**Welcome to the IRONMEN and SEVERN GILDERS**

Congratulations on coming along and having a go with two of the most exciting Morris teams in the country. Well, we think so anyway! This leaflet has been produced as an attempt to provide new members with some idea of the sort of things we do and the way we’re organised. Don’t be put off by what may sound like a bureaucratic organisation – what’s described here is the theory, and as you will soon discover, in practice, we’re nowhere near as organised as this leaflet would have you believe.

ABOVE ALL, REMEMBER THAT WE DO IT FOR FUN!

**WHAT IS MORRIS DANCING?**

The origins of Morris dancing have been lost in the mists of time, though of course there are many theories. Needless to say, people of all cultures have danced since time immemorial, but at what point Morris dancing as we know it emerged is impossible to say. Today there are a number of distinct Morris traditions, or styles, each of which has its origins in a different part of the country.

The classic Morris dance tradition, which most non-aficionados would recognise as Morris dancing is **Cotswold**. This is often characterised by a mainly white kit and dances using sticks or handkerchiefs. **Border**, originating in the Welsh border counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire is a more exuberant, less refined form of dance, in which the dancers traditionally have black faces. **North West** originated in the industrial towns of Lancashire and Cheshire and is a processional style of dance suited to carnivals and wakes days, which were often an expression of local pride. Other traditional Morris styles include **Molly,** which comes from the eastern counties of England, **English Long Sword** and **Rapper**, which both originated in the north of England. Incidentally, the word *Morris* may be a corruption of Moorish, the link may be real or a term to add “the exotic” to local performance dances.

**TEAM HISTORY**

The team has been in existence since 1976. The Ironmen were originally a Cotswold team, but following a brief interlude, when they danced both Cotswold and Border, soon became an exclusively Border side. The Severn Gilders dance in the North West style, in the tradition of the nineteenth century Lancashire dance teams who would often represent the mill or factory where they worked. The Gilders they take their name from the women who once gilded china at the Coalport factory on the banks of the River Severn.

Although the Ironmen have existed as a Border side since 1978, they are undoubtedly continuing a long-standing local tradition, as evidenced by a local newspaper report dating from 1652, which describes “a rude companye of dancers with blackened faces” who had been involved in a brawl at the Swan at Nordley, an event which was also recorded by the Wenlock Magistrates:

“Monday in Whitsunday Week, 7th June last, Morriss dancers of Broseley with 6 sword bearers – coming to Nordley, calling for what drinke they please, left most parte thereof unpaid and insulted the people of the house … there would have been a great fray and blood shed yf not murder”

That’s some reputation to live up to!

Team members are sometimes asked why the men dance with black faces and the only honest reply is that we simply don’t know. There are, however, a number of theories, some of which may even come near the truth! One theory makes a link with Moorish dancing and the dark faces of the native dancers. Most suggest, however, that the black face is a form of disguise, perhaps to prevent evil spirits from recognising the dancers, or when dancing was used as a means of earning a crust, to prevent the dancers being recognised as beggars. Whatever the reasons, we know for a fact that black-faced dancers have performed in this part of Shropshire for over three hundred years. However, in awareness of how facial blacking can be misinterpreted, we decided a few years ago to combine the black with red to reflect our team colours.

**THE DANCES**

There were few, if any, fully recorded Border dances, and so the Ironmen, in common with most other Border sides, create their own dances, which conform to the border tradition in general and to the team style in particular. They all contain a stick clash using either long or short sticks, and usually have a chorus, which may be the stick strikes on its own, or stick strikes combined with a hey. The chorus are interspersed with a variety of different figures. Dances are normally for four, six or eight men, and are characterised by lots of noise and energy and are often named after local villages.

By contrast, the North West tradition includes specific steps (eg the rant or polka) and many recorded dances are named after the towns in which they originated; the dancers use sticks decorated with ribbons and bells (which are not clashed!), garlands or slings. The Severn Gilders dance many of these traditional dances (eg Ashton, Cheadle, Hyde), but also develop their own dances in the North West style. In order to reinforce the links with the gilders from whom the team take their name, these new dances are usually named after ranges of Coalport china (eg Paradise Polka and Mandalay).

An essential element of the North West tradition is dancing in clogs. The Ironmen have, unusually for Border sides, also chosen to dance in clogs. This also reflects the kind of footwear worn by agricultural labourers as well as providing greater impact when dancing.

In addition to their separate repertoire, the teams also dance mixed dances: for example *Three Jolly Black Sheepskins* based on a traditional Shropshire dance figure and *Derby Assembly* created for a memorable booking at the Assembly Rooms in Derby.

**KIT**

The kit of both teams is red and black, the colours symbolising the coal and fire which were integral parts of the iron-making history of the area.

