



RATTLE UP My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE
WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

Series 2, Issue N° 3. Spring 1989



Goathland Plough Stots an important village tradition

Goathland is a village of approximately 450 people situated 7 miles inland from Whitby in North Yorkshire. It lies on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. The majority of local people are employed in farming or related industries.

The village is widely known as the termini and stock yard of the North Yorkshire Moors Historical Railway Trust, which operates a valuable local service and offers much to interest railway enthusiasts. Another feature of the area is the nearby landmark of the "giant golf-balls" at Fylingdales Early Warning Station.

But to anyone with an interest in folk traditions Goathland is well known as the home of the Goathland Plough Stots who perform their own version of the Longsword Dance.

The Longsword Dance was once widespread, especially throughout Yorkshire and parts of County Durham. In many places it died out in the years after the first World War. But the tradition survived, and is still popular in North Yorkshire - there are currently four other teams within a few miles of Goathland.

The area is rich in Longsword traditions. There were once teams in the neighbouring villages of Sleights, Egton Bridge, Great Ayton, Aislaby and in the town of Whitby. A few miles further North there were, or are now, dances from the villages of Loftus, Boosbeck, Lingdale, Skelton, North Skelton and Greatham.

One of many reasons for the continuing local popularity of the dance in this area has been the focal point, both for the teams and for interested observers, provided by an annual Competitive Dance Festival held in Whitby. The Festival

was founded in the early 1920's as the Eskdale Folk Song Festival and early records of the event list teams well known to anyone interested in Longsword.

This article explores the history of the Goathland Plough Stots team, especially from its major revival in 1923 through to the start of the Second World War. I am grateful for the help of villagers, many of whom were personally involved, or have first hand experience of the team during these years.

The activities of teams during these early years laid the foundations for the high esteem and commitment the current team attracts.

The history of the village tradition

Written records detailing this, or other village traditions from the area, are sparse. Few records exist from before the early 1800's when an increased interest in country life by antiquarians brought about a welcome increase in written references.

One early record referred generally to Sword dance traditions in North Yorkshire. It appeared in May 1811 in the curiously named "The Gentleman's Magazine" and it described the "Mode of celebrating Christmas in Yorkshire"

"On the feast of St Stephen also, 6 youths (called sword-dancers, from their dancing with swords), clad in white, and bedecked with ribbands, attended by a fiddler, and another youth curiously dressed, who generally has the name of "Bessy", and also one who personates a Doctor, begin to travel from village to village, performing a rude dance, called the sword dance. One of the 6 above mentioned acts the part of King in a kind of farce which

consists of singing and dancing, when "the Bessy" interferes while they are making a hexagon with their swords, and is killed. These frolics they continue to New Year's Day, when they spend their gains at the alehouse with the greatest innocence and mirth, having invited all their rustic acquaintance"

The Plough Monday tradition

The 1811 report mentions St Stephens day but most subsequent records lead us to believe that "Plough Monday" was the "proper" time for the major annual dance event in Goathland.

The main feature of the Plough Monday tradition involves the team of dancers, known as Stots, travelling round the village, stopping to perform one or two figures from their dance at 30 or 40 houses. They once went on to carry out a week long tour of neighbouring villages.

Plough Monday is the first Monday after January 6th. On the preceding Sunday, Epiphany in the Church calendar, a plough is taken to Church for blessing. The dance tour used to start the following day and last a week. It now takes place on the following Saturday.

The plough used in the blessing ceremony once featured prominently in the dance tour. The dancers were accompanied by men who dragged the plough around, known locally as Stots, the dialect word for bullocks. Hence the name of the team.



The lads team often takes out a model plough on the traditional Plough Monday outings

In the past the plough was reputed to have been used to plough up the garden of any householder churlish enough not to support the collection. Today the blessing ceremony takes place using a model plough and it is occasionally taken out by the dance team.

Just as important as the dance tour was the "annual do" once called the "Plew Stot Rosh" - meal and social evening for the dancers and friends from the village.

The influence of Cecil Sharp

The Goathland dance had been dormant for 40 years when Cecil Sharp, a leading folk dance collector, visited Yorkshire in 1910 and 1913. In 1912 Sharp wrote to many of the clerics in North Yorkshire to enquire if the Sword dance was performed, or remembered, in their village. The Rev E B Hale of Goathland replied "There used to be dancers here, but not now. Dancers still come round from other places."

