

"Troyl I" (Seven Cornish Dances)
Gans Merv and Alison Davey.

WMP Archive 1983

THREE HAND REELS

This a name for a type of Cornish step dancing performed by a limited number of people, not necessarily three. All three hand reels have some things in common: they are all danced in heavy shoes to lively reel tunes the step is quite complex but the pattern of dance itself fairly simple.

These dances were most commonly done in a farm kitchen or similar situation where on stone flagged floors the scoots (or as they are called in West Cornwall — Qs and Toe plates) must have made a terrific noise especially when, as is traditional, the dancers marked the end of the musical phrases with a heavy stamp step.

In his idealised tales of Celtic Cornwall Bottrel writes in 1870 of a reunion where they "... sang old three men's songs over and over, they danced hornpipes and three hand reels, Margaret showing off many of the steps for which she was famous in her younger days".

As to the music, the tunes were often more important than the words which were frequently nonsense or simply a form of mouth music. At the time of writing the tunes would all appear to have been in reel time which is less common than polka or hornpipe rhythm in Cornish traditional dancing. The tune shown on the opposite page has become known as 'the three hand reel' and is in fact a variant of a popular Scottish reel.

One elderly gentleman we talked to went from farmhouse to farmhouse with his friends during the festive seasons and danced these reels in exchange for access to the cider barrel. This would seem to have been common practice within the moorland farming communities up until the Second World War.

Nineteenth century written evidence corroborates remarkably with information gathered from oral sources as far apart as Penzance, Boscastle, and Looe. Although more detailed accounts have been given to us from individuals living in the North of Cornwall this form of dance would seem to have been widespread throughout the Duchy at one time.

This is a dance for three people standing in a line. The step is as follows: Step forward onto the right foot, hop on this foot and at the same time bring the left leg forward with the knee straight so that the heel of this left foot strikes the ground level with the toe of the right foot. Repeat, stepping forward with the left foot this time.

Calling the three dancers *A*, *B* and *C* the dance begins with *A* and *B* facing each other, *C* facing *B*'s back. *A* and *B* passing each other right shoulders commence a reel of three which continues for sixteen bars to finish with *A* in the centre facing *C*. *A* turns to face *B* and they set to each other for four bars. *A* then turns around to face *C* and they set to each other for four bars. The reel begins again from this position, *A* and *C* passing each other right shoulders, this time *C* will finish in the centre. This pattern is repeated six times in all, thus every dancer has done the dance from every position twice.

Plethen Try Luf