

Bygones

ONE hundred years of English dancing in Ripley will be marked by a Day of Dance celebrated by men and ladies' Morris dancing groups.

Ripley Morris men and ladies' group, Ripley Green Garters, will dance at the centenary of English Dancing in Ripley on Saturday, September 13.

The celebration, in Ripley town centre, will feature more than 14 Morris sides attending from across the UK.

Clive Sturgess, who plays Ripley Morris Fool – a character who serves as a humorous and interactive link between the dancers and the audience – is keen for more people to get involved with Morris dancing.

"We put it down as fun, fitness and fellowship," he says. "We travel, you get to meet new people and make friends. It's really great."

The Day of Dance will start at 10.30am and will be held in pubs, cafes and other pedestrianised areas in the town for the dancers.

Ripley Folk Dance Club was formed in 1925, where the style of dance evolved and became a "distinct entity" in the town, establishing Morris dancing in Ripley.

Years after this, in 1949, Ripley Morris Men was established. During this time you needed a minimum of six dancers and a musician.

The men's group continued until folding in 1963, before the 1970s when there was a resurgence of Morris dancing, which led to 1981 when the men's group was re-founded in Ripley.

The group dances in a Cotswold style of dance, characterised by white trousers and shirt with a crossbelt called "baldicks", a straw hat and bell pads.

"The pictures we've got show people dressed in a very similar style," says Clive. "The dances danced would more or less have been the same. The dancers went on tours like we do. So things haven't changed a great deal since then."

Ripley Morris dancers practise weekly from September to April and spend the summer months performing at local pubs, events and festivals, keeping Cotswold Morris dance routines thriving.

Other styles of Morris include Border, North West and Molly, while the Cotswold tradition is the style most typically associated with the classic image of Morris dancing – white-clad dancers with decorated hats and sashes, waving handkerchiefs or clashing sticks in time to lively tunes.

The group consists of multiple members including some aged in their 70s and 80s, but it welcomes all ages including younger generations and children.

"We had a dancer who was still dancing two weeks before he sadly passed at the age of 86," says Clive.

"The dance generally takes about three and a half minutes on average. So you get a spurt of activity and then you get a rest. Not like going jogging a kilometre. Also, you're doing it with other people, so that

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MORRIS MILESTONE

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interaction is really enjoyable."

"If you're an extrovert, you've got a crowd, or hopefully you've got people watching you. So it does your mind good, because you have to learn a dance, practice it, perform it. So it's good for the body and good for the brain."

Despite the tradition being kept alive for 100 years, Ripley Morris misses its younger members, adding dimension and energy to the dances.

"Historically when we were younger we all had our own kids and we had a massive kids side," says Clive. "Sadly, they all grew up and went to university and spread out."

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"I suppose the best age group is people in their 30s. We all used to trail the kids along with us and they absolutely loved it."

Clive started Morris dancing in his 30s and has never looked back. Since dancing, he has made lifelong friendships, been on tours around the UK and managed to beat his asthma issues.

"I was Mr sick note for any activity at school," says Clive. "I was very good at forging my mother's signature. I hated getting cold during games, and I had undiagnosed exercise asthma, so it made it really

painful. When myself and my wife had a son, our midwife introduced us to a friend who was dancing in the next village. We were out and one of the Ripley boys said 'You could do this.' He said they had a photoshoot the night before, and he had a face drawn on his knee. They'd all had faces drawn on their knees."

"I thought, 'This could be quite fun.' So I plucked up the courage and went along, and after a couple of weeks I was really enjoying myself, and I was determined to be good at it."

Having been Morris dancing for the last 40 years, Clive has taken on multiple different roles including the Squire, Dancer in Charge, the Bagman (simi-

lar to a secretary) and now the Fool.

Morris has provided Clive with friendships and a sense of belonging where previously he spent his school years reluctant to do physical activity.

He is keen for younger members as well as children to get involved in Morris again, to spread the feeling of community across generations.

"The friendships are wonderful," says Clive. "You're not necessarily buddy-buddy, but I've never known any arguments or issues."

"We've been on trips to London, and danced underneath the dinosaur's tail in the Natural History Museum."

"We've been to France, Denmark, Germany. The France trips are fantas-

