



# RATTLE UP My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE  
WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

Series 2, Issue 5 Autumn 1990

## The Sword-Dance Of Papa Stour, Shetland

This issue features two articles which arose from my visit to the Shetland Islands in May of last year. The first is a general introduction to the Papa Stour dance and brief details to my visit. The second item is taken from a letter from Harold Johnson, an informant I met in the Shetland Isles. In spite of obvious duplication I felt that the two reports presented together give a good insight into this fascinating dance.

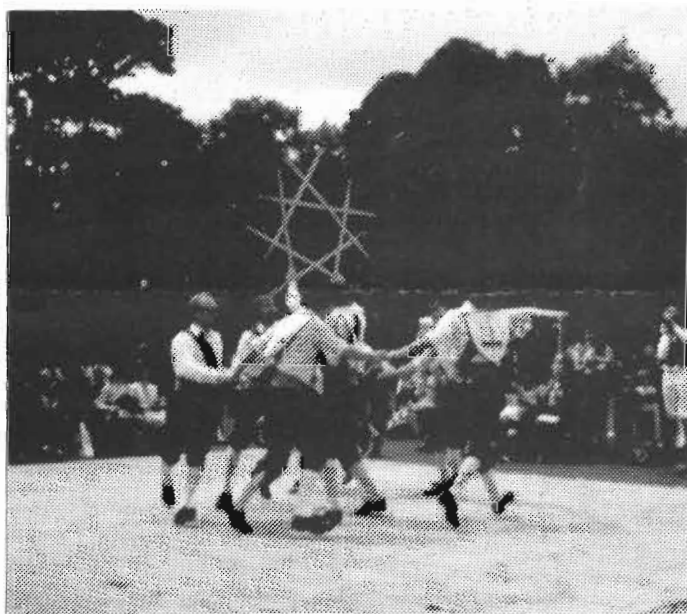
But on my visit I gathered much more material. An interview with George Peterson, expert in the history and folklore of his native island of Papa Stour, and leader of the current Shetland team, will be featured in a later issue of the Broadsheet.

Soon after I developed an interest in Longsword traditions I came across references to the Papa Stour sword dance. I found much easily accessible material in the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House including reports of visits by Patrick Shaudlam Shaw in 1948, Nibs Matthews in 1967 and by Keith Chandler, who recorded the tune at a performance in 1978.

The many written records fascinated me, particularly because the location is so remote and I did not expect it to attract so much attention. My interest in the Papa Stour tradition was furthered by an article in the Folk Music Journal Vol. 3, No 4, 1978, in which Ivor Allsop analysed the two major written records; Sir Walter Scott writing about an old document he was given on a visit in 1814 and Dr Samuel Hibbert writing about two visits to see the dance in 1817 & 1819. Ivor compared the published dance instructions and examined the available information on the background to the tradition.

At the time I first studied records of the dance I had not acquired the caution which knowledge, especially knowledge of Continental sword dances, has since brought. When I read the instructions and heard the tune I created a dance in my imagination similar to the North of England sword dances.

This preconception was compounded by a workshop at which the "Papa Stour" dance was performed. The idea of the Papa Stour dance as a variant of the Yorkshire sword dance became stronger still when I saw performances of the dance in the early 1980's, one by Duffy Swordsmen of Manchester and another by London Folk.



Duffy Swordsmen from Manchester dance the Papa Stour dance. In a recent survey only one other team was found to regularly perform the dance, Carlisle Sword, but many Scottish dance groups include it in their repertoire.

My desire to see the team from the Shetland Isles was thwarted when the Island team had to pull out from planned attendance at the 1981 Longsword weekend. I then became convinced that I must travel to the Islands to see the dance performed in its home setting by local people.

This desire to see the Shetland tradition was heightened when exposure to Continental sword dances caused me to wonder if the Papa Stour dance may hold clues in the search for links between English and European dances. I began to doubt my pre-conceived ideas about the Papa Stour dance as a variant of the family of Yorkshire dances. In May 1989, with Maureen Tinker and Renaat Van Craenenbroeck, I travelled to the Shetland Islands to fulfill an ambition of 15 years.

**Background to the Papa Stour tradition**

Ivor Allsop gave permission to reprint part of his article from the Folk Music Journal<sup>1</sup> which summarises the background to the dance.

"Of all the sword dances of the British Isles the sword dance from the remote, small Island of Papa Stour in the Shetland Isles must be one of the most noted and written about, if not the most written about, sword dance. Sharp did not even consider it to be part of our heritage of sword dances and he did not visit the Island<sup>2</sup> at all....

The earliest record (of which I can find no text, except that it is quoted by D H MacIennan in "Highland and Traditional Scottish Dances") is circa 1770 from a Mr Low<sup>3</sup>. The next reference is to the diary of Sir Walter Scott August 7th, 1814. "At Scalloway my curiosity was gratified by an account of the sword dance, now almost lost, but still practiced in the Island of Papa Stour, belonging to Mr Scott. There are eight performers, seven of whom represent the Seven Champions of Christendom, who enter one by one with their swords drawn, and are presented to the eighth personage, who is not named." This is the only reference that I have come across to an eighth personage.