From this information, and the details he gathered on his visit to the area he assumed that the dance was similar to the dance from the neighbouring village of Sleights₂ which he had already published. As a consequence, and no doubt influenced by the imminent First World War, he did not seek details of the Goathland tradition with the determination he applied to some other sword dances. His collecting notes contain details of the dance, and parts of the associated play, based on information from two informants: Mr Hill of Goathland and Bill Pearson (Pierson) of Egton, who were interviewed by Sharp in July 1913.

After the first World War Sharp corresponded with Frank Dowson, a London based teacher who had a house in the village. The men collaborated in a vain effort to assemble the full text of the folk play referred to by Bill Pierson. This play was reputed to have been performed at Easter and at the social evening after the Plough Monday tour. It was part of a performance which lasted over two hours! Little wonder it died out.

There is evidence that the play was brought to Goathland from the Ampleforth area by a travelling dance teacher₃. From the parts of the text collected it seems certain that the play was similar to the standard "Chapbook" version popular throughout the county.

Mr John Sleightholme, who was involved in the 1923 revival of the Goathland tradition, gave a collector snippets of information about the characters and the action in the play:

"Mr Sleightholme described the Hobby Horse as being the dried skin of a real horse, with two men inside. The man who rode the horse was thrown, and feigned death. Then a doctor was called who, after much fooling, brought the dead man back to life."

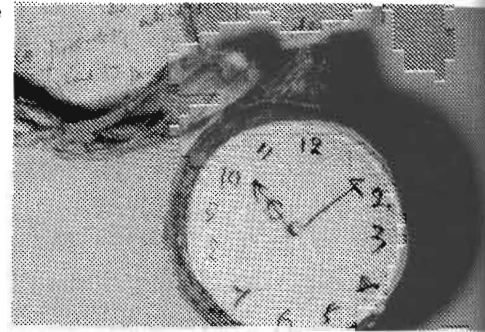
In spite of limited success in assembling the full play Mr Dowson recruited the help of Major Fairfax-Blakeborough₅ to help to drum up local interest in the sword dance tradition. They hoped to assemble details of the dance last performed more than 50 years previously.

The 1923 revival

No doubt stimulated by his contact with Cecil Sharp, and driven by a dedication to local traditions, Frank Dowson set about reviving the Plough Stots. He did not see the earlier team perform their dance. It is not known where he got the dance instructions for the 1923 team.

In the Summer of 1922 a meeting was arranged in the village and a lecture was given by Major Fairfax-Blakeborough giving details of the Plough Stot tradition. This created much

