

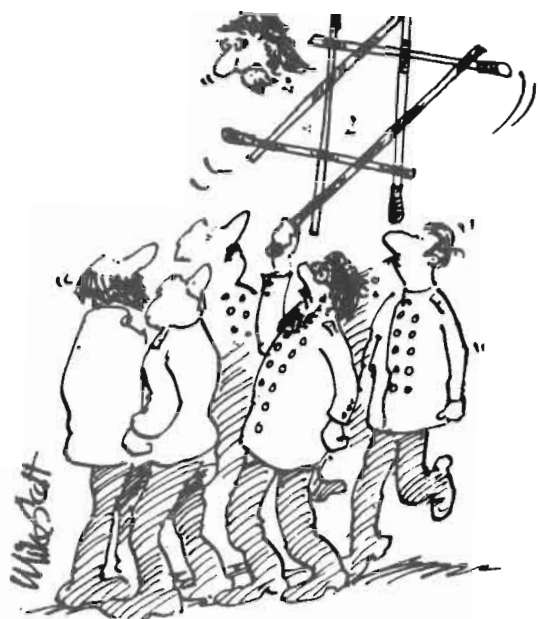
When, if ever, does a revival team become a traditional team?

This issue profiles two teams who only perform Longsword. After a few years in which they sought help and advice both teams have now developed their own style and are maturing.

It would be interesting to hear readers views about when, if ever do teams like Spen Valley and Sullivans Sword qualify for the tag "traditional". Is it, as some people suggest only after the team has died out and revived, or is it when a second generation of dancers learn to dance from the "old team"?

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Cartoon supplied by Sullivans Sword

In the next issue

More on Continental Dances

An article by Bob Schofield describes his visit to see the French sword dance at Bacuber and I will report on a trip to Czechoslovakia which revealed many similarities to our dances.

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RATTLE UP MY BOYS....

an occasional broadsheet for those
with an interest in Longsword dance

Published by Trevor Stone, 6 Priory Road, Sale, Cheshire, M33 2BR

In this issue

Team profiles from two revival teams, both who dance Longsword only.

Spen Valley from Ciecikheaton sprung from workshops lead by Kathy Mitchell.

Sullivans Sword from Nottingham developed from a local mummers team.

Mystery painting

Cindy Sughrue asks for help in identifying a painting from the 1850's which shows a Longsword team, but which one?

Issue No 4, Series 1

A PROFILE OF SPEN VALLEY LONGSWORD

Most Longswordmen will have heard of Spen Valley Longsword but few will know where the Spen Valley is. It is an area of industrial West Yorkshire between Bradford and Dewsbury. Our base - where we practise every Monday night is the Royal Hotel in Cleckheaton - five miles south of Bradford.

Spen Valley Longsword was formed in the Autumn of 1975. Many of the early team had an interest in folk dance - they were members of the Yorkshire Mixtures Folk Dance club, a local weekly ceilidh Club. The interest in Longsword came after Kathy Mitchell's Longsword workshops at the 1975 Whitby Folk Festival. These early dancers decided to try to form a team.

There were eight founder members - three still dance with the team.

The first public performance was in 1976 - at a local mental hospital. Some say the team was lucky to get out considering the mental state of most Spen Valley dancers, but such people are unkind and are to be ignored.

The team has grown and changed over the last twelve years, but membership has remained stable. We have eleven regular dancers and two musicians. Three regulars were founder members and seven have been with the team for more than ten years. Our youngest dancer claims to be twenty nine years old and the oldest admits to being almost fifty. Most of the team are Yorkshiremen - born and bred, but this is not a membership requirement - we've even got a Welshman in the team.

In common with other sword teams I've seen we are a men's team. This is our only membership requirement - the ability to dance is an advantage but not essential, but we are a men only team. It's not that we don't like women - several of us are married to women - and we don't have the die-hard attitude of some Morris Ring teams. We are happy, nay keen, to dance out with women's teams and mixed teams, but only men can join Spen Valley.

Our dances

We dance Helmsley and North Skelton as our main dances, and we occasionally dance Flamborough. The Flamborough dance is a nice dance but we don't often perform it as we have difficulty getting eight men with enough stamina to perform it out on tours. The editor of this broadsheet is one of our dancers who claims to be 'too fat for Flamborough'. When we dance Flamborough we usually do it as a six man dance - there are six of us who can manage it. It may not be traditional and if Cecil Sharp was alive now he'd be turning in his grave, but necessity is the mother of invention.