But where exactly is Papa Stour? The grid reference is HU 1660 and it is off Mainland Shetland, just to the north of Sandness, in an area about 1,300 acres and about 500 miles north of the nearest longsword dance that we know today...."

What the summary does not emphasise is just how remote the Island of Papa Stour is. It is one of the smaller (two miles long by three miles wide) of the group of more than twenty Islands, collectively known as the Shetland Islands. The Shetland group is often shown on maps as an inset off the north coast of Scotland, making it difficult to envisage the Islands' true location - almost as close to Norway as it is to Britain.

The main Island in the group is Mainland Shetland. Outside the main town of Lerwick there are few conurbations of more than a few dozen houses. The roads are good but ferries are needed to link the many Islands. Travelling from Sumburgh Airport at the southern tip of the main Island to the most northerly Island of Unst would take most of a day.

Features of the English street scene, such as pubs, are few and far between and there is a striking absence of advertising signs. Trees are almost as rare as poster hoardings on the Islands.

The most striking thing about the Shetland Isles, when one becomes acclimatized to the constant strong winds, is a feeling of isolation and remoteness. In spite of increased outside influence the Islanders have resisted such modern developments as fast food shops, amusement arcades, and other features of "Big City" life.



The Shetland Islands group comprises over a dozen inhabited Islands linked by roads and ferries. The inset shows the true location of the group.

Most readers will have heard, and possibly passed on to enquirers, the simplistic story about "Viking origins" in response to questions about the history and origin of the Sword dance. However in the Shetland Islands Viking and Scandinavian influence is strong, as evidenced by over 10,000 Norse words and the survival of a system of local government with areas known as "tings". Shetland was part of the Scandinavian world until 1469 when the Islands were given to James III, King of the Scots, as dowry at his marriage.

There are a number of Scandinavian records, including some from as early as 1582 of Sword dancing at the Swedish Court<sup>4</sup>, but there is still no clear evidence of a link between the Papa Stour dance and other Continental dances, let alone any links with the Vikings. The records of the dance seem to owe much to "antiquarian" influence, with references to classical themes rather than to Norse

material. Indeed some phrases used in records of the dance "The Clew" and "pas seu" (used to describe dance movements) are used in preference to local dialect phrases.

**The influences on the current dance team**

The effect of Shetland's isolation is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that only 2 of the team of 8 who performed for us had ever seen any other Morris or traditional dance team in the flesh. With the exception of a visit by a Swedish dance troupe, who demonstrated their dances after the Sword dance was performed for them, the last time the Shetlanders danced out with another team was in 1977 when they were guests of the Lothian Morris Men on a dance tour in Edinburgh. Five years earlier the team had visited Edinburgh and this was almost certainly the first time the team had performed outside the Shetland Islands<sup>5</sup>.

There can be few, if any, other teams in Britain

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In 1877 a Shetland Islands team visited Edinburgh as guests of Lothian Morris Men. This is one of the few occasions when a team from the Islands has danced away from their home base.

who have been so little influenced by peer groups, or by performing at multi-team events such as Ring meetings.

Within the Islands the dance is widely known, usually it is linked with the reputation of George Peterson. The various teams over the past 20 years have visited many of the outlying Islands. But there is one place they have not been in recent years - the Island of Papa Stour itself.

#### The Island of Papa Stour

Papa Stour lies approximately 2 miles, across a treacherous tidal race, from the remote western point of the main Island of Shetland. The name of the island is reputed to mean "the big Isle of the Priests" and is derived from its Norse name "Papey Stjora".

In 1885 the population of Papa Stour was over 300 but fifty years ago it had dropped to less than 100. Over 30 years ago de-population resulted in insufficient people to support a team. The present population is approximately 36 people, more than half of whom are incomers who have taken up crofting in recent years.

The island has splendid scenery and is occasionally visited by adventurous ornithologists who use the twice weekly pedestrian ferry to get to the island which is a designated SSSI (site of special scientific interest). An event of importance to the Islanders was the recent introduction of an electricity

supply a few months before our visit, soon to be followed by the building of an airstrip.

The Sword Dance team on the Island has a history of revival followed by dying out - in the winter of 1892/93 the dance was revived even though none of the participants had seen it performed. It soon died out again to be revived in 1920/21 by a team who learnt it from Sir Walter Scott's novel "The Pirate" with the help of three ex-dancers. The team on the Island suffered a setback in the 1920's when the main organiser of the team, Alex Johnson, moved to the Mainland. In the years preceding his move performances of the dance had been limited because of lack of men but, the team had hung on. The last known performance by a team based on Papa Stour was in 1962.

