

WHY RATTLE UP, MY BOYS?

"Rattle up my boys" is a new occasional broadsheet for all with an interest in Longsword dance planned to appeal to all interested in Longsword dancing - the enthusiast, researcher, the performer or those with general interest in this distinctive tradition.

It is not intended as another general folk magazine but will deal with Longsword subjects in depth. It will be published whenever worthwhile material is available but at least three issues a year are guaranteed to subscribers.

The material published will be selected to ensure that the contents of the broadsheet will not date. It will not feature current news or ads but a free newsletter will accompany the broadsheet to carry news, details of events etc. Organisers are invited to submit details of any sword event they would like to publicise.

In the next issue

The Goathland Ploughstots

Social background of the team, recent changes and a survey of developments since the 1923 revival - includes some photographs not previously published. ... plus a photo montage, anecdotes and details from the 1979, 1981, 1984 and 1987 Longsword Weekends.
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An ego trip for Trevor Stone?

All material in this first issue has been written by me to get the project off the ground. I already have promises of articles by many people but I would welcome more, especially team profiles, reports on major events etc. If you have never published an article before I would be delighted to help with advice and encouragement.

Topics in the pipeline

Subjects already in hand include:

History of the Whitby Competitive Dance Festival, Sword dancing in South Yorkshire, an interview with Joe Brown - dance teacher for 60 years, Extracts from Cecil Sharps collecting notebooks, The Papa Stour sword dance, the Morris Ring archives, team profiles of many teams, the Baccou-ber sword dance from France ... and much more.

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Organisers of Longsword events!

Why not use the enclosed newsletter to promote your event or tour

For further information on this fascinating Yorkshire tradition send for a copy of the only booklet on this subject.

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RATTLE UP

MY BOYS....

an occasional broadsheet for those with an interest in Longsword dance

In this issue

Ampleforth revisited

Details of the discovery and follow-up of an old photograph handed in during the 1984 Longsword weekend, featuring an Ampleforth team circa 1900

Continental sword dance

general details of sword dancing in Europe and the recent visit to Antwerp by the sword dance team from Strani in Czechoslovakia.

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European Sword Dances

In her book "Sword Dance and Drama" Violet Alford lists over 400 locations throughout Europe where sword dances, or dances which she considers to be of the same family, were performed. Miss Alford goes on to analyse the distribution of such dances and draws the conclusion that most of the areas with such dances have, or had, a local mining industry.



● The locations of European Sword dances from "Sword dance and Drama" by Violet Alford

The theory that sword dances had their origins in mining or metal working communities has been regularly represented by other scholars who often cite English Longsword dances from the mining areas of Cleveland and South Yorkshire in support

However there are enough exceptions to create doubt about this otherwise neat and tempting solution.

Given the necessity to provide building materials and fuel for the locality, it is hard to find many pre-industrial sites in Britain, or I suspect, on the Continent, which did not have some local mining

Dances in Britain

In Britain we have the largest concentration of sword dances in Europe. Our dances are mainly found in Yorkshire and County Durham but at least a third come from predominantly agricultural areas (Goathland and the dances from the Vale of York for example) or communities where fishing was the major industry (Flamborough and Papa Stour).

Most Continental dances do not seem to me to owe their continuing existence to any apparent links with mining. A major influence appears to be the connection with local carnivals and ceremonial events - usually church processions in the Latin countries and City or Craft guild events in Northern Europe.

A much more interesting area for speculation exists. What connection, if any, is there between the sword dances from different countries? Was there once a sword dance from which other national and regional variants developed?

One theory, presented by Dr Richard Wolfram, the pre-eminent scholar in this field, is that our sword dances are degenerate copies of a German tradition, possibly introduced to England by an antiquarian after doing the Grand Tour of Europe.

Language difficulties and the expense of foreign travel make it unlikely that any one individual researcher can evaluate all the available material but I hope to gather further information on Continental dances for future issues of the Broadsheet.

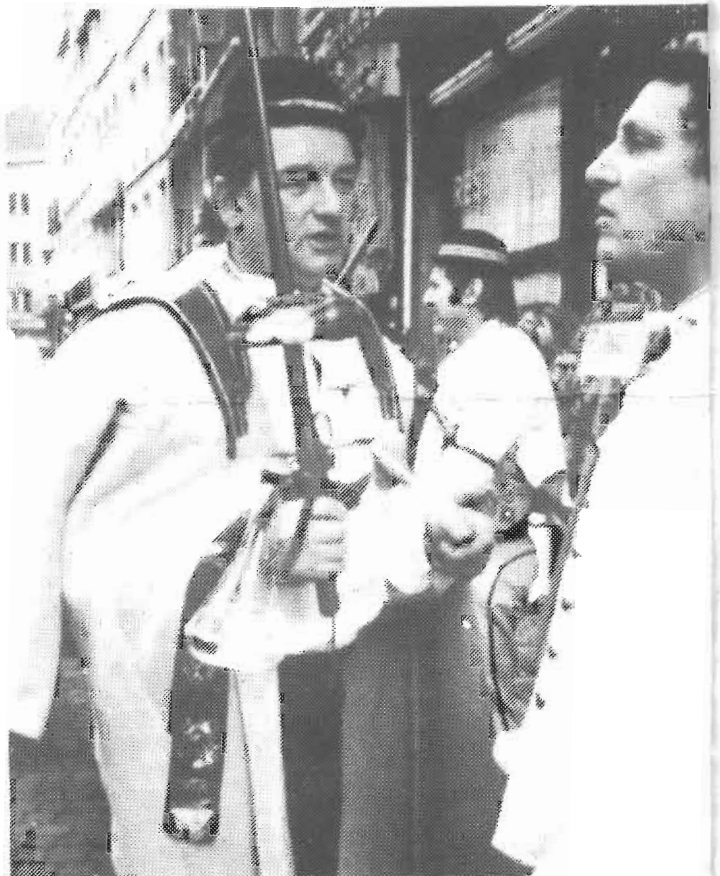
In 1981 the Flemish dance group, Lange Wapper attended the Longsword Dance Weekend to perform their sword dance. The team came again to the 1984 weekend and invited me to their traditional dance event, held at Half Lent in Antwerp. This I did in 1982, 1984 and again in 1987

