



What follows are some notes about the mechanics of putting on a show. They are not meant to be exhaustive, and hopefully, all clubs will be able to supplement this list with ideas of their own. However, it is hoped that these notes will encourage discussion and thought, and it must be said that they would not have been necessary had it not been very obvious from some events that, sadly, very little thought had actually been given to The Show.

When a Morris team goes out to dance in public it is often said that they are going to 'put on a show', but what does this mean and what do teams need to do to ensure that it is a good show? In the distant past dancers were employed, and paid, to entertain in processions, in grand halls or in churches. In the early nineteenth century they danced to entertain in order to raise money to supplement poor wages. But when the remaining few teams were seen by the collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the idea grew that dancing was a part of our cultural heritage and was less concerned with entertainment than with custom. Today, a team dancing on the lawn of a stately home might be able to claim a link with an ancient custom, but one dancing in a Milton Keynes shopping precinct might be better to consider their link with the entertainers in Guild processions, yet in their own way both teams are 'putting on a show'.

1. The Venue

Any site that is to be used for dancing needs to be considered as 'the show ground'. Ideally, someone should have visited the site before hand and decided how the show is to take place, but certain basic principles can be considered. Please remember, as noted at the end of this section, that local clubs can often help with the legalities of dancing in their area.



1.1 The Pub. Often pubs have an area that can be used, and many landlords will cordon off a part of the car park or sitting area. Always talk to the owners or managers before turning up to dance. Points to consider include – are you going to annoy visitors to the pub by restricting or obstructing their car park? If you gather an audience, are they going to be able to see the dancing, or will they retire to seats and benches in an area away from the dancing?

1.2 The Road. The most contested area for dancing. It might be appropriate outside a village pub, on a quiet rural road, but it still needs great care. Always position someone at both ends of the site to talk to waiting motorists. If a motorist insists on driving through – move and let them. Argue, and you may get into legal hot water. Step aside and you will always have the audience with you. If a team wants to dance in a busy tourist town it may be necessary to contact the relevant authority to gain official permission, which can be a lengthy, but legally obligatory process.





1.3 Pedestrian Areas. Traffic-free zones are often considered to be ideal sites for dancing. However, teams must ensure that there is space for pedestrians to walk passed the dancing site, and they must be aware that shops might object strongly to having their windows and entrances blocked by either dancers or audience. Not all sites are freely available, and it might still be necessary to apply for a permit, or some form of written permission. The presence of a 'busker' needs careful handling. They may have permission to be on the site, in which

case they might object to dancers.

1.4 The Show Ground or Field. Dancing in the middle of a rough field at a Fete is regarded by many teams as being their worst nightmare. Certainly, the condition of the grass must be a major concern, and organisers might be persuaded that a piece of hardstanding at the edge of the field is a safer site. However, dancing in the centre of an arena can be perfectly acceptable if the principles of putting on a show and providing entertainment are followed. Dancing in front of stalls at the edge of the show ground can be a good option, particularly if it has been discussed with stall owners, who may appreciate the attention.



1.5 The Stage. It can be difficult to show Morris Dancing at its best when dances are restricted to a stage and the audience can only see one side of the dance, but it is certainly not impossible if thought is given to the show. Consider dance forms, use of space, and positioning of musicians in order to give the audience the full flavour of the dance. Detailed thought also needs to be given to ways of getting on and off the stage.

Finally, it regrettably needs repeating that common courtesy should ensure that clubs touring an area inform teams in that area of the intended programme. While it is increasingly impractical to consider that any area 'belongs' to one club, early communication can avoid embarrassing clashes regarding dance sites, and teams with local knowledge can smooth the path of visitors with local authorities.

2. Preparing for The Show

Preparation should begin during the practice season. While most practice sessions are obviously concerned with learning or polishing the dance, considering the mechanics of a show can be just as valuable.

2.1 The Squire

In this case the term is used to indicate the person leading the Show. This might not be the lead dancer, although for many teams, the Squire is assumed to be the person who will not only be in charge of the performance but will call the dances. However, the person who is in charge must not only check on the dancers present but know their abilities so that a decision can be made regarding the list of dances in order to show off those abilities. The leader of the show must also know when to step back and delegate calling dances, or talking to the audience, to others.

The Squire must make sure that the show begins on time, must quickly check over the dancing site, must pass instructions to the team clearly and in time, must either talk to the audience or get a member of the team to act as spokesperson (see below), must make sure that the show proceeds at

an appropriate pace to maintain interest, and must be aware of that crucial time when it becomes clear that the audience (or the dancers) have had enough and it's time to stop.

2.2 The Dancers

We have all experienced the shambles that can occur when it is time to begin a show, but the dancers are not ready, have not put their bells on, or have decided that it's time to get a beer. Awareness of these problems can begin during practice sessions when it is made clear that the dancers must be prepared at the correct time, must walk out on the site ready to dance, and must stand in set formation showing that they are waiting for the start of the dance. During the show dancers must not stand in the way of the audience, but, depending on the type of show and the venue, could be a vital communication link with the audience.

