

# The Maypole Manual

Mike Ruff & Jenny Read

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[www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk](http://www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk)



The Endless Bookcase  
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# Why Maypole?

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## Enjoyment

The best reason we know for Maypole Dancing is that it is fun to do, great for all ages and abilities, and visually pleasing for those watching. People enjoy trying the dances and the teacher's job becomes one of harnessing enthusiasm. Learning takes place automatically and teamwork becomes instinctive as the dancers realise that they have to work together to get results. While many people think that Maypole is just for children, most adults love to have a go!

## Three Dimensions

Because a Maypole is a three dimensional tool, it takes learning into a different environment and dancers get a chance to think and learn in new and creative ways. It is also one of the few forms of dance where the focus is not on the dancers but on the patterns and the ribbons, and the dances can be adapted to suit the abilities and fitness of the group.

## A Cross - Curricular Tool

The various cross curricular links are dealt with elsewhere and the more confident the teachers become the more this will happen naturally as everyone is likely to want to explore new ideas as they arise.

## Cultural Heritage

We start from the point of Maypoles being part of our cultural heritage but that this is shared. The Maypole is not unique to England and similar activities can be found around the globe. Even more common is the idea of seasonal celebrations so that once again the Maypole becomes the starting point rather than the end product.

## Introducing Music and Dance

Our own interests lie with traditional music and dance and we have found that once Maypole Dancing has been introduced then exploring different dance forms and musical styles can become much easier.

## A Visual Artform

Because the Maypole can be seen, it can easily become the focus of activities at summer fetes and the like, and including Maypole Dancing in these events then becomes a tradition. Better still, because it is so visible and relatively cheap compared to other pieces of equipment, raising funds for a new Maypole or to enhance the existing tradition becomes much easier for any school or group.

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The *Maypole Manual Music* CD can be purchased via our website: <https://mikeruffmusic.co.uk/>

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## Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time in the making, and we owe huge thanks to all the people who have helped it to reach print. Thank you to our family and friends for endless patience with all things maypole related! Thank you Tamsin and Ruth for sharing your teaching expertise. Thanks to Quicksilver for an amazing CD to dance to, and Alan for your help with printing. Thanks to all at Tradamis and Spinningpath Arts CIC for supporting this new project, and to everyone who has proofread or commented on sections of the book before going to press.



## About the Authors

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**Mike Ruff** gave up any attempt at a day job more than 30 years ago to concentrate on being a musician. Working in schools came a few years later and the purchase of a Maypole meant “have Maypole will travel” became a major part of Mike’s work. He has taught dancers of all ages and abilities, creating shows and teaching teachers. In 2012, he worked with the English National Ballet to provide Maypole dancing and music for morris dancing for their *Big Dance* event.



Two creative partnership projects in Slough in 2002 resulted in Mike forming Tradamis which is now a charity, with Mike as Director and one of the Trustees. Through a nationwide network of practitioners, Tradamis offers a wide range of teaching modules, training, mentoring, and resources on traditional and historical dance and music aimed at increasing appreciation of our cultural heritage as widely as possible.

Much of Mike’s work had to stop during the Covid 19 pandemic and at the time of writing it is not clear how much will get going again and how much will change; certainly, some of his bands are unlikely to work regularly any more but that could change again in the next year. He is still doing barn dances and teaching country dancing [for the English Folk Dance and Song Society at their Thursday classes]. There are also regular solo gigs, anything from Old Time Music Hall to French Café. A more recent project has been the creation of the mAy team to offer Maypole performances at major events and Maypole teaching at more informal events. They appeared regularly at Countryfile Live at Blenheim and Castle Howard as well as The Swiss Garden, Spring Live and many other events.

**Jenny Read** lives in Devon where she enjoys sharing her love of music and dance with people of all ages. Having gained her BA Hons in Music from the University of Exeter, she went on to study at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, becoming the first folk dance artist to gain the Diploma in Dance Teaching and Learning for Children and Young People (DDTAL) from Trinity College London. She now works as a community musician with Wren Music as well as continuing her own freelance practice. She is currently pursuing her ongoing interest in the therapeutic value of music, by studying for a masters degree in Music Therapy.



As a performer, Jenny dances and sings with the UK’s old-time American string band, *The Buffalo Gals*, and has played and called for a good number of ceilidhs over the years! She is also five times winner of the Dartmoor Step Dance Competition and has introduced many hundreds of people to the joys of dancing on a tiny step board!

This book started as a series of notes for a Tradamis Training Workshop that Mike was running. It was clear then that there was enough about each dance to create a book; something that gives all the tricks for teaching, the hints and the pitfalls inherent in the dances and something that does not require an expert to get you started. Others agreed and here it is.

In 2012 there was another teacher training session planned in Devon. Mike could not do it but Jenny could and the collaboration was born. Jenny's more formal training as a teacher, dancer and musician has given a whole new dimension to the book that might otherwise have been missing.

Music is essential for Maypole and this project needed new music to accompany the dances. This is just the sort of challenge that Mike's band, Quicksilver, enjoys and we had a lot of fun putting it together. If you haven't already purchased a copy of the digital download or remixed CD, then you will find them on the website: [www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk/](http://www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk/).