When he moved to Mainland Shetland Alex Johnson formed a group in Lerwick which later became the Shetland Folklore Society. They organised many events on Mainland Shetland and toured a programme of "Shetland Evenings" (which always ended with the Sword dance) throughout the Islands which popularised the tradition over a period of 10 years.

During my visit I spent some time at the excellent Shetland Island Council Archives, primarily to explore the possibility of any guld influence (as was the case with the nearest Sword dance, the Perth Glovers dance<sup>6</sup>) or any Masonic links as suggested



There are an unusually large number of records of the dance. In addition to those referred to in this article there is also a booklet produced by the President of 'The Viking Club'

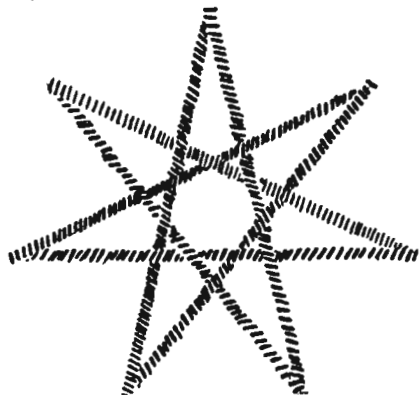
by an American author<sup>7</sup>. The archivist passed on the name of Mr John Harold Johnson (a friend, but no relation to Alex Johnson) as one of the oldest known surviving members of the Lerwick team. Mr Johnson was credited with supplying information and material to both the archive and the local Museum's collection. I visited him at his home on May 8th. It was Mr Johnson's 83rd birthday and he was accompanied by his daughter Peggy. Mr Johnson was spritely and enjoyed excellent recall for dates and names.

In addition to the material donated to the archive Mr Johnson has costumes (described as smocks and sashes), swords, and photographs of the teams with which he was involved. These items were all "in the attic" and the only accessible item was large scrapbook covering the years 1929 to 1931.

Harold Johnson first saw the dance in 1924 in the Anderson Institute and he became a leading member of the group organised by Alex Johnson and stimulated by Miss Christina Jamieson, a local folklorist. Harold Johnson told me that between 1928 and 1935 the Lerwick based troupe could field two teams - Mr Johnson danced the part of St George in the youthe team and later St David with the seniors. The teams visited "dozens of halls including many in the outlying Islands." A detailed letter from Mr Johnson follows.

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A photograph of the Lerwick team, provided by the Lerwick Museum and thought to have been taken in 1925, shows the costume and names the participants. The swords it shows are longer than those used by the present-day team. The photo shows a pronounced handle guard unlike swords shown in a photo of the Papa Stour team taken before 1920. These latter swords are still kept on Papa Stour.



The Papa Stour lock is formed into a seven pointed star

### The current dance team

The only Shetland team currently dancing is based in Brae in Mainland Shetland and is led and taught by George P S Peterson, a native of Papa Stour, who was taught the dance by the island team in the 1950's. Mr Peterson is the team's only

remaining link with the original home of the dance but they have an ambition to perform the dance again on the island of Papa Stour.

The village of Brae is approximately 20 miles from Lerwick and only a short distance from Sullom Voe, famous for its oil terminal. George Peterson, was, until his recent retirement, a schoolmaster and, although he involved his pupils as dancers, he has recently managed to ensure that the team exists independently of the school. A fascinating interview which I recorded with George Peterson will be published in a future issue of the Broadsheet.

### The dance

There are many printed notations of this unique seven man dance and a further detailed description by me would add little. However the video I took of the Dance display in a Hotel in Brae<sup>3</sup> and my general impressions of the performance may be of interest. The video can be viewed by arrangement but I regret that copies are not available for sale or loan.

The dancers dress in dark trousers and white shirts and sport sashes in different colours to represent their Saint, for they play the parts of the Seven Champions of Christendom. The tradition includes an Epilogue and a Prologue, both delivered in a "dead pan manner" by the leading dancer who

takes the part of St George of England. Further details of the performers and their background will be given in a future issue as part of the article based on an interview with George Peterson, the leader and "Minstre" for this team.

The performance of the dance came as a surprise to me. It was quite unlike other performances I had seen purporting to be the Papa Stour dance. Nor did it bear any resemblance to the dance I had imagined after reading the notations.

The most significant difference was in the stepping and movements of the dance. The dancers used a step best described as a solid plod, with variations between the step of the various performers<sup>2</sup>. There had obviously been little effort to unify the team's approach to stepping or to the dance movements which, to anyone used to seeing "polished" dance displays, came as a surprise.

The whole performance, although different to my expectations, had a dignity and unique character.

The present-day dance follows the same sequence as that recorded by Sir Walter Scott but George Peterson bases his teaching not on the various printed versions but on notes which he took shortly before the Papa Stour team ceased to perform.



