



The Gate to Southwell

One of Nottingham's oldest and most colourful traditions - The Gate to Southwell - took place earlier this summer with parades and dancing in the steets and villages between Nottingham and Southwell

Word: Chris Gigg

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A local ceremony dating back to the 12th Century which appeared to have been lost in the mists of time, has been revived and is once again thriving and taking place each year at Whitsuntide.

The Gate to Southwell is an ancient Nottinghamshire procession that dates back to 1109 when the Archbishop of York, Thomas of York, wrote to each of the parishes in Nottinghamshire asking them to contribute to the building of a

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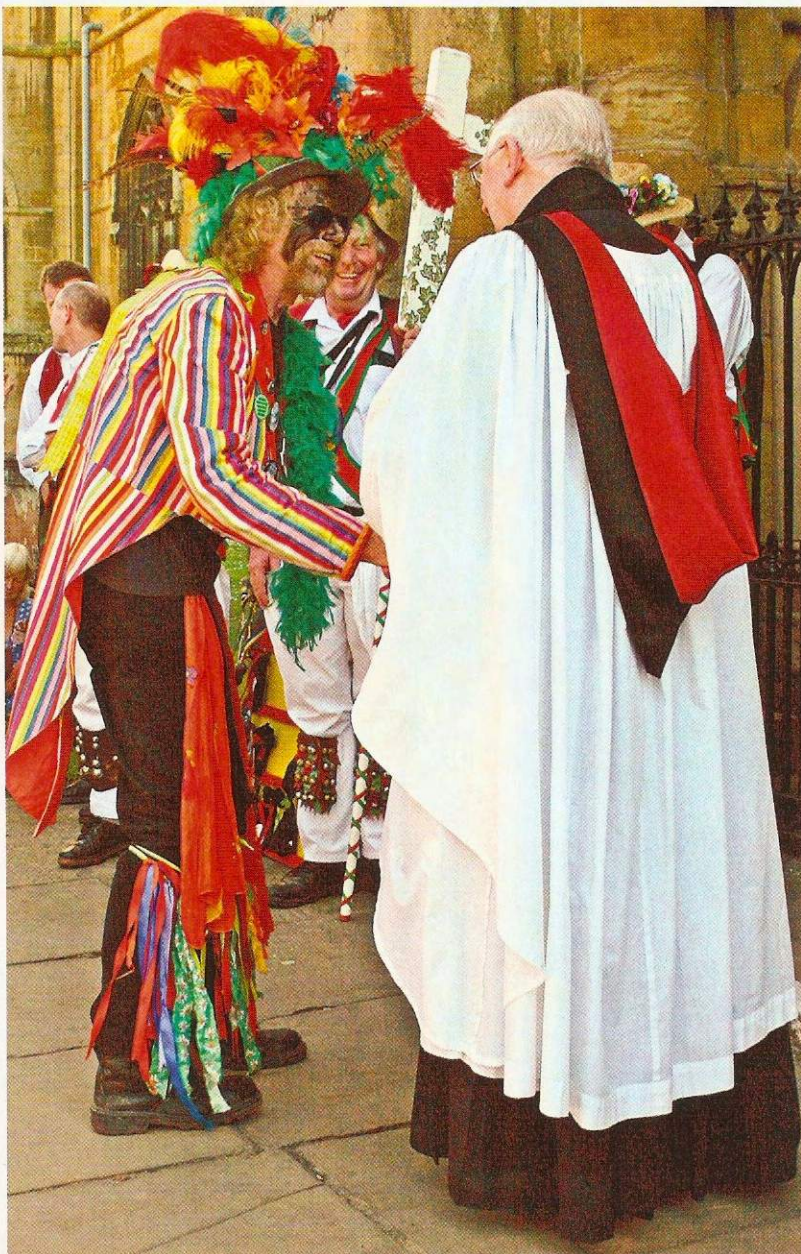
Chris Gigg, organiser of this year's Gate to Southwell event



A Powderkeg dancer pictured at the Cross Keys, Burton Joyce



The Maids of Clifton on their way through Sneinton



Dancers meet the dean and clergy at Southwell Minster

new mother church at Southwell. This resolved a dispute as to whether the Nottinghamshire offerings should be given to York or Southwell. These offerings, the Southwell Pence, were brought to St. Mary's, Southwell, by an annual procession at Whitsuntide.

'Gate' is thought to be derived from the Scandinavian word 'gata' meaning 'road'.

By tradition the procession began at Nottingham and was headed by the Mayor and city officials in their best ceremonial robes. Behind the Mayor came clergy who could use the occasion to get up to date with church business and ordinary people combining a pilgrimage with a holiday excursion.

According to one author "Southwell was very gay on Whit Monday with the representatives of two hundred and five odd parishes riding into the little town. Whit week was long regarded as Southwell Feast week, when merry village sports and other pastimes made a welcome break in the peaceful progress of the year.

