



Issue 2, Series 4 Summer 1993

RATTLE UP My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE
WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

I consider myself lucky to be able to travel increasingly often to the Continent and, with the contacts made mainly at Lange Wapper events in Antwerp, I have established an international network of contacts who have an interest in sword dancing.

Some of my trips result in full blown articles in the broadsheet (Strani from Czechoslovakia in RUMB issue 2, series 2, Bal do Sabre from Bagnasco, Italy in issue 4, series 2). Other trips result in less substantial, but never-the-less interesting material. This is specially so when I am revisiting a dance team or, in the case of the following articles, making trips to see teams I have seen before on their own ground. The following two articles result from trips made in 1991 to Italy and America.

LA DANZA DELLA SCIABOLA!

A trip to Northern Italy.

In July 1991 I accepted an invitation from the Folklore Group "Bal du Sabre" from the village of Bagnasco in Northern Italy to attend what was described on their invitation as an International Gathering of sword teams. I gathered that the organisers had invited dance teams from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, England Italy (two teams) and possibly a team from Spain, however the Germans, English and Spanish did not turn up.

In the absence of an English dance team my part in the proceedings involved giving a video and slide presentation about Longsword dancing in Britain. The event at which this presentation was held followed an official reception in an elegant marble floored hall on the Sunday morning. Most of the dancers, plus more than fifty villagers and local officials, were present and, in spite of the delays caused by translation into two languages, they were receptive and appreciative. The most dramatic audience reaction came, at the end of my talk, when I called up the leaders of the Czech, Belgian and Italian teams together with the Mayor, the local police official and a visiting academic. I showed them how to create a 'back lock' that, when it was hoisted in the air, was greeted as something akin to magic.

I first met the Bagnasco team and their President, Guiseppe Carazonne, the organiser of the International event, in 1989 when we both visited Antwerp for the Lange Wapper Half Lent event.

The Bagnasco meeting was billed as the fifth International Sword gathering, although the previous four events, held every other year, had previously involved local teams, three from Northern Italy plus the Baccubert from South East France. The dances from these villages are similar in general style - in the case

of the Italian teams I was only able to see the subtle variations in the dances by comparing the performances on video. The previous gatherings moved between the home towns of the four teams involved - Bagnasco, Castello Stura and Fenestrelle, Italian teams from the area around the town of Cuneo, and Briancon (the home of the French team who dance the Baccubert) and they attracted substantial interest from local people and from Italian and French folk researchers. I first heard of the event in 1978 when Renaat van Craenenbroeck, leader of the Belgian Lange Wapper team, visited Bagnasco on his 'mission' to locate as many teams as possible who perform sword dance traditions.

Lange Wapper, or more accurately, Renaat, regularly invites foreign sword dance teams to visit Antwerp for the traditional Half Lent event in March. Grenoside Traditional Sword Dancers have attended in the past as have the Czech team from Strani and recently Goathland Plough Stots spent a very enjoyable time there on their first trip abroad. It therefore seemed natural enough that Renaat should invite his hosts in Bagnasco to visit the Half Lent event in Antwerp in 1989.

As a result of this visit to Antwerp the Bagnasco team got an appetite for foreign travel. They have visited Czechoslovakia and are making strenuous efforts to get an invitation to come to England. Goathland Plough Stots have similarly caught the travel bug and are anxious to get on more overseas trips.

An International future?

To further this desire to travel and make overseas contacts the organisers of the Bagnasco gathering decided to make their event an International affair and invite the foreign teams.

This has since proved to be a one-off event, mainly because of the cost of arranging such 'International' events. This may serve to relieve the original format and re-include the local teams from Fenestrelle and Castello Stura.

The Bagnasco event was a great success. It was most enjoyable and worth the exceptionally long journey. There is talk of the event being held annually and moving around Europe between Antwerp, Briancon, Czechoslovakia and Bagnasco. The Bagnasco organisers involved Turin University who videoed taping the event. The dancing display was preceded by a rousing speech by Dr Tavo Burat from the University, who linked traditions and the sword dance with personal liberty and freedom (although my understanding of Italian is limited) and suggested that sword dance teams from Spain, Bulgaria(?) and England, should be invited to join the "International network".

