



The Forgotten Mary Neal

The True Spirit of Morris Dancing

**a show presented at
Sidmouth International Festival of Folk Arts 1998**

Mary Neal was a prominent figure in the 'revival' of morris dancing from 1905 onwards. She was responsible for the popularisation of morris dancing as a healthy pastime for young working women and, later, young men. She had frequent contact with traditional dancers including those from Abingdon, who instructed the young women of the Esperance Club. In turn the Esperance Club instructresses taught morris dancing in 'every county' amid considerable publicity.

Initially Cecil Sharp, who had already gained a reputation as a folk song collector and had originally put Neal in touch with the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers he had met in 1899, supported Neal and worked alongside her. Sharp saw the opportunities for developing morris dancing as an educational sport and felt that Neal's relaxed attitude towards morris dance style and her involvement with the suffrage movement were detrimental. Bitter rows followed between Sharp and Neal, often formalised in newspapers and national magazines.

In 1910, Neal was invited to America, taking the head instructress of the Esperance Club, Florrie Warren. Florrie met her future husband there and stayed in America while Neal returned alone to England. Meanwhile Sharp was busy lecturing as well as collecting and publishing dances, and steadily increasing his influence as an authority on morris dance as well as folksong and country dance.

At the start of the 1914 war, Neal turned her attention to social welfare and effectively relinquished her interest in morris dancing. Some people in the folk movement felt that she had been ignored by Sharp and the English Folk Dance Society, and she was awarded the CBE for services to morris dancing in 1937, and invited to the Abingdon Morris Ring meeting in 1938 as recognition of her work. Today, Cecil Sharp's name is well known in connection with morris dancing but Mary Neal's name is only known to a few.

We hope that this documentary style of show will help the morris dancers today understand the contribution of the forgotten Mary Neal. Morris dancing is now an established activity covering a wide range of dances and styles and reflecting both Sharp and Neal influence and attitudes over ninety years ago.

There will be a debate on Thursday at 3pm in the Unitarian Hall about the differences in Neal's and Sharp's attitudes to morris dance style - The Heart vs The Head - and how this relates to our approach to morris dancing today. Please come and share your experience and views.

Acknowledgements

The show was produced by Sue Swift.

Thanks are given to those who worked on the production and script, particularly Sally Wearing, Jan Grayson, Malcolm Lawrence, Jameson Wooders, Kirstie Mair, Mary-Jo Searle and Janet Dowling.

In addition, thanks are extended to Peter, Meg, Jack, Jane, Anna, Sue, Lucy, Ann, Amanda, Victoria, Natalie, Fiona, Gill, Phil, Tim, Will, Andy, Lynn as well as members of New Esperance Morris, Stroud Morris Dancers and Black Annis. A special thank you to Half Moon Sword from America for lending authenticity to the scene set in New York. Thanks also to those who gave technical support especially the lighting technician, Andrew Frank and the Manor Pavilion Theatre manager John Morgan.

Grateful thanks are also extended to Roy Judge for his support and inspirational article on Mary Neal which forms the basis of this show.

References

This list includes all articles referred to in constructing the script of the show about Mary Neal. However, it is not a full list of related articles and does not include correspondence and other original material.

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Notes from Mary Neal's draft autobiography by Roy Dommett (Morris Federation archive).