

Essex Sound and Video Archive

Sources on Traditional English Dance in Essex



Contents

- 1) Social Dance
- 2) Morris Dance
 - Cotswold Morris
 - Thaxted and the Morris Revival
 - Morris Dancing since 1950
 - North West Morris
 - Border Morris
 - Sword Dancing
- 3) Molly Dancing and Stepping – Two East Anglian Traditions
 - Step Dancing
 - Molly Dancing
- 4) Maypole Dancing
- 5) Other dances and events

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Dancing is common to all cultures and all times, and England, being a very mixed nation, is very rich in folk dance and music. This guide will show what sources we have on traditional English dance from the 16th century to the present day.

Most of the video sources are in the catalogue **VA 30** and include copies of cine film from the early 1960s, videos of morris dancing, molly dancing, sword dancing, north west, step dancing, folk dancing and festivals. Other items include those from Hospital TV , **VA 2**, donated by Dennis Rookard. Sound recordings are mainly tapes donated by Jim Etheridge, **SA 30/6**, and John Durrant, **SA 30/2**. Photographic, document and ERO Library sources are also listed.

All these items can be viewed at the Essex Record Office. For more information you can search the catalogue online SEAX at www.essex.gov.uk/ero

1) Social Dance

Traditional music and dance has evolved through time, responding to changes in society and fashions in music and dance. The older circle or round dances which feature in the dance books of the 17th century began to give way to dances of longways sets for “as many as will” (that is, two lines of dancers, usually arranged with partners facing one another, with the dancers working their way up and down the set) or dances for three or four couples. The 18th century was the heyday of English country dancing, with travelling dancing masters giving lessons at private houses and village halls and dances taking place at private and public rooms. English country dancing became popular throughout Europe and travelled with emigrants to America.

D/DHw/F8: two tunes and dance instructions from the papers of the Ambrose family of Manningtree, 1790–1810

D/DHw/F6/6/12: two sets of dance instructions

D/DU 1391/1: Farming diary of Jeffery Carter, with a list of dances for 1793

VA 30/1/1: Essex dances performed by Seven Straw Braid at Shire Hall

Fashions in dance came and went but the older dances remained popular in villages, and by the end of the nineteenth century country dance evenings included some of the older circle dances, longways sets, set dances for two, three or four couples, some Victorian set dances like the quadrille and couple dances like the polka and the waltz.

Fearing that the traditional dances would be lost altogether under the onslaught of urbanisation and social change, men and women like Cecil Sharp began collecting the dances. They set up the English Folk Dance Society and Sharp

published his Country Dance Book volume 1 in 1909. Folk dance clubs were established and country dancing was taught in schools.

D/DU 1046: Miss Heatley's dance programme for Christmas 1914
I/Mb 196/1/30 – 31: Girls' Dancing Competition at Ingatestone Hall
I/Wa 6/1-12: photographs of Little Waltham Folk Dance Team competing at Ingatestone Hall, 1919 (including photographs of Cecil Sharp announcing the results)
Acc. A11663: May Dancing in Henham 1930
D/Z 113/6: Essex Rural Community Council Folk Dance Committee Minutes 1931-6

In the 1950s there was an explosion of interest in folk dancing and many clubs were set up in Essex. They did the traditional English country dances, the 17th and 18th century dances from printed sources (called Playford dances, after the publisher of the first collection) and some American dances, including square dances. From America they brought the custom of "calling" the dance, the caller giving instructions to those who did not know the dance. Before that, the more popular dances would have been well known, and the new dances would have been quickly learnt from the lead couple by a public accustomed to dance.

ERO Library: Essex Folk News for details of Folk Dance Clubs and events
ERO Library Box 111: Chelmsford Folk Dance Club 25th Anniversary issue, with music and instructions for Chelmsford Assembly
VA 30/2/1: Festival of Folk Dance, Cliffs Pavilion, Southend 1964 and The Blue Jays Band
VA 30/25/1: Circassian Circle Folk Dance Club 1961-64 and 1971
Acc.S3085: Records of the Circassian Circle Folk Dance Club
VA 30/10/1: Jovial Beggars at Leigh Folk Festival
VA 30/11/1: Chelmsford Folk Dance Group at Leigh Folk Festival
VA 30/23/1: Thaxted Country Dance Club 2004
SA 30/1/23/1: The Barnacles – at last (Colchester country dance band)

Children continue to learn country dancing at many schools in Essex.