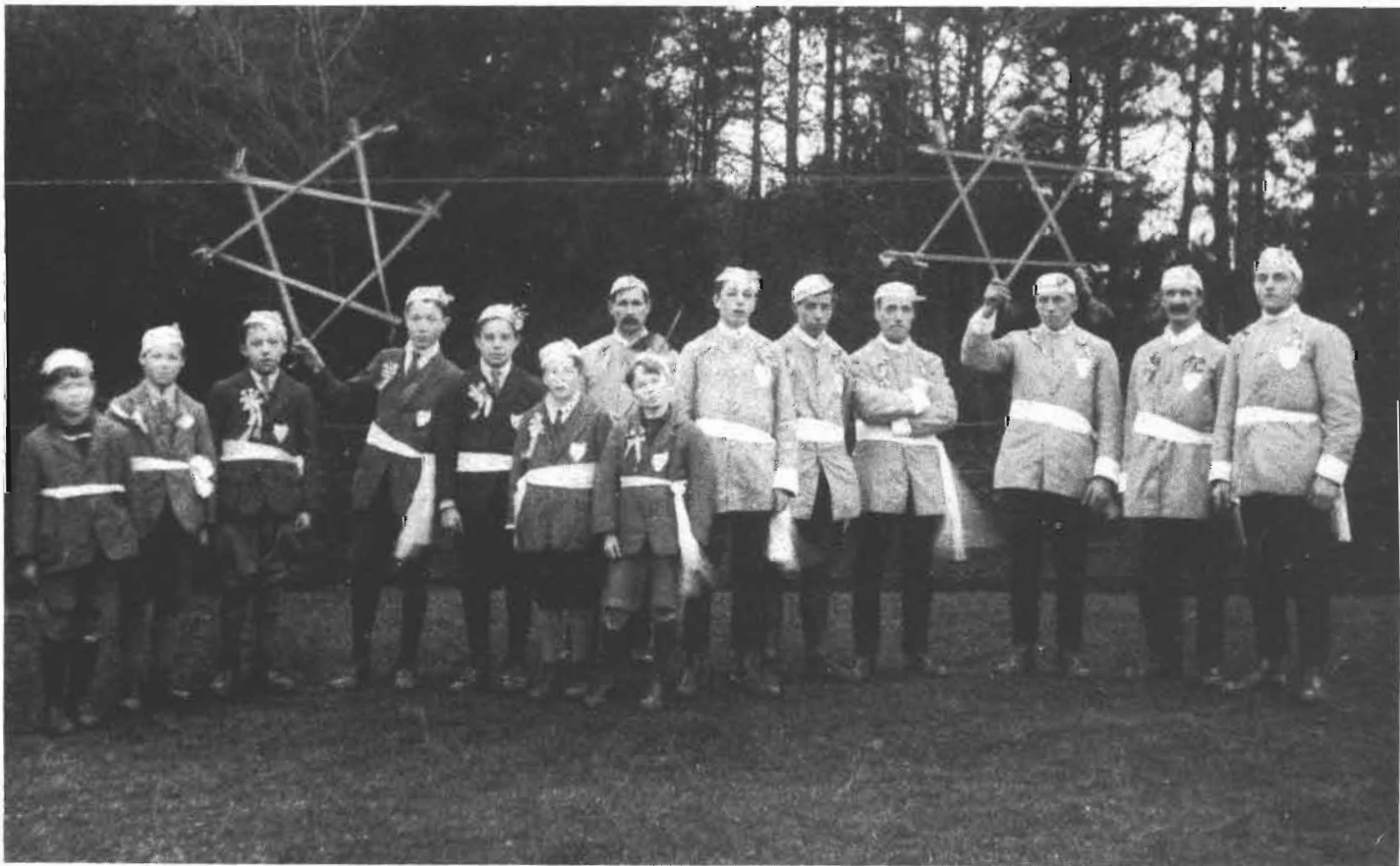
local interest and brought to light "old swords, rosettes (a century or more old), a large old china watch₆ worn by the clown or jester, and other curios...." This meeting also resulted in "a score of young men who gave their names as willing to practice the dance and revive the old pageant₇."



The fool's pot watch, over 150 years old

On Plough Monday 1923 two teams appeared, one of men and one of boys. The photographs of the occasion show a total of 23 members, 14 dancers and 7 "Toms", characters who attended the dance and are thought to be the vestiges of a custom which formerly included both play and dance₈.

The dance was practiced throughout the Summer, with the encouragement of Mr Dowson, but under the instruction of a local man, John Sleightholme. Mr Sleightholme also played the fiddle for the dancers.



The 1923 Plough Monday team

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Ernest Redmond | 11. Jimmy (John) Sleightholme |
| 2. Wilf Hughill | 12. Jack Harrison (King) |
| 3. Alwyn (Boy) Grayson | 13. Taff Pennock |
| 4. Tom Pierson Atkinson | 14. Fred Gaines |
| 5. Freddie Atkinson | |
| 6. Jack Sleightholme | |
| 7. Tommy Redmond | |
| 8. Billy (Daddy) Pennock | |
| 9. Fred (Pup) Grayson | |
| 10. Ron Hughill | |





Crossing the Beck at Darnholm circa 1933

Survivors from the 1923 team

Two members of the 1923 boys team, Alwyn "Boy" Grayson and "TP" Tom Pierson Atkinson, were interviewed in 1988 and gave much fascinating information about this revival team and its early tours.

Both men danced for 9 or 10 years, first in the boys team and later with the men.

They tell of a major tour in 1923, the first revival year, which was repeated in subsequent years. The tour lasted a full week. The plough was taken to church and blessed on Plough Sunday and the team visited homes in Goathland on Plough Monday. During the following week the team toured neighbouring villages by foot and by train, travelling as far as Pickering, 18 miles away.