The possible impact of the changes

The move towards "International" events often results in changes in the presentation and performances of some of those teams who attend. The Strani team now have a well-rehearsed stage show, reminiscent of the slick, but

unsympathetic performances by other East European State Dance troupes, and at least one other team perform a shortened version of their dance.

It will be interesting to see if the changes made for this type of event will affect the format and style of the traditional customs in the teams' home bases.



Some months after the Belgian team Lange Wapper visited Britain for the Longsword Weekend I saw Ebor Morris hoist their fool on a sword lock in a move reminiscent of the climax of Lange Wapper's dance.

Perhaps I am worrying unduly - perhaps this is all part of the traditional process and the teams will continue to relate to their traditional audience whilst enjoying the undoubted satisfaction to be gained by trips to perform in very different settings.

6,000 miles for one dance!

A notable feature of the event for me, with experience of English Folk Festivals and Days of Dance, was that each team danced only once in the whole weekend. On Saturday afternoon, and in the blazing sun on a raised stage in the local Sports Ground, each team came on and performed their dance. The dances by Bagnasco and the Baccubert team both last over 20 minutes. The Belgians added the Trawantel dance (the traditional Flemish stick and hoop dance) to their sword dance and the Czechs added a substantial programme of song and social dance - the full show lasted over well over 2 hours (in the heat of an Italian afternoon on a football pitch) in total but it was the only chance over the weekend to see the dance teams in action.

The cancellation of the planned 1992 Longsword weekend led me to wonder if Continental teams would pull the crowds - and attract the teams to a UK based event with international involvement.

Would it have an adverse effect on UK teams? How much do we owe to being relatively isolated by the Channel?

The last such event was the International event in London's Hyde Park in 1935 - shortly before the war broke out!

Any reactions or offers to help?

Trevor Stone, May 1992

"ANYTHING BUT BAGELS!"

A dance weekend with a difference - the Half Moon event in New York in February 1992.

Details of the dance weekends organised by Half Moon Sword in New York were the subject of an article by Steve Corrsin in RUMB Issue 3, Series 3. Although I knew what to expect from reading Steve's article I was never-the-less 'knocked out' by the event - by the differences and similarities, by the dedication of the teams, and by the atmosphere - dancing based on traditional English sword dances transplanted to noisy and bustling New York. It left a lasting impression and caused me to question some of my preconceptions. This is a report of my personal reactions to the trip.

Background

Many people tend to assume that, because of a common language and to an apparent fondness in the UK for American TV programming, life in America will not be substantially different to life in the UK. If my experiences are anything to go by this couldn't be further from the truth.

Some years ago, from a workshop participant at Sidmouth Folk Festival, I heard of an annual sword dance event held in New York "involving dozens of teams". It seemed incomprehensible to me that there would be enough teams with an interest in sword dancing to support such an event in the whole of America let alone from the Eastern Seaboard. I therefore dismissed the claim as colonial one-upmanship.

Three years ago I started corresponding with Steve Corrsin from New York and (less often) with Rhett Krause from Boston. My contact with Steve was to help him to enhance the sword dance bibliography he is working on of references to European sword dance. My correspondence with Rhett was to follow up on an article on sword locks he wrote for the CDSS Journal.

This correspondence soon showed just how wrong my assumption about the sword dance scene in America was. A video sent by Steve of the 1989 Sword Ale, although suffering from degradation by copying, showed no less than 11 teams, many of whom achieved a high standard of performance. This aroused my curiosity and I expressed interest in attending the New York Sword Ale - from then on things moved at a rapid pace. In addition to the two day Sword Ale I also agreed to an unspecified number of workshops - expecting a couple - but this rapidly became six - including two which included trips to Boston and New Jersey. One request, to go to Minnesota, had to be turned down when I realised that it was 1,000 miles away from New York.

