

Recollections of the Red Stags Morris Men

By Mike Jackson

(Joint Founder and Member, October 1968 – July 1970)

August 2005

It is quite gratifying to know that something a group of us started in October 1968 is still going today, some 37 years later. Long live the Red Stags Morris (Men)!

So, how did it all happen? – well, alcohol had something to do with it. But I think it's a good idea to start at the beginning. I came up to Southampton in October 1967 to read Botany and Geography (that somehow became Environmental Botany and Geography before I graduated in 1970). I had a place in South Stoneham House (SSH) hall of residence in Wessex Lane for my first two years at Southampton. Botany and SSH have a lot to do with the founding of the Red Stags.

I'd always had an interest in folk music (especially Irish music) but had never taken part in any folk dancing whatsoever. Well, during Freshers' Week in 1967, I was browsing around the Bun Fight as it was called where all the Union societies tried to sign up as many new members as possible. Well, I happened to sort of dawdle in front of the stall of the English and Scottish Folk Dance Society (ESFDS), and before I knew it, I'd been signed up to join. And so the following Monday I went along to the Union and started to learn to dance English and Scottish dances – nothing about Morris at this time.¹

At the end of my first year, all Botany students had to attend a field course in the summer vacation, held at Lisdoonvarna on the west coast of Ireland in County Clare – lots of Guinness and good music and dancing. I guess we must have done some work as well. While on that course, one of my fellow students, Gloria Davies mentioned that one of the Botany Dept. staff, Dr. Joe Smartt, a geneticist, was involved in folk music, and danced with the Winchester Morris Men (WMM). Joe didn't teach in the first year, so I had not met him – in fact, I didn't really know who he was. At the beginning of my second year, in October 1968, the Botany Dept. held a social in the dept to welcome freshers. After a few glasses of beer, maybe wine, I decided to introduce myself to Joe. I told him that I'd heard he was a Morris dancer. He told me about the WMM, and that he'd also danced with the Westminster Morris Men. On the basis of what he told me, I said that if I could find five others who were interested, would he teach the Morris to us. And, lo and behold, within two weeks, the Red Stags Morris Men was formed, and registered as a society in the Union.

I was Vice President of the SSH JCR, and managed to persuade a number of friends there to join the Red Stags – Neil Freeman (Law), Simon Newman (Maths), Chris Lovegrove (Music), Derek Gorham (English, I believe, and in his first year), and Clive James (Accountancy). Joe had a collection of 78 rpm recording of William Kimber (Headington) playing Morris tunes, and we used to meet once a week in the seminar room on the first floor of the Botany Dept (now the Shackleton Building where Geography is housed). Joe would bring a portable record player and the records; we cut short and long sticks, and settled on learning Headington, Adderbury, and Bampton repertoires.

We were also joined by some friends not in SSH – Colin Anderson (I think that was his surname, who was also in Accountancy, I believe), and Steve Jordan (Maths). We were also joined from time-to-time by Russell Meredith (Maths), a year ahead of us in SSH, who

¹ Funnily enough, one of the leading lights in the ESFDS was Edward Johns from Penzance, then a final year PhD student in Physiology, now Professor at Cork. Edward moved to Birmingham University in 1968, and I met up with him again when I was a student there from 1970-1975, as well as a fellow faculty member when I joined Birmingham University in 1981. He had been with the Winchester Morris Men, and in Birmingham was also a member of Green Man's Morris & Sword Club (GMM&SC) that I also joined when I first went to Birmingham.

was primarily with WMM. Colin was a member of the ESFDS, and that's where I had met him – I think he also danced with WMM. Colin's girlfriend Veronica (?) worked in the university's admin somewhere. She made all the tabards for the club. I wonder what happened to those.

It took a little time to decide on a name for the side, finally settling for Red Stags, as that was the university's crest in those days – not the dolphin as you rightly point out on your web site. We also decided to don the university colours of black, gold and red. Our choice of tabards and black hats was made to set us apart, to some extent, from the WMM. The Westminster Morris men have black hats, and I guess it was Joe Smartt's association with them that set us on that course. We had to search out a supply of straw hats in Southampton – not the easiest thing to do in mid-winter. We finally found a supply in Dunn's in the High Street – we cause some amusement asking for about 10 hats, different sizes. Then we had to spray them black.

