

an occasional broadsheet for those with an interest in Longsword dance

MY BOYS ...

# RATTLE UP



Issue No 5 Series 1

**In this issue ....**  
Bob Schofield, Captain of Kirkburton Rapper Dancers, once regularly published folk material. I welcome his renewed interest in the form of an article on his visit to see the Bacubert.  
I also include a fascinating team profile (and general observations) from Mike Jensen about Longsword dancing in Cumbria (and Canada!)

Be sure to let us know if you change your address.

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Trevor Stone, 6 Priory Road, Sale, Cheshire M33 2BR.



**SUBSCRIPTIONS RUN OUT WITH THIS ISSUE.**  
The second series of broadsheets will start with the next issue in July/August. Have you renewed your subs? Articles already to hand include cover the design of swords, sword dance on the Continent, sword dancing at the Albert Hall, and a number of team profiles.

In the next issue ....

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**Organisers of Longsword events!**  
Why not use the enclosed newsletter to promote your event or tour.

### Cindy's painting ...

Thanks to the readers who volunteered suggestions about the dance team shown in the painting featured in issue 4. Possibly the best lead is from the village of Littlebeck, a few miles from Whitby, Goathland and Sleights. Apparently the artist was a regular visitor to the village. The information will be followed up.

### International event delayed ...

Renaat van Craenenbroeck, who is proposing to organise an International Sword dance event to celebrate 600 years since the first written reference to a sword dance (on the Continent), tells me that he has had to delay the event.

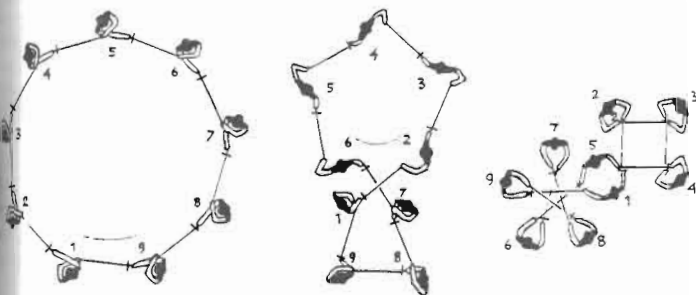
Apparently official backing from the Antwerp authorities was only forthcoming for an event to be held in 1992 - not to celebrate the "common market" we hear so much about but rather to coincide with the appointment of Antwerp as "Cultural capital of Europe"



## The Figures

A large part of the dance is taken up with manoeuvring into position in order to display unlocked shapes with the swords to the audience. With nine dancers it is possible to make three triangles at the same time, two triangles and a square, or a square and a five pointed star, along with lesser combinations, all by variations of the single under movement. To demonstrate this, assuming one starts from a full circle, the progression to a square and a star could be as follows:

No 9 & 8 single under 1 & 2's sword as in the leve to form a square.



No 3 passes under 4 & 5's sword, then No 6 passes beneath three swords, those of 4 & 5, 2 & 3 and 3 & 4, to form a star.

All the time the pace is the sedate shuffle in a generally clockwise direction. The swords are held in the shapes at body height, sometimes sloping, as in plate 2, where the star can be seen on the left, and a square on the right. Plate 3 shows three triangles held at waist height.