Spen Valley dancing their version of the Helmsley dance in Helmsley market place. The latter jackets have given rise to the claim that the team look like "multi-coloured car washes".

We think of the Helmsley sword dance as our own dance. We were introduced to it by Trevor Stone when he was our foreman, and working from Sharp's brief notes we pieced a dance together. We liked the dance and it worked, apart from the move Sharp called the three man reel. I defy anyone to read Sharp's notes and then do the figure. We spend hours trying to work out what Sharp had been trying to do (we had a video camera). Eventually we arrived at the figure we now call 'triangles' and it was incorporated into the dance.

We were the first team to dance Helmsley as it is now danced but we are not now the only team to dance it. We have taught it at festivals and I recently saw it danced by Sullivan Sword at the Malton Longsword Festival.

It was an odd feeling watching someone else do our dance. Being the foreman I wanted to shout out to tell them how to do it properly. We don't claim any special rights - with the exception of the dances of traditional teams such as Goathland (and Flamborough? ... Ed) other dances are in the public domain. Anyone can dance Helmsley, but that's just how I felt.

Dancing out

We dance out twelve to fifteen times a year. We are invited to dance out more than we can manage. We dance at three types of event. Most are local, but the exceptions are folk festivals. As a team we enjoy going away to weekend festivals. We do three or four every year and are even prepared to travel south of Sheffield for a good festival.

We support local EFDSS events, although we despair at the image they present and their organisation. We have danced at every EFDSS do we've been invited to. Individual members are Society supporters. At a recent District AGM four of the sixteen people present were members of S.V.L.S. Three of our members are past editors of Tykes News - the regional folk magazine.

But most of our public performances are dancing tours with other teams, either our own tours or when we are invited out with other teams. We enjoy mixing with some other sides and we have organised weekends of dance. These are not Longsword only events, we try for a mix of dance types. They have been super weekends and more are planned.



Spen Valley celebrate a win at Whitby Competitive Festival with friends from Goathland Ploughstols who are regular competitors in the Longsword class.

A major event in our calendar is to compete in the Whitby Competitive Dance Festival. The other obligatory event is our Boxing Day tour of Spen Valley - an afternoon tour of selected public houses on our home patch.

Why do we dance?

We are a bit messianic about longsword - we don't like being called morris dancers and we dance out locally in the hope that people will come think of longsword as their folkdance. We dance to enjoy ourselves but also to entertain and educate the public.

Believe it or not, there are some people who think that sword dancing is but a thin excuse for visiting pubs, but this is not true. The fact is that we spend a lot of time in them is simply a consequence of the social side of our activities. The social life of the team is important; the music, singing, drinking and swapping tales.

And the dancing? We take pride and pleasure in knowing that we are good. That's not meant to be big-headed. If you are a dancer you will know what it's like when a dance goes well - you know it's good. We dance Helmsley with drive and energy, and we do it well and with style!

It was suggested that I should include some of the amusing and interesting incidents from our history - such as finding Tutenkhamun's sister in York, the gale in Bolton, what happened in the Treffussis room at Cecil Sharp House, the pebble dashing of the bus etc. But law of libel being what it is and the editor of this magazine being who he is, I won't go further.

But if ever you meet a Spen Valley Longsword man you can be sure that his tongue will be loosened by a pint or two and you will find out more about Spen Valley Longsword than I have been able to tell you.

Pat Langdon, Foreman 1987.

Spen Valley and Sullivan's Sword will meet again soon, as competitors at the Whitby Competitive Dance Festival. It will be interesting to see if they both perform their versions of the Helmsley dance. I don't envy the adjudicators - Barbara & Bill Kinsman.

Any views on the 'ownership' of dances? Are they ever part of the public domain?

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SULLIVAN'S SWORD



Sullivan's Sword from Nottingham have never appeared without performing a calling-on song

Longsword Dancing may be a Yorkshire tradition but it is now alive and flourishing in the East Midlands. Apart from Sullivan's Sword in Nottingham, Phoenix Sword (Loughborough) and Black Cap (Derby) are going strong.