The main motivation of most of the participants was to earn cash at a time when many were laid-off work, without wages, for the agricultural holiday. The collections were usually good and the boys received 2/6 a day and the men 5/-, in most cases more than they usually earned. The balance of the money collected went towards a "good do" at Martha's, the local pub at the nearby village of Beckholes, but this was frowned upon by Frank Dowson, described as "a serious and moderate man".

In addition to cash the dancers received food and drink at the houses visited. By the end of the week-long tour the youngsters were "sick to death of gingerbread and cheese".

On Saturday, the last day of the tour, the team went to Whitby where they had an excellent reception from the townsfolk. The collections in Whitby were contributed to the funds of the local hospital, no doubt one of the reasons for their good reception.

Earlier teams enjoyed a varied welcome.

In 1870 an article in the Whitby Gazette tells of two teams of Plough Stots who turned up to perform in Whitby, one team from Ailasby and one from Goathland.

"Two sets of Plough Boys (Plough Stots), one from Ailasby and one from Goathland will visit Whitby on Monday. A correspondent writes to us and speaks for a favorable reception for the Party from Goathland, on the

grounds that the money they hope to receive will not be spent on a "drinking bout" but will be appropriated towards defraying the expenses of a New Year Festival for the farmers, their wives, sons, daughters, manservants and maidservants of the Township of Goathland."

A subsequent report states:

"This festival was held at the house of Mr Thomas Ward, Cross Pipes, Goathland on Monday evening and was a great success. About 200 persons (including the aged, poor and young) partook of the good things which had been provided. Tea and spice cake with plenty of beef and ham, and for those who preferred something stronger than tea there was an abundant supply of good malt liquor. Mr Thos Adamson and Mr James Pierson presiding as carvers. When tea was finished the party proceeded at once to tread the merry dance. Dancing was kept up with much zest until many of the "wee short hours" had passed"

10 years later, in the 1880's, records testify to teams from Goathland and Egton Bridge meeting in Whitby when a fracas followed. The team from Egton Bridge long since disappeared.

There are records of a troupe of over 100 Plough Stots visiting Whitby in the 1850's. On their visit to the area occupied by the fishermen they were pelted with mud and passed coins which had been heated in the fire. No reason is given for this hostile reception but the team continued to visit the town until recently. The "drink & drive" legislation caused the team to drop Whitby from the Plough Monday tour, the last visit was in 1984.

Frank Dowson continued to encourage the team and to study other aspects of the folklore of the area.

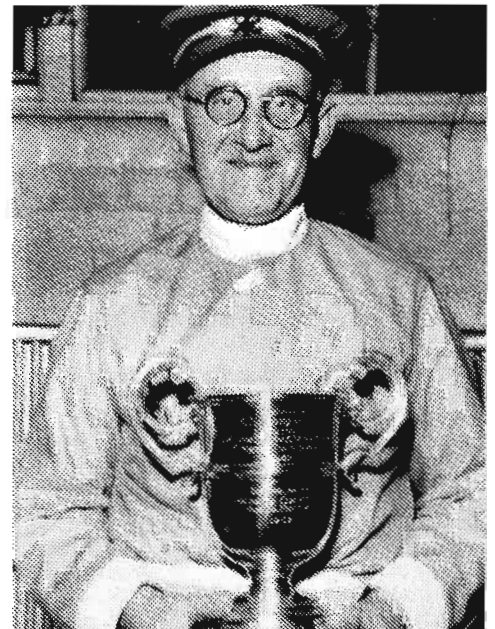
Since the revival of 1923 the Plough Monday tradition has changed in detail but it has survived, interrupted by the second World War and occasional lapses of a few years. Today commitment to the tradition is as strong as it has ever been.

The influence of Jack Scarth

One of the early supporters of the newly revived tradition was Mr Jack Scarth.¹⁰ For many years Mr Scarth was employed as a gardener at the Hydro Hotel in Goathland. He was not directly involved in the 1923 revival

team but he saw them dance and described their performance as "a bit rough".

In 1927 Mr Scarth started dancing with the team. After the end of the Second World War he took on the task of Secretary, Leader and general organiser. The present healthy state of the Goathland Plough Stots and their current high reputation is largely due to his efforts. He was the leader of the team during a period of little general interest and he had the thankless task of trying to overcome indifference. He was the mainstay of the team until 1957 when he gave up regular involvement.