The Ironmen’s kit consists of:

* Red collarless shirt with black buttons
* Black cord breeches
* Long red socks
* Red and black tatter jacket (a waistcoat covered with strips of red and black material)
* Black lace-up clogs with bells
* Bowler hat, usually with red and black ribbon, decorated with fresh flowers, foliage and feathers
* Bell strap below each knee with red and black braids
* Black and Red face
* Tailcoat (optional, very rarely worn while actually dancing)
* Beard (optional)

The Severn Gilders’ kit consists of:

* Red dress
* Black pinafore dress
* Black tights or stockings
* Black buckled clogs with bells attached
* Yellow silk rose
* Black, red and yellow beads
* Garter (optional, just)
* Tailcoat (strictly speaking optional, but in cold weather the Gilders sometimes dance in their coats, provided everyone has one)

Getting the kit together is the responsibility of the individual member, although there is a team supply of bells and feathers, roses, beads and fabric for the ladies’ dresses. Clogs are available form a small number of makers, mainly in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Bowler hats can be found on the internet, in antique centres, junk shops and charity shops, as can waistcoats and tailcoats. The Squire or any of the team members will help you get started. The team also has a small stock of used kit, including some clogs, to help.

The team provide all necessary sticks, bobbins and garlands for practice and dance-out. The set for dance-outs is usually more robust or decorative.

**WHEN WILL I DANCE IN PUBLIC?**

The Foreman advises the Squire when a new member is ready to dance. The Squire will discuss with the new member all that is needed, including kit, and will usually choose a low-key event for the first dance-out. Often there will be a focus on learning just one dance for the first public appearance.

**THE FORMAL BIT**

The team is a formally constituted organisation, officially known as The Ironmen and Severn Gilders Morris Dance Club. As a team, we are members of the Morris Federation through which we receive Public Liability Insurance and individuals are able to add, before 25th January each year, Accident Insurance (at a minimal cost to the individual).

In addition to performance dancing, our constitution’s aims to support the social side of the club and the promotion of traditional dancing and music. Copies of the document are available from the secretary or on the members’ pages of the website.

The club is run by a number of officers who are elected each year, usually in October at the AGM:

|  |  |
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| **Men’s Squire** | Leader of the men’s team, who after considering the men’s availability, has the final say on whether we accept a booking. He is in overall charge of the men’s team when we dance out and decides which dances we perform and who dances them. At a dance-out he liaises with the organisers of the event, and communicates to the team when and where they are required to be. |
| **Women’s Squire** | See Men’s Squire |
| **Men’s Foreman** | The Foreman is responsible for running the practices and therefore has overall responsibility for the quality of the dancing and the teaching of dances to new dancers. He deputises for the Squire on all occasions when the latter is absent. |
| **Women’s Foreman** | See Men’s Foreman |
| **Bandleader** | Responsible for organising the musicians when dancing out and arranging band practices. |
| **Secretary** | Handles all team correspondence, eg invitations for the team to dance and invitations to other teams when we ourselves organise events. |
| **Treasurer** | Responsible for all things financial. |
| **Publicity Officer** | Takes the lead on publicising the team and its activities. This involves the preparation of press releases and the distribution of leaflets when dancing out. |

The officers meet on an ad hoc basis to discuss team business.

Any member may approach any officer on any matter.

Minutes of officers’ meetings, AGM and EGMs are available through the members section of the web-site..

The officer posts are currently held by the following:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Men’s Squire | Martyn Goodwin | mens.squire@imsg.org.uk  |
| Women’s Squire | Nicola Fisher | womens.squire@imsg.org.uk  |
| Men’s Foreman | Bob Foxall-Colley | mens.foreman@imsg.org.uk  |
| Women’s Foreman | Linda Atkinson | womens.foreman@imsg.org.uk  |
| Bandleader | Jill Spanner | bandleader@imsg.org.uk  |
| Secretary | John Parnell | secretary@imsg.org.uk  |
| Treasurer | Dave Baxter | treasurer@imsg.org.uk  |
| Publicity Officer | Beryl Taylor / Fiona Sperryn | info@imsg.org.uk  |

**DANCE PRACTICES**

Practices are held on Monday evenings at the Telford Langley School, Dawley, TF4 3JS from 8pm to 10pm. There are usually no practices on Bank Holidays.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS**

Members currently pay a subscription of £40 a year and the officers may reduce the subscription for anyone in particular financial difficulty. New members get several weeks’ grace. Don’t worry, the treasurer won’t hesitate to tell you when you owe money. Some members, typically those who have moved out of the area, are allowed to join as ‘Country Members’, paying a £5 per year fee, and join us for the occasional dance-out.

The subscription covers the cost of the hall hire for Monday night practices. The team also receives some income from performance at specific events, such as a wedding or local Fayres. This is used to support extras, such as hall hire for the team social events and subsidising the team’s activities where appropriate.