The greatest attractions were the donkey and pony races from Burgage Green to the top of Hockerton Hill and back. Nothing is left of all these enjoyments now and the Feast has turned into Southwell Races which are held at Rolleston."

It is not known exactly when the procession was ended but it seems likely to have been in the 16th Century. In the late 18th Century, the annual church meeting held in conjunction with the procession, was abolished. Even after the procession had long ceased, the Chapter Clerk kept up the custom of attending in the North Porch of the Minster, where his predecessors had collected the Southwell Pence.

In the late 1970s Bob Hine of Dolphin Morris Men was researching the origins of Morris dancing in the Nottingham area when he discovered in the Nottingham Borough records that in 1530, entertainment on the procession was provided by a team of Morris Dancers. Apparently they were rewarded for their efforts by payment from the Borough for the bells, coats, and the ale that the dancers 'drank at all times'. Thus, in 1981, he revived this ancient tradition and that year's event was attended by many local Morris dancing sides, most walking all the way to Southwell, with long periods of dancing along the way.

The Gate to Southwell in the 21st Century is based on research from the 1980s, but has evolved to meet modern travel and timing requirements, with the dancers being assisted by bus along various sections of the route. This year's event was organised by Chris Gigg of the Dolphin Morris Men.



Above: The procession winds its way through the streets of Southwell

Right: the cross bearer leading the procession through Southwell



Today, the dancers assemble in Nottingham's Market Square. The Lord Mayor of Nottingham, Councillor Des Wilson, greeted the dancers, walkers, musicians and charity workers. The board with the Southwell Pence has been brought to the Market Square, and the Lord Mayor formally presents the contribution from Nottingham to the assembled dancers to take to Southwell on his behalf.

(The records show that Nottingham gave 13 Shillings and 4 Pence (about 66p), whereas lowly Stanton gave only 5d (about 2p). The total came to 15 Pounds, 18 Shillings, 7 Pence and one Farthing. The bags contain real money, including silver three-penny bits and sixpences, with some coins as old as 1737).

By tradition, the Lord Mayor is invited to accompany the procession on horseback along with his retinue and the clergy - he always declines. Also, he is asked if he would like to pay for the dancer's ale on the trip - again this request is turned down.

In years gone by, the dancers themselves have collected money along the way for various charities. In recent years, with strict requirements on street collecting, Dolphin Morris Men have chosen a worthy cause so that they can benefit from the day's events. Since 2003 the chosen Charity has been the Nottingham Hospice and in previous years the collection has sometimes raised over £1500.

After the presentation of the Southwell Pence by The Lord Mayor, the procession starts by winding through the streets of Nottingham and the Lace Market. It is preceded by a cross to represent the association with the church together with a banner depicting the ancient tradition. The board carrying the Southwell Pence is also very much at the forefront of the procession.

After winding its way through Sneinton the first stop is at the



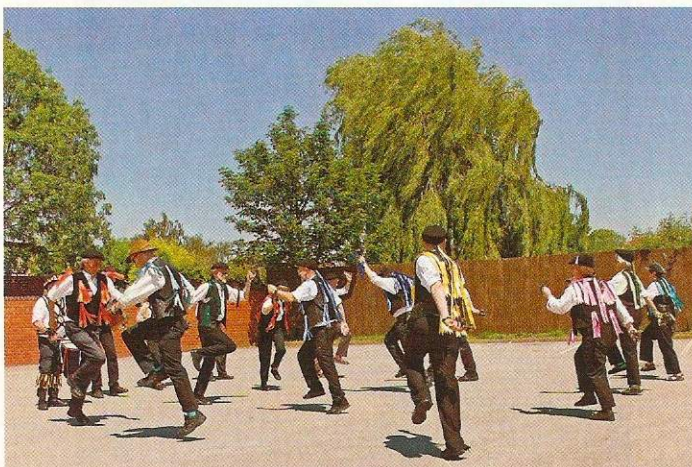
Tom Huggon with scrolls meets the dancing teams at Sneinton



The Powderkegs from Derbyshire's Peak District head for Southwell via Sneinton



A Powderkeg dancer



Rattlejag dancers at The Railway, Lowdham

Sneinton Hermitage Centre, on Sneinton Boulevard, for a well-earned cup of tea. Here the procession is met by the Sneinton Environmental Society, and in particular, by Tom Huggon. Tom prepares a scroll which welcomes every dancing team, makes some topical jokes, and then reinforces the traditions of the dancing and customs of Old England. A cheque from the Society is presented to the Hospice, this year accepted by Beverly Brooks MBE who is their newly appointed chief executive.

The procession is then joined by members of the Sneinton Environmental Society, who walk with the dancers to the parish boundary.

Buses then take the dancers and musicians to Burton Joyce for a massed dance display, thereafter to various villages and pubs along the route. A stop is made in Bleasby for tea and scones, which are generously provided by the village's WI.