The event

The focal point of the trip, the Sword Ale, is organised by Half Moon Sword. The Ale takes a similar form to most English dance weekends but there were significant differences, differences that gave the event a unique character. The use of the name "Ale" is misleading to us 'Brits' - we anticipate the bawdy events which caused the Ales of the past to be banned. Rather the title is typical of a general American desire to "antiquate". I could not imagine any participants at the New York event spending time in prison for drunkenness.

Different dance venues

In England we are liable to overlook the influence of the English pub on many aspects of our social life - including dancing. New York, indeed it seemed to me the whole of America, has nothing to compare with our pubs and the locations used as dance venues were the first main difference. The day started with a display by each of the 13 teams in a cramped and dingy part of Pennsylvania Station. The teams then split into 5 tours to give displays at theatres and museums throughout the city - the tour we accompanied visited a building in Central Park called "The Dairy". Before they danced there some of the dancers took a diversion to ride on a roundabout of the type we see in many traditional

Fairs. It had been carefully housed in a special building as a prized display piece. The tours met again at 5.00pm where all teams once again performed in turn in the dramatic, but overpowering, Grand Central Station.

Travel between the dance spots was by public transport - on the New York subway system.

This last display finished around 7.00pm and was followed by a meal which presented a Quixotic mixture of formality and casualness. The meal and a few short speeches were followed by an informal dance session (jet lag overtook me so I missed the session).

The dancers

A quick glance through the tables in Steve Corrsin's article which listed the teams who attended previous events would rapidly identify the key difference compared with UK events - in the sex of the dancers, women outnumbered men by more than 2 to 1. At the 1992 Sword Ale 4 teams (Half Moon, Short Sword, Toronto Women's Sword & Mystic Garland) were women only, 6 teams (Orion, New Yorktown Sword School team, New World Sword, Midnight Rapper, New Haven, That Long Tall Sword) were mixed gender and 3 teams (Greenwich Morris, Snark Rapper & Longwood Rapper) were men only.

The majority of the dancers had a high level of commitment and took a keen interest in the performance of the other teams with appreciation of new and complex moves expressed by cheering, whooping and clapping.

There was no risk of drunkenness - very little alcohol was available on the tours. At most locations there were no bars and no official "pub stop" until late on Sunday afternoon. Perhaps it was the predominance of women involved in organising the event, or maybe the fact that women were in the majority in the dance teams, that made pub spots so unimportant. Or to look at it another way, perhaps it was the lack of alcohol which contributed to the high standard of dance performance.

There is a tendency (which I consider to be unfortunate!) for many American sword teams to overdo the flashy moves. A number of the rapper teams we saw squeezed into their performances the maximum number of dramatic figures, usually danced with amazing rapidity and gusto but ignoring the contrast so necessary to a balanced performance. Even the simple act of withdrawing swords from the lock was turned into an elaborate flourish by some teams.

Sunday involved a fuller programme than would be found at most English weekends. The day started with an informal "brunch" at the home of one of the dancers - an ideal opportunity to socialise and handle the masses of questions about the dance scene in England. Then the six teams who could field a full team set off on three tours to perform at Arts Centres, Churches and Museums around the Brooklyn area. Then, as a finale, 6 teams who could still field a full team performed at a most suitable building, known as the Picnic House, in a park in Brooklyn. This was a fitting finale - it was the most relaxed and pleasant session of the weekend with a large and appreciative audience. And it was followed by a trip to a bar involving a informal session which was as memorable as any in the UK.

A "Pickup" team....

When we arrived in New York we were told that an English "pick up" team was expected to attend the event. When it was explained to us that a "pick up team" was not what we imagined but what we would call a "scratch team" I said that the only such sword team I knew of was Snark Rapper. This turned out to be a good guess. A group of 10 people drawn from rapper teams throughout England made the trip, in the case of one dancer just for two days as he had to return home to get married!