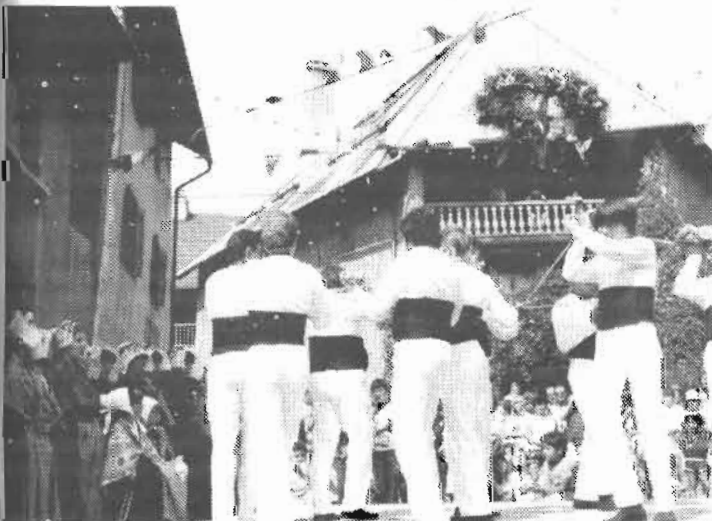


Plate 2

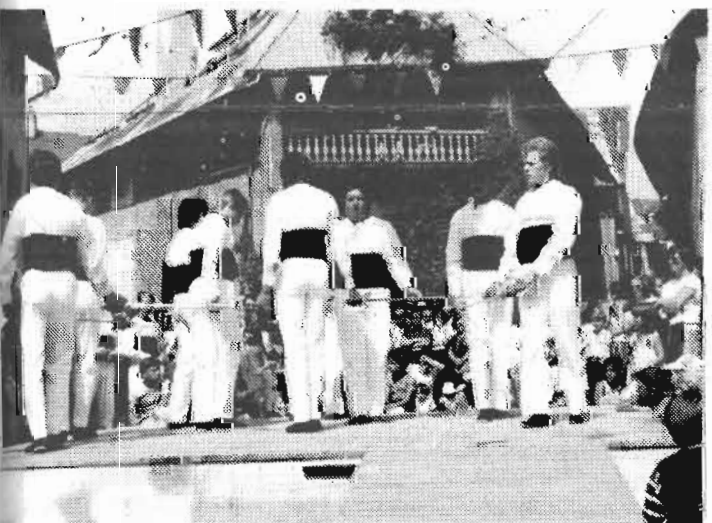


Plate 3

Each figure produces applause from the crowd, and eventually the possibilities of combination of the shapes is exhausted. In the days of three hour sermons, when the audience constitutions were stronger, there were up to thirteen dancers. The number and variety of shapes would be enormous and the end must have seemed a long way off to the choir.

Today, the figures last about ten minutes, then the team unwinds into the hilt and point circle, the points are let go, the swords held up vertically, and the team marches off. The singers finish with a last "tra la", and the dance is over. The steps come on the stage, the wreath is quickly pulled down and all shoot off to the next stand.

## PROVENANCE

"Tell me, my man, what is your provenance?"  
(Asked of a Kirkburton dancer at a folk festival in 1987).

As pointed out above, Violet Alford (1940 & 1962), gives an account of the team in 1939. Other than her usual thesis of affinity with mining which possibly existed in these parts in ancient times, she does not hazard a guess as to the earlier history of the dance. Despite its apparent isolation there are, close by, the Fenestrelle sword dance in Italy and Les Olivettes in Provence, both of "carnival character", which Alford considered to be of the same origin, with the Baccubert not suffering from a Morisca taint, perhaps because of their distance from the Moor infested coast.

Since we did not see either of the other two dances, it is best not to try to make too many conclusions, other than to note that the existence of one dance often assists in the preservation and continuing performance of another, though our insular upbringing does not equip us with the personal knowledge of the extent of cross cultural links over alpine borders and between different languages.

The dance has great affinity with English sword dances. The swords are of similar length, though less rudimentary, having true blades, gilt handles, and guards. The hilt and point circle is only broken for the introduction, as in the English clash, though the swords are laid in clash formation on the ground rather than struck together. The figures are performed by easily recognised single under movements, and the high spot is the leve, which receives the greatest applause as in this country.

The steps and figures do not appear to have changed since 1939, probably due to constant reference by the team to the notation produced in 1914 by Dr Raphael Blanchard in an otherwise naive work that assumes the Baccubert to be the only sword dance in Europe!

There has been no effort to introduce Harlequin, as in the Fenestrelle dance, though Alford saw a fool in 1939, or to dress in mediaeval costume, other than the singers, and indeed, the whole effect is reminiscent of an English side, though taken at a much less brisk speed. The dance is definitely for connoisseurs, rather than entertainment. Alford makes the point that the atmosphere is one of a village rite, the tedious pace being matched with eyes pointed to the ground and a solemn expression.