**Photograph of the "Lerwick team"**

This photo, dated 1925, was given to the Shetland Island Council archive by John Harold Johnson who added the following: The Saints wore coloured sashes: England - Red, white and blue; Spain - Orange, red, orange, red and orange; France - Blue, white and red; Italy - Green, white and red; Scotland - Red, white and blue; Ireland - Green; Wales - Orange, red

and orange. The Minstre wore a tabard with the national emblems of all the Saints.

Performers were: back row (left to right): Alex Johnson, Peter Leask, Alex Leask, Peter Codland and James Jamieson; front row Wm Anderson (Minstre), John H Johnson, Walter Johnson and Andrew Tait (Accompanist). Photo by courtesy of the Shetland Museum Service.

It was evident that the team regard the dance as an integral part of the whole tradition, rather than as an element in its own right. To the performers the March On, the music, the Epilogue, and the Prologue are every bit as important as the dance itself; indeed during a practice session the team stopped two or three times because of wording errors in the speeches rather than mistakes in the dance.

Most of the dancers in the team we saw were in their teens but only two were in further education. The performers included George Peterson's youngest son and his son-in-law<sup>10</sup>. At least three older "regular" dancers were unable to be with the team because of work commitments.

#### Continuation of the tradition

The tradition has survived transfer from the island of Papa Stour, where it was regularly revived and performed as part of the traditional calendar, to Mainland Shetland. However, its survival over the past thirty years has relied mainly on the dedication of one man - George Peterson.

George Peterson's sons both share his enthusiasm for the history and traditions of Papa Stour. George's sister still lives on the island and the family have crofts there which are currently worked. George intends, following his recent retirement from teaching, to spend more time on Papa Stour. It will be interesting to see if the team on Mainland survives less involvement by him, or if it will decline

further and die out after a few years.

Over recent years the team have given relatively few performances. Many of their performances were specially staged presentations for visitors and this seems to have been a feature of the tradition over many years<sup>11</sup>. Fortunately there are many boys and men living in the Shetland Islands who learnt the dance whilst at school. If the will exists it would be possible to revive the dance from memory, or aided by the detailed written notations available.

#### Post script

In 1979 George Peterson wrote to the Morris Ring suggesting that other teams should desist from performing the Papa Stour dance in order to give the tradition an opportunity to re-establish itself. This letter was discussed in issue No 10 of the Morris Dancer (August 1981).

During my visit George Peterson told me that he has revised his views on this subject<sup>12</sup>. He is anxious to encourage anything which contributes to the tradition to which he is so committed. He is, however, convinced that other teams should not infer that there is only one version of the dance. George refers to his teams' performances as "The Papa Stour Dance, Shetland version". Having seen this "Shetland version" I can understand his enthusiasm for the continuation of this unique tradition.

Trevor Stone: October 1990



The Island team danced for us in the function room of a local hotel and then gave a second performance outside the hotel. A video of both performances can be viewed by arrangement with the author.

1. I am grateful to Ivor Allsop for his permission to use this material and for his general comments on my article. I am also indebted to the Editor of the *Folk Music Journal* for his approval to re-print the item.
2. The Shetlands Islands Council archives contain a series of publications produced by the *Viking Club, Society for Northern Research* which was based at King's College London. The Society's year book from 1912 refers to "a display of Morris dancing by a team taught by Cecil Sharp". It also refers to the Papa Stour dance and promises that, at the following AGM, there would be a demonstration of the dance followed by a talk by Cecil Sharp. There was no record of this having taken place and limited time prevented me from looking further into this fascinating connection.
3. George Peterson believes "Mr Low" to be Reverend G Low, Minister of Orkney, and author of a book "A tour through the Islands of Orkney and Shetland in 1774" in Mr Peterson's possession. More details will be in an article in a future issue to be based on an interview with George Peterson.
4. There is an article published in "Early Music", XIV (1988) by Madeline Inglehearn which discusses a number of documents in the Stockholm Kungliga Biblioteket.
5. According to George Peterson and Harold Johnson there are no other records of a team from the Islands performing outside the Shetland Islands in living memory (personal interviews in May 1989 and subsequent correspondence)
6. There is a detailed record of a Sword dance display organised for a special celebration in 1863 by the Perth Glovers Guild. The guilds records claim that the dance dates back to at least 1633. There are many records from the Continent of Sword dances performed by craft guilds.
7. An article in "Southern Folklore Quarterly" XXXIII/4 by James E Spears, dated December 1969, suggests that there may be links between Freemasonry and the Sword dance in general, and the Papa Stour dance in particular, mainly because of similarities between aspects of the dance and Masonic symbols and rituals. I am indebted to Ron Shuttleworth for drawing my attention to this item.  
  