Finally, what should be included? We hope that there is all the basic information and a bit more. The classic John Ruskin dances and their links to Victorian Society had to be included. Then the new dances and our creative approach will open up Maypole Dancing to many, both younger and older, allowing everyone much more scope. Looking further back in time there are some genuine Tudor dances which work incredibly well around a Maypole and link it to another key section of the history curriculum. All of that brings us to 21 dances but Mike's original list had another 14 rarely used dances which are not included here and we have already had suggestions for others.

This is where modern technology helps out. The website ([www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk/](http://www.the-maypole-manual.co.uk/)) is a part of this project, with links to other projects, new dances and video clips of what people are doing. We will be adding details and updates that are not in the book to download, ideas for other dances and information on other products.

At the end of it all we hope that you will share the joy that we have had from dancing and teaching Maypole Dancing. For Mike it started as a simple set of requests:

- Can you play for Maypole Dancing? He could.
- Where do we get one? He found out and bought one.
- How do we do the dances? He looked some up and started from there.
- Can we try out some new ideas? Most certainly!

Enjoy!

Mike & Jenny

# NOTES FOR TEACHERS

## Origins and History of Maypole Dancing

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### Early Maypoles

It is thought that the earliest Maypoles formed part of a celebration of Summer. They were probably linked with mystical beliefs such as tree worship, but also provided opportunities to dance and have a good time. They were almost certainly simple trees cut down and re-erected in the centre of a village green. Illustration show that, by the 16th and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Maypoles were often very tall. Although actual dances were not recorded, the Puritans, who hated Maypoles and all they signified, have helped our knowledge by describing in great detail what they were destroying!

### No ribbons

After the Restoration, many Maypoles were re-instated. One of the most notable stood in the Strand at an impressive 134 feet tall (approx. 41m)... until Sir Isaac Newton used parts of it as a base for his telescope! Some of the maypoles from that period still survive in villages around the country. None of them had ribbons; not only were the poles so tall that it would be impractical, but machines for making ribbons were not invented until 1858. This would mean that any ribbons before then would have been extremely difficult and expensive to make. It is reasonable to assume that Maypole Dances were simply any that were popular at the time, either country dances or morris dancing of some sort.

It is also likely that circle dances would have been used when space allowed. We have included some of these dances, not just to reflect the history, but because experience tells us that they enhance any performance.

### John Ruskin and the English Tradition

The Maypole Dancing that most people think of was introduced by John Ruskin to Whitelands College in 1881, creating a sequence of dances and a May Pageant which generations of teachers learnt and took with them wherever they went on to teach. By the middle of the 20th century, Maypole Dancing had become a major tradition, much of which survives to the present day.



*Maypole Dancing for the Coronation of George V in 1911. Note the use of recorded music - it's nothing new!*

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## Maypoles around the world

While Maypoles are regarded as something very English, they exist in many other parts of the world, although sometimes in slightly different forms. Pictures from Germany show Maypoles with ribbons, and versions of these dances still exist in Brazil and Argentina. Illustrations from the French Court of Louis XIV show Maypoles as part of their large scale entertainments, and other traditions are found in Galicia (Spain), Finland & Mexico.

We also know of people who learnt Maypole Dancing sixty or more years ago in Jamaica, Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean. While they may have started from Whitelands College a century ago, these dances have certainly taken on a life of their own. Interestingly, in other parts of the world it is often the adults that do the Maypole Dances and it does seem as though the idea of it being something just for children is uniquely English.

## New ideas

Fortunately, after a period of decline, Maypole Dancing is experiencing a revival due to a greater awareness of our own culture, and the sheer enjoyment of dancers and audience alike. The main difference is that there is now a far greater degree of creativity, with new dances and styles being invented all the time.

Quite often the same ideas will be repeated, but that does not necessarily mean they have been copied. Variations occur as dancers try out new ideas, influenced by popular dance styles and music.



## Music

In the early days, music would have been played on instruments such as the pipe and tabor or the English bagpipes. By the time of John Ruskin, the concertina or fiddle would have been added, with later instruments including the accordion, flute and any others loud enough to carry in the open air. Whilst this still holds true, people will now often dance to recordings, whether that be traditional country dance music similar to the above, or more modern pop songs and rap.

## Costume

Originally, dancers would have worn their best clothes. However, by the Victorian period there was a deliberate attempt to re-create an image of "Merrie England" (which disputedly never existed) with costumes being chosen to reflect that. Nowadays anything goes. There are Tudor Peasants, Victorian Ladies and Gentlemen, Medieval Costumes (which can be quite grand), sports kit, simple variations on school uniform or just sashes to identify dancers from spectators.



*St George's Kermis with the Dance Around the Maypole; Pieter Breughel the Younger, 1627*

*No ribbons, but clearly a lot of fun!*

*Etch of a sketch by Caneletto – 1751 – depicts the Jubilee Ball of May 24 1751 to celebrate the birthday of George, Prince of Wales (later George III)  
In V&A collection and Government's Art Collection*