The origins of Sullivan's Sword go back to 1975 when the Owd 'Oss Mummies decided to widen their repertoire and perform a sword-play. Our first instruction came from Sybil Clark of the EFDSS who taught us the basics of the Sleights dance in return for running a workshop on mummung.

For a long time we worked on the dance at odd moments during mummung practices and became aware that there was far more to it than we'd realised. Eventually we emerged from hiding and performed as the Owd 'Oss Sword Dancers. Our dancing might not have been brilliant but we enjoyed it and the sheer elation of performing in public guaranteed we would become hooked.

A sword-play never materialised because we never found a play that we liked enough that would work with a dance in the middle of it. Our mummung roots are reflected however, in the fact that we have never once danced out without a calling-on song.

After a few years we realised that trying to find a compromise between the lengths of time spent on sword dancing and on mummung wasn't suiting anyone. We then decided that the sword dancers needed a separate identity and name. While we were arguing Joe O'Sullivan, the landlord of the pub appeared and we were unanimous on our new name. The 'O' was immediately dropped in case people thought that our dances were Irish!

Sleights is the dance we started with and we have never stopped performing it. It is basically very simple and easy to teach to newcomers but when performed well the variety of locks in particular, make it crisp and spectacular. Not being a traditional side, we have never felt restricted to just one dance and have tried a number. First came Escrick which we tried to learn from Cecil Sharp's "The Sword Dances of Northern England". No matter how long we worked at the dance, we never mastered it, the New Roll especially.

In retrospect we now realise that for an inexperienced team it is almost impossible to learn a new dance from a book. Personal instruction is invaluable, not only because it avoids the endless arguments about what a particular phrase means, but also because you get a real feel for the dance. Next day you might have forgotten the details but the overall patterns stick in the mind.

In common with many others, we are particularly indebted to Ivor Allsop and Trevor Stone. Ivor ran a workshop in Barnsley, on behalf of the Morris Ring, where we learnt the Ampleforth dance. This was the first time most of us had ever seen any other sword dancers and we immediately forgot all about Escrick. We performed Ampleforth for a couple of years until we persuaded Trevor to come down to Nottingham to give us an instructional weekend. The things I remember about it are the incredibly cold scout hut that we'd hired, Trevor getting paralytic with the rest of us on the Saturday night and the rudiments of the Helmsley Dance.

A few months later Ivor came down for an evening and took great delight in showing us ways in which we could change Trevor's interpretation of the dance completely. We still perform "The Helmsley Dance" but now we are quite unashamed of doing it in a way that feels right for us.

Over the last couple of years we've danced at a number of folk festivals, including Redcar, Cleethorpes and Warwick in 1986, as well as pub tours and bookings nearer home and weekends of dance with various morris and clog teams. At all these events we have just done our two dances. We are now starting to feel more ambitious and to give more variety to our performances we are working on a third dance. Totally ignoring our previous experience with Escrick we have taken the Flamborough Dance from Cecil Sharp's book.

Now however we've got much more idea of what we're doing and are quite confident of altering it until we've come up with something completely unrecognisable from the original. Purists will be pleased to know that we've also changed the name. We reflect it's origins by calling it the Woodborough Dance from a village near Nottingham!

One of the main factors that has kept us going over our relatively short history has been a succession of dedicated musicians, in our early days

Greg Morris and Phil Barber both played the melodeon and now we have Alan Davies, who is a smashing concertina player. He gave us great heart when we went to Malton this year, since we all knew that no matter what our dancing was like, his music would be as good as anything we were likely to hear.

We all enjoyed Malton, but perhaps due to a surfeit of sword dancing, the best part for us was a splendid Saturday evening in the Crown singing and playing with the Spen Valley lads. They seem to share our philosophy that while the only way to get real satisfaction from dancing is by doing it well, the most important things to remember are that you are doing it for enjoyment and to entertain others. We are not preserving a special local tradition, but rather we are trying to conserve the spirit of longsword dancing by performing in a way that appeals to a wide audience.

While we have always been blessed with talented musicians, there have been times when we have struggled to get enough dancers. For 90% of our history we have been all-male but about 7 years ago we danced for about a year with a women in our team rather than pack in completely. I wonder if our third party insurance through being associate members of the Morris Ring would have invalidated if they had known about it! It has never been a contentious issue between us since no other woman has ever wanted to dance with us, but if the situation ever re-occurred, I am sure that there would be a lot of dissention amongst our current members.

