

2018 Black Meet

Written by Silurian Border Morris
Wednesday, 11 April 2018 16:04 -

Silurian Border Morrismen of Ledbury will be hosting the Black Meet - a gathering of black-faced Morris sides - in Ledbury next Sunday 15th April. The last time such a gathering took place in Ledbury was in April 2017:



The Welsh Border tradition is generally considered to be the oldest form of English Morris - some of the earliest records come from the border counties of Hereford, Worcester and Shropshire. Ten Morris 'sides' from as far away as Preston have been invited to take part: dancing will take place mainly by the Market House, by the Master's House behind St. Katherines, outside the Talbot and the Brewery Inn.

Sunday's proceedings will start at 11:00 at the Market House when Silurian presents a cheque for £2228 to St Michael's Hospice - Silurian raised over £1100 at the Much Marcle Wassail last January (up from £800 the previous year), which has been matched by Westons Cider.

In 1609 a side of twelve dancers performed at Hereford races, accompanied by four whiffers (crowd controllers) and two musicians. Their average age was said to be 103 years. In 1652 a team from Broseley (in Shropshire) caused a disturbance at an ale house at Nordley. In 1614 the inhabitants of Longdon (about 9 miles east of Ledbury) entertained themselves with May games, morrices and dancing upon a Sabbath day in the summer set aside for such purposes.

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A team was expected in Shrewsbury, especially at Christmas and in the summer, or sometimes earlier in the year.

It would seem from this and other evidence that the Morris Dance was fairly widely performed in this area in the seventeenth century at Christmas and probably at other times of the year.

Why do we black our faces?

Many of the sides wore bells, and a common feature was the black face. You might be aware of problems caused in 2016 by some organisations who mistakenly consider the black face to be a form of racism. Whilst it is true there were imitations from the mid-19th century until the second half of the 20th century that had racist connotations, black-faced Morris goes back much, much earlier. A widely held belief at one time was that the Morris (or Moorish) dance was brought over by the Moors, and hence the dancers imitated their dark complexion. Since the Moors did not succeed in invading further north than Poitiers (in central France), this is somewhat tenuous. It's more likely that the word (if indeed it is derived from Moorish at all) was used only to describe the black faces. So the black face is likely to be a much older feature, and if compared with other forms of men's ritual dance throughout the world, it fits in with the general theme of anonymity.

Many Morris dancers from earlier times who came out at Christmas often were out-of-work farm labourers who 'bottled' for their Christmas box but didn't want prospective employers to recognise them - which concurs with the anonymity theory.

Silurian is pleased that no accusation of racism has been made in Herefordshire, and hopes the people of Ledbury will enjoy the show we will be hosting. If you are unable to come along, don't worry - we will be back again during the Poetry Festival in July - watch this space!