!

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Devils Dyke Morris Men  
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