Our practices continued through the autumn term of 1968, and our first public performance was in February 1969 (although Joe recently told me that we attended the WMM annual feast at the beginning of the year and did our first performance as a side at that event, although I don't really remember).

I was a regular member of the folk club that met in the Union on Sunday evenings. I persuaded the club to let me organize a ceilidh in February 1969, at which the Stags would make their first performance. But we needed a musician! Joe did take up the pipe and tabor later on, but in early 1969 (and on many other occasions) we were supported by Dudley Savage, a fiddle player of considerable skill whose playing could really lift the dancers. He played also for the WMM and as lead in a local folk band. A local 'caller' for folk dances (I can't remember his name) was also a member of WMM (see image stags4). We also got a well-known Cockney singer from London as the 'star turn' – John Foreman. The event was catered by members and friends of the ESFDS and Red Stags – a bar, ploughman's etc. Over 200 people turned up, and a great time was had by all.

The other star turn were the Red Stags – making their debut, processing on, and dancing maybe four or five Headington and Adderbury dances. Needless to say, we were very nervous, but the reception was great. And I think we went from strength to strength.

We joined up with WMM during the summer term on their tours throughout Hampshire and especially in the New Forest. We also joined with them in West Sussex to meet up with the Martlets from Colchester. I certainly had some great times out with the Red Stags and the WMM.

The B & W photos you have on your web site were taken in February 1970 at the Inter-Varsity Folk Dance Festival, held Reading University that year. On another occasion we met up with the Reading University folk dance society at one of their ceilidhs with The Yetties in attendance, who played for our dances since Dudley was unable to join us on that occasion.

I think the Red Stags were in demand, and we did quite a few shows, at University Open Days, in the city and around. The local TV used a film of us dancing Above Bar for the closing credits of a weekly news program, and this was shown for well over a year.

In September 1969, Joe Smartt, Russell Meredith and myself (as Red Stags) joined a group of dancers and pipers from Newcastle, including husband and wife Colin Ross – of The High Level Ranters fame – and Ray Fisher, to participate in a bagpipe festival in Strakonice, Czechoslovakia. We danced our way across Holland, Germany and into Czechoslovakia. Our stay in Strakonice was sponsored by the local brewery! Highlights included a fabulous Breton pipe band from Brest and a dance group from Concarneau. We danced Morris and Rapper that the group had taught me very quickly in Newcastle before leaving. A baptism of fire. Although I didn't get the stepping entirely correct, it was more

important to get the movements, patterns right. We went round workingmen's clubs in the Newcastle area on the Saturday night – and those men know their rapper!

The Red Stags were represented at only one meeting of the Morris Ring, in Bristol 1970. We were unable to field a full side unfortunately, but had a good time nevertheless. Joe was not with us – being otherwise engaged, getting married in Southampton!

Well, 37 years later, what are we all up to. Joe Smartt retired from the University a few years ago. It was great visiting and staying with him just a few weeks ago. We went out on a Wednesday evening to Nether Wallop and Over Wallop to watch the WMM – a fine side. And some old friends still with them, including Geoff Jerram who used to sing at the university folk club while I was there and dance with the WMM. Geoff also became Squire of the Morris Ring.

Neil Freeman is a solicitor and senior partner in a practice in Aylesbury. He still dances with Albury Morris Men in Hertfordshire. Chris Lovegrove is a music teacher as far as I know. Si Newman must be still around in the Southampton area since you've had contact with him. Steve Jordan dances sometimes I hear with the WMM, as does Derek Gorham (although I heard that he is unwell with a heart condition). I don't know about the others.

As for me, I went on to Birmingham University, completing an MSc in 1971 and PhD in botany in 1975. In the meantime, I went to Peru and Costa Rica between January 1973 and April 1981 working at the International Potato Centre. I returned to Birmingham as Lecturer in the Dept. of Plant Biology in 1981 and stayed there 10 years. In July 1991 I joined the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, and managed its genetic resources program for 10 years. For the past 4 years I am the Director for Program Planning and Coordination.

