

75th meeting of the Thaxted Morris Men Festival 31st May to 2nd June

Report by Carmen Kilner

It was a great pleasure to be able to join the Thaxted Morris Men at their annual festival. Any one who has seen Morris dancers and Basque *danzaris* (dancers) must have been struck by some of the similarities - white shirts and trousers, leg bells, dancing with sticks and swords; perhaps that is why in 1939 a group of Basque boys from Leah Manning's colony at Theydon Bois were invited to dance at Thaxted. Now 80 years later another group of Basque *danzaris* were invited to participate at their 75th meeting.

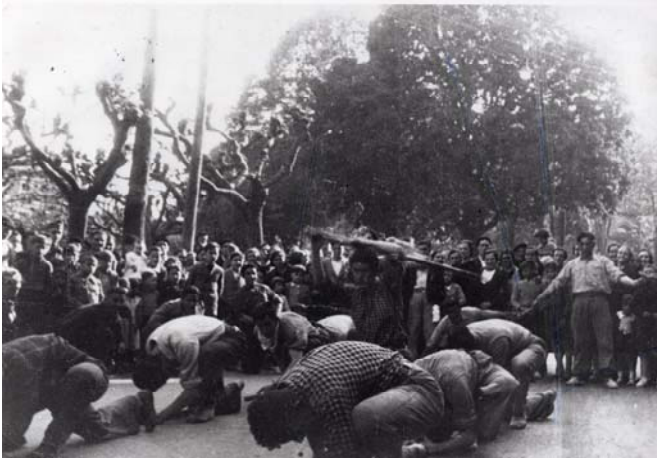
The Thaxted Morris Men, who claim to be the oldest revival side in the country, have a tradition of hosting Morris dancers from all around England and abroad at their annual festival. This year was no exception. Apart from the local group, seven others took part including the San Lorentzo *dantza taldea* (dance group) from Berriz, in the Durango area of the Basque country.



The association became involved when I was contacted by Oier Araolaza who put me in touch with the Thaxted Morris Men. Oier Araolaza leads the group Kezka *danza taldea* who danced at our 70 and 75th commemoration events. As a result of this contact we were able to place our own BCA'37 UK exhibition alongside that of the Thaxted Morris Men in the magnificent fourteenth century Thaxted Parish Church of St John the Baptist with Our Lady and St Laurence. We would like to thank the Thaxted Morris Men for allowing us to set up our exhibition beside their own fascinating one.



We are grateful to the Thaxted Morris Men for allowing us to use some of their photos from 1939. One of these is of the Basque boys from the Theydon Bois colony dancing the *Agintariena* - a dance with a flag honouring their home town our country. Interestingly we have a photograph by Faustino Pastor Gurrutxaga of the same dance taking place in Gernika on Sunday 25th April 1937 - the day before the infamous bombing which was the catalyst for the evacuation of the children to Britain. The circle is completed by the third photo of the San Lorenzo *danzaris* at Thaxted 2019.



Gernika 1937 above ↑

Thaxted 2019 below ↓

Thaxted 1939 above ↑



The weather was truly glorious for the whole weekend. On Saturday the groups travelled through this part of Essex performing at many beautiful and picturesque villages pubs. On both Saturday and Sunday Town Street in the historic village of Thaxted saw crowds enticed out by the weather to watch the dancing. All the groups both local and visitors were given a warm welcome; the athletic high kicking Basque dances accompanied by the *txistu* (pipe and drum) surprised and delighted the audiences.





After the groups had danced separately they then performed a group dance - here the Basques were the beginners and had to pick up the new patterns and rhythms.

But it was a two way learning curve as Morris dancers from several of the groups joined in learning some Basque steps. Perhaps most notable was young Morris dancer Charlie Smith aged 12 who proved an enthusiastic and able pupil. He took part in a dance where he was lifted horizontally and his feet were made to dance! Needless to say this was received rapturously by the whole crowd.



The next day, Sunday, the San Lorentzo dancers performed at the church during the service. It was spine-tingling to hear the evocative sound of the *txistu* being played in that highly vaulted very English church.



Everywhere the Basques were met with friendliness and never failed to impress with their athletic and elegant dancing. It was also obvious that they were as keen to engage with their hosts as the hosts were with them. There was enough English on the Basque side and Spanish on the English side for many friendships to be made.

The final event on Sunday took place in Margaret Gardens - dancing by the individual groups followed by country dancing, both English and Basque, where both performers and audience were able to join in.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable weekend for everyone. One cannot underestimate how much the warmth of the welcome extended by the Thaxted Morris Men contributed to the success of the event.



Thank you and *eskerrik asko!*

I have, perhaps naturally, concentrated on the Basque dancers, but the other colourful dancing groups are well represented by the wonderful gallery of photos taken by John Savill on <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157393478098980&set=a.10157397018373980&type=3>

There are also many other photos and clips of the dancing on our twitter site link: <https://twitter.com/basquechildren?lang=en-gb>.

The Basque website Dantzan has a report (translated into English) accompanied by many photographs <https://dantzan.eus/albisteak/harrera-ezin-hobea-berriztarrei-ingalateran>

You can view all of the photographs from this report in our gallery at: <http://www.basquechildren.org/photoset/set019>