Snark Rapper were well received by the American audiences and especially by the dancers. The excellent dancers were supported by a boisterous and noisy Betty and Tommy - to quote "How come, when you lot have had 200 years to practice, you still haven't mastered the English language" - delivered in a Geordie dialect that I had problems with! The daughters of one of the dancers, nicknamed the Snarkettes, gave an excellent display of step dancing.

Snark put on an entertaining show, particularly at the Sunday evening pub session and, in spite of the organisers determination otherwise, they managed to find two or three unscheduled pub spots, with one selling Sam Smith's beer (at more than £3 a pint). It was one of the Snark performers who, towards the end of their stay, when asked what they wanted for breakfast came out with the phrase "anything but bagels" that became a catchword for the next few days.

The workshops

Most of the workshops I have taken in England have been held at Folk Festivals or at team practice rooms in draughty church halls or gloomy, little



Above - At the feast which followed the dance tours one of the women's' teams decided to give one of the Snark team a fitting send off when he left to travel back to attend his wedding!

Right - One of the ladies teams, Toronto Women's Sword dancing 'North Skelton' at breakneck speed in Grand Central Station at New York.



used rooms in the less popular pubs. I am used to participants 'drifting in' anytime up to an hour after the published starting time - and at most venues we need to make regular beer breaks.

Not so in America!

Two of the workshops I gave, one in New Jersey for a team called Shandygaff and the other for the Boston Centre of the CDSS, were in church halls but hardly the dreary places I am used to. All other four workshops (for New World Sword, Half Moon, Greenwich Morris Men and Orion Sword) introduced me to a new phenomena - the dance studio. These were rooms specially booked by the hour for dance practice and rehearsal - and they were all incredibly hot.

The usual practice arrangement for New York teams is for the room to be booked for a two hour spell. This ensured that most team members turned up on time and were very keen to get the maximum value out of their practice session. The need to pay for the room, coupled with lack of distractions, especially the absence of a bar, resulted in a level of commitment to the dance that would be the envy of most British teams.

Working with smaller groups in an informal atmosphere gave me an opportunity to ask the dancers questions about their motivation, how they got involved in the dance and find out a little more about their background.

Surprisingly, very few of the dancers I talked to had any logical connection with England. I expected to find large numbers of ex-pats, or second generation migrants from Great Britain, but only once heard of a dancer with English predecessors - and that was a female dancer who could trace her ancestry to a Quaker family who arrived in America over 200 years ago.

Most dancers were aged between 30 and 45, not dissimilar to the age range found in England. However a quick "straw poll" of the occupations of dancers indicated a much greater predominance of professionals than we would expect to find here. There was a surprisingly high number of dancers with experience in the Theatre, which may account for the preference for dramatic movements.

The reasons dancers took up sword dancing, especially for many of the women dancers, were similar to the reasoning we would expect to find in England except that there was very little dedication to the maintenance of a tradition. The lack of feeling for 'tradition' may well have been a major reason for the dancers' determination to achieve a high technical standard of dance - the dances which most performers enjoyed were those which were taxing, fast and contained a large number of flashy features.

Most teams admitted to needing a 'regular injection' of interest, usually created by changing the dances they performed every two or three years. A refreshing feature, which arose from the teams desires to "create differences", was a different approach to calling-on songs. Three teams used self-penned calling on songs, two of which were amusing, brought in current events and topical personalities and were highly relevant to the American scene. An example, from Longwood Rapper from near Boston appealed to me:

Intro

Good people pay attention, come listen to our song

It isn't our intention to keep you very long

Chorus

Indeed friends, it's true friends I would not tell a lie

and if you wait a moment you'll see it as well as I

Verses to introduce each dancer - e.g.

Now Joe says he's half English, half Irish and half Scot

He works to balance the budget and that explains a lot.

