

BATHAMPTON MORRIS MEN

A HISTORY OF THE BATHAMPTON STABLE

1950 - 2017



John Salmon
March 2017

BATHAMPTON MORRIS MEN A HISTORY OF THE BATHAMPTON STABLE

The First Horse (1950 – 1953)

Bathampton Morris Men have, since the 1950s, been accompanied by a horse. Only sparse information about the early years of the stable exists and that part of history has been interpreted from the Logbooks with the help of Dave Duncan, former Squire of Bathampton.

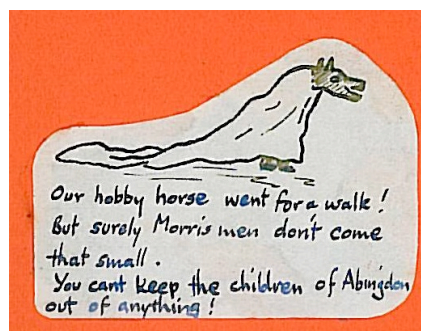
The side's Hobby Horse (note, it's a horse not an Oss. Only Padstow has an Oss) has been both a tourney horse and a mast horse in the past. A "tourney" or rider horse is meant to look like a person riding a small horse. The body is usually covered by a long caparison or cape which, in medieval times, both decorated and protected the horse during jousting. The caparison on the Morris tourney horse hides the rider's legs. A "mast" or "pole horse" has a head usually made of wood with snapping jaws. Occasionally an actual horse's skull is used. The operator is wholly covered by a long skirt.

The introduction of a horse into the side's routine was in about 1950. Dave Duncan recalls a hobby horse, "*most likely a tourney horse*", in use by Lionel Gray accompanied by Don Williams the Fool at that time. This horse, he believes, was the one lost in the Bathampton Village Hall fire where the side regularly practiced although the date of the fire is not known. As a result of the loss the side borrowed a hobby horse from time to time from other sides for special occasions. White Horse Morris Men lent their horse which danced with Bathampton at a performance of the Abbot's Bromley Horn Dance on 28th July 1953. John Silcox was the rider.

The Replacement Horse (1954 – 1960)

Bathampton's founder, Mrs Oakey, arranged for the construction of a replacement horse again of the tourney type and it was made and donated to the Morris Men by Fred Lovell of Batheaston. It first appeared on the evening of Thursday 1st July 1954 at a "*marathon floral dance*" through Batheaston village to celebrate Parish Church Week and it was watched by "*hundreds of people*". The rider was Ken Harrison. This horse was used on a number of occasions until it was decided that it was too uncomfortable to wear and difficult to transport and something more suitable was needed.

The first reference to a hobby horse in the logbook was in 1956 when Bathampton was first represented at a Ring Meeting. It was held in Abingdon to celebrate the town's charter and the horse was apparently "stolen" by small children who got inside and walked away. This was recorded by Dave Duncan in a cartoon. But this was not a Bathampton horse. It referred to a horse owned by one of the sides to which Bathampton was attached on a walking tour on that first Ring Meeting.



A photograph taken at the Royal Show in Whitchurch, Bristol, between July 1st and 4th 1959 shows only the back of Bathampton's replacement tourney horse but it shows that the caparison was a flowery cotton material and the rider wore a straw hat with a pheasant's feather and a dark long cape which covered his "legs" on either side of the saddle.

On 5th July the side went on to the EDFSS Festival at Weston super Mare. In a group photograph the Horse can be seen with the rider crouching at the front of a group of 19 men. It has a black head with a white blaze, bright alert eyes and upright ears. The rider who has not been identified, but may be Peter Pagan, wears a medieval peasant costume which is not the same as the other members of the side.



In July 1959 the Horse went to the Exeter Ring Meeting



And on 5th September 1959 it was seen dancing in the Parade Gardens in Bath. This might have been its last outing.



The White Horse 1960

No further references to the tourney horse can be found except that it retired in 1960 when a new horse danced out. This was a pole horse made by Dave Duncan *“from odd materials at hand”*. It was first recorded dancing at the Wellow Flower Show and *“slight changes were subsequently made to it in the light of experience”*. It had a two tone skirt; the front was a red and white check with a white cloth window for the operator and the back was white with a few red spots. It appeared to be very tall with a large, square, peg-board head and a skirt which reached the ground. This horse was quite popular and by 1961 / 1962 several photographs of it appeared in the log. Dave Duncan was the operator for an introductory period.



