

RATTLE UP My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE
WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

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Visit to the Shetland Isles - an interview with George Peterson

For more than fifteen years I have been keen to see the Papa Stour sword dance. I have read reports of it and wondered, not just about its performance but about its traditional and social significance. I finally got the chance to see the dance on a trip to the Shetland Isles in May 1989. During my visit I met and interviewed George Peterson, the long time leader and musician of the island based team who have continued the dance tradition over the past 30 years. Mr Peterson arranged for a team to present the dance in the function room of the Brae Hotel. A further performance was held to enable a video record to be made.



Mr Peterson playing for the team at practice

During my visit I toured many of the Islands in the group, including Papa Stour, and I spent time looking through the Shetland Island Council archives and the photographic collection at the Lerwick Museum. I also located an ex-dancer from the 1920's Lerwick based team, Mr John Harold Johnson, who lived in Lerwick and who gave much information about that revival, details of which were published in the last issue of the Broadsheet.

This article records an interview with George P S Peterson at his home in Brae on May 6th 1989. Mr Peterson was present with Peter, his youngest son. Our party was Maureen Tinker, who videoed the interview, Renaat van Craenebroek (from Belgium) and myself.

TS I would like to ask you about the Papa Stour dance. You were telling me that you knew of the Mr Low who wrote about the dance in the 1770's. (Mr Peterson brought a book "A Tour through the Islands of Orkney & Shetland in 1774" by the Reverend G Low, published in Kirkwall 1879).

GP The book tells of Low's visit to the Islands. The geology of the Islands involves rocks worn away. These caves are a showpiece for visitors. He visited the caves but hated it.

TS This book is by the Rev George Low. The reference I saw was to plain Mr Low. He was quoted in "Highland & Traditional Scottish Dances". The writer of this book (Mr Peterson's) was the Minister of Orkney, would he be the same person?

GP Oh was he, it's unlikely to have two of that name.

TS Is this the earliest record that you know of the dance?

GP Yes. I had always thought that Sir Walter Scott's was the first reference but this is earlier. He (Sir Walter Scott) wrote about the dance in his book "The Pirate", which I have tried three or four times to read. The appendix to the book has details of the sword dance which he said he borrowed from William Henderson of Papa Stour - from a very old copy.

TS Is the Henderson family known to you?

GP Yes, I've read up all the family trees and sorted out a quantity of stuff. I read that the Haa was built for the Hendersons by Gifford the Laird. Henderson was his factor.

TS The "Haa" being the big house? Is it still there?

GP Yes, it's still there. The Haa was occupied by the Hendersons. It is at the head of the pier. Remember when you see it that it has been lowered three feet. The shed at the end of the house was part of the house. It had three rooms, and was three feet higher than it is today. As far as I can gather the Hendersons were gentry. William Henderson came to Papa Stour round about 1770, when the Haa was built. William Henderson died in 1799.

TS Do you know from where the Hendersons came when they first came to Papa Stour?

GP Yes, he came from Walls, that's a village by the West side. His ancestry was from North Mainland. They came from Yell and originally from Unst. They are Shetland gentry.

TS Do you think that there is any likelihood that he had details of a dance from elsewhere and took it to Papa Stour?

GP Certainly, it's feasible - but it's odd that there's no folk

memory of the sword dance or tune elsewhere. There would be something over a couple of hundred years. It's not so remote that we would have no memory of the dance or the tune.

TS You say that the first reference to the dance you know of is in about 1812. Was it being regularly performed then, or was that a one-off performance do you think?

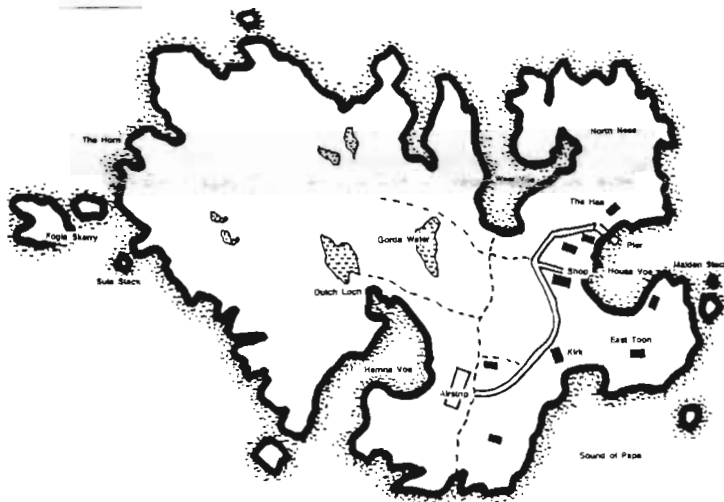
GP That occasion was a special one-off for Sir Walter Scott. He visited Shetland as Inspector of Lighthouses, there weren't many at that time. He stayed in a mansion house in Scalloway and I suppose they were short of entertainment. He may have heard of a sword dance. Or maybe somebody mentioned it and he expressed a desire to see it because he was a great student of that kind of thing. They got a group of men from Papa Stour to come to Scalloway to perform for them. He was so captivated by it that he wrote down the words.

TS You were saying to me last night you thought he (Scott) may have been responsible for introducing little bits.

