

In Africa, and other countries such as Australia and New Zealand where the indigenous population have darkened skins, their dance forms frequently involve the same desire for disguise as ours. Therefore, they adopt white face paint (and other colours sometimes - but predominantly white). Should white people be offended? Should white people complain? Of course not, those southern nations have their traditions. We have ours. In the event of any 'persons of colour' joining us, we have hoped that they would 'white up' to mirror our 'blacking up'.

There is overt racism in many walks of life - but you will not find it in border morris (except possibly against the Welsh?). Black really is just another colour and it is what you ascribe to it that makes the difference. In Black Pig we have met and danced with people of all colours without any friction. In the early days of the side, there was a trip to an event in California where the side was driven around happily by a black bus driver who quite understood where we were coming from.

Similarly, at a dance event in the Derbyshire Peak District, which included both vaudeville 'sand dancers' and traditional dancers from Africa, we were approached by a young group of black men - 'Zulu Nation' - who also understood our dance and dress code completely. Most amazingly of all, they also said they 'sympathised with our plight of being persecuted in our own nation'. Given their own origins, that was probably generously overstating the case, but the point was well made and gratefully received.

There are, of course, instances where black face is seen in a wholly positive light - most notably in the hiring of chimney sweeps at wedding celebrations.

At the end of the day, black really is just another colour. We would prefer to think that we are celebrating it rather than being ashamed of it.

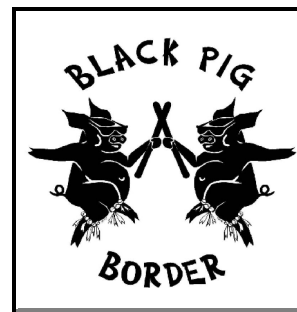
Black Pig and face paint today:

Notwithstanding the debate, Black Pig costume, generally, has evolved in the 30+ years since it was formed, from the original flat caps, pink shirts and waistcoats to the multicoloured outfits we wear today. Our face paint has also evolved and we removed the 'predominantly black' rule in 2019. Instead, members are expected to use colours, other than black, which complement their kit - with a light to medium grey as the default colour in the absence of other colours.

At the end of the day, we have no wish to offend anyone but recognise that there will always be those who are offended.

After all, some people are offended by any sort of morris dancing...

(1v3 2019)



Welcome to Black Pig Border Morris

3. Disguise: All About Blacking:

Why We Paint Our Faces:

We are often asked about our face paint.

Face and body paint have been used since ancient times and for a variety of reasons; to enhance beauty, to increase fear and awe in the beholder or to ward off evil spirits - and also so they do not return to haunt us!

The most popular idea generally, which most of the above have in common, is that it is to act as disguise so that onlookers do not recognise us for whatever reason.

It is possible that the first painting surface ever used by man was man himself. Face and body paints appear to have been used from earliest times and for a variety of reasons - as suggested above - in short, to render ordinary man extraordinary.

Face painting, generally, is closely linked with masks, creating not just a disguise and a sense of theatre, but a sense of make believe. The popularity of children's face painting at fêtes and festivals is testament to this. On the other hand, early actors in Greece, for example, performed behind masks, which were eventually replaced on the Western stage by face paint.

Our face painting is part of the Border Morris tradition. Dancing originally took place at the turn of the year, allegedly to ward off the evil spirits but, equally for workers on the land to earn some extra cash. The traditional painted face was intended as a disguise so that the spirits would not recognise the participants and return to haunt them. Border dancers had a more pressing need for disguise however, which was that if they were recognised they might be apprehended and transported for 'begging'. Alternatively, the Waltham Black Act of 1723 made blacking up an offence punishable by death! This has since been repealed.

Even today, there has to be a clear distinction between begging (i.e. simply asking for money) and a performance, such as dancing, where some sort of 'service' is provided to the onlooker and therefore legitimises the collection of money.

A variety of different substances have been used for face painting in the past, which included rubbing burnt cork on our faces. We have now settled on a water based theatrical make up which applies easily with a brush or sponge and washes off just as easily with soap and water when we have finished.

What is wrong with black?

Regrettably, using black to colour faces is seen by some as a racist issue. However, following an incident in Birmingham in 2017 a statement was issued by MP Sajid Javid that the Government Department for Culture did not view what we do as racist. Despite this, there are always those who seek conflict where none exists, or who find fault in the most innocent of past times. Therefore the following seeks to address, and explain, the use of blackened faces from a historical point of view.