On these trips I met sword dance enthusiasts, especially the leader of Lange Wapper, Renaat van Craenenbroeck. Renaat is working on an International index of sword dances for a proposed International gathering in 1989, celebrating 600 years since the earliest known Continental reference to sword dance.

The last meeting in Antwerp included a symposium where Renaat van Craenenbroeck, two Czech researchers and myself gave presentations about sword dancing in our countries.

I was fascinated to hear of many features in Slovak sword dances which display marked similarities to our own Longsword dance. It was doubly rewarding the next day to see one of these dances performed by the team from Strani in Southern Moravia.

Czechoslovak sword dances



As in the Grenoside dance, the leader or captain does not join the dance with the dancers. He directs the team from outside the circle. In the Strani dance he sings the accompanying songs and carries a sword on which is impaled food received as a gift from the householder

Are our sword dances derived from a Germanic original?



Ampleforth revisited

In 1979 I interviewed a Dominican priest, Father Damian Webb O.S.B. who when we met was based at the Priory in Garforth, near Leeds. Father Damian was the instigator of a 1950's revival of the Ampleforth Dance for the boys of Ampleforth College.

Father Damian gave details of the experiences of the College team, including an appearance at the Royal Albert Hall in 1951. He also provided information about earlier teams he heard of in interviews with a local musician called Willie Worthy.

Stimulated by this interview, I arranged a social weekend at Ampleforth which was attended by members from my own team Spen Valley Longsword, and two other Longsword teams.

The Ampleforth weekend involved more socialising than dancing but some of us hoped that dance displays in the village would spark off local interest. We hoped that a villager would rush out to us and supply exciting and hitherto unknown information.

Of course it didn't happen like that - at least not during the Ampleforth weekend, but the weekend was the forerunner of a number of Longsword events which grew in size and popularity.

So many teams and spectators wanted to attend the subsequent weekends that we had to move away from Ampleforth with its limited facilities. The 1981 & 1984 events were both based at Malton 10 miles away, but Ampleforth was visited by one of the dance tours.

The tours were planned to include towns and villages in Ryedale and the Vale of York which were known to have a Longsword team between 1840 and 1910. I felt that they should be included, in spite of little present day interest or knowledge of the dance.

Imagine my surprise when the leader of a tour which visited Ampleforth returned with a faded and battered old photograph.

The owner of the photograph, Mr Leslie Thomas, has lived in the village all his life and his father was the photographer who took

the picture. Mr Thomas gave permission for the photograph to be expertly repaired and copied, which revealed lots of detail.

The photograph shows 6 dancers in their teens through to early 30's. They are accompanied by 5 older men, one in a fools costume.

The dancers are dressed in short jackets and light coloured trousers with side stripes - a similar costume to that described by Cecil Sharp's informants. They also wore pill box hats, popular with a number of dance teams at that time.

Four men in every-day dress include one carrying a huge drum, a melodeon player and one other identified as 'Lame Harry Wright'.

Unusual design of swords

The 'fool' displays a perfect sword lock. The swords are of unusual design with three semi-circular notches on each side of the blade just below the handles. Father Damian found such a sword in the village in the 1950's which was being used to stake flowers. He made copies of this sword for the College revival team.

There is no date on the photograph and Mr Thompson was unable to do other than guess a date around 1900. This estimate is confirmed by the style of dress of the onlookers in the background.

This date would make the photograph amongst the older photographic records of a Longsword team. I believe that the oldest photograph of an Ampleforth team is a postcard in the Vaughn Williams Memorial Library dated 1896. This shows an Ampleforth Longsword team in similar costume posing outside the College building.

Unfortunately this postcard is of such poor definition that it is of not much use in helping to date the newly discovered photograph or to identify the members of the team. Much work remains to be done to date the photo more precisely, and to identify the people in it and see if this leads to any further local leads.