A subsequent verse had me beat - until it was explained that it referred to recent legislation which made it illegal to serve eggs that had not been thoroughly cooked, thus outlawing the American delicacy of "egg sunny side up"

More teams than I had expected restricted their dancing to sword dances although only a handful of teams went as far as dancing only rapper or longsword. The dozen or so teams who perform Longsword in the New York and Boston areas have gone through a number of fashions in the dances they perform. Twenty years ago, mainly because of the teaching of a handful of tutors including Jim Morrison, most teams danced versions of the North Skelton and/or Sleights dances. Then the dances from Escrick and Ampleforth took over in popularity. The impact of workshops by Ivor Allsop some years ago at the Pinewoods Camp could be seen in one team who had recently started dancing the Haxby dance - identical to the version danced by Barnsley Longsword. The latest fad is "Papa Stour" - but not the version as danced by the Shetland team but rather a dance based on the faster and more taxing version performed by Carlisle Sword. Two teams in the New York area already perform it and at least three additional teams expressed their intention to perform it and were most anxious to see my videos of versions of the dance.

During my travels I also came across a team of women from Marlborough who danced a version of the Handsworth dance. I am told by John Pitts (of the Handsworth team) that an American woman, Andy Barrand, spent some time with the team some years ago - the team understood her visit to be part of a research project. They were most put-out to find that it was to gather information to teach the Handsworth dance to an American women's team! I do not know whether it is consoling, or rubbing salt into the wound for the Handsworth team to say that the Marlborough women performed the dance very well.

The workshops I gave excluded any dances currently performed by "traditional" teams and concentrated on my version of the Helmsley and Bellerby dances, both of which went down well. The Helmsley dance however attracted much cynical comment in New York - the very wealthy Helmsley family had just featured in a well-publicised court case accused of evading taxes!

For the first time at any workshop I have given a team from Boston, Orion Sword, mastered the Salton dance (with the one, two, three, hop step specified by Maud Karpeles).

I understand that at least four of the teams I taught are still working on dances taught at the workshops and so the next US Longsword fashion may be the Helmsley dance and the triangular lock. There was also a deal of interest in the "portcullis lock" that I demonstrated to some teams and I am sure that it will be worked into some of their dances in the near future.

When planning my trip I received an invitation to go Minneapolis which I was tempted to accept until I realised that it was over 1000 miles away from New York. I understand that the area supports an active Morris and sword dancing fraternity and regular "Ales" are held there and indeed in other parts of America.

So, after expressing concern in the first article about the unwitting changes that can result from external contacts how am I going to justify my "intrusion" onto the American scene? Obviously I will have had some impact on the future of sword dancing in America - but the traditions there are very different. There are no long established customs (even though sword dancing has been regularly danced in the New York area for over 70 years). The outstanding tradition is one of regular change, elaboration and invention. I hope to have given it a push. I also hope Steve Corrsin will carry out a survey of teams to provide some records for future researchers who may have an interest in Morris and Sword in America.

POSTSCRIPT: Steve Corrsin supplied a handout and details of the 1993 Sword Ale that sounds just as popular as the event I attended. Steve also tells me that two teams continue to work on the dances I taught on my trip - Orion are dancing the Bellerby dance and Steve's own team, New World Sword are working on Helmsley. Perhaps I will get a chance to return in the next few years and see what has developed! I have fewer misgivings about 'influencing' the dance in America where the tradition is of change and experiment, than changes to Continental (or English) customs.

Trevor Stone, March 1993

THE AIDENSFIELD ARMS



Goathland Plough Stots with their guests Kirkburton Rapier Dancers and Sullivan's Sword at the dance weekend described in the text. If you visit the area don't go looking for the pub shown - it is really The Goathland Hotel and is regularly renamed to become part of the set for the TV series 'Heartbeat'.

A LONGSWORD GATHERING

Report by Keith Thompson of the Goathland Plough Stots dance weekend held in September 1992.