VA 1/6/1: Maypole Dance 1964
VA 30/3/1: Schoolchildren dancing at the Moreton Millennium Festival
I/Ee 24/2: Mountnessing School Fete 2000

Traditional English dancing is also done by people who do not dance regularly, at weddings, fundraisers and other events, doing some of the simpler dances, assisted by a caller. A recent development is of fast and furious country dancing in a disco atmosphere for students and young people at colleges and festivals.

2) Morris Dance

Cotswold Morris is usually danced by teams of six people (usually men) with bells at their knees and wielding hankies or sticks. The dance is athletic and

some of the dances involve mock fights. The tradition of morris dancing goes back about 500 years (although elements of the dance may be older than this) and was danced in London and towns and villages all over the south of England and the Midlands, but by the time the dances were written down it was mainly danced in the villages of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire and is now known as Cotswold Morris (thus distinguishing it from North West Morris and Border Morris). Music would have been provided by a pipe and tabor (a small drum) or the English bagpipes, and later by a fiddle or some variety of squeeze box – concertina, melodeon or accordion.

There are references to morris dancing in Essex as far back as 1527, where an entry in the Dunmow churchwardens' accounts seems to refer to a black morris coat. Records show that the morris was danced in Maldon, where the chamberlains' accounts for 1540 refer to payments for bells, minstrels and morris dancers; and the Barrington family of Hatfield Broad Oak made payments to morris dancers for Christmas entertainments between 1635 and 1660.

D/P 11/5/1: Dunmow Churchwardens Accounts

D/B 3/3/236: Maldon Chamberlains Accounts

D/DBa A2: Barrington Family papers

For a full discussion of morris dancing in 16th and 17th century Essex, see *The Suppression of Pestiferous Dancing in Essex* by John Smith, ERO

Library Folder: Dance

ERO Library E/DAGE: Morris Dancing in Dagenham in the 17th century, in *History of Dagenham* by J.P.Shawcross, 1904

But by the time Sharp and his friends were collecting morris dances in the early years of the 20th century, morris had entirely died out in Essex.

Thaxted and the Morris Revival Morris dancing was introduced to Thaxted by Miriam Noel, wife of Conrad Noel the vicar of Thaxted. She had become aware of morris dancing through her interest in the work of Mary Neale who had introduced morris dancing to the girls in the Esperance Club in London. In 1911 Thaxted Morris consisted of a boys' team and a girls' team, but when Thaxted Morris re-formed after the First World War it was as a men's team only. In 1934 the Morris Ring was formed, a federation of men's morris clubs which has met annually at Thaxted ever since.

I/Mb 350/1/43: Thaxted Morris Dancers 1911

D/P 16/28/16: "Comes the Morris Dancer In. A Celebration of 50 Years of the Morris Ring" (1984)

VA 30/34/1: Thaxted Ring Meeting 2003

Morris Dancing since 1950 The enthusiasm for folk dancing that took place after the war included morris dancing, and one of the first sides to be set up in Essex was the Benfleet Hoymen, a side that grew out of the Circassian Circle

Folk Dance Club and who first performed in the coronation year of 1953. Also formed in 1953 was Colchester Morris, successor to a pre-war side that had disbanded. Rumford Morris was formed in 1960 and Chingford Morris, which grew out of Chingford School boys' morris team taught by Peter Boyce, first danced out in 1962.

VA 30/2/1: Benfleet Hoymen 1964

VA 30/24/1: Colchester Morris, 1960

VA 30/25/1: Thaxted Ring Meeting 1963

ERO Library Box 111b: *The Morris and Sword Dances of England*, printed for the Morris Ring 1966

By the 1970s a new generation of young men was learning morris dancing. There were also some ladies' sides and some mixed sides.