GP It's a suspicion. He loved that sort of thing. He was a poet, a man of literature. He may have doctored it up. The Grandiose style, (quoting) "Mars doth rule he bends his brows, he makes us all aghast, After the few hours that we stay here, Venus will rule at last." It may be his influence.

TS So was the dance danced regularly in Papa Stour from then?

GP It was danced regularly enough to become a living folk tradition. It couldn't have lapsed for long. I don't know if they did it every year - certainly it didn't lapse long enough to be forgotten. It was usually done in mid-Winter.



The island of Papa Stour

The population of Papa Stour dropped by a third in ten years. From 1870-80 the population dropped by a hundred. That was a shocking buffet to a little community. Before then the island had approaching 300 people, perhaps 270/280, something like that. My mother was born in 1901 - she remembers 240 people on the island. I have the names - she told me and I wrote them down - house by house all the people. That would have been 1905. Now there are only 6 or 7 natives - I'm too horrified to count. The community is now in its last stages.

TS Why did it drop so dramatically between 1870 and 1880?

GP It was the problem of fuel. That's been a problem for Papa Stour all through its history. There were no major peat deposits, they had to leave the island to cut peat.

The fishing industry kept the population going. The soil is very fertile - they always had corn and potatoes. When crops failed they had fish so they never starved. It may have been monotonous but they never starved.

But you see, there had been a lot of inter-marriage on the island. The island was bursting at the seams. The population was top-heavy. Emigrating was encouraged to New Zealand and Australia, the new lands. Not many families went from Papa Stour, but they did from Sandness, that's the Mainland area next door. And the Sandness crofts that were vacated were taken by Papa men so a lot of them simply moved across the Sound. The Laird of Fetlar, up in the North owned two fifths of Papa Stour. He took several Papa families across to Fetlar because the families in Fetlar had emigrated.

But the de-population was inevitable. The fuel problem, and then big families so it had to come. But it was a devastating blow to a little community when a third of the people left. Many of those people took with them stories, traditions, odds and ends and fiddle tunes which eventually faded out after a generation or two. The natives would talk about such and such a gill, and such a house, such and such a loch. When their grandchildren came up and they didn't know where it was - it didn't mean anything to them and the stories faded away. The sword dance was one of the things to fall victim to this.

TS So when did the sword dance tradition start losing strength on Papa Stour?

GP That was in the 1870's or perhaps 1880's. It was revived in 1922 when it was over 30 years since it had been performed.

TS So it's about 1890 that it was performed before the 1922 revival - something like that?

GP Yes. About 1890. It had been talked about, you know, by the old folk in Papa, and they played the tune. ".....remember, that's the sword dance tune, we'll have to get round to getting it going again". The old people would say bits of the verses. Yes, ".....do you remember so and so?" Nothing was done until 1922. The man who revived it was Alec Henderson of the Haa, a descendant of William Henderson.

TS The Henderson who went out there in the 1770's?

GP Yes. He was a young man and he got a team together. There was no hall on the island but there was an empty cottage. The partitions had been taken out and it was empty and quite high with all the lofts out. They used to hold dances in there. I remember my mother speaking about it, she would have been 21 that year so she remembered it very well.

TS Your mother would have been 21 when the dance was revived in 1922? Did she remember the revival?

GP Yes. Her Brother - George Frazer - was one of the team. The fiddler was Wille Sinclair of North Banks. Alec Johnson was born in 1903. He was first cousin to my mother. He had a keen interest in the sword dance. When Alec Johnson was 17 he left Papa Stour to go to Lerwick for work and he was 7 years away. When he was in Lerwick he was encouraged by Miss Christina Jamieson, an avid folklorist. She knew about the sword dance and she encouraged him to get a team together in Lerwick in the 1920's. There is a photograph in the archives.

(A photo was traced along with details which led to an interview with John Harold Johnson, the last surviving man who performed in the 1930's Lerwick teams).

The members of the team were from all over. It would be nice to know if they have named the performers.

He (Alec Johnson) ran the sword dance in Lerwick for years but in 1934 he came back to Papa Stour to take over the Post Office and shop. At that time there were still perhaps 105 or so people on the island, a small but lively community with a lot of old-timers who would reminisce about the sword dance way back in the last century. Alec Johnson was the spokesman for the island. He led the sword dance, organised it. When I was a boy, it was performed occasionally on the island just to keep it alive within the island. Sometimes tourists would call and ask to see the sword dance when he would send a note around to try and collect enough men. They would leave their scythes and put on their white shirts for the show.

(Mr Peterson later gave details of Mr Alec Scott, former Papa

Stour inhabitant and an ex-dancer who now lives at Sicklinghall near Wetherby in Yorkshire)

- TS You said it was danced a couple of times a year. Was that a traditional or special event, or was it performed just when the chance came up?
- GP No it was usually incorporated in a concert between Christmas and New Year. Now, when I say the sword dance was incorporated into the concert it doesn't necessarily mean that the sword dance was traditionally performed between Christmas and New Year's Day. I don't know if there is any association and I can't say for certain if the dance always belonged to mid-Winter. In Winter people didn't have so much work to do. There were long nights when you could sit and study a script for a sketch or a song. It was convenient in the Winter. So the dance was incorporated into the concert but I can't say that it was always a mid-Winter thing. It would be wrong to presume.



