

STAVE DANCES

The Clubs

The local Friendly Societies of the nineteenth century were formed for mutual benefit in the days before the affiliated clubs or the trade unions, to provide financial cover against sickness, unemployment and funerals, in return for making regular contributions. There was often more than one club in a village to cater for different age groups, as older workers drew more heavily on funds. Solidarity was shown by attendance at meetings, in particular the annual club day, during which there would often be a procession, a printed church service with an invited sermon, and a concluding dinner.

The annual club walks with their bands, dancing and entertainments are well known throughout England and southern Scotland and mentioned in newspapers and other records. William Barnes, the Dorset dialect poet, described one such event. Although not widely known now, they still exist in some villages such as South Harting (West Sussex) and Priddy (Somerset) and as the "women's walk" at Nether Stowey (Somerset). The processional route can be quite short, at South Harting they walk the route twice!

The Friendly Societies in the 19th century gradually became absorbed or affiliated into the various National Societies. Although many died with the introduction of the welfare state and the National Health Service in 1945, some persist, as at Bampton (Oxfordshire), as savings clubs. Today Friendly Societies still have an official Recorder, although they act more as conventional lending or building societies.

The Staves

A staff as a badge of office is well known in many cultures. Tipstaves are carried in front of prominent office holders. There is Black Rod and Golden Rod at the Houses of Parliament, Field Marshalls have batons, at one time State Ministers had one, and churches usually have two for wardens, one for the throne and the other for the bishop, with stave heads probably of crown and mitre. The stave used to and sometimes still does symbolise a crowd controller, being on occasion a simple stick or even with a whip end as a "whiffler". Although in the Middle Ages it might also represent a spear, pike or halberd, it probably reminded the Friendly Societies of long handled farm implements. These themselves could become weapons for impoverished rebellious groups. Old police and railway staff truncheons were often elaborately turned on lathes and well decorated, there are several collections to be seen at the Police College at Bramshill. They were more badges of office rather than tools. Even today the police are only trained in a limited number of moves for their own self defence, despite what is seen on TV during disturbances.

The staves could vary in length from the equivalent of a walking stick to a long rake handle. Club officials sometimes had a more elaborate or a larger stave and stave head. There are some examples of staves in the reserve collection of the Reading Rural Life Museum which show that many were tapered, like natural wood, rather than parallel like a broom handle. Some are octagonal in cross section, typically the first step in making something round by hand. This is advantageous when the mass of a stave head has to be balanced to avoid or minimise the bouncing impacts on the shoulders whilst moving. Several were decorated, sometimes with the name of the society, others in 15 deg spirals.

(Several years ago, with a visiting party of Americans, we had the opportunity to dance with them outside at the Museum.)

At South Harting most of the staves are made of fresh wood with the bark still attached and carved decoratively. This was a common practice with wood cut from hedges for walking sticks before WW2. In the south of England the finial was often wooden, of an acorn, pineapple or door knob shape. In the south west use was made of the brass plate industry around Bristol to provide standard club designs. Some can be seen in most of that area's museums. A man in Burnham-on-Sea has a personal collection of nearly 250 stave heads and delivers a good lecture on the West of England Friendly Societies illustrated with examples. Because it was for only a single day it was also common to decorate the head with natural flowers, often looking like the poles of the Tuttimen at Hungerford.

Modern dance teams have found a variety of solutions for the stave heads. Somerset Maids have a valuable set of real antique brass heads. Knobs and Knockers have reproduced the Henstridge design. Fleur de Lys used golden curtain rail finials, Abercorn small door knobs as being typical of the area, but Magog have large engraved emblems. Other sides should research the local practice. The decoration can be various weights of

ribbon, draw cords and other haberdashery, even small banners. A common experience is that the longer poles need to dismantle into halves for carriage.

The Sources

As the old Societies demised, their records were supposed to revert to the Recorder who usually passed them on to the appropriate County Archivist Department. I stumbled on relevant material when researching for possible details of 19th century rural ceremonial costume. This turned out to be best clothes, wide blue sash over one shoulder, and rosettes or cockades on the hats. The common blue colour was considered traditional for workers. Most minute books gave the club's regulations, including details of dressing and descriptions of the requirements for staves on the club day as well as all the economic business. There are few references to dancing and several of these have now gone missing. There has been no systematic search of existing Friendly Society records.

