

## Green Man's Morris and Sword Club: *the final chapter*

Paul Oldhams, Green Man's last bagman, tells the all-too familiar story of a side struggling with the competing challenges of everyday life – and *anno domini*.

It is now just over a year since February 2017, when the men of Green Man made the decision to close the Club. What follows is a purely personal attempt to chart the course of the Club in the last few years, in the hope that what happened to us, can possibly be avoided by others.

much, as we were still performing each week, and managing to put out two sides on most occasions.

In 2005, when the Club celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Colin Spencer produced *A Short History of The Green Man's Morris and Sword Club*. In it he expressed

the following offer: we would dance free of charge at an event of their choice, if they sent along parents/staff to our practices so that they could dance with us at the event. The idea was that we might gain some recruits. The letters were sent out in January and we waited for the replies to come in.

In the event, we had two replies! One, in May, asked if we could dance in July, (they would send someone to our practices in June to learn the dances), and one other school asking us to dance in June. They would send six or seven people to our practices from the end of January.

Of the men that they sent, three stayed with us throughout the practice sessions, and by the time of the event, two had indicated that they wished to stay longer. At this point we felt that the exercise had been valid, as they were proving to be able dancers, and when we danced at the school, several of the parents 'had a go', but ultimately, for a variety of reasons, this was unsuccessful.

Unfortunately for us, one of the guys already ran a scout group and sang in an amateur operatic society. When you added to this that he was also a consultant anaesthetist at a local hospital, it soon became obvious that something would have to give – and yes, it was the Morris.

The second recruit did stay with us for almost a year, but the financial crash put a strain on his business, and given the fact that he had a young family, meant that he did, reluctantly, leave.

We danced at a local secondary school, a local scout group, and gave some instruction. Very enjoyable, but again no interest.

We also tried dancing in local shopping centres, advertising in local papers, using the



Green Man's Morris at the 2006 Lichfield Bower

I first joined Green Man, in January 2000, at the young age of almost 50! I had never danced morris before, but I was made to feel very welcome. I didn't feel out of place either, age wise – at that time I think that there were only a couple of men who were younger than myself.

I knew little about the Club, but was soon to learn of its illustrious history. I'll not go into that here, but suffice it to say that during the late 1950s and 1960s the Club had performed at major festivals both in the UK and outside it, and had provided two Squires of the Morris Ring, John Venables and Ray King.

Over the next few years, we saw the addition to our ranks of one new and one returning dancer, but the lack of recruits didn't seem to matter too

concerns about the future of the Club, pointing out the lack of recruitment of younger dancers and the ageing of the existing members. This I think, was the first time that many of us had thought of these issues seriously. He mentioned in the book that at one time the club had had high hopes of continuing via the sons of existing men. Although this group did perform in public, it failed to bear fruit.

We soon decided that we must do something to try to recruit new members. We were already trying to persuade audience members 'to have a go' during our shows, and we decided to try to redouble our efforts in this field.

We also adopted a suggestion that we should write to as many of the schools in Birmingham as we could, with





Morris Ring publicity boards and offering a free drink to any one who would come along to a practice afterwards. Again, we had no takers.

Among other efforts were the printing of leaflets and beer mats, which we distributed freely and left in those hostelrys in which we danced, and a standing chart which was professionally made which we carried with us. It goes without saying that we also took the details of anyone expressing an interest.

In 2015, informal discussions

however, Lichfield MM seemed to be in decline themselves, and although we suggested that they joined with us at our practices, they were unable to do so.

We met in a city centre pub, advertised in the local papers, and although again we offered various inducements, we had no takers. By now, in late 2016, our number of fit men had dropped so that we were unable to put out a side. We had already decided in 2016 that, apart from the Lichfield Bower, we would

Club lost the chance of recruiting sons of the then dancers. Certainly, in my time, I think that there was a degree of complacency, and by the time that we realised our problem, it was too late. We were unable to attract younger men, as we were no longer 'young' ourselves.

All I can say is that if we could have done more, we would have done, but how can being outside in the 'fresh' air and exercising compete with 24-hour television, computers, Xboxes and the like?



The dancers and musicians of **Green Man's Morris and Sword Club** relax at the 2006 Chipperfield weekend, hosted by Greensleeves Morris Men.

took place with Stafford Morris Men and Uttoxeter Hearts of Oak Morris Men about joint performances, but excessive travelling worked against us.

Our final throw of the dice, in 2016, was to decide to move our base of operation from Erdington in Birmingham to Lichfield. This idea had earlier been rejected, because it could offend the members of Lichfield Morris Men, in that they might feel that we were drawing on their pool of potential recruits. By 2016,

accept no fee-paying bookings, and in December 2016 decided that we were unable to dance out. Once this decision was taken, it was only a short step to decide that without performance, there was no real point in existing, and we decided to close.

Where did we go wrong? *Did we go wrong?* With hindsight, it is easy to criticise. Perhaps in the early days the Club set its standards very high, was not prepared to moderate them, and therefore lost recruits. Perhaps again, the

Since the decision was made, many of us have been in receipt of good wishes and to our friends in the Morris we thank you for these. Some of our men have joined other clubs, but for most, the end of Green Man has meant the end of our dancing days. The Lichfield Bower procession which we led for 60 years has been left in the capable feet of the ladies of Three Spires Morris.