THE 1928 PAPA STOUR TEAM

The 1928 Papa Stour team
Back row: David Drummond (43); Alec Scott (16);
John Foubister (49); James Fraser (19)

Front row: James Coutts (Minstrel); William Georgeson (26) the
team leader; William Georgeson (26) (these two men are cousins);
John Georgeson (57).

- TS Did the Second World War affect the Island and the dance?
- GP There were always enough hands to perform you know.

In 1950 we were asked to come to Lerwick to an event - the Viking Congress it was called. It was a meeting of students of Northern interests and Scandinavian studies. They met in Lerwick then later in Iceland, Faroe and Norway. That year it was in Lerwick. The team was asked to dance and they were short. I was asked to come in. I was 18 that year, no I was

only 17. So I was the youngest member at that time to perform the sword dance. We performed it in the Garrison Theatre for the audience. That was my first public performance.

That Winter I got together a team of schoolboys - my equals - for a party in the boys hostel in Lerwick. Then the following year I left Lerwick for University. Those boys are from many places in Shetland. They are now all over the world.

- TS You said that the Papa Stour team was still active at that time. Did they welcome your new team?
- GP No. There was a rather chilly reception. I can't say there was anything spoken against them (the Lerwick boys team) but there was a feeling that "it belongs here."

Those lads are all over the world now. They were from all over Shetland - Yell, Whalsay. They couldn't get back home each evening you see. They would stay there for a week and travel home at weekend. They were housed together at Lerwick. Yes, there were plenty of them - 40 or 50 boys.

- TS The dance died out Papa Stour shortly after that?
- GP Yes, the system of things meant that the youngsters had to leave home and go to Lerwick. This killed many of the smaller communities because after their studies the youngsters would find jobs in Lerwick and stay.

In 1962 my Uncle and Aunt left Papa Stour with a young family - in October. And in 1963 four families left. Three of these families had youngsters and that was a terrible blow to our small community of perhaps eighty. Up until that time there was still enough to occasionally do the dance. You know, everybody was talking about who was going to be the next (to leave) and morale was very poor. It did seem that the Island was in a trap - if the population went too low the Post Office would be shut. That would shock everyone and would be quite unthinkable.

Although I was teaching here in Brae I was still going back and forth (to Papa Stour) when my parents were still alive. I was very interested in the Island. I felt that if we were going to go down let's go down with the flag flying. So we did anything we could to uplift our morale with Burns Suppers and Shetland suppers and we kept the sword dance going. The old leader had left but there were some on the Island who could still say the words. We performed after 1964 I think.

- RvC You performed the sword dance only with youngsters?
- GP On Papa it was always men of mature years who danced. I was the youngest member when I was 17. I don't think anybody younger had danced. The Papa team was always adult men.
- TS So it was an adult men's dance?
- GP Yes. But I saw that the sword dance would eventually vanish if the population continued to go down. I felt that action would have to be taken to keep this lovely piece of folklore. So I asked the Headmaster of Brae School in 1962 or 1963 if I could have permission to take boys out of the classes to learn the sword dance. We performed at the School Concert and at the Prize Giving Day. But I feared it was a lark for the boys - they thought it was a joke, getting off lessons. I didn't think they would take it seriously, but they did. The day came for the performance. They had the swords, the sashes and the white shirts and they did it very proudly. That's a good while ago.

Since then I've tried to keep a school team. But as they left school, I couldn't get at them so easily. I began to think that perhaps it might be too connected with the school. When boys leave school they leave school things behind them and I had a feeling that this would happen to the sword dance.

But in the past two or three years boys who have left the school have come forward with an interest to keep it going. I'm hopeful that we have weaned it clear of the school now. When the mens team take an interest it's safer.

- TS There's still a regular team at the school?

