

THE HORN DANCE, ABBOTS BROMLEY.
(From a photograph taken by Mr. Alfred Parker in September, 1893.)

CHAPTER III.

THE ABBOTS BROMLEY HORN-DANCE.

THERE are ten performers, six dancers, a fool, Maid Marian, a hobby-horse, and a boy carrying a bow and arrow. These are accompanied by a musician, who plays an accordion, and a boy with a triangle.

Each dancer carries a pair of reindeer horns of great size, some of which weigh between 80 and 90 pounds apiece. The antlers borne by the first three dancers are painted a white or cream colour, the remaining three a dark blue. The horns are set in a wooden counterfeit skull, from which depends a short wooden pole or handle about eighteen inches long. Each dancer bears the head in front of him, and supports it by grasping the handle with his right hand and balancing the horns with his left.

The fool has a stick with a bladder attached to it; Maid Marian who, as usual, is impersonated by a man dressed in woman's clothes, carries a wooden ladle which is used to collect money; and the boy holds a bow and arrow which he clicks together in time with the music. The form of the hobby-horse is shown in the accompanying photograph. The head is made of wood, painted, and furnished with a hairy mane. The lower jaw is attached to the upper by a hinge which is worked by a string so that the rider can snap the jaws together in time with the music.

The actual dresses now worn by the performers (*see* photograph) are copies, more or less exact, of some that were devised by a local resident about twenty-five or thirty years ago. As, therefore, there is no traditional authority for them, there is no need to describe them in detail.

THE MUSIC.

There is no special or traditional tune for the dance. The musician told me that any country-dance air would serve, provided that it was played in the proper time (in Common Time $\text{♩} = 108$). When I saw the dance performed two tunes

only were played, "Yankee Doodle" and the following simple little melody :—



In a letter written in 1893 by the vicar of the parish (see "Folk-Lore Journal," vol. iv., p. 172), it is stated that a special tune used to be played for the horn dance by a man with a fiddle, and within the memory of some then living, but that all efforts to recover it had failed.

THE STEP.

The step is very similar to the normal country-dance step. It is an easy, rhythmical, graceful and springy walking movement, executed entirely on the ball of the foot, and in a jaunty manner which is highly characteristic and extremely engaging. The performers hold themselves erect, heads up and backs straight, bear themselves with dignity and preserve a grave demeanour. The steps fall on the first and middle beats of the bar throughout the dance, with one trifling exception presently to be explained.

The dance is performed annually on the Monday in the Wakes week, that is on the day following the first Sunday after the fourth of September. The horns and other properties are in the custody of the Vicar and are kept in the church tower.

There is a tradition that at one time the dance used to be performed on certain Sunday mornings in front of the church porch, and a collection made for the poor. The earliest account of the dance is, probably, that given by Dr. Plot in his "Natural History of Staffordshire" (1686). As this is of great interest it will bear quotation in full :—

"At Abbots, or now rather Pagets Bromley, they had also, within memory, a sort of sport, which they celebrated at

Christmas (on New-year and Twelft-day) call'd the Hobby-horse dance, from a person that carryed the image of a horse between his legs, made of thin boards, and in his hand a bow and arrow, which passing through a hole in the bow, and stopping upon a sholder it had in it, he made a snapping noise as he drew it to and fro, keeping time with the Music : with this man danced six others, carrying on their shoulders as many Rain deers heads, 3 of them painted white, and 3 red, with the Armes of the cheif families (viz. of Paget, Bagot, and Wells) to whom the revenews of the Town cheifly belonged, depicted on the palms of them, with which they danced the Hays, and other Country dances. To this Hobby-horse dance there also belong'd a pot, which was kept by turnes, by 4 or 5 of the cheif of the Town, whom they call'd Reeves, who provided Cakes and Ale to put in this pot; all people who had any kindness for the good intent of the Institution of the sport, giving pence a piece for themselves and families; and so forraigners too, that came to see it: with which Mony (the charge of the Cakes and Ale being defrayed) they not only repaired their Church but kept their poore too: which charges are not now perhaps so cheerfully boarn."

