

Maple Morris 2008

by Justin Morrison

The fourth annual Maple Morris weekend was a great success. We were hosted by Adam Brown in Ottawa and had sixteen participants from Ottawa, Toronto and Brighton in Canada, as well as participants from New York, Vermont, Massachusetts and Washington, DC.

On Friday night, we met at Adam's apartment, where we went over Ducklington's Black Joke and an invented Sherborne dance to the tune Schottische a Virmoux. This dance began life as a three-person jig at this year's Marlboro Ale. When some of the Maple Morrisers got together at the London (Ontario) Ale in June, we took the opportunity to develop it into a four-person dance.

However, on this weekend, we spent some time on Friday workshopping the dance together to make it into a full six-person dance. We continued to develop and refine the dance over the weekend, but it was on Friday night that we came up with a cool alternative to traditional corner-crossing caper figures (doing the caper figures together in groups of two facing up) and a chorus that we eventually called "the thresher." It was also on the Maple Morris weekend that the dance finally got a name—Crown Russe. It was great to toss around dancing ideas with some truly innovative folks, and it was really fun to have a dance that we had made together. When it got too late to continue making noise in Adam's backyard we went inside to play some tunes and have a spirited singing session.

We had booked dormitory space at the University of Ottawa, and checking in there presented the only notable problem of the weekend. We decided to go there after meeting and rehearsing at Adam's because the dorm buildings were open twenty-four hours. However, a combination of computer problems at the University and a series of (later comical) mix-

ups with our reservations meant that we were all up somewhat later than we intended. However, we ended up being charged for just one night instead of two, which reduced the expected cost of the weekend for everyone.

After a light coffee shop breakfast, we reconvened for another practice session on Saturday morning in an outdoor plaza of the University. Various attendees jumped in to teach dances to the group, both old favourites from previous Maple Morris events and new (to us) dances from the repertoires of teams such as Ring o'Bells and the Toronto Morris Men.

Once we had a solid repertoire of about six dances, we headed out to perform. Our first stand was in a pedestrian market at Sparks Street. It's an interesting phenomenon that once you are thrust into a performance mindset, everyone's dancing improves very quickly! After a lunch stop, we headed out to dance in front of the houses of Parliament. It seemed strangely Canadian that, dancing near the main entrance of the country's chief legislative body, our only encounter with the authorities was a casual instruction to stay out of the road and try not to block the path of the tourists.

What did put a swift end to the stand, though, was the rain shower that had been hovering in wait all morning. As we waited for it to pass, we gathered under a covered alcove, where we sang rain-themed songs for the captive audience of tourists. As it lightened up, we walked down to the Rideau Canal, where we danced beside the locks that let out into the Ottawa River for another large and appreciative audience.

After a walk back to the University area, during which several of us entertained ourselves by practicing some harmony singing, we had a great dinner of



Top to bottom: Sarah Pilzer leaping, team practice, Aiden Carey and Scott Tribble. Photos courtesy Adam Brown.

Indian food that Adam had cooked, followed by another fine evening of singing and music. We talked about the CDSS grant money, and Erica Morse distributed the materials she had brought with her. We also went over a Welsh morris dance from the Toronto repertoire that several people had recently learned at Pinewoods.

On Sunday morning, we travelled to the bustling ByWard Market area, where we found a secluded courtyard to hold another practice. This practice was mostly dedicated to refining and rehearsing our new dance. It came out a much improved dance, with everyone contributing useful comments and ideas. After that, it was out to dance for the crowds, where, in addition to the repertoire we already had, our esteemed delegation from Ring o' Bells (Eleanor Anderson, Sarah Pilzer and Julia Friend) performed a three-person jig. This Sunday also happened to be Sarah's birthday, so we had to recognize, that of course; as she said, "Morris dancers sure do know how to properly celebrate birthdays."

After a few stands in the market area we went to a nearby courtyard with a restaurant patio where a Thames Valley International-led Ottawa tour in July always stops. We knew we were in the right place when one of the restaurant's servers said "You guys are great! But there's an older group that comes too, right?" Here we danced for a very appreciative captive audience, and even did the Welsh dance from the night before. After this, we settled in for a farewell lunch and said our goodbyes.

After most people had left on Sunday, a few of us reconvened on Adam's porch for a talk over how the weekend went. We came up with a number of ideas to improve and expand Maple Morris next year, including:

- ❖ Adding a second, similar weekend in the northeast United States in the spring, organized by some of our American participants.
- ❖ Extending the event to a Thursday night to Monday morning long weekend. This would allow us more time for the useful and appreciated practice sessions and workshopping of dances together, as well as leave lots of time for the performance aspect of the weekend.
- ❖ Planning any future grant applications earlier. Although the money this year was used to defray food and housing costs, we realize the intention of the grant is to

specifically assist those in financial need, so we plan to gather information on exactly how many people are not able to come because of financial issues, so that any possible funds could be used specifically to help them.

The Maple Morris email list saw a lot of great feedback after the weekend, with comments such as "the dancing was amazing," "I had such a lovely weekend with you all, and feel it such a pleasure to be able to perform one of my favourite things, morris dancing with you fine folk," "I don't think I've ever had more fun morris dancing," and "thanks particularly to Adam for being such a wonderful host and to all those who travelled from afar for making this weekend—dare I say it?—the BEST MAPLE MORRIS EVER?"

Thanks to CDSS and everyone who contributed to the New Leaders, Good Leaders fund for helping to make this year's Maple Morris into the success that it was. For more photos and video from the weekend, see flickr.com/maplemorris and youtube.com/maplemorris.

Maple Morris 2008 participants: Adam Brown, Chris Bracken, Liora Goldensher, Scott Tribble, Moira Flanagan, Aidin Carey, Sarah Pilzer, Adrian Rigopulos, Eleanor Anderson, Julia Friend, Erica Morse, Emily Addison, Justin Morrison, Stefan Read, Tim Pyron, Stephanie Phillips.

This article appeared in the CDSS News, issue 206, January/February 2009.