The only time we wished we had insurance for ourselves was this October, when we were dancing at a ceilidh club in Derby (Did Black Cap put a curse on us?). While performing Sleights for at least the 500th time, Phil Hind, our only other founder member still dancing, managed to get the point of a sword in his eye (always an exhibitionist!). As he lay there with blood streaming down his face the landlady, when phoning for an ambulance, had great difficulty persuading them that, yes - he had been hit by a sword, but no - we didn't want the police to come.

When we first started dancing out we wore mummung costumes but we soon found out it was very difficult to be taken seriously when half the team were in women's clothing. Our next plumage consisted of chef's jackets dyed red with a sword motif on the back. I thought they looked very smart, but everyone else thought they looked like, well - chef's jackets dyed red!



The teams' early costume was based on Chef's jackets

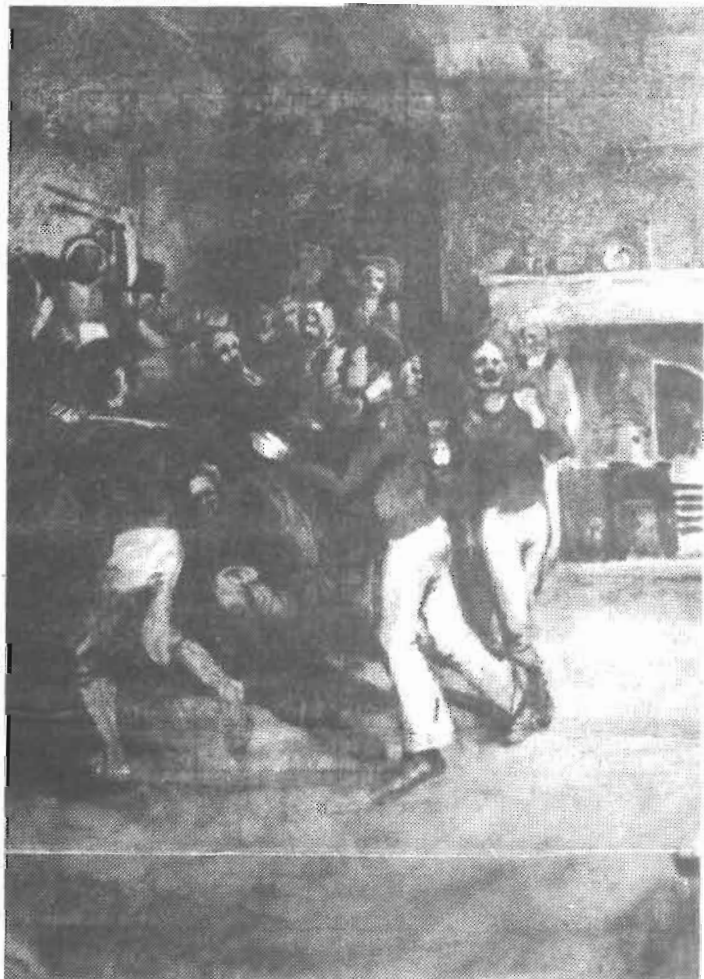
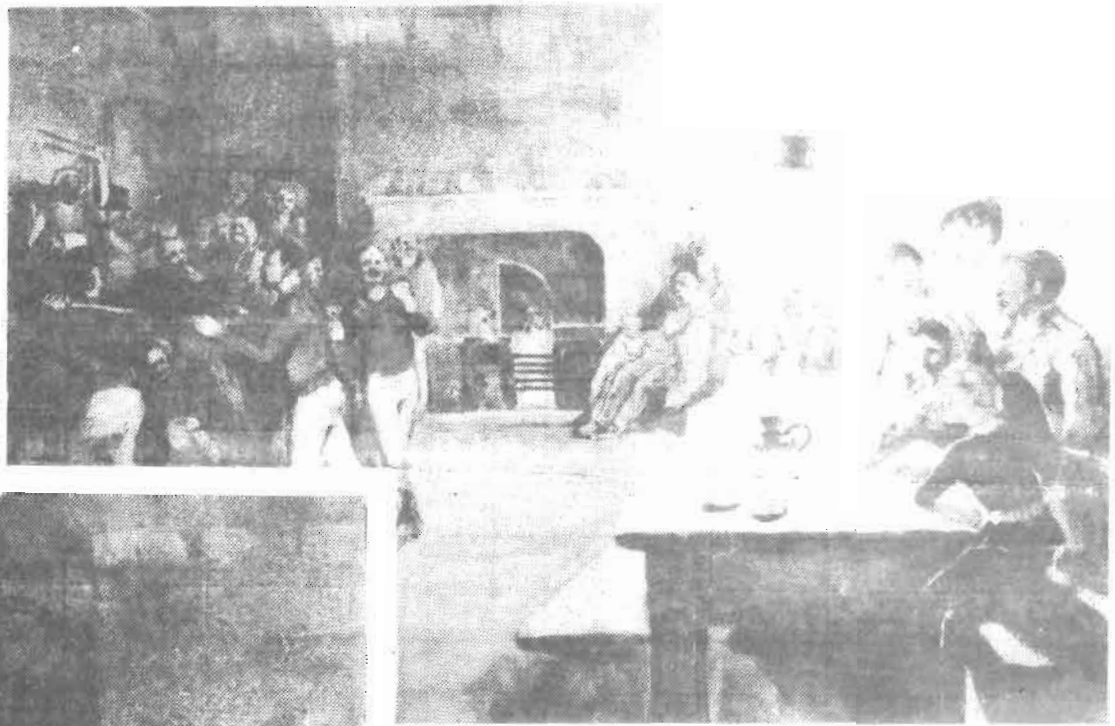
Finally we approached a friend of ours, Margaret Mitchell, and asked her to design and make a set of costumes that made us look like 19th century plough-boys in their Sunday best. These proved particularly popular with cartmieves, who stole two of them from the Summerfield Folk Festival in 1985. If anyone spots two burglars in Birmingham wearing corduroy waistcoats and knee-breeches please let us know.