VA 30/14/1: Barnstaple Morris Tour 1983 (with Blackmore Morris and Chelmsford Morris)

VA 30/4/1: Barnstaple Morris Tour 1984 (with Blackmore and Chelmsford)

VA 30/15/1: Barnstaple Morris Farewell Tour 2001 (with Blackmore and Chelmsford)

VA 30/6/1: Chingford Morris 30th Anniversary (1), 1992

VA 30/7/1: Chingford Morris 30th Anniversary (2), 1992

VA 30/3/1: Moreton Millennium Festival (Blackmore Morris)

VA 30/5/1: Blackmore Morris, 2000

VA 30/30/1: Rise Bridge Ladies Morris

VA 2/69/1: Abbotts Bromley Horn Dance at Thaxted

VA 2/52/1: Mayflower Morris at Brentwood Summer Fair 1980

VA 2/51/1: Heart of Oak Morris at Horndon-on-the-Hill

VA 2/68/1: Hands Around Ladies Morris 1989

Acc. A8287 T3964A/14: Massed Morris in Basildon Town Square

There are sound recordings of Cotswold morris dancing as follows:

SA 30/3/5/1: unedited recording of Thaxted Ring Meeting 1976

SA 30/6/6/1: Chelmsford Morris

SA 30/6/13/1: Chelmsford Morris repertoire

SA 30/6/14/1: Chelmsford Morris repertoire

SA 30/6/26/1: Chelmsford Morris repertoire

SA 30/6/29/1: Chelmsford Morris

SA 30/6/33/1: Chelmsford Morris May Day 1980

SA 30/6/428/1: Chelmsford Morris at Chelmsford Folk Club 1982

SA 30/6/478/1: Blackmore Morris at Chelmsford Folk Club 1983

SA 34/1/1/6/1/1: Folk Dances of England by Carl Huson 1962

SA 30/2/3/8/1: songs and tunes from the morris tradition

Additional information about Cotswold Morris in Essex can be found in copies of *Essex Folk News*.

ERO Library: *Essex Folk News*

T/B 241/1: microfilm of Roding Valley Morris Men log books

North West Morris In the 1980s there was in Essex an upsurge of interest in North West Morris dance and a number of ladies and mixed sides were formed. North West Morris was a style of dancing in clogs on paved or cobbled streets that evolved when people moved into the new towns of the north in the industrial revolution. The earlier processional dances (which were performed at Whitsun or Wakes Week or at Rushbearing ceremonies) gave way to dances with complicated figures performed at fetes and carnivals. Morris dancing competitions with strict rules were a feature of carnival morris.

VA 30/3/1: Moreton Millennium Festival

VA 30/5/1: Black Bull Clog

VA 30/16/1: Fiddler's Brook 2000

SA 30/6/15/1: Chelmsford Morris, North West and Border dances

I/Ee 100/5: Chelmsford Ladies at Harlow Victorian Fair

Border Morris A style of dance associated with the Welsh Borders. Little is known about Border Morris. There is enough information to deduce something about the steps and the style of dance but the scarcity of information has inspired Border sides to develop their own dances and styles within the overall tradition. The dancers disguise themselves – historically they would use soot or burnt cork – and they usually wear tatter coats (coats covered with brightly coloured cloth or ribbons) and top hats with feathers, partly to avoid identification and partly to add to the drama, excitement and “otherness” of the occasion.

VA 30/3/1: Moreton Millennium Festival

VA 30/13/1: Leigh Folk Festival Procession

SA 30/1/11/1: Border Dances

SA 30/6/15/1: Chelmsford Morris, North West and Border Dances

Sword Dancing English Sword Dancing, using longswords or short, flexible, two-handled rapper swords, is characteristic of Yorkshire and Northumberland.

VA 30/3/1: Moreton Millennium Festival

VA 30/22/1: East Saxon Swordsmen 1986

VA 30/17/1: East Saxon Rapper, 2000

VA 30/2/1: Boys' Rapper side at Southend Folk Dance Festival 1964

3) Molly Dancing and Stepping – Two East Anglian Traditions

Step Dancing English regions have a tradition of “stepping”, that is, individual dancing in clogs or shoes, which relies on complicated footwork and rhythmic tapping, somewhat similar to modern tap dancing. East Anglian stepping is done in heavy shoes. People danced in pubs and kitchens, sometimes on a small wooden board. It was widespread and is known to have been danced in Essex. Current exponents learned from “old boys” in Norfolk and Suffolk and from travellers.