Performances in Gloucester and Marshfield.

The man looking the new White Horse in the mouth is Tony Cowley.

The first of Bathampton's many camping tours was on Exmoor in 1960. The White Horse went camping too and the *“Bathampton Way”* recorded that the side *“took with it its first Hobby Horse of the hooded type which replaced the cumbersome Batheaston Horse”*. Bert Shilock is recorded as the operator. Dave Duncan recalls that the tour *“provided a good test of acceptance of this type of horse as part of our Morris offering”*.

On May Day in 1965 the White Horse was led by its reins by the side's mascot, 7 year old Simon Reynolds, brother of 19 year old dancer James, to collect money amongst the crowd. It appears that the main function of a horse was a collection role. By 1967 photographs of the horse no longer featured in the log book. This may have coincided with a note that Dave Duncan had stepped down as squire because he could no longer guarantee to attend functions.

The Brown Horse

Almost nothing can be found regarding the Brown Horse except a brief reference to it in the Bathampton Way. This records that between 1966 and 1968 the 'Brown 'Oss' was operated by Rupert Simon. It may have been the future Red Horse in a brown skirt.

The Red Horse

By the 1970s the White Horse had been replaced by the Red Horse. This mast horse is dressed in a red skirt with yellow and green dots and, for a long time after the side's first overseas tour to Cesson in 1979, carried a GB badge. In 1975 David (presumably David Eales) was recorded as being the operator at the Plough Sunday service in Warminster. In 1976 it appeared on television dancing for an HTV event in Avebury.

David Eales was a master operator, changing from his mild manner into an evil being when beneath the skirt. The horse was scary in his hands. He allowed his head to protrude in outline behind the horse's head, like a camel's hump, which somehow increased the nefarious animal quality of the beast. Children were both mesmerised and scared when David brought it out.



Fred Goater with the Red Horse The Horse before the red skirt was made. Could this be the Brown Horse?

From 1990 the appearances of the horse became more infrequent and had nearly ceased when David retired as foreman of the Morris Men in 1994, a role he had undertaken for 27 years. From that time he no longer appeared at events and in the latter part of the 1990s the Horse was taken over by John Salmon who has been the main operator since then. Occasionally John Laver played the part too. In 1999 the Red Horse was dressed in a new red skirt made by Jane Moseley of Frome to replace the old skirt which was getting tired, faded and threadbare.



The Red Horse after 1999 with the new (longer) skirt

The Green Horse

Brian Newton, who had been a chippy in the Royal Navy, joined the side in 1975 and produced the Green Horse which made its first appearance at the Bath Carriage Museum in 1975. Three or four years later he refurbished it using the head of the old White Horse replacing the peg-board cheeks with more solid plywood and adding a furry mane. A photo of the horse in Nunney in 1976 shows it in a, probably temporary, long black skirt but a new skirt was subsequently made of green cloth with coloured markings of small triangles and circles and, from time to time when the Red Horse could not appear, Brian operated the Green Horse. The Bathampton Way records David Eales as the operator of the Red Horse between 1969 and 1989 and Brian Newton as operator of the Green Horse between 1975 and 1990. On very rare occasions both horses have danced at the same event including at the Bath Carriage Museum and on one Plough Sunday in Horningsham Church. The Red Horse was always the primary Horse and the Green Horse the back-up. The Green Horse has a happy face and was much friendlier towards the audience than the Red Horse.



Brian Newton in the Green Horse

Traditionally, one of the first stops of the dance season is at Midford Cross Roads where we dance outside the home of Carnival Costume designer and maker Shula Newick. Shula has been a long-standing good friend of Bathampton and has on many occasions provided and still provides the men with food and cider after performing in Midford. In 2012 Shula offered to make a new costume for the Horse. As Brian Newton had left the side many years previously to live in Portsmouth and the Green Horse was redundant, it was too good an offer to refuse.