It is my belief that such links cannot yet be proven although further work may be useful, especially into some of the special "Chapters" found in Masonary.
8. The team assembled at the Brae Hotel on Friday, May 5th at 7.00pm. They practised for 20 minutes and then gave two full performances of the dance, one indoors and one outside the Hotel. The dance had only been performed twice in the preceding 12 months. More details in a future issue.
9. The stepping of the dancers was different to my expectations but it was both distinctive and fitted the dance well. Ivor Allsop tells me that Pat Shaw was critical of the way most English teams did the stepping when they performed the "Papa Stour" dance.
10. The team we saw was:  
 Musician and Leader - George P S Peterson  
 St George - Peter Peterson (Son of George Peterson)  
 St James of Spain - Steven Laurenson (son-in-law of George Peterson)  
 St Denis of France - Ross Johnson  
 St David of Wales - David Johnson  
 St Patrick of Ireland - Kevin Laurenson  
 St Anthony of Italy - John Clark  
 St Andrew of Scotland - Ian Jamieson
11. Alfred W Johnston, President of the Viking Club Society for Northern Research (and author of a booklet on the dance "The Sword Dance, Papa Stour, Shetland, and Four Shetland Airs" published in 1912) wrote to Cecil Sharp suggesting that the dance could be seen "for a consideration"
12. Interview with George Peterson at his home on May 6th 1989, and subsequent correspondence.



A letter dated October 1989 from John Harold Johnson, former dancer with the Lerwick team of the 1920's

### THE REVIVAL OF THE PAPA STOUR SWORD DANCE IN THE 1920's

The published account of the Sword Dance of Papa Stour, written and published in 1926 by my late friend and colleague Alex Johnson, omits reference to the important role he played in reviving the dance in the early 1920's.

As a result of conversations with several of the older Papa men his interest in the dance was awakened, and he became the prime mover in researching the history of the dance and mustering a team. With assistance from men who had participated in the dance he recreated the figures, and trained a team to give public performances. Had Alex not been intensely interested in the history of his home Island there is little doubt but that the dance would have been irretrievably lost.

Papa Stour, at the time of Alex's teenage years, was a populous crofting and fishing community. However there was little industry on the island forcing young people - Alex amongst them - to leave to earn money to support themselves. Increasing numbers of the male population left the island for a life of seafaring, or other careers, leaving the womenfolk to manage the crofts, look after families, and to supplement incomes by producing the knitwear that was the mainstay in most crofting families. Alex left the island of Papa Stour in his early 20's and came to Lerwick, Shetland's capital town where he engaged as a shop assistant. I first made his acquaintance when

he came to lodge with the same family. Living in the same house we became firm friends, and when Alex revealed that he was writing a booklet, "The Sword Dance of Papa Stour", I and my friends enthusiastically backed and encouraged him.

Alex was determined to record the history and figures of the dance. When he completed his task he approached the local printers and publishers, Johnson & Grieg, who published books by Shetland authors and also published one of the two Shetland Newspapers, The "Shetland Times" (which still appears after 100 years). They agreed to print Alex's booklet and sell it.

Alex suggested that the dance should be seen by a wider audience, as over the past decade it had rarely been seen outside Papa Stour. He had our enthusiastic backing. We invited friends to join a team to learn and perform the dance. At that time the fishing season had finished, and the majority of young people faced a winter of unemployment, with little prospect of being able to afford any amusements to while away the long, dark winter days. So a willing and enthusiastic team was formed and we searched around for practice premises.

In the early days we used a vacant net store - at no cost, but eventually the proprietors insisted on charging and we could not afford the facilities so we had to vacate. We were on the point of disbanding when we were asked to visit Miss Christina Jamieson, at Twagios House. Miss Jamieson had heard of our plight and she offered us the use of the large kitchen of Twagios House for practices and encouraged us in our project.

From then on we met twice or three times a week at Twagios and continued to practice to attain a standard that met with Alex Johnson's approval. We had recruited an old Papa Stour gentleman, then resident in Lerwick, to play the Sword Dance tunes and to be our "Minstrel Man". Later he found the assignment too onerous and withdrew but we got in touch with William Anderson - now deceased - who readily agreed to play for us.

By this time, news of our project had circulated by the "grapevine" and we were approached from all quarters with requests from individuals wishing to join our team. How could we accommodate them? On discussion with Miss Jamieson, I proposed that we should form a Society to research, promote and perform Shetland art forms such as Dances, Folk Tales, Poems, Rhymes and Games, plays and sketches, with a view to giving performances throughout the Shetland Islands. My idea was enthusiastically supported and thus was formed the Shetland Folk Lore Society. I had experience in writing and in presenting sketches so I was appointed as the Society's playwright.

We soon had a flourishing Society of over forty members. Many of Miss Jamieson's friends - elderly, well-to-do people - supported us with gifts enabling us to purchase materials for the costumes traditional to the various Shetland Parishes. Miss Jamieson invited some of her friends to see the

Sword Dance in Twagios kitchen. They were extremely appreciative and enthusiastically urged us to continue and to give public performances. This was the first of many private performances.

In the meantime, we had added more traditional dances to our repertoire now that mixed teams were available. I wrote a Shetland Play incorporating these dances and culminating in a performance of the Papa Stour Sword Dance.

