

Johnny Burke

(This appreciation of the well-known and sadly missed morris man is based on text by Peter Stephens, augmented and revised through conversation with many others.)

A man of forthright character and opinion, very enthusiastic, fair, well respected and reliable. A real "Constant Billy". Johnny Burke was born in Winchester on 10th March 1923. He spent his early years under his maternal grandfather's wing whilst his father, a regular in the Royal Navy, spent lengthy spells on service abroad. He didn't, however, follow his grandfather into the family undertaking business.



During the Second World War he joined the Royal Navy and was sunk twice! The first time, he was two days before being picked up; the second time, the ship was in Portsmouth harbour! On this second event, excessive contact with the mixture of sea water and heavy oil took its toll on his health, preventing him from further sea postings and he was stationed at the Royal Naval Armaments Depot in Kingswinford as a draughtsman. He became associated with the Men of Mercia in Burton and push-biked from Quarry Bank to Burton for practice (32 miles each way - as the crow flies). He met Ellen at the RN depot at Kingswinford in 1943 and they were married in March 1948. He then took a two-year Teacher Training course at College in Folkestone, returning in 1950 to Hurst Hill School near Dudley, and cycling the 15-mile round trip from Quarry Bank.

Later (in 1953), he taught at Charing near Ashford in Kent and was a founder member of East Kent Morris Men, before being appointed Headmaster of the village school in Weston in January 1957. As the schoolhouse was not available to them, they lived in Fradswell and an ancient Ford car replaced the bicycle, this time for a mere 5-mile journey. Fradswell is one of those places best identified by its grid reference owing to a lack of signs! On at least one occasion, snow forced him to walk, only to be greeted by the children saying "Oh Sir, we knew you'd turn up!" At that time, he joined both Stafford Morris Men, newly revived, and Uttoxeter Hearts of Oak Morris Men, adding enormously to both.

Morris, School and the Parish Council were his life. He was a motivator who would push and cajole men individually, particularly into attending events. He was a dancer and he could remember the details of a dance, its formation, steps and distinctive figures, making him an excellent teacher. Bucknell was a favourite tradition, particularly Queen's Delight. He was careful about getting a good understanding of the dance before the practice, for example regularly calling on Geoff Legg to come in early to get the sticking sorted out before men arrived.

Johnny was Foreman for "donkey's years", introducing many new dances and traditions to the club. With Peter Stephens he helped the Cannock Morris Men to get started with both organisational and instructional support, including introducing them to the Morris Ring and later, as Cannock folded, he welcomed many into Stafford Morris Men. He was Squire of Stafford for a time, and, on behalf of Stafford and Uttoxeter, he was Squire for both Staffordshire Ring Meetings.

Johnny attended many annual representatives' meetings and went to every Ring Meeting going.

If Stafford were not going, he'd find some other side who were and tag onto them. He was instrumental in persuading the Morris Ring to introduce regional representatives to a formal Advisory Council, and was one of the first representatives elected. Together with Morris Sunderland and Trevor Hull, he founded the Fools' Union, and was also an honorary member of the Jockey Men's Morris and Sword Club. Not only did he dance in England, but in Ireland (the Dublin Festival), France, Germany and Denmark (four times in the Copenhagen International Festival).

As an historian he researched the history of The Morris in Stafford (1600 and onwards), and especially between the wars (1920-1939). Johnny researched and revived the Tideswell processional, including spending some time at the school in Tideswell teaching it to the local children. Stafford's links with Tideswell had started when SMM were on tour in the Peak District and choose to dance at Tideswell because they had a fete on the Saturday. Stafford was a young side in those days and family attendance at the Tideswell weekend became a regular event.

He had become Clerk to the Parish Council in Weston and was an active member of Weston (St. Andrew's) Church and was extremely industrious on both accounts. While Headmaster of Weston School for thirty-one years, he instructed the youngsters in the art of Mumming, using the Weston play, previously performed pre-1914. He researched other plays from several of the villages around Stafford and Uttoxeter. Pewter tankards also had a fascination for him, and he collected over one hundred in his lifetime.

He died one Sunday evening after being out dancing at Stoke and having given Geoff Legg details of the forthcoming Tideswell event. 'I think he knew', says Geoff, 'since, having done the first spot, he said "Geoff, come and sit with me" and proceeded to list out what had been done and what still needed doing'. The following Monday morning, Geoff learnt he had died in the evening, and then looked to the task of organising the Morris details of the funeral, calling sides all over the country. Stafford Morris Men did, however, carry out the programmed tour on the Monday after he died, dancing at The Wheatsheaf and The Elms at Shareswell.

In June 1992, 80 Morris Men, including at least five Fools, representing 21 clubs from all over England, came to Weston to attend Johnny's funeral. Five Fools danced William and Nancy, Bledington, on the village green, with the No. 1 spot left open for Johnny. Some of the collection made during the service went towards a carved wooden cover for the font in Weston Church, the remainder to the British Heart Foundation. A window in Thaxted Church commemorates Johnny. The window has his name etched in a copy of his handwriting. It overlooks Fools' Corner and was unveiled in June 1993 during the Ring Meeting.

In October 1996, Uttoxeter Hearts of Oak Morris Men paid tribute to the life and work of Johnny in Weston and to his dedication to the Morris over forty-four years by the planting of an oak tree in a grassy corner opposite the old school where Johnny had taught for many years. On 12th June 1999, Stafford Morris Men, by a strange set of circumstances, found themselves dancing their 2000th event at Weston Summer Fete. The men took the opportunity to dance in front of Johnny's tree between the shows, local press recording the event.

Johnny was a family man and now his son John and his grandson Michael carry on the tradition of the Morris in Winchester (Winchester Morris Men) and Southampton (King John's Morris Men), where John is Foreman!