The tradition of the dance being done by the young men is still adhered to and presumably their places will be taken by up and coming young bloods at present waiting in the wings.

Perhaps they may be persuaded to visit this country, but robbed of the air of tradition that goes with dancing on their own patch on the correct date, our experiences would be much poorer than seeing it in the flesh. Somehow, things aren't quite the same when we substitute Bradford for Briancon, or York Minster for the little church with a clock.

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### References

Alford, Violet. (1940)  
"The Baccubert" Journal of English Folk Dance and Song Society, vol IV, no.1

Alford, Violet. (1962)  
Sword Dance and Drama, London, Merin.

Blanchard, Raphael. (1914) Le Baccubert.

Photos by Bob Schofield & Renaat van Creanenbroeck

Any reader who would like further details of this dance tradition should contact me.

In addition to videos of Baccubert performing in Italy in 1987, I also have a translation (courtesy of Ian Porter) of the article Bob refers to by Raphael Blanchard.

In September I intend to accompany the Belgian team Lange Wapper to a sword event in France where I expect to see the Baccubert dance as well as the Italian dances from Bagnasco and Fenestrelle.

Is there any interest in the publishing of an index of over 100 hours of video recordings I have made of more than 30 sword dance teams? Most of the videos can be viewed by agreement but I regret they cannot be loaned out. Get in touch if you have any interest.



# THE BACCUBERT OF SOUTH EAST FRANCE



Pont De Savières is a scruffy run down community on the less fashionable edge of Briançon, a rather up-market resort in the Daphinee Alps, about fifty miles east of Grenoble. Dusty cobbled streets wind between tall grey houses, roofed with corrugated sheets that bear snow for five months of the year, for the town is 4,000 feet above sea level, to meet at a small square distinguished only by the church of St Roch and St Martin, sporting the village clock and little else.

Visiting the village on the patronal day, August 16th, in 1984, there was little to show it was the annual festival other than a tiny fair with about three stalls and an adjacent area with tiered seating and a turnstile.

Prising the kids away from the fair by the purchase of a few easily broken trinkets, we climbed the 300 yds to the main square, eventually finding a poster telling us that today was the Fete Folklorique de St Roch and the Baccubert would be performed that afternoon at 15.00 in the square and at 15.45 in the arena in the Place Jean-Jaures. To keep up with the times, after a firework display at 21.00, there was to be "un bal avec "Disco-mobile" EXODUS". Would be late night revellers were warned that "Le jet des petards est interdit".

Our journey on the strength of a date in Violet Alford's book "Sword Dance and Drama" had been worthwhile.

Returning to the square in the afternoon, we found a low stage had been erected, preventing any motorised traffic from driving through the village, not that there was much. A few kids hung around, jumping on and off the stage, and eventually, at about half past two the village started stirring to life, and an audience, mainly locals, assembled round.

One important looking folklorist had managed to bribe his way onto an overlooking balcony and was busy setting up a battery of cine equipment. We had to content ourselves with crouching with the kids at the edge of the stage, but at least we did have a camera and six minutes of film.

One of the supporters next arrived with a pair of steps, from which he managed to hang a large wreath of flowers from a wire which crossed the square. Beneath the wreath on a red and white ribbon hung a silver medal, presented in 1866 when the team danced at the unveiling of a statue in the regional capital, Gap.

Usually their lot has been the jeers of the public, unimpressed by the sedate pace. Away performances have been dropped for a long time.

The wreath being hung, the choir arrived, about a dozen women and girls in "traditional" dress, long skirts, shawls, and white lace bonnets. At one time the choir was made up of old crones, another time the village virgins. This is not the case today, with some obviously mother and daughter partnerships evident in the ranks.

On a signal the dancers entered the ring behind a banner proclaiming the Baccubert, and the choir started chanting the interminable variations of the nonsense song that last the whole performance. Though the dance is slow, the women certainly have to work hard, singing non-stop for about a quarter of an hour.

Alford (1940, and 1962) gives the tune she noted in 1939, but it is different to that used in 1984. The haunting minor tune we recorded is easily remembered, and accompanies words sounding to us as:

"A grat tan la, a grat tan la, a grat tan la, la la, tra la la" and so on.