**RULES, REGULATIONS, CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES**

Information on dance-outs, social events, extra practices, meetings and any cancellation is disseminated to members by email. New members are asked to complete a Membership form; its content is available only to officers.

The team uses an on-line spreadsheet to allow members to indicate their availability for dance-outs. A link to this spreadsheet is to be found at the bottom of emails from the club’s Secretary. The Squires determine whether a dance-out will proceed, dependent upon the entries in the spreadsheet: it is each member’s responsibility to complete it (or if unable to complete for any reason, advise the Secretary of their availability).

When in public, all members should be in full kit or totally out of kit. This means, for example, that men should not be in kit without face paint and that sleeves should not be rolled up (except with the express permission of the Squire). Hats, beads, bells, etc should not be removed while ‘in the public domain’.

When dancing out, it is your responsibility to know where and when you are expected to dance. While the respective squires will do their best to keep the teams informed, it is impossible for them to keep track of everybody’s movements and to chase after everyone who has just ‘popped to the loo’ or ‘gone to get another pint’. So, before you wander off, make sure you know when you are needed, and if you do need to go somewhere urgently, inform the squire first.

The appropriate squire must be informed as soon as you know that you are unable to attend a booking to which you have previously committed yourself. We, unfortunately, rarely have the luxury of a great surplus of dancers and it, therefore, only takes a couple of absentees to make dancing out difficult, if not impossible.

Similarly, the appropriate foreman should be informed if you know you are going to be unable to attend a practice. A quick phone call or email is always appreciated. If you miss a practice then it is up to you as an individual to find out about any decisions made in your absence.

We hold a number of social events during the year, to which all members and their partners / family are invited. If you have guests at your home at the time of a social, those guests are also invited. When we have a social in a hired hall, we generally each contribute a sharing platter of food, a team member organises an honesty bar and we have music and dancing. Attendees are invited to do a ‘party piece’.

**ANNUAL PROGRAMME**

The team usually organises a few regular annual events:

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| --- | --- |
| **New Year’s Day** | Dance (ladies in fancy dress) at Ironbridge from 12 noon, then retire to the Tontine for refreshment, music and conversation. |
| **Shrewsbury Folk Festival** | We support our local Folk Festival on the August Bank Holiday weekend. This involves dancing in Shrewsbury on Saturday and Sunday, with other teams, at specified dance spots and at specified times. On the Monday, we usually close the Festival with a dance-out on the Festival Stage. A recent addition has been the Morris Party, early on the Saturday evening, after the dancing in the town, where all teams do a spot in the Dance Marquee. Further, the band usually leads the Children’s Lantern Procession on the Sunday evening. We sometimes do a Morris Workshop or a Ceilidh spot on one of the evenings. In exchange, the dancers and band members get free Festival tickets, including free camping on site.  |
| **Boxing Day** | As New Year’s Day, except the men wear fancy dress. |

Other dance-outs depend on invitations received and acceptance is subject to availability. Early in the calendar year, the team has a Bookings Meeting where the main weekend events are discussed to set the framework for the year. In the course of a typical year, we agree to four or more weekends away in various parts of the country (usually May to September) either as guests of other teams or as performers at folk festivals, and a larger number of local bookings (village fêtes etc). We also arrange our own dance-outs locally, including inviting other sides.

Weekends away usually involve travelling there on a Friday evening and travelling back mid-afternoon on Sunday, or Monday if it’s a Bank Holiday. Accommodation may be indoor camping (village hall, scout hut, etc), outdoor camping with your own gear or staying with a member of a host team. The cost can vary, but is usually around £40, but this often includes some meals.

In addition to dancing in most parts of this country, we have danced in Spain, Germany, Ireland, France and Belgium, and other notable bookings have the included The Lord Mayor’s Show, Channel 4’s Big Breakfast, A Japanese TV Documentary, BBC’s Newsnight, a contemporary dance programme for the BBC and most of the major British folk festivals, including Sidmouth.

All this may appear a bit daunting, but everybody has other calls on their time, meaning that even the most committed members are rarely able (or indeed willing) to attend every booking.

**AND FINALLY … YOU CAN FIND US ON THE INTERNET**

Our website has a public part with a brief description of the team and information promoting future events as well as members’ only pages. [www.imsg.org.uk](http://www.imsg.org.uk).

We have a presence on other social media sites:

<https://www.facebook.com/ironmen.morris/>

<https://twitter.com/imsg_morris>

<https://instagram.com/ironmenseverngilders/>

The Morris Federation web-site is <https://www.morrisfed.org.uk>.

The other members of the Joint Morris Organisation are The Morris Ring: <https://themorrisring.org/> and Open Morris <https://open-morris.org/> .