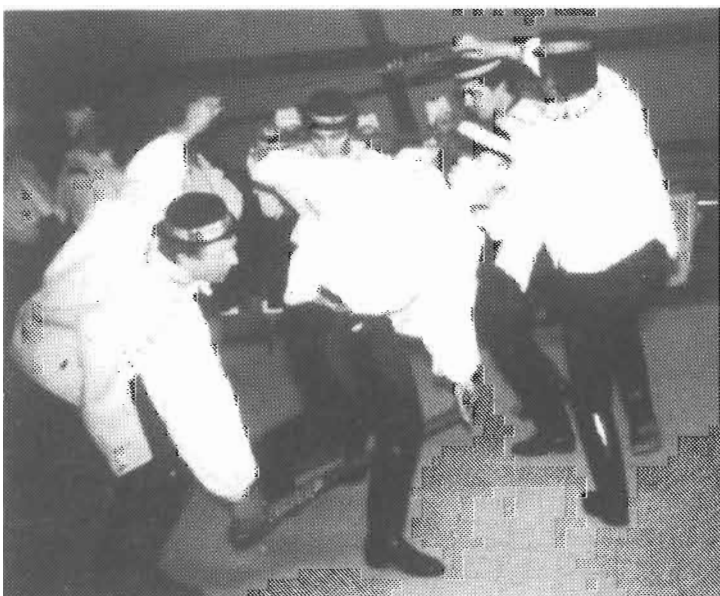
But it proves that sometimes, just sometimes, good luck can lead to a fascinating new lead.

Like Goathland Ploughstots the Strani team tour the community and dance when invited (and rewarded in cash or food) to do so.

There are similar dances throughout Czechoslovakia. Some teams have a gaudily dressed entourage. Earlier English teams were often accompanied by such troupes. These characters survive with some of the Czech teams. They are known as maskers because they wear exotic fancy dress. They are often as important to local people as the dance team is.

Many differences exist with our dances. The Strani team has 5 dancers but some Czech teams involve as many men as turn up. Some teams are from men from one village or one family. One team is for men about to be called up to the armed forces.

The English sword lock is unknown in Czechoslovakia because most of their swords are made of thick wood. The Strani team's swords are approx 39" long with a D shaped handle. They taper from 2" wide below the handle to 3/4" at the tip. The sword is painted red with metal rings which jingle when clashed.



The Strani Sword Dance Ceremony

In the same way as the English dance once involved a play, the Strani Sword Dance is a part of a complex ceremony which lasts over 15 minutes. It was difficult to understand the details due to language difficulties but it was obvious that the full version was reserved for more formal displays.

The full ceremony opens with singing, including a haunting, powerful song sung by all the men. Four women then join in for more songs, dances and a game involving exchanging hats with others in a circle.

The mood then changes, the singing becomes forceful and the sword dance proper is performed by five men whilst the leader and the women sing with the music. The performance is enthusiastic, with many whistles and whoops by the dancers.

The dance lasts about 5 minutes and is performed with a hop step throughout. It involves moves we call shoulders, clash hilts, single under, single over and others.

At the beginning the dancers jerk their swords and tap them on the ground but the swords are not clashed in the "High Basket" figure known in all English dances.

The shortened display usually performed by the team involves the introductory song, the sword dance, a short sequence of dancing (with partners) and a parting song. The full ceremony includes more singing and an interesting sequence where a dancer is picked out and symbolically beaten by the others with their swords. More songs and dancing with partners ends the full show.

The most memorable feature of the Strani performance was the superb singing. The complete performance, including the sword dance itself, is accompanied by song as well as musicians playing violin and pipes.

The group have two sets of costume, described as traditional dress and carnival dress. The former is plainer with, the men in long black boots, dark blue jodpur-style trousers, white shirt, and short cream colour jacket hung loose over their shoulders. They all wear brimless black hats, like low bowlers, with a single ribbon around the crown.

The carnival costume is brought out for major displays. The men have trousers and waistcoats in dark purple this time worn normally. Shirts have added lace in pale blue and the hats have bunches of coloured ribbons looped from the crown.

But the change to the womens costume is most striking. From a muted traditional costume they change into dramatically short and colourful flared dresses of red with gold designs applied and white lace frills.

A dark coloured, heavily embroidered bodice is worn over white lace trimmed blouses. A large red head scarf, tied in a manner reminiscent of the 1940's turban adds the final touch to a very striking outfit.

Of the two costumes, I prefer the muted version as I feel that it best suits the tradition but there is no denying that the carnival costume is most striking.

Conclusion

I set out with the hope that a better understanding of Continental dances may shed some light on the origins of our own sword dances. I was really hoping that I would see something in the traditions of other countries which would disprove Wolfram's theory about Germanic origins.

I soon realised that confusion and uncertainty increased, rather than lessened with more knowledge. The Strani dance illustrates some striking similarities, but there are just as many significant differences.

I prefer to stick to the romantic, and unprovable view that the dances originated in Britain and where spread across the Continent by travellers such as the crusaders.

Strani to visit England?

One more positive result has come from the meeting. The leader of the Strani team has since written saying that they would welcome the chance to come to England. If I understand his letter correctly (his English is hesitant, but far superior to my Czech) they are hoping to come to a sword dance event rather than a conventional festival. Perhaps more of us will soon get a change to see their very impressive tradition.