- GP Yes. But I've applied for early retirement and it's been granted so this year I'm finished with the school.
- TS So do you think anybody else will teach it at the school?
- GP The sword dance? Oh I doubt it, I don't think so. No. But we've got a nucleus now of young men.
- TS There are some things about your background that I'd like to touch on if I could.
- Your mother was a native of Papa Stour - a Frazer. Presumably she was born there and it's her croft that you now have.
- GP Yes. She was born in 1901 and she married my father, George Peterson who was from Melby in Sandness, in 1931.
- They left Papa Stour to live in Lerwick after their marriage. He was a merchant seaman and was often away. They got rooms in Lerwick and I was born there in 1932 and my sister in 1934. But she didn't like Lerwick much and longed to be back in Papa. So when a croft became available in 1933 or 1934 they applied and got it. My father didn't mind. Today to move to the fringes is not done, but it was in those days. He was no worse off there than anywhere else. Lots of other men from Papa Stour went to the Merchant Navy. We stayed with my Grandfather Geordie Frazer while the house was repaired and then they moved to the croft and I was brought up there.
- I was steeped in the traditions of the Island. It seems that I was just interested in them. Youngsters can listen to stories and they pass over their heads but they seemed to hold me. I was there until I was 14. When I reached 14 I went to the Lerwick school. Of course I always classed myself as coming from Papa Stour. In fact at school there were two boys of my name, myself and another George Peterson. The teacher said "How are we going to distinguish between you, what are your initials?" My initials are George P S, that's for Peter Scott. But as soon as the teacher heard PS she said "That stands for Papa Stour" so I was always called that.
- My mother died in 1970, my father in 1976. I asked the Crofter's Commission if I could take over the croft. My father wasn't the owner, just a tenant. I thought that with me living in Brae they may well say no, but they had no objection to transfer from father to son. My father had three crofts, all adjacent so now they're all enclosed by fences and three houses. Two of them are still in use, my sister lives in the old home alone. The other houses we have for our family use, in fact that's where my wife is, she went up there for the week.
- My eldest son is out there now, he and his wife have been out there for a week for the lambing. They will be back tomorrow night. Steven (one of the dancers) and Ingrid, my daughter went out there last week and came back on Sunday night. The youngsters are all very interested in Papa Stour, I couldn't manage the croft without their help. If they had not been interested in the sheep, and going to Papa Stour, I would have had to give it up. But I suppose I have instilled some of my interest in the Island to them, telling them stories and the place names and so on and so forth. I'm very happy about that.
- TS Are you a member of the Folklore Society or any other local societies?
- GP There is a Folklore Society in Lerwick but I'm not a member.
- TS Have you come across references to the Viking Society?
- GP No.
- TS I don't know if it is still going, I know they were active in the 1920's. The Society published the booklet I brought you (a photostat copy of "The Sword dance and four Shetland Airs" (1921) by Alfred W Johnston, president of the Viking Club, Society for Northern Research.)
- Did you do any dancing when you were at University?
- GP No. I don't know why I never did the sword dance there.
- TS Which University was this?
- GP Aberdeen, the nearest. I graduated in 1955 with an MA and Teachers Training qualification in 1956. Then I had to do 2 years in the forces. I was a qualified teacher and ready for work but National Service was obligatory. I was lucky enough to get into the Education Corps. In 1956 I was sent to Dorchester in the south of England and then after the New Year we were posted to Düsseldorf in West Germany. I was there a year and a half and came back to the Island as a teacher in 1958, 31 years ago.
- TS Have you seen other sword teams or any other sword dances?
- GP In 1977 we were invited to go to Edinburgh by the Lothians Morris Men. While we were there we met some of the Goathland team, the Plough Stots. And there were some dancers from down in, was it Gloucestershire?
- TS Was that was the first time you'd seen other dancers?
- GP Yes
- TS Did, you or other people involved with the Papa Stour dance, know that it was similar to dances in England?
- GP I'd heard that it was similar to a Yorkshire dance but I'd never seen any.
- (Break)
- I remember as a boy we were all greatly excited about this (the Papa Stour Sword dance) and we tried to perform the sword dance with the stalks of long dockers.
- TS Dockers? Oh yes, weeds - docks.
- GP Yes. At first we couldn't get the Star made but we were all very excited about it.
- The people of the Island, they always looked on the sword dance as a thing of great pride. At the concert there would be few items, you know, and then the men would rise and walk in their ribbons. The fiddler would come in leading them onto the floor.
- After they'd gone out the people would sit and chat and joke amongst themselves but when the fiddler marched in everybody sat silent. He would come right into the middle of the floor. They were given great attention - you could hear a pin drop.
- RvC The colours of the sashes, are they traditional or do they change. Do they have a meaning?
- GP No the ribbons have always been handed down.
- The red ribbon over the white shirt I suppose is St George's Cross. The navy blue and white for St Andrew represents the Scottish flag, blue with a white cross. The green of St Patrick represents the emerald. Then St David of Wales, he has a gold ribbon with a green edge to represent the daffodil. St Anthony of Italy has a pink ribbon. St Denis of France has a yellow ribbon with red edging. Now the old French flag was called an "ori flamme" - the gold flame I think, but that's way before the Revolution. St James' famous sash is purple, but I don't know to what it relates.
- RvC So it was traditional that those colours were used as far as you know? They always had a white shirt?
- GP Yes, always a white shirt. They didn't wear rubber boots or high necked jerseys. They dressed up for the occasion in their suits. They were not dressed in working clothes but in their best with a white shirt.
- TS One or two of the teams I have seen, mainly Scottish Country dance teams, tend to put on fisherman's jumpers and do the dance in Wellington boots.
- GP Yes, they associate it with fishing, but they are not correct.