Jack Scarth with one of the cups won by the team

However, as often happens, interest in the dance revived and in 1972 the team honoured Jack Scarth by appointing him their President. In 1985 the Plough Stots awarded Jack their highest honour, a hand carved oak plough sock (share). Jack was only the third recipient of the award, another having been made to "Napper" Noble, a "Tom" or clown with the team since 1923.



Post-war teams on a Plough Monday tour circa 1950.

The accolade helped to revive Jack's interest and he subsequently taught the team a dance figure known as "No Man's Jig". The No Man's Jig is the sixth figure in the dance. It is performed with two extra men and involves distinctive moves not found in the rest of the dance. For many years the team had performed only five figures but the 1923 team is known to have performed the No Man's Jig. Village tradition insists that the dance once had seven figures.

Family similarities

The Goathland dance incorporates some features, such as the No Mans Jig, which also appear in other dances from the area, particularly in the dance from nearby Sleights. There is no decisive evidence about the source of the details taught to the 1923 revival team. It may be that they were taught by a Sleights dancer or as often happens, the similarities may have developed over years of cross fertilisation.

As far as I can establish local people made little distinction between the teams from various villages in the area. The general description "Plough Stot" is applied to those taking part in the tradition and there is some evidence that dancers moved from team to team. Perhaps the dance was identical, or at least very similar, rather than differing from village to village.

Many dances from this area, although probably from the same traditional sources as the Goathland dance, have developed into more

sophisticated and choreographed dances, more suited to indoor or stage display, rather than touring the village.

One such dance is performed by another long-lived team performing in the Cleveland area, Loftus Sword who are highly regarded as skilful and stylish performers of the Longsword dance. However, as if to emphasise the interaction and common origins of these dances, records indicate that an earlier Loftus team were taught by an old Plough Stot from Goathland.

Conclusion

The Goathland Plough Stots present a fascinating example of a folk custom which has changed, as all such customs will, but has changed in an evolutionary manner and with the minimum of external influences.

A further article, to be printed later, will explore the later changes to the Plough Stot tradition, and to the Goathland team in particular. It will explore the problems which face the team over the coming decade as local property is bought up by outsiders for holiday homes, and as education policy affects the village school and the traditional way of teaching the dance.

Trevor Stone 1989.

Photo credits: David Webster, Julian Stevens, the Goathland Plough Stots, and the Author.

1. The four local teams are Loftus, Yorkshire Coast, Redcar and Guisborough. Whitby boasts a number of junior teams.
2. In his collecting notes Cecil Sharp quotes an interview with Mr Hill of Goathland and comments "he described the dance very roughly, from which I gathered it was very much the same as the Sleights" VWL ref 131-137.
3. Frank Dowson wrote "I have a strong belief that the play comes to Goathland and other places in the Malton district from Ampleforth, through the instrumentality of the famous John Robinson, known as "Dandy John" who lived at Egton about a century ago. He was ... a music master who taught dancing in the villages round about" Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, 1926.
4. Quoted from an article by Douglas Kennedy "Fragments of Sword Dance Plays", Journal of English Folk Dance Society, 2nd series 1930.
5. Major Fairfax-Blakeborough was a local antiquarian who contributed regularly to "Notes & Queries".
6. The China watch still exists and is amongst the souvenirs kept by the present team.
7. Report by F W Dowson of the meeting in the Summer of 1922 Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society.
8. See the article by Geoffrey Ridden - Journal of the English Folk Dance & Song Society, Vol 2, no 5 1974.
9. As reported in "A History of Goathland Vale" by F W Pierson published privately circa 1980.
10. John Robert (Jack) Scarth was born in Sleights in December 1904. He died on May 2nd 1988.
11. Reference to Loftus men taught to dance by an ex-Goathland Plough Stot called Ventress - an Ironstone miner who moved to Egton to take a pub. Loftus District Council Coronation Souvenir Yearbook June 1953.

The next Longsword weekend (May 12th - 14th) will be based on Goathland and the team will be taking part in the tours.
Contact Mike Cook for details

Contributions welcome

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The next Issue will feature an essay on the tune "The Old Wife o' Dallogill" and details of the survey of Sword teams arising from the results of the questionnaire enclosed with this issue.

Additional material, teams profiles and details of outings are most welcome.

Be sure to let me know if you change your address