Interesting as this account is, the words "within memory," implying that Dr. Plot wrote from his own or others' recollections, and these of no very recent date, render inference as to subsequent changes in the custom, based on omissions and differences of detail in his description, somewhat precarious.

On the one hand, however, it will be noticed that the dance was performed at Christmas time; that the bow was carried by the rider of the hobby-horse; that the horns were borne on the shoulders instead of in the hands of the dancers; and that no mention is made either of a fool or of Maid Marian.

On the other hand we find that the bearer of the bow and arrow still makes the snapping noise "keeping time with the Music"; that the number of the dancers is the same; and that the dance itself has changed very little. For the Hays

evidently refers to the serpentine movement which is the chief and the most characteristic feature of the modern dance; while the second evolution, "All-Together," is, of course, a well known country-dance figure. It is greatly to be regretted that Dr. Plot made no reference to the music nor to the costumes worn by the dancers.

Other accounts of the dance will be found in P. H. Ditchfield's "Old English Customs," p. 139, and in "The Folk-Lore Journal," vol. iv., p. 172, and vol. vii., p. 382.

THE DANCE.

The performers stand in single file, one behind the other, headed by the leader, and in the following order:—

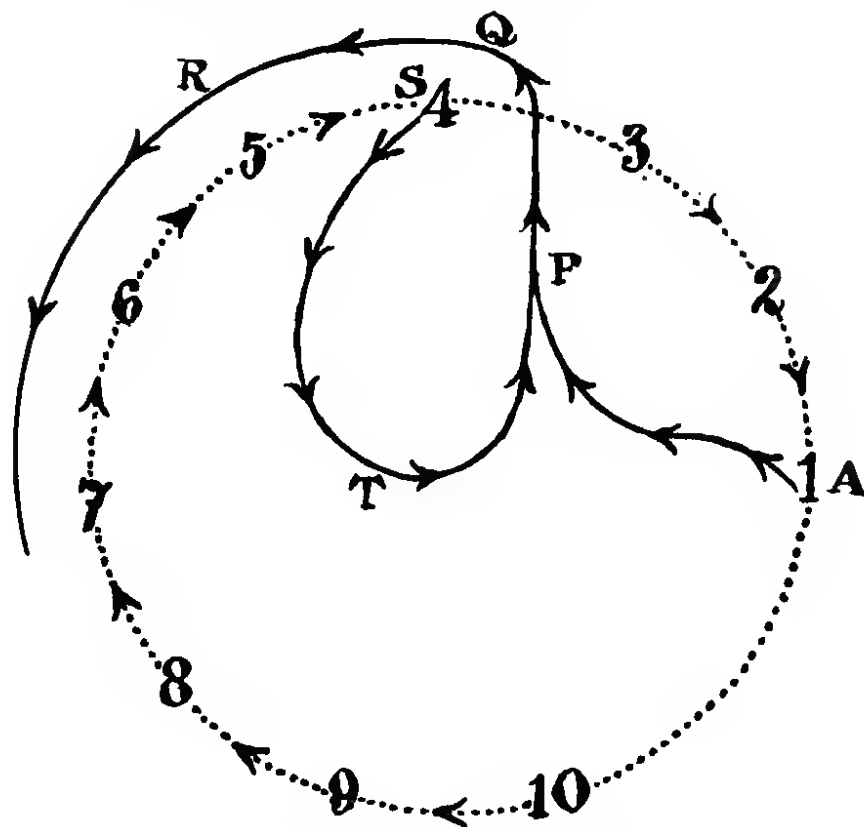
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|-----|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. | } | Dancers carrying horns. |
| 2. | | |
| 3. | | |
| 4. | | |
| 5. | | |
| 6. | | |
| 7. | Maid Marian. | |
| 8. | Hobby-horse. | |
| 9. | Boy with bow and arrow. | |
| 10. | The Fool. | |

Led by No. 1, they first move forward a few yards in a straight line and then describe a circular or elliptic track in either direction, say, clockwise. If space permits, the circle should be large enough to allow of a clear space of at least ten yards between the head and tail of the procession.