- RvC Teams never dance in working clothes. This is a mistake made by people trying to look primitive.
- GP That's right.
- Now, Alec Johnson tried to get up a sort of uniform. You may find this photograph in the archive. They had white smocks made which came down to just above the knee with a belt around the middle. They had criss-cross thonging on the trouser legs. But it never took on.
- TS That was the Lerwick team?
- GP Yes - that was the Lerwick team.
- TS The difference between the old photograph (of the Papa Stour team in 1928) you gave us and the team we saw last night was that in the old photograph they had braces.
- GP Yes that's right. St George always had this flower, what do you call it, a rosette.
- RvC What footwear did they wear, as early as you can remember?
- GP At one time it was probably clogs, you know, wooden soled clogs. I would imagine, years ago, they had wooden soled boots. I danced in shoes, I've never seen it danced in clogs.
- RvC You think perhaps that the stepping is suitable for clogs?
- GP Yes, possibly. Back a hundred years ago or so they wouldn't have had proper shoes as we know. But wooden soled shoes were common, home-made ones. The boots that the fishermen wore were not rubber boots, they were leather boots, leather up to the knee and the soles were wood. They were slippery on the beach but that was what they wore.
- TS What about your mother, did she ever comment on having known them dance in anything but shoes?
- GP No. It was either shoes or leather boots with bairn soles.
- TS When you joined the team, who taught you the dance? Did somebody actually take you to one side and say this is what you do and this is how you do it?
- GP I remember it very well. I was given a sword and told where to stand. I was St Anthony of Italy. There was nobody to say do it this way - there were just the seven of us. I always took the wrong turning until somebody said that I was going the wrong way. That's how I came to pick it up. I had been going in the wrong direction but the circle came out in spite of me going wrong. There was no man standing at one side saying go this way or that way. You were just given a sword and became one of the team and picked it up.
- TS In one of the records of the Papa Stour dance it says there was a Master and seven dancers. Another record claims there was a master but he was part of the team of seven dancers. Have you ever known eight people involved in a performance?
- GP No, it has always been seven, and the Minstrel - but he's not really a member of the team.
- TS He never wore a special costume?
- GP He would have dressed up a bit when it was a public performance. They wouldn't come in patches. They had a respect for the thing and would get dressed up.
- TS Do you ever return to the written notations, or is the detail of the dance carried in your head?
- GP No, it's just in my head. The last time we did it with Alec Johnson, he left in 1963 so that it must have been '61 or '62, we knew he was leaving. It was very regrettable that he wouldn't be leading us again. I went home from that performance and I wrote down the order of the figures.
- There are seven of them. The first one is repeated as the fourth but I'm pretty sure there has been some difference which was slight enough to have been lost over the years.
- Maybe when they revived the dance in 1922 the difference was forgotten.
- TS Between the first and the fourth figure?
- GP Yes. Today the first and the fourth figures are the same but I feel that there were seven separate figures originally. Seven Champions, seven different figures.
- TS Do you use the same names for the figures as Scott used? Do you give them names?
- GP Yes we have names. The first and fourth is called the "Weaving" and the second is called "Step over the left hand sword" The third one is called "Down the middle", and the fifth is "Individually step into the circle (over the left hand sword)". The sixth is "Break the circle" and the seventh is "The Star".
- Sir Walter Scott's list I find almost unintelligible. I can't make any sense of it.
- TS Do you use his titles such as "The Clew"? Is that a local word or is it one that you use? He also talks about the "Pas Seul" has this ever been used by the Islanders?
- GP No.
- TS How many outings over recent years have the team done? You kindly put on a show for us last night. When was the last time the team went out before that?
- GP (pause) Oh yes, it was in September or October last year, we were asked to do at a function in Blixter. They were presenting prizes for an Agricultural Show. It was the older team, that's the last time they performed.
- In July or June there was a party of Swedish folk dancers. They asked if there were any local dances at the Tourist Office in Lerwick. They contacted me to see if we would do the sword dance and of course we did in the Scalloway School. The Swedish visitors were very impressed. They were in national costume and they showed us some Swedish dances.
- RvC Do the dancers always perform the same part in the dance?
- GP No, they prefer to keep their own Saint.
- TS So do you have a job making sure that you have a full team - not too many of one position?
- GP No, I just say "decide where you want to be and let's get going".
- There are 10 or more men round about here who are clear of school who are interested so if there are some who are absent you can always get another one. This time, I'm sorry about this, my oldest son was in Papa Stour and four members of the team had to go to Lerwick for a Fire Brigade event.
- TS You were telling me last night that there are as many as twenty or so local men who can dance the dance and could be called on.
- GP I'm sure that 20 is a safe estimate if I counted them all up. I have spoken with ones who have said to me "mind, if you ever start the sword dance again give me a ring." Boys and young men in Walls, Aith and Voe - ones I've taught. But of course they would need a bit of practice.
- TS You were saying last night that one of your ambitions is to take the sword dance back to Papa Stour.
- GP Yes, and these young men are keen to go. It would have to be a fine weekend when it would be possible for us to do it outside on the beach perhaps, on the sandy beach or in some field.
- TS Because there's no building on the island big enough?
- GP Well the school can be used. They could do it indoors, but it would be good to get the background of Papa Stour. The hills

and the beaches with the men doing it, rather than in a building which could be anywhere.

TS Have the team toured other islands? We went to Whalsay and met people who have heard of the dance but not seen it.

GP Yes, that's right. We haven't been to Whalsay yet. I've spoken to one or two Whalsay folk and said if you are ever having a concert and want an item give us a shout. We will be glad to come. But they haven't done it yet.

We've been in Yell and quite a number of halls in the area around here: Ollaberry, Urafirth, North Roe, Sullom and Voe and Brae of course. And Walls and Aith on the West Side and Scalloway and Lerwick. Also Quarff oh yes, and Fetlar, that's one of the Northern Islands. We haven't been to Unst yet.

TS Do you get encouragement from local people, are they keen to see the dance?