If dancing occurred it would happen at stops during or after the procession. Normally the staves would be stacked, as was often insisted at the entrance to a church, to allow the performing of reels and country dances, presumably as often as not with accompanying women. However at several places the dancers carried their staves during the dances to avoid them going missing. There are probably many references that still can be found through newspaper and library searches. Keith Chandler has noticed many in the Cotswold area.

The Dances

The first dance I was given was sent to me as an undated 19th century local newspaper cutting for a wedding at Buckhorn Weston where members of the grooms club in Wiltshire came and danced around the bridal pair in front of the church, "They footed it, crossed over and did the figure with great abandon." Then I found a note in a minute book of the "first" and "second" parts to be practised at Stourton Caundle in north Dorset. It was a loose leaf and the County Record Office tell me that it has gone missing. The next obtained was another Wiltshire notation from Maud Karpeles who told me that she had seen a performance.

The best find was a list of dances apparently from Fifehead Magdalen, which is near Marnhull from where Hardy's Tess of the Durbevilles was supposed to have come, that had been done during a local club walk. Many were the well known Victorian country dances but several took some tracing through contemporary dance books, and these, such as *The Dorsetshire March* and *Spithead Fleet*, turned out to be of considerable dance interest. All the material was typically sketchy and required significant stylistic interpretation.

Rather than rush into print and spawn endless and ultimately unsatisfactory interpretations, the dances were passed on to see how they worked and to find if something distinctive emerged. For variety in performance other southern material has been resurrected such as ribbon dances, mostly from Sharp MSS, and a handkerchief dance constructed called "*Under the Greenwood Tree*", based on the country dance movements recorded in the Thomas Hardy MSS. It is also practical to search publications for dances with local titles, although the connections may be illusionary.

Stave dances from the Stourton Caundle set were first given to the Bath City women with wonderful results, being a great contrast to other morris repertoire. The dances have since been passed over on request to any interested southern sides. One was even seen on TV, as a background in a Whicker's World interview in Los Angeles, being danced by Americans with bamboo poles, presumably thanks to Tony Barrand. The local Abercorn Stave team existed for a few seasons, led by Marguerite Dommett with close friends and family, to explore the other material. The Stourton Caundle set has lent itself to some modern innovative choruses. Some teams have changed the figures around to make each dance more individual. Besides modern inventions I have tried to look out for set dances that suit the stave idiom.

The Morris Federation held a one day workshop at Sparkford which was videoed, involving representatives of several clubs who had stave dances in their repertoires. Royal Liberty from Purbeck who were there are no longer active. Another side lost is Flaming Morris from Ottery St Mary whose leader had a degree in clowning from Manchester University and who entered a solo stave dance in the jig competition at the Sidmouth Festival. Also gone is Dorset Knobs and Knockers based at Stalbridge, who composed some fine dances. I was once giving them a workshop when a snowstorm started and we were stuck locally for days with no electricity.

The Morris Federation Directory lists Bath City, Bourne Bumpers, English Miscellany, Fleur-de-Lys, Furness, Hastings Jack in the Green, Magog, Maybe, Mendip Stave, and Somerset Morris as currently active with stave

dances in their repertoires. I once did a workshop in Ipswich. There has been an elderly side from the Midlands at Sidmouth that did stave.

Reconstruction

Basics : There was no guide available for the details necessary for dancing, so various people's experience from meeting country dancers in the south have been tapped.

Stance : When stationary, with the stave butt on the ground, stand leaning on it, like pictures of soldiers in Elizabethan plays. During *Once to Yourself* the stave was raised, then sloped over and rested on the right shoulder with its decorations hanging down the back. Unless the stave is short, this would not be like a soldier carrying a rifle, nor in the *Border Morris* style. Most sides found that a grip which had the arm and hand wound round the stave steadied it best.

Travelling Step : a 1 2 3 and more of a body rise rather than a full hop, an asymmetric "chasing step", without much knee rise.

Setting Steps : It was hard to find suitable evidence as the various local Four Hand Reels are now danced with a cross-over polka step and the *Sidbury Reel* is very simple. Around the Hampshire-Dorset border the setting step was either a simple hopping backstep or a cross-over step in which the free foot was slapped down flat behind the supporting foot.

Passing : It proved advantageous that passings of dancers were by the left shoulder for preference rather than the right, to avoid the all too easy entangling of the stave decorations. It helps if the dance style is flowing so that the movements take the full measure of the music with no dancing on the spot waiting for the next action.