Taking the "bull by the horns" we hired the Public Hall, in Shetland's Ancient Capital - Scalloway - and presented a comprehensive programme culminating in the first public performance by our team of the Papa Stour Sword Dance, a dramatic and spectacular end to the evening's performance which got a standing ovation. The performance earned us close on £20, expenses paid, and was the only income we ever devoted to our Society's benefit. All subsequent performances were for charity.

When it became known that we had a programme available we were invited to perform in Lerwick's Town Hall. The proceeds went to the recently erected Sanatorium for the treatment of TB patients to provide a wireless set and a piano. This performance proved so popular that we were invited to give a repeat showing the following week. The "pièce de résistance" was always the Sword Dance, audiences gave a standing ovation and the local Press handed out plaudits in their reports.

By that time we had recruited and trained a junior team of Sword Dancers and it was agreed that seniors and juniors should alternate performances.

We then set about improving the Sword Dancers' image. As they represented the "Seven Champions of Christendom" we felt that the team should be appropriately dressed. In his record of the dance Sir Walter Scott had mentioned a shirt to stimulate the coat of mail worn by the Knights. This was erroneous as the overshirt was used to cover the coat of mail to give protection from rusting. We decided to adopt a simple, white, hip-length cotton shirt with a boat neck, and with sleeves gathered to the cuffs. With this, the Champions wore navy blue trousers with "rivins" (skin shoes made from cow or seal skin) with crisscross thonging made from lengths of white tape wrapped round the legs and tied below the knee. This gave the dress a Viking look, and was extremely comfortable to wear. A visit to an Army Surplus store provided broad navy belts and leather equipment belts which finished off the dress. The ladies of the Society made a set of colour sashes, one for each Champion in the national colours of the country he represented. These sashes were draped over the left shoulder and fastened at the waist. The leather equipment belts had a stout brass ring which proved to be a most convenient "scabbard" for the swords.

Regarding the swords, we found that those normally made from lengths of galvanized barrel

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hoop were much too supple, and easily bent, often making the final "lock" often difficult to achieve and giving the lock a ragged, untidy, look for the "seven pointed star". So we decided to have swords made from mild steel. I had the swords made with a tapered point and decided to add a cross hilt hand guard to make the swords look more authentic. We found the new swords to be ideal for the dance. They were not susceptible to bending or distortion, giving the final lock a trim appearance in keeping with the expertise of the dancers, who by this time were extremely proficient.

During the next decade we performed our repertoire in almost every district in Shetland that had a Public Hall. We also assisted at charity Carnivals and at Twagios House we gave open air performances in the spacious garden for many visitors. One delightful occasion was when we entertained a shipload of Faroese visitors on a trip to Shetland. They were most interested in our traditional dancing, and reciprocated by displaying Faroese dancing resplendent in National costume.

Members of our Society also gave performances on the occasions of courtesy visits of ships of the Royal Navy. We entertained officers and ratings of such ships as the "Warspite" and the "Barham" as they lay anchored in Lerwick harbour. We were invited aboard cruise liners to give performances of the Sword Dance. Amongst these famous ships were the "Viceroy of India" and the "Paris" on tours of Scandinavian countries.

We also gave performances to notable people visiting the Islands. One such memorable occasion was when we performed before the famous author, H Morton, who was visiting Shetland to collect material for a book on the Scottish Isles. Later this material was serialised in the Scottish Daily Express and contained a vivid description of our performance and a photograph of the team, led by myself as St George of England. As far as I know Morton never published the articles in book form.

In the mid 1930's the Society dwindled as male members left the Islands to take up seafaring and some of the women left to enter domestic service. We had difficulty from then in mustering teams for dances, including the Sword Dance so our activities virtually ceased. Miss Jamieson, by then an elderly lady in failing health, emigrated to New Zealand where she died on March 23rd 1942. The Shetland Folk Lore Society was disbanded when the Jamiesons vacated Twagios House, to be revived several years later by the present Shetland Folk Society. This group don't include Folk dancing in their repertoire.

About halfway through our Society's existence Alex Johnson left Lerwick and took up employment in Sandness, on the Mainland just across the sound from his home Isle of Papa Stour. He was much missed within our Society - though we never lost touch. He had been a tireless worker, always keen to improve the team's performances. But we

carried on. I was in charge of the Junior Sword Dance team and a mixed band of Seniors and Juniors to enable us to muster a team for performances. So it remained until we disbanded.

By that time Alex had moved back to his home Island of Papa Stour where he took charge of the Island shop and Post Office. In addition to his many activities over the years he raised a considerable family.

As the years progressed, more and more young people left Papa Stour and as the old people died out, the Island became progressively depopulated until Alex decided to leave. This time he moved to Bigton continuing as shopkeeper and local postmaster where he remained until his retirement and the sudden death of his wife, who predeceased him by less than a year. So ended a useful life.

During our latter years as a Society we had many requests from Shetland Societies to perform at Aberdeen, Edinburgh and London but we didn't have the funds to enable us to travel. So, regrettably, and reluctantly we had to refuse.