GP Yes. They do like it. We do it sometimes at the Christmas party for pensioners. It once happened that a youngster twisted his ankle, it happened once, and we had to postpone our visit. It was the junior team and there wasn't another youth of that age group. We just had the seven and had to call off. Some people expressed disappointment saying "that's the reason why we came."

TS Have you ever been involved with Up Helly Aa, is that the right way to pronounce it, the January celebration?

GP We did in a way. There are squads of maybe ten or so people, you know, and they each have an act, each squad. Each group has an act, sometimes it's a skit on some local misfortune to make a joke of it. Or sometimes it's about a national or political thing. Its light hearted. Sometimes it's a dance and I remember I took some boys. I played the fiddle to them and they did part of a sword dance at North Maven for Up Helly Aa.

TS You taught one of the squads to do it?

GP Yes. It was what I have now as the men's team. It was some years ago when they were still at school. Even though they did it for Up Helly Aa the dance is too long to be done in its entirety. They did a couple of movements or three movements and incorporate the most dramatic one - the Star. They did a shortened version solely for Up Helly Aa.

TS I notice you call it a Star. In some records I have read it is called a shield. Have you ever heard it being called a lock or a shield by the dancers?

GP No, not in Papa Stour I've not.

TS You were saying that you made a slight change to the dance when the Star was displayed and dropped.

GP Yes. In some dances it is the music that dictates the dance but in Papa Stour the dance dictates the music. When the Star is crashed to the ground it is highly dramatic. The Star going up is highly dramatic, and then when it is crashed to the floor the music stops. Whatever you are playing you stop.

I remember with the older men, their swords were galvanized hoops straightened. There were no hand grips, no hilts. So when the Star was crashed to the floor the Star went to pieces and there was always a bit of a scramble bringing up your sword. It seemed to be rather an anti-climax so I felt that we could make it cleaner by having each hilt painted the same colour as the sash. Each Saint would see his sword, grasp his hilt, pull it out and the Star vanishes.

TS So he draws out his sword rather than scrambling about on the floor to pick one up?

GP Yes. I thought that it would add to the dramatic effect.

TS You said that the early swords were galvanized. Were these the swords that were used in Papa Stour?

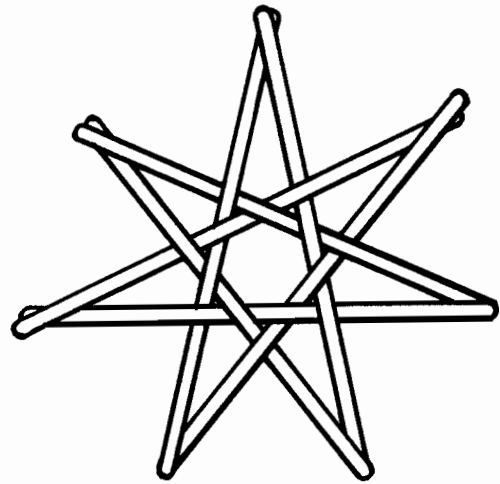
GP Yes.

TS There are suggestions that they may have been made from herring barrel hoops. Is that correct?

GP Oh, - straightened of course. Yes it was exactly that sort of thing that we used. I think they were about 3 feet.

TS About the same length as the swords you used last night?

GP Yes. They have to weave, to bend four times. Each of them bends four times for the Star to come together.



The Papa Stour Star is made by "locking" the swords twice. This is why the swords need to be flexible.

TS You said that you think there may still be some swords on Papa Stour from the original team?

GP When Alec Johnson left he gave the box of swords to Alec Scott whose son still lives on the Island.

The swords that we used were a gift from a Mr Armstrong. I don't know if he is still alive. He came up to Papa Stour one summer to see the sword dance and he saw us doing it with the barrel hoops and he presented us with a wooden case of swords with wooden hilts. Those are the ones that Alec Scott had, he was the last St George on Papa Stour after Alec Johnson left. I would imagine that they are still there.

TS Have you ever thought of trying to get them for use by the Brae team?

GP I think that would be a very good idea.

The one's we use now were made by school boys - and by the Technical teacher at our school, Bertie Mowat from Sullom who died last year. He was a great enthusiast for the sword dance though he never performed in the team. He was a man of rather retiring nature but he encouraged us. He suggested getting stainless steel and he got the boys to put on handles. And seeing he did, you see, I didn't want to say "don't bother, we've got swords." That was his kindness, so we've always used these.

But the swords in Papa Stour - I'll see if I can get them.

TS And the music - you told me you were self-taught to play the fiddle. Who did you pick the tune up from?

GP I cannot read music. The man who taught me the tune was called Johnnie Frazer, he was first cousin to my mother. He came of a long line of fiddlers. His father was my mother's Uncle Johnny Frazer and his father was called Abraham Frazer

There's a handed-down story that he (Abraham Frazer) was press-ganged in perhaps 1810 or 1812 as a young lad. A ship appeared off Papa Stour which came slowly in. It was flying a flag indicating that a pilot was required. There were some men working in the fields cutting the corn. It often happened

that a ship would come in seeking a pilot. So my grandfather's grandfather, Abraham Frazer who was young, and three elderly men, shoved out a boat and rowed off.