The basis of the modern day issue seems to be that some see a connection to the 'Minstrel Shows' that existed worldwide from around 1834 to 1971 - especially in the mid to late 19th century when such shows were common, and extremely popular after the large scale abolition of slavery. Yet this 'minstrelsy' is in turn linked to slavery in the Americas and elsewhere. The suggestion is that blackface morris comes from minstrelsy and is therefore a parody of people with darker skins. Whilst there is little doubt that the minstrel shows would have affected the style and detail of morris blacking for some time (in the same way that any fashion gains new followers), documented 'blacking up' in morris predates the minstrel shows by some 300 years!

What is more, black face was not unique to England. It was recorded elsewhere in Europe, for example in France in the early 1500s, "In fashionable society when I was young, a small boy, his face daubed with black and his forehead swathed in a white or yellow handkerchief, would make an appearance after supper. He wore leggings covered with little bells and performed a morris." (Arbeau c.1580)

The English 'morris' is a similar sounding word to 'moorish' and also to continental 'moresk' and 'moresco' - where continental dancers, in similar groups, perform arguably similar dances with a variety of handkerchiefs and sticks. However, these mostly do not involve black faces and there is no recorded connection between them. It might be argued that the dances travelled, or were passed around, from one area to another throughout Europe. On the other hand, given that each country regards their traditions as their own - and not imported - that suggestion is difficult to support.

Either way, all this pre-dates the minstrelsy of mid 19th century USA which is relatively well defined and described as being of (mostly, but not exclusively) white musicians blacking up and doing their take to cash in on the increasingly successful negro minstrel bands which had gained considerable popularity in that era. This was therefore a simple case of white (American) musicians copying their black counterparts for commercial reasons. Although in some cases there was undoubted parody and mimicry, it is arguable that this was primarily for financial, rather than derogatory, reasons.

What is probably most important here is that none of this would be likely to have been known about in the Welsh border counties of England previously - and very long after the Border Morris tradition had been established. A similar argument applies to the Molly Dancing tradition in the fens and East Anglia.

At this point it is probably worth mentioning the different types of black face. The minstrel groups (up to and including the Black & White Minstrels of 1971!) wore a total black theatrical makeup covering the whole face (and sometimes even neck and hands). This was almost certainly directly influenced by a wish to copy the negro minstrel groups and in many cases this would now be considered racist - regardless of how it was considered at the time. However, this was not the origin of the black face in border morris which, apparently coming from the aspect of disguise, was much more of smudging of soot and candle grease. This form of disguise was commonly used by poachers and others, frequently for nefarious purposes. In fact, the modern military still uses this 'smudge' effect in camouflage.

Blacking up in other social instances still remains in many areas of England. As well as the 'hobby horse' festivals of the west country, the south coats bonfire festivals also use extensive black face - simply because the activities were outlawed for many years. Not forgetting of course the Rochester (chimney) Sweeps Festival!

Over time, the use of 'smudge face' and 'slick black' have merged (not least because of the possible carcinogenic risk to using soot on one's face!) which has led to theatrical black being used almost universally. This has added to the idea that black face border and minstrelsy, and therefore slavery, and therefore racism, are linked. However, the simple fact is that there is no link except the colour used for disguise. Even the style of dress is completely different. If border morris sides wore sharp suits and bow ties then there would be undeniable similarities, but they do not. The border morris origins of old tattered coats, ribbons and bells could not be further from that. If further evidence is needed, another point of divergence is that the whitened lips and eyes of the later minstrels have *never* been seen in border morris. Ironically, this whitening has been seen by some as black minstrels parodying white minstrels attempts to mimic them!

Black Is Just Another Colour...

We have sometimes been asked, "Why not use a different colour?" To which the usual response is, "Why? We are Black Pig Border, not any other colour of pig. We are named after the ship of the cartoon pirate, Captain Pugwash. What other colour would we be?" It is true that other border sides have adopted different colours such as green, red or blue in an attempt to divert potential criticism. Whilst we respect their decision, we also see it as an acknowledgement that the criticism was justified in the first place whereas we see that criticism as misplaced.