There was interest from overseas for years after we disbanded, and I supplied information and advice on the Sword Dance, and other traditional dances, to people in Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand, though as far as I know no performances resulted.

The only performances outside Shetland that I know of was by a group of Nairn schoolchildren, who performed the Papa Stour Sword Dance from instructions I sent to their teacher. The other was a television broadcast on BBC by a Scottish Country Dance Society, who performed a stilted and incorrect version, unlike their faultless performance of other dances. They blundered through a sloppy version of the Sword dance which they renamed "A Scottish Fisherman's Dance" performing in oiled smocks, and Wellington boots. I challenged the Company, and the BBC, and they acknowledged my protest with a "tongue in cheek" reply and a veiled request to "mind my own business". Which was precisely what I was doing!

A few local people had recorded our various dance performances on film, but those who did have died and most of the films have been lost.

In the 1940's I moved to the country area of Hillswick. I became very involved in the St Magnus Community Club, and its associated St Magnus Drama Group. There I trained a mixed team of men and women in the Sword Dance and performed it in the open air for the benefit of Billy Kay, who recorded the whole performance on 16mm film. This film is still in Mr Kay's collection...

I left my home Islands in 1958 for a post in Birmingham, remaining there for fifteen years. On my retirement I returned home. During my absence from Shetland, there were some displays of the

Sword Dance, sponsored by a schoolmaster, George P S Peterson, a native of Papa Stour. He taught teams of senior pupils from primary and secondary schools in Lerwick, giving a few public displays. However, there have been few, if any, performances for several years, and once again the Papa Stour Sword Dance seems to be abeyance.

The current Folk Society has little interest in Traditional Dancing so Shetland seems once again to be in danger of losing an important part of its heritage. The Folk Society's lack of interest in Traditional Dancing is difficult to understand as they "lean over backwards" to promote and preserve traditional music. One can only hope that someone with an interest in Shetland's traditional dances - of which there are many - will revive them and research and preserve those that are left.

For some years now there has been a resurgence of interest in the distinctive Shetland fiddling and a revival of old, half forgotten tunes. The next step would seem to be to revive the old dances that compliment the tunes. Such well known fiddlers as Dr Tom Anderson - who initially was responsible for setting the Shetland musical revival in motion, and Aly Bain known as a master fiddler, have taught enthusiasts from all over the world the traditional style of Shetland fiddling putting Shetland music "on the map". It has been featured on concert tours and on television and it is popularising the style. One can only hope that this will lead to revival of the old dances.

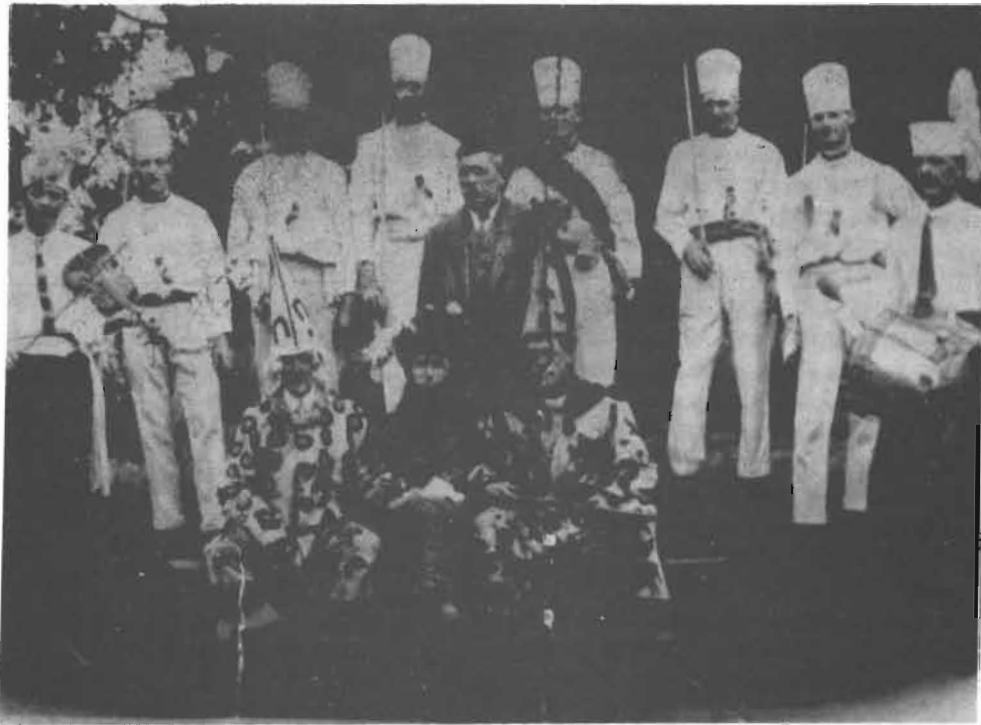
In our time, we, as a Society did our best to research and perform many old dances, some almost forgotten, and we brought them to many appreciative audiences. But now as each year passes, the gap widens, and lack of interest, and ignorance of that part of our heritage may result in dances being irretrievably lost. In my day we found that many dances; work dances, religious dances, spectacle dances etc had been lost and it would be a tragedy if what is left suffered a similar fate.