There was one man on the scene, the story goes, and he leaned over and he pointed to the young man to come aboard. There were no words spoken. So he climbed aboard and when he came over the bulwarks the crew jumped on him and knocked him out. Then the Captain gave orders to sail away. The three old men rowed ashore, they couldn't do anything about it. When the lad came to his senses, it was a Danish ship, and the skipper told him "now you are one of my crew, we are going to fight the English." There were more Shetland men. The Danish ship had lost some men and he had called in at various places in Western Shetland and had done the same trick. He had got his crew.

They met the English and they exchanged shots and the Danish ship was sunk. The English skipper lined up the survivors and shouted out "prisoners of war step forward" so the Shetland men stepped forward and the English Captain said "now you are my crew and we are going to fight the French." They sailed for the English Channel and met a French ship and the French sank an English ship. They didn't sink many, but this one was sunk and the survivors were imprisoned, I suppose, in Dieppe or Calais.

But it's been handed down that the French General was not unkind and my ancestor, who found time very, very tedious. He asked the French General for a fiddle. The French General gave him a fiddle and he started to play in a French prison.

At the end of the war he came back home to Shetland, married and settled down and one of his sons was my great grandfather. So the tradition has been in the family a long time. Johnny Frazer, he was a bachelor fellow all his life - he was a ship's carpenter. He came home to Papa Stour where he stayed for a few years and called at our house. I was a young fellow and he taught me the sword dance tune as I play it. He was very particular, a very fussy man. If I made a mistake, "no no no that's not how to play it, listen again." I'm sure that I play it as he played it and he played it as his father played it.

TS When did he teach you?

GP Oh, it was maybe in the 1950's maybe 1953 or '54.

TS So you've never bothered with printed notations of the tune.

GP No. There was a music teacher at Brae school who was quite taken by the tune and he asked me to play it so that he could notate it. So it is written down somewhere. But I can't read it. And he found it a bit difficult to get in the shivers. I remember him saying "So it's on paper now for somebody to use."

TS It is a fascinating tune, like nothing I've come across before connected with any other sword dance.

GP Bits of the tune are played on two strings to give a sort of drone effect. It may have been a pipe tune. It may be Scandinavian - I couldn't tell you.

TS There's an article in a Folklore Journal suggesting that the dance may be linked with Masonic guilds, mainly because of words in it. Have you any views on that?

GP It is quite possible. There are indications that there were feats of strength done - "Brave David a bow must string and big with awe set up a wand upon a stand. And that Brave David will cleave in twa" it seems to be a feat of archery but there could be something in that.

TS But there are no Masonic links that you knew of when the dance was in Papa Stour?

GP No. It was just repeated there as some sort of mystery and it was accepted as a mystery. No attempt was made to explain it.

TS You say you are coming up for early retirement, what have you got in mind, are you intending to go back to Papa Stour?

GP Not permanently. I can't, I'm not old enough to retire and sit back, you know and at the same time I'm too old to take a job. But I hope we'll keep a lodger or two. Two of our family have married and moved out. I don't want to sit back and do nothing. I would like to write as much as I can. I've got a few short stories I hope to publish, all based on Papa Stour of course. I've tried to grasp the soul of the island.

TS These are about traditions in the island?

GP Some of the stories are reminiscences and some that I've imagined, I've made up. Stories about the fairy people and stories about them living in the caves.

I'll be going to the island back and forth and staying on for several weeks at a time mending fences and repairing the houses and so on. It will probably be in the Summer with lodgers and Tourists - not in the Winter. There is a big call for tourists' accommodation in Shetland.

TS You were saying that there are very few islanders, only about half a dozen, still left on in Papa Stour but I understand that there are some incomers. Are they these people from England or from the Mainland?

Would you count them as incomers if they moved from Mainland or from one of the other Isles?

GP The Shetland Isles?

TS Yes.

GP Yes. They would still be different from the local people.

RVC Every island has its own peculiarity?

GP Yes indeed, indeed, that's right. And the sort of talk is different. If they are coming from the mainland of Shetland here we are conditioned to say things such as "what car is that?" and so on and so forth. And in Papa Stour we say "what boat is that?" You see it's our link and at the same time our lifeline. We are surrounded by sea.

TS The boat is your lifeline?

GP As well as being our lifeline it's also our barrier. But the island is going, it's fading, it's being ripped up by the elements.

TS So, if the folk dance got revived in Papa Stour by incomers, what would your view be? If it was done by people who live there but were, say, born in England would you welcome that?

GP Yes I would indeed. As long as the dance is kept alive, that is the essential part, that the tradition shouldn't vanish. If they are interested enough to perform the sword dance it doesn't matter if they come from Timbuctoo. That's the thing, keep it going - good luck to them.

TS In Sir Walter Scott's report there was a point that you may be able to help with. He refers to "Papa Stour, the island owned by Mr Scott." It wasn't quite clear in the way that it was worded whether it was owned by another Mr Scott, by Sir Walter Scott himself, or whether he was referring to something else. Has the island ever been owned by individuals?

GP Yes. Papa Stour - from what one can gather after Norway handed over, Norway & Denmark, handed the Shetland Islands to Scotland. There were certain places which were still retained by the Norwegian court. Papa Stour was one. For 100 years after the hand-over there were still people paying Odal rent to Norwegian people.

