

The Overseas Bagman's Very Occasional Newsletter

Oxford

On the weekend of the 5th and 6th of July, Yateley Morris Men celebrated their semi-centennial by inviting Het Utrecht's Morris Team over for a couple of celebratory jaunts... And since they are jolly good fellows, I was able to tag along with them.

"Oxford is the most dangerous place to which a young man can be sent." - Anthony Trollope.

The first tour that the quinquagenary Yateley Morris Men organised was a Saturday tour of Oxford. William Gladstone once said that

Oxford "inculcated a reverence for what is ancient and free and great.". I'm not sure that reaching their 50th year qualifies Yateley as ancient, but they are certainly free and great and I was very happy to come up to Oxford to visit them.

I first espied Yateley and Utrecht as they were breaking their fast and stretching their gullets in that most august of institutions, The Four Candles. England and the Netherlands united in that most universal of pursuits: sausage guzzling. I gently supped a beer while they sated their appetites. Outside, the city was as quiet as a library - excepting the dreaming spires which tintinntabulated softly in anticipation of a day's dancing... which probably means that their gutters need fixing.

Once Yateley and Utrecht had finished their vittles they bravely breached the threshold of The Four Candles and greeted the morning.

A man cried out somewhere in the distance in what sounded like Latin... But that's what drinking Buckfast all night can do to you.

Our first port of call was the Oxford Museum of Natural History where a cornucopia of items ranging from dinosaur skeletons to reindeer skin knickers can be seen. The weather outside was a traditional English summer's day... So, grey with the threat of worse to come. But the stout-hearted dancers weren't to be deterred by the elements and danced outside for the entertainment and intrigue of museum visitors. "Where does this dancing come from?" was inevitably asked. I definitely didn't tell one tourist that it was from Scotland. Nope, definitely not...



The first break of the day found most of the dancers exploring the delights of the museum, but a small posse broke free of the pack and went to visit another historic venue: The Lamb and Flag. I had a pint of Cherry and Chipotle Porter, which I thought was quite pleasant... Though nobody I offered a sip to seemed to agree. I wonder if they still have the taste lingering at the back of their throat?

After a passing shower Yateley and Utrecht resumed their terpsichorean pursuits. It's a lovely spot for a bit of morris - a wide open space, a steady trickle of passing tourists, the glorious backdrop of the museum's Victorian neo-Gothic architecture... and a reasonably priced coffee stall for those well-behaved enough to spurn the delights of the local pubs. But, those local pubs can't be spurned entirely, and, after the dancing outside the local museum had finished, it was time to visit The White Horse... No doubt named in tribute to The World Famous Yateley Horse.

It may be a coincidence, but, as we stepped out of the pub with full tankards, the sun seemed to come out. Sunshine, pints of ale, swarms of tourists, the dignified Oxfordian architecture gazing down serenely upon us... It really was a beautiful day to be drinking. Dancing! I mean dancing!!

Het Utrecht's Morris Team are no strangers to ancient cities famed for their university, the same is true of Utrecht itself, so perhaps Oxford seemed like a home from home... except possibly for the hordes of morris-curious tourists. While Yateley and Utrecht performed outside The White Horse, they were ringed around by tourists from innumerable nations - all of whom seemed to have smart-devices in their hands and be broadcasting the morris into every corner of the big round world.

Yateley and Utrecht danced in turns over and over while the audience around them also rotated - by the time we left everyone was dizzy with the delights of morris. But, always leave your audience wanting more - and definitely always leave when the dancers want lunch. Lunch waits for no man.

Yateley had organised a tour of the New College for the culturally enthusiastic, but I headed off by myself in search of a morris-themed eatery... And so I ended up at 'Taylors' - a purveyor of, presumably, Longborough-sourced sandwiches.

After lunch, Yateley and Utrecht picked up their feet once more and gave them a good shake. The venue this time was on Catte Street between St Mary's Church and the Radcliffe Camera. The

tourists had tracked us down again. I'm not sure whether more time was spent dancing or posing for photographs with tourists who suddenly found themselves wearing Yateley hats. The World Famous Yateley Horse proved very popular and behaved himself very well - he barely ate a single child!

Eventually both the tourists and the dancers seemed sated, and it was time to move on to The Bear Inn... If only someone could remember where it was! I found myself following Mr de Courcy... Of course, in retrospect, I now realise my mistake, for I shortly found myself following him back the way we had come... And then back again in another u-turn when we eventually found the turning we should have taken in the first place... Never follow a man with bells on his hat and bells on his toes, for he shall get lost wherever he goes.