After completing one or more revolutions, the leader suddenly turns inwards, and faces No. 2. Poising himself for a moment, while taking two or three short steps backward, he then passes between Nos. 3 and 4; turns sharply to his left, dances close to and outside the rest of the dancers, and initiates a new circular movement in the reverse direction, counter-clockwise.

Immediately No. 1 faces No. 2, No. 4, followed by those behind him, moves inwards to his right along the track

shown in the diagram, shaping his course and regulating his pace so that he falls in naturally behind No. 3:—



The dotted line in the above diagram shows the original track. A is the point where the leader doubles back and faces No. 2; and A P Q R the course along which he then proceeds, followed, as far as P, by Nos. 2 and 3 and, subsequently, by the rest of the procession.

No. 4, with those behind him, moves along the line S T P Q R joining No. 1's track at P at the moment when No. 3 has just passed by. The success of the evolution very largely depends upon the skill with which No. 4 shapes his course and orders his pace.

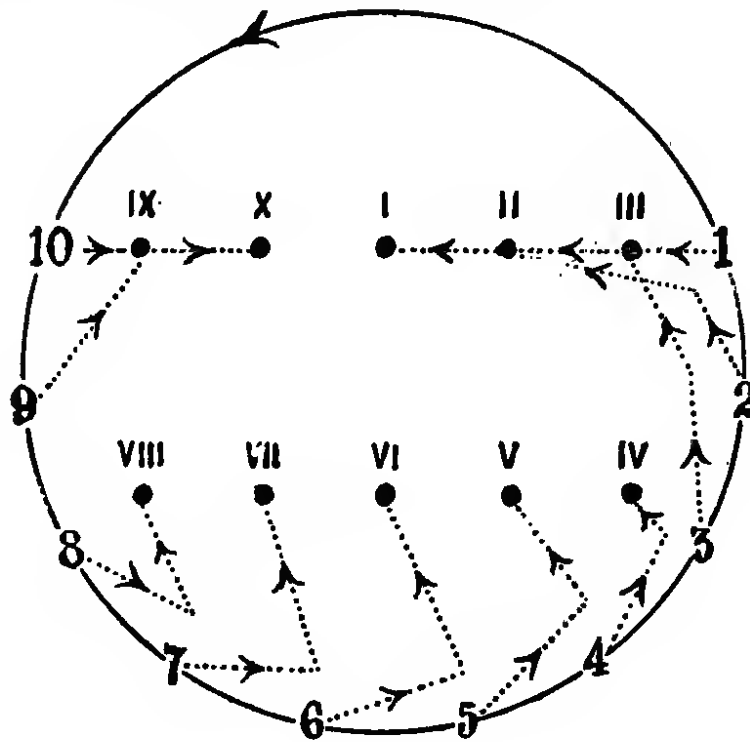
These circular and serpentine movements are repeated, in alternation, as often as the leader elects. He then calls "All-Together," turns sharply to his left (*i.e.*, if he is going round ~~clockwise~~; otherwise, to his right) and, followed by Nos. 2 and 3, proceeds in a straight line across the circle, as

counter-
clockwise

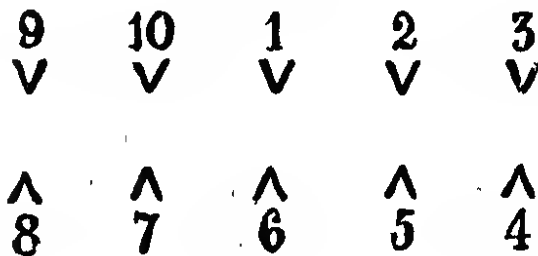
shown in the diagram. Simultaneously, Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 edge towards the left until they are in a straight line parallel to and about five yards away from the path described by the leader. When the latter is opposite to No. 6, all, except Nos. 9 and 10, halt and make a quarter turn inwards, so that Nos. 1, 2 and 3 face one way and Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the opposite direction.