2.3 The Musicians

Teams should have decided on the part their musicians will play during the show. Will they play a tune between dances, or will that interrupt the talking to the audience? Will they play as the dancers prepare for the dance, or will they remain silent until the set has formed up (and then only play the 'Once to yourself')? Will they play as the dancers walk off after a dance? Such matters are vital to the smooth running of any show, but certainly must be decided upon for a stage show.

3. The Event or The Show

Walking out into the centre of an arena, or on to a stage, can be a daunting experience. It certainly focuses the mind on the task in hand and often leads to a charge of adrenaline that brings out the best in a team. There is no reason why this same feeling should not be present at all events, whether the team is dancing for over a hundred people at a local carnival, a few bored stallholders at a village fete on a wet Saturday afternoon, or a man and his dog outside the pub. Every event is a Show and must be treated with the same determination. Whatever the event there are some basic principles that do not change.



3.1 Timings

The Team must know the timings - when they need to be ready to dance, when the show starts, how long it is planned to dance for.

3.2 The First Dance

The Team certainly must know the first dance and should know the first few dances. For a large arena show or a stage show they should be aware of the whole list of dances and which dancers are going to make up each set.

3.3 The Audience

From the very beginning talk to the audience. Make eye contact, and smile at them. Develop your dance repertoire so that it relates to the audience – six dancers huddled together in the centre of a muddy arena are not putting on a show. You might ask why dances finish “all in” – why not have some that turn out to face the audience? But having all dances ending with a run into the audience can also become repetitive.

3.4 The Programme

Carefully consider your programme. How will it start – outside a pub with no audience a long dance might encourage people inside the pub to come out to see what is happening just as much as a noisy

stick dance. At a Fete in the middle of an arena or in a town square a vigorous stick dance might be the better option. How will you get on to the dancing area? How will the programme develop – try to bring in variety and difference, if not between handkerchief and stick dances, perhaps between pace – faster or slower, or whole team or jig – or shape – lines, squares or circles.

3.5 Expectations

A crucial factor in this is an appreciation of audience expectation. The people running the show must know that the people watching the dancing will have different expectations depending upon the style of the event. In a more formal setting the audience will expect a high degree of professionalism, and such an approach should also be used in situations where there is a lack of knowledge of the audience or of the event. If the event is a regular one where the team is well-known to the audience, it might be more appropriate to adopt a more relaxed approach.

3.6 Enthusiasm

The audience will enjoy seeing teams dancing with energy and enthusiasm, but it must not be assumed that this only applies to young teams. All dancers can provide both energy and enthusiasm if the dances chosen are suitable for them. However, it must not be assumed that extremely vigorous stick clashing, or continual whooping noises, indicate either of these attributes.

3.7 Communicate

Talking to the audience is important, particularly at large shows. The person chosen should be able to communicate with a large audience in a clear, relaxed style (never give the microphone to anyone who likes the sound of their own voice!). The information given should, as far as possible, be factually correct. Fanciful theories about the origins of the dance including magic or ritual are no longer acceptable. But talk to the audience, not at them.

3.8 Duration

The length of any show needs careful consideration. If a team has been booked to dance in an arena or on a stage for a definite length of time a conversation should have taken place with the organisers about the degree to which an audience can be expected to maintain interest in the dance. At a fete, for example, it is not unknown for audiences to say that they have seen the Cotswold handkerchief dance, and the Cotswold stick dance, so any further action as far as an untutored audience is concerned is simply repeating what has already been shown. To maintain interest, as noted above, there should have been careful consideration given to the dance programme, but even so, it is often better to have two shorter sets rather than one long display.

3.9 Content

It might also be appropriate to consider the length of the individual dances. Just because the records say that a dance has four or five figures interspersed with a chorus there is nothing in the rule book that says that all figures must be performed every time. A shorter dance may provide a better fit with the programme, particularly when a team is performing on a stage, may allow time for different styles of dance to be shown, and help to maintain interest in the performance.

3.10 Massed Shows

Where a club has invited other teams to attend a Day of Dance, careful consideration needs to be given to the reason for holding a 'Massed Show'. In the early years of the Morris Revival audiences liked to see tens, even hundreds, of dancers performing the same dance. Although this gives rise to much discussion today, many audiences do still appreciate the colourful spectacle of a massed dance, but as teams have devised their own styles and their own dances this is becoming

increasingly difficult to engineer. If, therefore, the Show consists of a succession of similar dances from individual teams, any audience may drift away quite quickly, and in which case would it not be better to organise a series of shorter shows at different locations? If the reason for the show is to allow teams to enjoy each other's dances, it might be more appropriate to arrange a performance area away from the general public.

Hopefully these notes will help you to consider your shows, and how you relate to your audiences. But finally, remember that the show must also entertain and amuse yourselves. Your pleasure in the dance will be appreciated by your audience, and enjoyment is catching.

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