Once we succeeded in hunting down The Bear, refreshments were taken. Apparently The Bear caters neither for naturists, nor for hairy gay men, instead it is a rather pleasant Fuller's pub with a wide selection of cut-off ties. Once we had refreshed ourselves with pints of real ale, Yateley and Utrecht settled in for a little light socialising and song... And then, of course, we danced. We had escaped the relentless tide of tourists, we had managed to survive the day without being sconced, rusticated or sent down. Utrecht and Yateley deserved a blue for beating the bounds of Oxford, and beating back the clouds with the power of morris so that they could dance with bells glistening in the July sunshine. I was only blue to say goodbye... But I would see them all again tomorrow in Guildford.

Guildford

"All right," said Ford. "How would you react if I said that I'm not from Guildford at all, but from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse?" - Douglas Adams

For the second day of Yateley Morris Men's celebratory 50th anniversary weekend, Yateley, Het Utrechts Morris Team and myself found ourselves in Guildford. Guildford, whose name is thought to derive from 'gylde' which is Old English for gold seems an appropriate place for Yateley Morris Men to celebrate their golden anniversary - 50 years of dancing and merriment and drinking pints of golden foaming ale.

Utrecht had travelled to this sceptered isle en masse: Arnold, Maarten, Koos, Jan, Arjen, Menno, Stephen + Camilla, Henk (from Helmond), Jean, Heleen, Joyce and Eveline (who were in Maids of the Mill kit). That's 13 in all, but 13 is a happy number, and I was very happy to see them all.

I once again met up with Yateley and Utrecht while they were in full swing - that is to say, swinging breakfast towards its final destination. For my own sustenance, I was able to find a home for a pint of mild. Needs must when the devil drives...

Our first dancing spot was on the Guildford Town Bridge, in front of The White House - which is a Fuller's pub: no presidents were known to be in residence as far as we were aware. Also standing fair behind the bridge was St Nicolas Parish Church: Santa similarly was not at home. It was a very picturesque spot for a touch of dancing - the High Street's hill above us, views up and down the river, the White House and St Nicolas's in the background, and a gentle stream of locals passing over the bridge to enjoy the performance... and a very welcome visit from Andy Richards, local Pilgrim's Morris supremo, who kept a close eye on our activities while we were on his manor.



It was a pleasant day for dancing - the sun discretely veiled behind friendly clouds, occasionally flirting with us by gently lifting the veil to raise our hopes. But nothing raises the hopes of morris dancers as much as the promise of a pint of beer... And so we wandered up the High Street to visit The Three Pigeons - situated between the Palladian Holy Trinity Church and the Jacobean Abbot's Hospital - an architectural education from the comfortable harbour of a pub.

Despite the dancing in the High Street, I actually spent most of my time at this spot playing with Utrecht's youngest associate Camilla. A fluorescent ice-lolly down by the bridge had activated her youthful vigour, and so I spent time trying to teach her, among other things, stick-twirling. And then I hid.

Once the dancing in the High Street was over, we headed up to The Royal Oak for an always welcome pint and the dancers rested their well-worn limbs. But, as pleasant a supping point as it was, the morris has its demands and we soon had to head off again.

I've never been to Guildford before, but the next spot was particularly charming. Guildford Castle and its glorious garden were quite delightful... And we had the additional welcome surprise of a visit from Greensleeves musician David Legg, who then joined in with the morris orchestration. The castle is a lovely spot to visit and dance, I wouldn't say that we were over-run by spectators but those who made the walk up the hill were very glad to see us.

Once you've been up to visit Guildford Castle, it's all downhill from there... And so we navigated the alleys and backstreets towards our final dancing destination. Thankfully, I learnt from my mistakes of yesterday and didn't follow Mr de Courcy this time. The journey to The Britannia was remarkably straightforward.

Music, sweet music - there'll be music everywhere. There'll be swinging, swaying, musicians playing and dancing in the street... And so it was. We found the Britannia pub, and we ended as we begun: Utrecht and Yateley united by song and dance, and myself enjoying it all. We had a drink, we did some dancing, and then I said goodbye.

This weekend was doubly happy for me. I am 50 years ancient this year and have been trying to visit sides who are also 50 years old, but I also have the pleasure of serving as the Morris Ring Overseas Bagman, so have been looking for opportunities to visit sides who are based beyond these fair shores. This weekend with Yateley and Utrecht I was able to do both for two days in a row - and rather marvellous it all was.

Lewis Elliot

Morris Ring Overseas Bagman