My Morris days are long past. I danced in Birmingham with the GMM&SC from 1970 until I headed off to Peru, and for a while in 1975 when I was back completing my thesis requirement. I was with them in the 1980s and became Squire 1982-1983. I gave up from the mid-1980s because I developed arthritis in my hips, and was advised that such energetic exercise was not good.

So, here's the difference of 37 years (me on the left, with Steve Jordan and Joe Smartt):



I hope you find these recollections interesting – and now you know how it started all those years ago. I managed to scan a number of photos – I feature in many of them because they were taken by my parents when they visited for the University Open Day in March 1970.

Legends to photos:



stags1: l to r, outside the SCR, Simon Newman, Russell Meredith, hidden (possible Chris Lovegrove), Derek Gorham, Joe Smartt, Neil Freeman, Mike Jackson. Dudley Savage playing. Can't remember the name of the person standing in the background. He came to Southampton to study a postgraduate diploma in industrial archaeology. Date (?)



stags2: Joe Smartt leaving his old home in Elmsleigh Gardens. I think we were on our way to dance in Above Bar Street in the city centre. Date (?)



stags3: Between Law and the Nuffield. No date. L to r, Colin Anderson (?), Steve Jordan, Chris Lovegrove, Mike Jackson, Neil Freeman, Simon Newman. Dudley Savage playing. Date (?).



stags4: Mike Jackson in Leapfrog (Bledington), at the Winchester Morris Men annual feast, probably early 1970. Clive James and Chris Lovegrove in the background. The WMM member with hands in pockets also used to 'call' with a local folk band of which Dudley Savage was a leading light. See recollections for more on this.



stags5: l to r, Simon Newman, Russell Meredith, Mike Jackson – performing an Adderbury dance with long sticks. Outside Students' Union.



stags6: Simon Newman and Derek Gorham, with Steve Jordan in the background leaving Joe Smartt's house – see Stags2.



stags7: taken outside the Nuffield Theatre, March 1970 at the University Open Day. Standing, l to r, Mike (?) - not a student but came from university in London, Derek Gorham holding the hobby horse, Joe Smartt, Bob (??), Steve Jordan, Simon Newman, Russell Meredith; kneeling, l to r, Dudley Savage, (?), Mike Jackson.



stags8: l to r, Russell Meredith, Mike Jackson, Steve Jordan, Joe Smartt, outside the Law Faculty.



stags9: l to r, Dudley Savage, Mike Jackson, Steve Jordan, Joe Smartt, hidden, Mike (?), hidden. Open Day, March 1970. A Headington two stick dance.



stags10: Taken at the WMM annual feast, in early 1970. Joe Smartt (centre facing) is dancing as WMM. Mike (?) is to his right in the middle. In the background behind Joe is John Venables of the Green Man's Morris & Sword Club from Birmingham. John was then Squire of the Morris Ring, and also Foreman of GMM&S. Mike Jackson joined GMM&S when he moved to Birmingham University in September 1970.



stags11: l t r, Dudley Savage, Joe Smartt, Mike Jackson, Mike (?), Steve Jordan, Russell Meredith, and Derek Gorham. Open Day, March 1970 – see Stags9.



stags12: l to r, Joe Smartt, Mike Jackson, Russell Meredith, and Steve Jordan. Mike (?), Derek Gorham and Dudley Savage are hidden.



stags13: same as Stags7.



stags14: l to r, Russell Meredith, Simon Newman, and Mike Jackson, as in Stags5.



stags15: as in Stags12.



stags16: Neil Freeman and the Hobby Horse, Above Bar Street, in the city centre. Date (?).



stags17: l to r, hidden, Steve Jordan, (?), Bob (?), our industrial archaeology colleague from Cirencester, two hidden.



stags18: l to r, Chris Lovegrove, Derek Gorham (not sure), Neil Freeman or Steve Jordan, Joe Smartt (half hidden), Mike Jackson, Dudley Savage, Hobby Horse. Above Bar Street, city centre. This was filmed by local commercial TV, and the Red Stags film was used for over a year on the Friday evening local news programme as the fade out film for the credits!



stags19: l to r, Mike Jackson, Steve Jordan, and Joe Smartt.



stags20: l to r, Steve Jordan (just see his head), hidden, Simon Newman, Mike Jackson, and Joe Smartt – as Stags5 site and date.