This article has been a "potted history" covering sixty years of the revived Papa Stour Sword Dance, and its part in creating a Society that encompassed the wider aspects of Shetland tradition and culture. Whilst there are numerous attempts at the preservation of tradition by the present Folk Society, there are important gaps. Unfortunately, unless these are plugged some traditions may be doomed to extinction. At the moment, I see little signs of such resurgence of interest, and though I regret it deeply, with the best will in the world, because of advanced years there is little I can do to reverse the trend.

October 1989

#### Editors note

I was told about Mr J H (Harold) Johnson during my visit to the Shetland Isles. He is thought to be the only surviving member from the 1920's team still living in the Islands. This article is based on a letter he wrote in October 1989 which included material and information he promised to send when we first met.



## THE BELLERBY SWORD DANCE

One of the lesser known and performed sword dances, from the 26 variants which are recorded in sufficient detail to be performed, is the dance from the village of Bellerby. This is possibly because there are relatively few records of the dance.

Bellerby is a small village approximately 3 miles from the town of Leyburn in North Yorkshire. A postcard depicting a Bellerby dance team and dated 1899 is in the Vaughn Williams Memorial Library. The main record of the dance and its associated play is in the Journal of the English Folk Dance Society, Second series No 2, 1928. This record, by Maud Karpeles, is based on the performance of a team in 1926 but we know little of any earlier teams, including the 1819 team.

There have been a handful of revivals in the village of the tradition in since then, largely inspired by participants in the Bellerby Feast which is still held annually.

In the Spring, 1989, newsletter I referred to a photograph collected from relatives by Keith Jackson, one of the Goathland Plough Stots. Keith has kindly given permission to reproduce the photograph and has promised to try to get further details about the performers in addition to the date of the photograph, which has been established as 1919.

The 1989 Long Sword weekend featured a performance of the Bellerby dance by Phoenix Sword from Leicester. Do you know of any other teams who perform the Bellerby dance?

## The Reverend John Tinkler ... From Ivor Allsop

With reference to the article which appeared in Series 2 Issue, No 4, Winter 1989 'A New Look at the Old Wife' by Martin Graetz, Martin asks 'Who was the Rev John Tinkler?'

John Tinkler was the Vicar of Caunton, Newark, Notts - at least he was on March 26th 1912 when he wrote a letter to a Mr Hodgkinson in which he described the events of New Year's Eve of 1869 at Arkengarthdale. These events turned out to be a sword-dance with an introductory song and there is description of the dance which is remarkable because there are only five dancers.

The letter appears in Volume Two of Maud Karpeles typewritten copy of Cecil Sharp's Folk Dance Notes on pp. 171-4, the original should be in Sharp's Manuscript which is currently housed in the Fellows Library at Clare College, Cambridge.

The letter raised more problems than it solves. There are two gentlemen mentioned in the letter \*Christopher Reine and \*Henry Cholder and both seem to be leading lights in this performance. Even more intriguing was the five man dance. Could the Rev Tinkler have miscounted the number of performers? If not then here we have a five man longsword dance.

Russell Wortley's manuscript (held at CECTAL in Sheffield University) mentions a longsword-dance at Arkengarthdale but has nothing to add to Rev Tinkler's account.

\* Who are these two men and did they come from Arkengarthdale?

Ivor also enclosed copies of the letter he refers to and also the relevant pages from Sharp's notes held in the Vaughn Williams Memorial Library. Shortage of space prevents publication of all the material he sent.

### Postscript

Shortly after returning home from the Shetland Isles I found that an ex-dancer, Alec Scott, who had been in both teams (the Papa Stour team and the Lerwick team) lives in Yorkshire!

A further unusual coincidence occurred on the ferry on our visit to Papa Stour. After sailing out to sea for almost a mile the ferry turned back to pick up an extra passenger who had

missed the sailing. The lady was returning to her home on the Island after a spell in hospital. Conversation revealed that she and her partner had moved to Papa Stour a few years earlier from her childhood home in West Yorkshire. The village she came from is just a few miles from Cleckheaton, the home of Spen Valley Longsword. Although the lady knew many Spen Valley team members she had not heard of the sword team, nor did she know of the Papa Stour Sword dance.

This is the last copy in series 2. Have you renewed your subscription for the next series?

In order to develop on the material in this issue the next issue will carry an interview with George Peterson, for over 40 years the leader and musician for the Shetland teams who perform the Papa Stour dance. The next issue will carry details of Boxing Day/New Year dance displays - details are welcome!

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

### Contributions welcome ...

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