VA 30/18/1: Moreton Step Dance Competition 2002

ERO Library: Essex Folk News No.12, 1976. Description of “The Purleigh Hornpipe”

Molly Dancing Another style of dancing, called Molly dancing (a Molly is a term for a man dressed as a woman) used to be performed in the 19th century by agricultural workers in East Anglia during the winter time. Molly dancing apparently took place on Boxing Day or Plough Monday when farm lads and men in their working clothes decorated with ribbons and with hob-nailed boots, faces blacked (probably to avoid recognition) would dance and drink and collect money for beer. At least one of the group would be dressed as a woman and one would be designated The Lord. There are echoes here of older traditions involving the Christmas Lord of Misrule, the man-woman and disguising, but the dances were similar to social dances of the 19th century and were performed in a fairly rough and ready manner. The groups of dancers collected money, sometimes for themselves, sometimes for the poor. See **ERO Library: *Truculent Rustics, Molly Dancing in East Anglia before 1940* by Elaine Bradtke**

There are references to Molly dancing in Essex in Ashdon, Helions Bumpstead, Great Chesterford and Great Sampford , and even Willingale, and though it was recorded in Little Downham in Norfolk as late as 1933 it seems to have died out in Essex by 1914.

In Ashdon, 8 or more blackface ploughboys, some in women’s clothes and one with a whip, danced to an accordion on Plough Monday before the First World War. In Great Sampford, a similar number of ploughboys are known to have danced, some in women’s clothes and with ribbons, on Plough Monday before 1900. In Great Chesterford they danced on Boxing Day.

In the 1970s an old man in Willingale told some morris dancers that he remembered similar dancing when he was a boy “but they called it Molly dancing then”. In the 1980s an old lady in Great Chesterford told how her father, the landlord of the Three Horseshoes, would have to bar his door against rowdy and drunken Molly dancers. **See ERO Library: *Molly Dancing in Essex, Essex Folk News No. 40 (1983)***

There are no details of the dances in Essex but some were reconstructed from information collected in Cambridgeshire by Russell Wortley and others in the 1940s. The steps were simple (right hop, left hop) and the dances were similar to social dances popular in rural areas in the 19th century. The tunes were popular country dance tunes of the period.

Good Easter Molly, a revival side which first danced out on Plough Monday 1984, dances only those traditional dances, though other sides have developed their own dances.

VA 30/20/1: Good Easter Molly Dancers 2000

VA 30/21/1: Good Easter Molly Dancers 2001

SA 30/1/13: Trinity Road, Chelmsford, School scrap book describing a visit from the Molly dancers 1984

SA 30/1/14/1: Soken Molly Gang at the launch of exhibition “As Many As Will” at Essex Record Office 2004

ERO Library: *Essex Review* 1910, Dunmow Churchwardens’ Accounts 1526-43, collection of money for church lights on Plough Monday

4) Maypole Dancing

Although dancing around the maypole is documented in England as far back as the fifteenth century, the ribbons were only introduced in the nineteenth century. In 1854 the people of Burnham attempted to revive the old May Day sports on the village green, including maypole dancing, but it was felt that dancing round a maypole “at sunrise in a hoar frost might not be attractive to modern young men and maidens” (Quoted in *Essex Illustrated*)

Acc. A9238 Box 1/023 15/40: Pitsea Congregational Fete Maypole Dancers 1911

ERO Library: *Essex Review* 1910, Mayday Festivities

SA 44/1/54/1: memories of maypole dancing at Kelvedon village school

VA 1/6/1: Maypole Dance 1964

Repairs to the maypole at Little Totham 1690, in *Essex Review* XLIX p.164

5) Other dances and events

VA 30/12/1: Mexican Folk Dancers at the Leigh Folk Festival

VA 30/3/1: Appalachian stepping at the Moreton Millennium Festival

SA 30/1/14/1: Music played for Appalachian dance group Scrambled Leggs

VA 30/12/1: Appalachian stepping at the Leigh Folk Festival

VA 30/2/1: Lancashire step-clogging demonstrated by Pat Tracey at Southend Folk Festival 1964

VA 27/2/1: Dancers at Essex History Fair, Heddingham Castle 1986

VA 8/1/1: Mysterious Essex (Morris dancers)

VA 30/8/1: Chingford Morris Mummings 1992

VA 30/3/1: Thameside Mummings at Moreton Millennium Festival

We would like to thank the generosity of those people who have given us recordings and other items and we hope that more people will be encouraged to deposit or loan recordings, photographs and other items to add to the collection.

We hope that these dance performances are interesting in themselves, as part of dance history and social history, and that they can play a part in the handing on of a dance heritage.

For more information, contact the Essex Sound and Video Archive on 01245 244624, or ero.enquiry@essex.gov.uk

Cover photo: Little Waltham dancing team at Grammar School Playing Fields Competition 1920 (ref: I/Wa/6/10)