The Staves : The best stave dances involve using the staves and exploiting the swirling of their decorations. It is natural to "cross staves" at the end of dances in various manners before walking off.

THE WEDDING REEL

- Set* : for six dances starting 3 v 3. It works also with garlands or with nothing in the hands.
Footing It : Step on the spot for 4 bars, facing opposite.
Cross Over : Change sides with opposite and face back across the set. This can be either straight across, passing left shoulders with opposites and turning right to face back, or through the ends. For this the middle dancer of each line moves forward to their right to pass between the end pair, who both can retire a little to generate space, passing the right hand opposite by the left shoulder and going round their place to the opposite middle place. The end pair cross, passing right shoulders and turn the easy way to face across. The effect is to be like a half hey. Repeat Footing and Cross Over
The Figure : This means a figure of eight. Figures of eight on the sides or ends do not provide an obvious movement around a bride and groom standing a little apart. One objective of the dance is to prevent them kissing at the end of the dance by keeping them separated by the staves. A common figure in British Wedding Reels is a reel of three danced in chasing pairs producing a single figure of eight. Each pair works together, passing in the centre alternately. After eight bars all reverse their direction of travel, and retrace their path, in reverse order in each pair.

COUNTRY DANCES

Set : in units of four that split and progress to dance with other pairs in a longways set for as many as will. In Victorian times sets were seldom as long as 6 to 8 pairs. The dance started with the top two pairs only and the rest were brought in progressively, and the dance continued until the top pair at least were back into their starting place. Probably most people's dancing experience was at small dance booths where they paid by the dance and wanted to get the maximum value for their money. The major problem in carrying staves when interpreting progressive country dances is the progression which was so often a partners swing and change positions with neighbours. However there were other progressions used including a version of the ubiquitous Figure. In any case the information is very limited.

Pop Goes The Weasel

Set : progressive longways for as many as will. In each four,

- A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 circle clockwise two and half times, staves crossed in the centre, until No 4 is opposite their starting place, and then "pops" under the staves to place, while Nos 1 and 2 pick up No 3.
- A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 circle anticlockwise two and half times etc.
- B1 Nos 1 and 2 dance down the middle of the set shoulder to shoulder, turn inwards to face back and dance back to place. Nos 3 and 4 fall in behind as they come up to place, or they follow Nos 1 and 2 down and make an arch for them to come under as they return to place.
- B2 All facing up, the first pair split and cast out on own side followed by their seconds and dance a reel of four across the set, ending progressed one place.

Pilley Stave Dance

Dance for 3 pairs, with staves, 40 bar sequence.

- 1 Lines forward and back, 4 bars, "gateposts up", 4 bars, lines forward and back again, 4 bars, "gateposts down", 4 bars. Gateposts = middle pair go through end pair and around them back to their place, whilst the relevant end pair rotate on the spot, keeping shoulder to shoulder, end cross staves in the centre.
- 2 All circle once around the set clockwise, staves making basket up in the middle, 8 bars, swing stave outwards at end to face back, all circle all the way back anti-clockwise, staves on shoulders, 8 bars, end staves crossed with opposite.
- 3 Progression : head pair cross over, 2 bars, cast to middle places, 2 bars, same pair cross over the centre of the set, 2 bars, cast to bottom place. During each cast the pair being gone und step sideways up the set just enough to move up one place in the set.

Bricks and Mortar

Longways for as many as will. Used as a finishing dance for the annual club walk at Seend, Wiltshire.

- A1&2 First pair followed by rest go down the middle and cast up the outside
- B1 All step in position facing partner
- B2 All cross over giving hands in passing, turn to face back & step on spot.
- A1&2 Down the middle and back up the outside as before
- A1&2 As before.
Repeat ad lib.

THE STOURTON CAUNDLE SET

It is probable that the dances were performed in a true country dance progressive format rather than as a set dance for 8, but the latter interpretation fits modern needs much better. It is simple to consider the "first parts" as figures used for several dances and the "second parts" as the choruses used repetitively in any one dance. In any case the information is very limited.

First Parts - the simplest interpretations but not the only ones.