Just before 5pm the final procession forms up in the Easthorpe area of Southwell. The procession then winds through the narrow streets and into Southwell Minster's grounds where it assembles at the North Porch of the Minster.

Here the procession is welcomed by the Dean of Chapter, the Very Reverend David Leaning, who retires this year after some 14 years in the post; Canon Pastor Nigel Coates, and Canon Jacqui Jones. The Southwell Pence are then presented to The Dean and Clergy, with each dancing side represented as well as the organisers and the charity. When all the bags of money have been handed over, the dancers and walkers are welcomed into the Minster for a short service. Many Southwell parishioners attend the service before they go to Evensong.

The service starts with a dance performed by a side chosen each year. This year the team chosen to dance in the Minster was Rattlejag.

A hymn then follows, this year it was appropriately *The Lord of the Dance*, followed by a short blessing. The service concludes with another hymn, this year being *My Faith it is an Oaken Staff* which has a tune that the Morris and the Church both share.

Following the service there is the opportunity for all the sides to retire to Southwell's Bramley Apple pub which for 26 years has provided liquid refreshment at the end of what is a very tiring day. For many years the Springhead Brewery of Newark has generously sponsored the event by giving pints of their real ale to thirsty dancers and walkers alike.



Black Pig Border at the Cross Keys, Burton Joyce

The origins of Morris Dancing

Although the origins of the English Morris dances are obscure, they are probably derived from an ancient fertility ritual performed in the spring to make the crops grow.

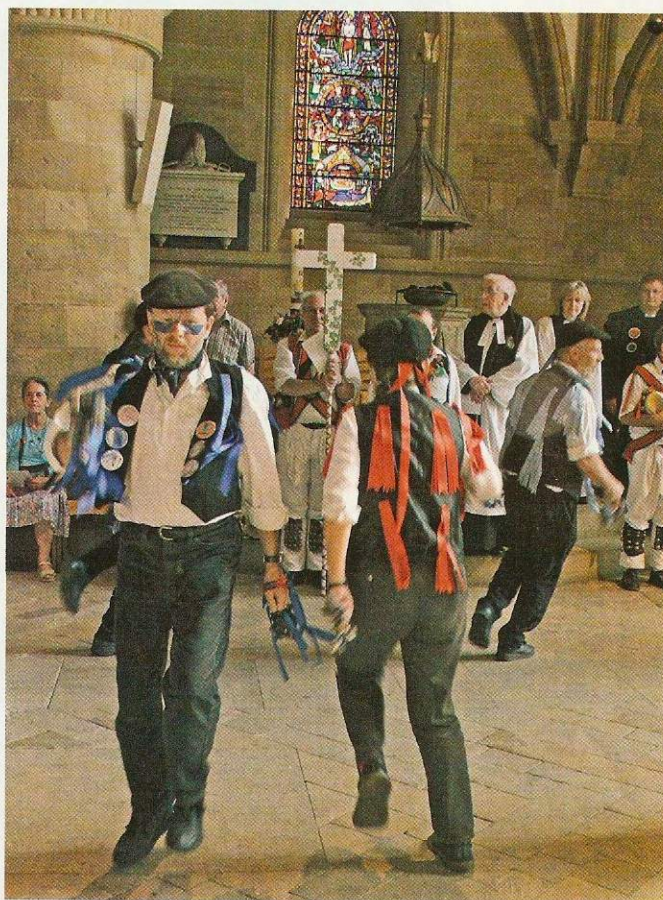
Traditional Morris dancing survived best in the Cotswolds where it was recorded by the folk song and music collector Cecil Sharp about 100 years ago. These dances generally involve a team of six dancers performing with sticks or handkerchiefs and are usually referred to as Cotswold Morris Dancing. Traditional accompaniment was the pipe and tabor; today however, the concertina, melodeon, accordion and fiddle are more common.

In the Northwest of England the wearing of clogs gave a different style to the Morris dances.

Another characteristic style evolved in the Northeast of England with the use of long swords or rapiers (rappers), and is known today as Rapper Sword.

The Morris sides who attend the Gate to Southwell each year are all revival sides, i.e., they were formed in the last few decades. Dolphin Morris Men formed in 1968 as an affiliated offshoot of the now defunct Nottingham Traditional Music Club or NTMC as it was known.

The sides who took part this year were : Dolphin Morris Men from Nottingham; Anstey Morris Men from Loughborough; Black Pig Border from Derbyshire; Black Annis from Leicester; Green Velvet Outlaws from Sherwood, Nottingham; Maids of Clifton from the Nottingham area; Powderkeg from the Peak District; Rattlejag from the Newark and Southwell area; Stone Monkey from Derbyshire; Sullivan Sword from Nottingham; Whip the Cat from Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.



Rattlejag dance in Southwell Minster