After many ups and downs, we are now feeling confident in our dancing. We have 10 regular dancers: John (Captain), Alan, Chris, Idwal, Keith, Malcolm, Nick, Pete, Phil and Richard as well as Alan, our musician. I am looking forward eagerly to dancing out with two sides for the first time.

MYSTERY PAINTING

can anybody help with any ideas of who, or where, or when it may be?



In November 1986, I met a man who said he had a watercolour painting of a set of sword dancers, identified by one of his colleagues as the Handsworth team. As I was investigating the history of the Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers as part of my research of longsword dancing in South Yorkshire, the subject of my PhD thesis, I was very interested to hear of this.

I was a bit surprised when I actually saw the painting pictured above, for while it does indeed portray a longsword team, it most certainly is not Handsworth.

Although the painting is neither signed nor dated, it is thought to be the work of Frank Saltfleet (1860-1937), a Sheffield artist, and was most likely painted around or after the turn of the century.

It was given to the present owner with a dozen or so other paintings by the artist and is said to be "in his style". Mr Saltfleet's obituary, which appeared in The Sheffield Telegraph on April 17th, 1937 stated that "He was no believer in 'trickery' in painting, and liked to give a faithful representation of what he saw The Yorkshire coast in the neighbourhood of Whitby was one of his favourite haunts".

As can be seen from the photograph, the painting portrays a longsword team dancing in a large kitchen for the amusement of the household. There appears to be six dancers: one man is down on one knee and all we see of another (on the far side of the set) is his head.

They are wearing navy blue jerseys, and while one man dons white trousers, the others wear beige knee breeches with blue-grey socks. The linking of the dancers is unusual (though this is most likely an oversight on the part of the artist) as the only visible sword is held on hilt and point by both men with their left hands.

The dancers appear to be accompanied by a troupe of mums, amongst whom there is a "doctor" character in a black top hat and two persons (one to the left of the doctor and the other behind the dancers in the centre of the crowd) dressed as women but who appear to have a substantial amount of facial hair.

The spectators, which are clearly set apart from the performers on the right side of the painting, suggest several generations of a family. There is quite a small child with an elderly couple by the fireplace, and, moving to the right, another older, portly gentleman, two younger women, a man seated at the table in a red uniform with gold epaulettes and buttons, another woman and a child of about eight years.

Does anyone have any ideas about this painting... who the team might have been, when and where they were performing, for what occasion etc?

Please send your impressions to Cindy Sughrue, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, replies will be included in the next broadsheet.