Shula had in mind to use some patchwork strips of cloth to make a costume in an "Egungun" style which emanates from a Nigerian tribe, the Yoruba, and is worn by its Shaman masqueraders. The Yoruba follow the Orisha religion wherein it is expected that when a man dies the elders and family get together to assess his contribution to society; the wiser and more powerful or venerable the person, the more expensive and prestigious the layers of cloth strips would be to make a cloak. Often

the cloak would be topped by a carved symbolic animal head and it would be used to dance at the funeral to enable the spirits of the Egungun to come down from the heavens and share physical fellowship with their relatives on earth. Shula had noted a link between the Bathampton Men promoting local and international goodwill using the pagan history of the costumed horse which symbolises fertility and prosperity and the ancient and powerful Yoruba tradition.

Shula used vintage cloth strips which she had inherited from her mother and copied the traditional style including varied lengths and the bordering and toothed edging of the Egungun strips. She applied the traditional open weave dish cloth for the wearer to look through and the red based cotton cloak on which the strips are stitched. A year or so after making the costume Shula added more strips and produced leggings to help obscure any aspect of the human beneath as is the Egungun style. The cloak took many hours to produce but the result, as has been widely acclaimed and often commented upon by onlookers, is truly spectacular. The Green Horse (because that's still its name despite its varied colours) made its first appearance at the Holburne Museum, Bath on 24th March 2013.



The Green Horse



With Fred Goater and Andy Minty at the Holburne Museum



The Green Horse in Nunney 2013.

The Men – John Salmon, Steve Archer, Richard Eamer, Chris Wildridge, James Sturgess, Green Horse supported by a young local volunteer, Ken Cobb, Steve Coombes, John Nutt, Andy Minty, Martin Bayfield, Idris Roker, John Sturgess.

The Performance of the Horse

The Bathampton Horse has, it is believed, a unique style of performance and offers an extra dimension to the display. Dave Duncan recalls that the horse usually made its appearance, probably accompanied by the Fool, towards the end of a show *“as a collecting aid”*. The Bathampton Horse continues the tradition to this day of only appearing once or twice during a show. Instead of standing passively for the duration of the men’s dance routine, as many other sides’ beasts do, the Horse comes into the performance unexpectedly often frightening unsuspecting members of the audience. There is a fine line to be drawn between terror and fun and the operator must ensure that children are never terrorised or babies caused to cry. But sometimes it happens.

David Eales records in the Bathampton Way; *“Our horse is an essential part of the complete performance. He suddenly appears as a real live animal and at the end may be sacrificed. He fills the time between dances, perhaps camouflages team mistakes and links the audience with the dancers. During the dances he fades into the background. His particular success is with the children to whose level he can descend to collect their coins. Each man creates the horse’s own character in mime – he never talks or complains at the many indignities suffered”*.

The Horse may dance with the men and sometimes amongst the men causing chaos in the set. Sometimes the Horse will sit on a seat next to an elderly person or muscle in between a couple on a bench or snuggle up to a young lady or move menacingly closer and closer to a photographer. He dances or squats on the ground next to the music, his head moving slightly as it studies the crowd. Sometimes a connection is made between the Horse and an onlooker even at a distance when the onlooker is unnerved by the feeling that the Horse is watching and then stalking him or her. And then the Horse moves ever closer until he or she runs away. Sometimes children will follow the Horse. They will often confront and taunt it but some younger ones will pat it or talk to it gently. Inside the Horse one can see little of what is going on outside and can only listen to the comments and react as best as possible. The operator has to be careful not to face the sun or bright lights because visibility, particularly in the Green Horse, can be completely lost. The Horse collects money, sometimes along with children’s offerings of stones and grass, which is put into his mouth and, usually, falls into a leather pouch.

The Red Horse is light and moves quickly and dances nimbly. The Green Horse is heavy, weighed down with a big head and yards of cloth and can only move slowly but the movement is more than made up by its costume. The Green Horse is spectacular. It is used on special occasions.

Whatever its antics the Horse draws attention from the dancers which is why, after performing vigorously, it leaves the floor for the men as suddenly as it had appeared. Occasionally it returns for the Bonny Green Garters finale where, at the All-in, the Horse is seen to rise high into the air and then drops down dead as the men walk around the prostrate body and cover it with their hats, thus protecting the operator’s anonymity and completing the sacrifice.

Acknowledgments

This brief history was prepared with help from Dave Duncan, Fred Goater and other Bathampton Men. Much of the information came from the Bathampton Log Books. Some information came from the Bathampton Way. In particular a huge thank you to Shula Newick who not only created a stunning Horse for the side but also prepared a written treatise which has been incorporated into this history.

John Salmon**March 2017**