It was leased to the first Scotsman, who was a man called Tulloch, who took over the rents of the island. I think the Mowatts were the first Scottish owners of Papa Stour. I'm not sure when the island was purchased by them. It must have been in the late 1600's, maybe 1700's.

In 1706 it was recorded that the Mowatts sold Papa Stour to John Scott who had a mansion in Sandness. He in turn sold it

10 years later to Arthur Nicholson of Lochend, that's here in this area. He had a big estate with pieces here and elsewhere in the Shetland Islands. He bought the island of Papa Stour in 1716. I don't know when the Giffords bought their portion but they owned a third of the island some time around 1778 - the Giffords who live here (Brae) just a mile or two up the road. The Giffords portion was bought by a soap manufacturer from England.

TS Not Lord Leverhume?

GP No, no. This was as recent as 1964 - he came up to meet his tenants. A very nice man, but he didn't stay - he didn't take up the mansion house on the island. He went back to England to his business. He sold his estate and the Shetlands Islands Council now have the whole island.

TS Are there many trees on the island?

GP In Papa? No there are shrubs, you know, but they have to be grown in shelter. There are South West gales and the spray - when the wind is from the South West, it's not a big island and consequently the spray permeates the air and after gales when you can taste the spray on your lips.

TS So on an island like Papa gales can be every bit as harmful as any other kind of weather?

GP Yes, usually gales are accompanied by rain, you know, so the salt doesn't kill off the grass. The grass dies off in winter, then the sheep go onto the beaches and eat the seaweed and tufts of grass and heather. In the springtime again the salt is worse. It goes into the soil and it destroys the grass.

TS How are people on the island earning a living? Are they still involved with the sea and fishing, or are they all crofters?

GP No, they are all mainly crofters. One of the incomers has occasional work on mainland Shetland as an electrician. He will go off for several weeks at a time and then he goes back to his wife. His sons keep things ticking over when he's away, but that is the difficulty with living there. It's a modest living, it's not a comfortable living. It's too small.

RvC I notice you do the stepping of the dance on the whole foot. A bit of a heavy trotting, whereas others did it on the heel. They stamp more. Is that correct or is it a flat foot step?

GP We did it just on the flat of the feet.

RvC I am interested in what you did in the early dance. Did you do the step with bent knees or with a stiff leg. I don't know what you call this step, but I call it the reel step (RvC demonstrating).

GP Yes, that's the back step, we call that the back step.

RvC Can you perform it, supposing you had a sword in your hand?

(GP demonstrates the step used in the solo stepping).

You do it straight, your body has to be straight?

GP Yes.

RvC Some of the youngsters, I saw they waggle a bit on one foot.

GP You have to be straight in the body.

RvC When the older men taught the dance did they dance a little bit like me, (demonstrating a pronounced, ponderous movement) you see what I mean?

GP Yes, that was what some of the Papa men said they did. I haven't been too hard on these boys, I appreciate their interest and willingness to come but it's maybe something I'll have to teach them. Some of the Papa men also bent the swords a little.

RvC They make a bow of the sword?

GP Yes. And the back should be straight.

RvC The back is straight? It's only the legs that are dancing?

The other thing I noticed was that when St George has the Star and the men go round them, each takes the sword shape and holds it up in turn. Usually the Star turned over one segment of a circle then one dancer took the Star without turning it. Should the Star rotate or not?

GP Yes. What you observed, that's quite accidental. I think that a point had come out and that's why the boy held it in that way. It was in danger of falling out. One of the boys noticed and so he took the points. That's what happened.

RvC There's one other thing which surprised me. In most of the dance everything is clearly marked by the music. There's only one point, I think when you step over, I can't remember exactly, that's not marked in music. How do they know when to change the move?

GP When they come out of the weaving, or when they're making the arch?

That's up to St George. He can prolong it as long as he likes. It's the dance that leads the music. What's it when he shouts "Loose?"

RvC Yes he shouts a command. But is there was a certain point when you step over the swords and that moment is not indicated by the music. Do you get a command or something? How do they know when to do this? Is there a counting of the steps or something like that? How do you know that you have to step over if it's not clearly indicated in the music.

GP No, I don't know when you mean. Maybe when they go underneath then two go down on their knees and step back over?

RvC It's when they are in a circle and they go over the swords, under the swords or over the swords all together.

GP But there's no indication in the music. If it happens in the dance to coincide with something in the music, that's accidental because the music is a background. The dance leads the music, there is no indication in the music anywhere.

RvC The command you gave is loose?

GP No. Loose - to let the swords go.

RvC Getting free? You are in a big circle and break free. That is the meaning getting loose?

GP Yes, that's right.

TS Thank you very much for talking to us. What I'd like to do, if it is alright with you is to transcribe this interview and write something based on what you've talked about. If you then approve I hope to print it in the newsletter on sword dancing similar to the sample you saw.

GP Please do. I am delighted to help.

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The next issue will contain an article from Renaat van Craenenbroek about the Antwerp Sword dance. It will also carry results of the survey carried out over the past 18 months plus general correspondence which has been "squeezed out" of the last two issues.

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

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