

Major Francis E Fryer

1888 – 1961

Francis “Fanny” Fryer is a recurrent character in any history of Berkshire morris revival sides and it is probably true to say that without his creation of the Wargrave Morris Men, his continuing love of all things morris and his generous sponsorship, the Abingdon, Eynsham, Kennet and South Berks Morris Men would not have either existed, or survived in their current form.

During the course of my various researches I have accumulated a number of reminiscences and references which may be of interest. This is not an attempt at a biography – I have neither the skill or resources for such a task - but merely my pen picture of his morris story, as far as I know it – and do remember, this is written by a Fool. There must be more tucked away in archives unbeknown to me.

We were fortunate to have a first-hand source in Ray Annetts, a Kennet founder member and currently a musician both for Kennet & Mr Hemmings Abingdon team. His father was Reggie Annetts, the Major’s “man” who moved with him from Newbury and had a flat at Wargrave Hall – where Ray spent some of his early childhood. One of his lasting memories of the place was the ballroom, where Abingdon’s Horns were stored - scary sight when first seen by a young boy.

'The Major' (a term he detested according to Roy Dommett) had retired from the Army in 1930 and returned to the family home in Burghclere, south of Newbury. Fryer never married and, according to Ray, lost any interest in marriage after having his heart broken when jilted by his “true love”. He was renowned for not changing his mind, once it was made up! He became a leading figure in Newbury folk circles and was president of the district EFDSS branch until his death.

He moved to Wargrave Hall in 1933. Here they found neither country-dance movement nor Morris Club in existence, but regular (and separate) weekly practices for both kinds of dancing were soon begun by him to the sound of his accordion or pipe and tabor for the morris – making the pipes himself out of bamboo which he could tune using matchsticks and plastic wood. Various local men and estate employees took part in the Morris practices, and visitors sometimes put in an appearance. Three local men proved to be stayers - John Gillet, Tom Jones, and Rae Jones, and later Fred Coxhead, who had done a good deal of dancing with Fryer and Reggie Annetts in the Newbury district, joined the Club. He hosted several EFDSS staff conferences and annual dances on the lawns, often attended by 200 or 300 people.¹

When the Morris Ring was formed in 1934, the Wargrave Morris Men were one of the Inaugural Members, and early in September 1936 the Ring met at Wargrave Hall, the Wargrave Morris Men being responsible for the local arrangements. All 38 attendees camped on the Major’s lawn which backed onto the Thames, Bill Kimber played for the instructional and Jinky Wells fooled on the tour. Henry and Percy Hemmings met them dancing in The Bury at Abingdon. The follow up party visited Tom Hemmings and also the Russells at Eynsham, and these contacts helped to spur their revivals in 1937.²

On June 18, 1937, the Abingdon men formed themselves into a proper club, old Henry was appointed Mayor, and Fryer was invited to become President. Tom supervised the dancing. Under Fryer's guidance, and with his generous help, the team undertook modest tours and appeared at

Ring meetings, including the one at Stow in 1938, to which Mary Neal was invited. The Mayor's Day ceremonial was also revived in full that year.²

At the outbreak of the Second War, Fryer again joined-up. Though he would or could not talk about it, it was rumoured as part of Bletchley Park Security. Fryer was demobbed in 1948 the team approached Major Fryer in 1948 to see if he could help out again. Fryer was willing and in 1949 team practices were held twice a month at the Happy Dick with music played by Fryer. He and Tom were able to rally the men as Fryer had learned the whole repertoire of tunes from Harry Thomas, who had died the previous year. By mid-1949 the team was back on its feet and was immediately successful. Fanny Fryer would continue his support as president of the Abingdon men for the rest of his days, but playing the new fangled melodeon, as he'd had to give up his piping for "lack of blow".(He was asthmatic and, according to his friend Lionel Bacon, may have been gassed in World War 1.) Len Bardwell, then with Oxford Morris Men recalled that it was about 1955 that Francis Fryer became decreasingly active because of asthma. When the fortunes of the OMM suffered a temporary decline, Len naturally was glad to turn to Abingdon to keep himself going as a morris man. Francis Fryer played a little (seated) up to about 1957 but he stood by to relieve him and from then on Len functioned as musician to the team.

Roy Dommett wrote in an appreciation¹ of Francis that he was careful never to interfere with, or influence, the traditional outlook of the team. His quiet, metric playing, though rather lifeless, seemed to reflect the ceremonial feeling the men have for their dances.

John Finch of Wargrave and Kennet recalled in a memoir that he had his eccentricities such as never missing the 'Archers' programme, even if he was being driven in his Bedford van to Abingdon. He was also very impatient about small matters while ignoring major ones. In dancing he seemed to be blind to wrong stepping but would be very irritated if in Picking Up Sticks a man turned his back on a woman in the diagonal movement. John had known him to storm out of the room over such an incident - and he didn't come back. Ray Annetts remembers well his daily devotion to the Shipping Forecast, when he would recalibrate his barograph, a pen recording aneroid barometer. He was also an excellent engineer and had a fully equipped workshop at Wargrave, complete with a lathe.

Francis Fryer died on January 26, 1961, aged 73.

We would know more if his brother Charles, who couldn't understand his folk interests, hadn't built a bonfire in Wargrave Halls' garden, following his death. This included his many volumes of morris notes, song collections, researches – and the Wargrave archive. Reggie Annetts and Roy Dommett, who was a regular visitor, witnessed the event and managed to salvage some of the material, which was passed to Abingdon's Jack Hyde. They now hopefully reside in their extensive archive, but much was lost.⁴ Quite a few of the dance and music sources in the Black Book came from Roy's rescue efforts and he credits Fryer for several of the collected versions appearing under "RD" in Lionel's opus.

Fryer's melodeons were recovered, one being given to Roy Dommett, and the other, a rare Swedish made Hagstrom D/G in a Viennese tuning, being gifted to Ray. It remains Ray's pride and joy.

Sources

Much of the story has resulted from discussions with Ray Annetts and Dave Spiers of Abingdon Traditional Morris Men.

Published sources include:

- 1 From Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society 1961 / 12 Vol. 9; Iss. 2 [TOM HEMMINGS and FRANCIS FRYER Their work for the Abingdon Morris](#)
- 2 [The Kennet Morris Men – A Foolish History](#)
- 3 [Abingdon Traditional MM online Diaries](#)
- 4 My involvement with Abingdon Morris – Roy Dommett 1997 ([reproduced in Morris Matters Dommett anthology](#))