The team of nine dancers, mostly in their early twenties, were smeared dressed in white trousers and shirt, with neat black bow ties. They all wore black carpet slippers and looked as if they had had a block booting that morning at the barbers. Alford (1940) gives a couple of photographs and the uniform has hardly changed, even to the hair styles. The only change is from shoes to slippers, now that a stage is provided.

## THE DANCE

The dance is lengthy, about fifteen minutes, and consists of three parts: an introduction, followed by a lock known as the leve, and then a set of more complicated figures designed to display a variety of shapes made with the swords, triangles, squares, and stars, to the audience, at the time proceeding clockwise round the stage.

### Introduction

After processing onto the stage, the dancers form a circle, marching clockwise, then stand, facing middle, with swords upright in right hand.

The sword point is then lowered to the ground by the foot, the hilt held away from the body, and left hand on hip. The swords are then raised on the ground in turn, points crossing at the centre of the circle and hilts to each dancer. Arms folded (See plate 1).

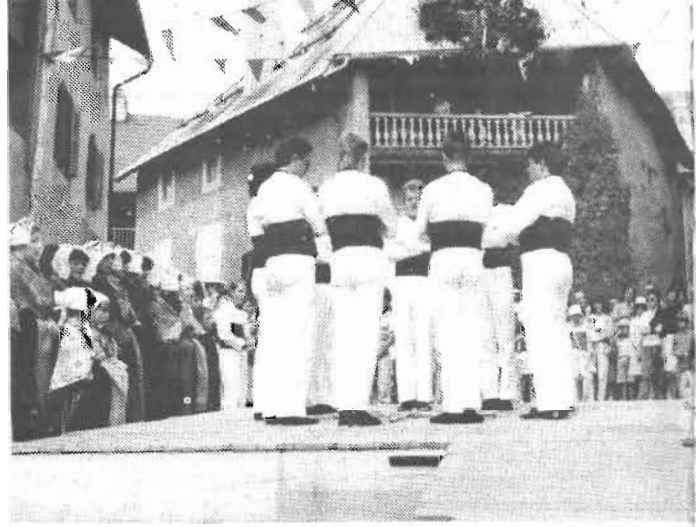


Plate 1

No 1 salutes the man on left, picks up his sword, salutes man on right (No 2) and offers him the point. No 2 does same, and so on until full hilt and point circle is made, which is retained throughout the dance.

### La leve or the lift

The team processes slowly round clockwise, picking up the slow rhythm and step which lasts throughout the dance. The step is a shuffle left - right - left with a pause on the fourth beat, a sort of very slow polka, but no lifting of the feet off the ground allowed! As with all the best traditional sides, some were better at keeping time than others.

All turn under their own sword outwards, then inwards. Single and double whereby Nos 9 & 8 pass under 1 & 2's sword and form a square on outside of the main set, the swords being displayed to the crowd, before returning to the circle and the same movement being repeated nine times with different leads.

No 1 passes into the middle of the set, still holding his own and swords, and crouches down. The others lay their swords across his in a lock shape, though not locked, and the team stop dancing round.

All the dancers jump down onto one knee and spring back up again facing the centre, with the lock still held across 1's back. This is repeated, Alford counted eight in 1939, but there were at least ten in 1984. In England, the audience applauds this, the central part of the dance.

The team goes back to a hilt and point formation, shuffling around clockwise, prior to part three.

## Sweating and swearing in Cumbria

There seems to be plenty of information on Longsword but most of it is either unpublished or practically inaccessible. Rattle Up so far has had a good mixture of contemporary teams and events, history, foreign "cousins" (some tantalizing asides on these!), and a notation. I hope there will be more of all of these.

I thought it was about time I wrote to tell you about some of the things we're getting up to on this side of the Pennines.

Carlisle Sword and Morris have nine men doing a repertoire of Border Morris, Longsword and Rapper, and a slightly larger women and children's group doing clog and step dancing.