Immediately No. 1 initiates this movement, Nos. 10 and 9 make a half turn to their left and, bearing to the right, dance towards and meet No. 1; whereupon they both turn inwards and face, respectively, Nos. 7 and 8.

The dancers are now in two parallel lines facing each other, as shown in the following diagram :—



giving



Standing in this position the two lines of dancers wait until the beginning of the next strain of the music. They then move forward and meet; each dancer beginning with his left foot, taking three steps forward and then, instead of a fourth step, throwing his right leg forward, while he swings both hands forward and upward (two bars).

They then take four steps backward to their places, beginning with right feet (two bars).

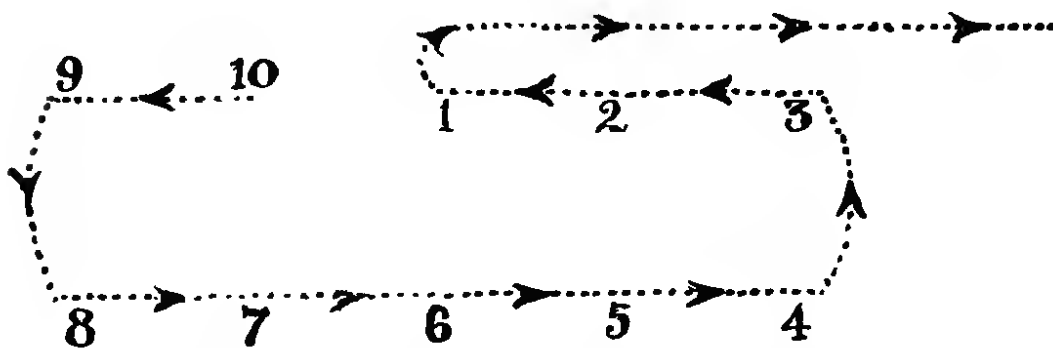
These forward and backward movements are then repeated twice (eight bars).

The two lines of dancers now cross over and change sides, partners passing left shoulder to left shoulder, turning inwards and facing each other (four bars).

All the above movements are then repeated in the reverse direction; and this brings the dancers back to their original positions (sixteen bars, *i.e.*, thirty-two bars in all).

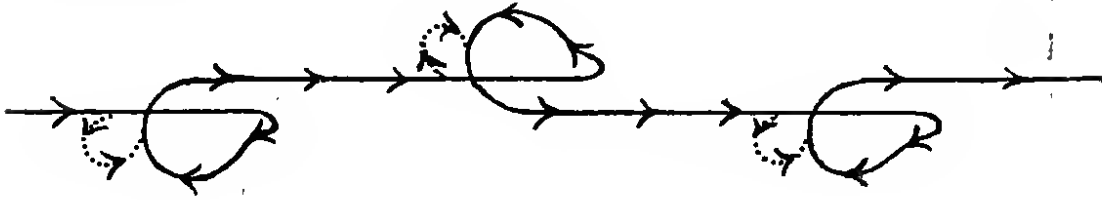
This concludes the figure, which is repeated or not at the leader's discretion. On its conclusion the dancers form up in single file and begin the dance over again.

To form line the leader faces outward, turns sharply to his right, followed by Nos. 2 and 3; No. 4, followed by Nos. 5, 6 7 and 8, falls in behind No. 3; while No. 9, with No. 10 behind him, follows No. 8.



The above movements are executed whenever the dancers perform in a stationary position before a special audience. When, however, they are proceeding from one "stand" to

another they dance in the way shown in the following diagram :—



The unbroken line shows the track taken by Nos. 1, 2, and 3; whenever No. 4, with those behind him, follows a different course the latter is indicated by a dotted line.