- 1 *Cross Over* : as Soldiers Joy
Facing across, cross over along a curved path, passing left shoulders, and turn to right to face back. Repeat to place.
- 2 *Arches* : as The Butterfly
In fours, top pair dance down centre, turn out and come up outside to place, crossing staves. Bottom pair come up the outside with crossed staves, turning in and going down centre with staves on shoulders. Repeat.
- 3 *Into Line (two at a time)* : as Double Change Sides
Into one line down the centre line of the set in pairs, crossing staves with appropriate neighbour. Two ends will have no one to cross staves with and keep stave on shoulder for that half of the movement. Then all cross staves with neighbour on other side and repeat

- appropriately. Thus first half : 2_1_3_4_6_5_7_8 etc, and second half : 1_2_4_3_5_6_8_7 etc.
- 4 *Down and Up* : as Double Lead Through
In fours, top pair dance down centre shoulder to shoulder and retire to place, then bottom pair dance up the middle and retire to place.
- 5 *The Figure* :
All face up, the first pair split and cast out on own side followed by their seconds and dance a reel of four across the set, passing left shoulders in the centre, ending in own place. To complete the movement in time it may be necessary to start the reel as soon as the seconds pass, and to finish the reel by cutting out the last passing and going straight to place.

Second Parts

- 1 All make 90 deg turn to left and dance off to left for 2 bars, turn out to face back and return to place in 2 bars, turn opposite once round with left hand, 4 bars, with a hesitation in opposite's place. No repeat. (Suitable tune - Over Hills and Far Away)
- 2 In fours, circle clockwise half way round, 3 bars, face along the diagonals, 1 bar, and all pass left shoulders in centre crossing to place simultaneously, 4 bars, going straight into a circle anticlockwise and crossing the centre left shoulders again, turning the easy way to face across. (Suitable tune - Ninety Five)
- 3 In fours, go down four in a line, 2 bars, face neighbour and step, 2 bars, half reel of four across the set. Come up four in a line, stop and step, and half reel to place. (Suitable tune - Tiptoe Polka)

Modern Second Parts

- 4 *Mad Moll of the Cheshire Hunt* (Abercorn) - In 4's, first corner pass left shoulders, crossing staves and going round anticlockwise to meet opposite, who they push round complete turn clockwise, taking 8 bars. Then same corners past left in centre and meet neighbour who they push round complete turn, ending in place. Other corner then repeat. Inactives dance on spot waiting for the first turn, then dance a small circle of their own whilst waiting for the second turn, so that they keep turning to the right. *Astley's Ride* (Fleur de Lys) - slight change of emphasis. All dancers start diagonally to the right so that neighbouring pairs move almost into one line along the centre, then the first corner continues passing left shoulder onto their opposite for the turn, and the second corner at the end of the 4 cast back to their right, ready to take the first corner for a push around along the sides of the set.
- 5 *Spanish Lady* (Fleur de Lys) - whole set figure - the top pair lead the set down the middle and back up the outside, each pair moving all the way to the top and to the bottom before turning. Top pair form arch when back in place and others go under each forming own arch when reach own place
- 6 *Grand Chain* (Fleur de Lys) - pairs face across (1&2, 7&8) and along sides (3&5, 2&4) and grand chain all the way round, passing right shoulders first.
Grand Chain (Abercorn) - Bottom 6 start a morris hey(3&4 cast out and go down, 7&8 cast up and go up, 5&6 go up between 3&4) and the top pair cross and change sides and join hey on the wrong side, thereby giving it three loops, the top pair cross again at the bottom but the others stay on their own side.
- 7 *Speed the Plough* (Fleur de Lys from Minden Rose) - top two pairs face down, the bottom two face up at start. The end pairs move between the middle pairs in one bar, to form two lines of 4 facing up and down the line of the set, the top line of 4 only turn inwards to face up, the other line dance on the spot for one bar. The top line of 4 splits at the centre and rotates as a pair 180 deg travelling in an outwards circle to form a line of 8 with the bottom row who have moved up a little in two bars. The line has 4 facing up and 4 facing down. The line of 8 breaks in the centre and each 4 rotates as lines of 4 to face the other way, in 2 bars, and reforming the line of 8. Then all the dancers move straight to their starting places in the last two bars.

CHRISTCHURCH ELECTION - for longways of 8 or more dancers

to be added

SPIRITHEAD FLEET - for a set of 6. (*Bootlaces at Abercorn*)

to be added

DORSETSHIRE MARCH - for a set of 6. (*The Witan Tree at Abercorn*)

to be added

THE STEP DANCE -

to be added