We're a busy team and make considerable demands on each other. Last year's programme consisted of twelve day/evening performances, seven weekends with other teams (including Easter in Dublin), and whole weeks at Sidmouth and Whitby Festivals.

This year we have been invited to Canada's Summer Folklore Festivals, so our home programme is restricted to money-raising.

The Longsword dances we do are: our own version of Flamborough; the dance from Papa Stour (with our interpretation of the "Clew"); and our reconstruction of the Cumberland Sword Dance.

Carlisle started in 1974 as a Cotswold side; none of the founder members is dancing with the team at present. (Does that make us "second generation" and therefore, traditional?) The first Longsword dances were Flamborough and Grenoside (in 1975 and 1976). The latter was dropped in favour of Papa Stour, which took several years to get out, but has since been a staple of our repertoire.

By 1980, the search was on for a third Longsword dance. One practical aspect of this was that the number of active and reliable dancers had stuck at around eight, and the eight-man Flamborough was vulnerable to injury or backsliding. Among the dances tried by a succession of foremen were Boosbeck and Ampleforth, but neither was ever danced out.

When I became foreman in 1984 I thought that we should be going for something of our own (as we had done with our "Border" dances). The basic references to a Cumberland sword dance were well known; Billy Cain had searched in the 1950's, but it was generally acknowledged that there was no chance of finding anything better than the rudimentary description in a dialect poem of 1811. We would just have to reconstruct the dance.

This started off as my "project", but the developed dance is really the result of the sweat and swearing of the whole team over the last

five years. We've selected, adapted and rejected figures, invented many that never flew and some that did, then arranged them "to taste", found out how they've gone in practice, and then watched audience response to performances. I think that's a pretty traditional way to do things.

You asked for thoughts on the "ownership" of dances: I'm sure you must be aware of the entertaining correspondence on the subject in English Dance and Song throughout 1977, initiated by Julian Pilling.

One of the most serious arguments put forward in that correspondence ten years ago was the fear of cultural uniformity if local customs were "colonised". The evidence of those last ten years is reassuring: far from dying out, regional customs are being revived apparently at an increasing rate. The wish to research and "renovate" local dances comes to individuals and groups after an apprenticeship of imitation.

Even within the "orthodoxy" of Cotswold, the latest circular from the Morris Ring has Geoff Jerram commenting that "no two clubs share a common view of how the dance goes", and finding "a constant urge to be different!". He ends by recommending teams to make more use of the archives of the Ring. (That partly misses the point: intelligent and experienced dancers will go to the archives and return with their own interpretations).

There is a long history in Rapper of bribery, theft, adaptation and invention as means of acquiring new figures. Jinky Wells claimed to have doubled the number of dances in Bampton's repertoire, we must assume, by broadly similar methods. A living tradition is so adaptive that all notations, like dictionaries, are out of date by the time they are published. That side of the argument adds up to: all dances are "in the public domain" and ownership of the dance lies only in your performance of it.

Another well-made argument was that the time, patience and hard work that goes into research and development conveys some "ownership" rights. "Authors" in this sense deserve some acknowledgment and recognition.

But we should be suspicious of anyone claiming copyright on traditional material. Even "traditional" teams will be found to meet only arbitrary criteria with regard to their membership, continuity etc on rigorous inspection. I find it refreshing that the Highside team have chosen not to appropriate the name "Kirkby Malzeard" (and that's not intended as a comment on their right to do so).

Once again, thank you for the broadsheet. It always arrives "unlooked for" and provides something worth reading and keeping.

Mike Jensen May 1988



## Sad news

Jack Scarth, whose involvement as dancer, teacher, leader and inspiration with the Goathland Plough Stots goes back to the 1930's, died recently in hospital.

Only a few years ago Jack taught the team the No Mans Jig, a figure done with 8 dancers - which had for many years been dropped from the team's repertoire. I will remember him whenever I see the figure performed.

The photograph shows Jack Scarth (centre) when he was presented with a plough 'sock' (share) at the dinner following the traditional Plough Monday tour in 1985. The Goathland Plough Stots awarded Jack the accolade in recognition of his work for the team over many years. He was the teams president from 1972 to his death.