September 92 saw the continuance of the longsword festival tradition started some years ago, as much as to please Mick Cook, whose original effort brought little response, as to uphold a gathering where sticks, bells & hankies were notable by their absence (not to mention the social side).

Friday 18th September saw the nocturnal gathering of the participants, Sullivan's Sword & Kirkburton Rapier Dancers, with the host team Goathland. Friendship renewed, tales recounted of the year so far, added to the general ambience of a pleasant evening, all washed down with copious helping of beer.

Saturday morning (not too early), saw the teams depart for Whitby buoyed by the absence of the forecasted rain, in fact the sun shone on the gathered righteous, who later upon departure, deemed ice cream a suitable accompaniment to that already imbibed. Dancing was in general of a very high standard, with little of the usual problems in getting the participants to perform, the informality of the event no doubt helped!

The night saw the usual singing and story telling in the Goathland Hotel, well into the small hours before turning in to start on the Sunday. Again the sun shone as the teams boarded the North Yorks. moors railway bound for Grosfont to dance, prior to returning to Goathland for a final fling and then homeward journeys. Unfortunately this was the derailing point of the do, Yorkshire Television were filming outside the hotel for the new Heartbeat series. This led to a bit of brinkmanship, culminating in the offer of free drink from the director in return for silence from melodeons, fiddles & accordions with a promise of a donation for charity. The power of the sword again prevailing. With a good crowd gathered the teams performed for the last time, before departing for home but not before a photograph taken at a new location to record the discovery of a new village somewhere in North Yorkshire. The general feeling was a good do for those who participated, well worth running next year around the same period, perhaps others may wish to join us?

Keith Thompson, February 1993

CUMBERLAND LONGSWORD REVISITED

An update from Andrew Kennedy of Carlisle Sword & Morris

Mike Jensen of Carlisle Sword & Morris has already written in these pages about Cumberland's sword dancing traditions, and indeed has put together a 6 man longsword dance which is now known as the Cumberland Sword Dance, and which, we are told, has been copied from a video recording and is now regularly performed in North America. *(It was one of the dances I saw at the Half Moon Sword Ale - and was danced very well Ed)* Carlisle dance a variety of styles and traditions and often go out during the winter on rapper tours, and so we decided to try something similar this year, but with longsword.

We used Mike's researches as the basis, identifying some villages where sword dancing had flourished in the past. To commemorate one notable appearance, when some weavers from Bampton danced in Great Orton on Shrove Tuesday, 1780, we chose 20th February - the Saturday before Shrove Tuesday. This had the added advantage of falling at a quiet time of the dancing year. As the core of the tour we took the villages of Little Bampton and Great Orton. The dances for the day were the Cumberland and Papa Stour; with us were some of the women of the team, to do some clog dancing.

We started in Wigton, supposedly to catch the shoppers, but it was a cold, wet day and we danced to a few passers-by - who kept on passing by, plus a mother and two children who had come specifically to see us and who stayed for the whole show, which we thus felt obliged to complete. We were pleased to get into the warmth after this, and revise our plans. There was to be no more outdoor dancing that day.

Our next stop was the Tam o' Shanter at Little Bampton, quite a big pub with plenty of space, although as it was fully carpeted the women had to stand in the flagstoned fireplace to dance! The Wellington at Great Orton is an altogether smaller place and the Papa Stour dance in particular was rather cramped and not looking its best. In both Little Bampton and Great Orton the locals were interested to hear what we were doing.

After this came the Ship, at Thursby. This had a good space and a bit of an audience, but despite having previously agreed to our visit with the landlord changed his mind and wouldn't let us dance, so we moved on, our only regret



Carlisle Sword Dancers are taking over from Loftus as the most travelled sword team! In addition to trips abroad (see issue 2, series 2 for details of a trip to Canada) they also attend many UK events and festivals. The photo shows them at the 1989 Longsword festival at Goathland.



Steve Corrsin on his last trip to Britain when he visited Cecil Sharp House to discuss the bibliography on European Sword Dance which he is working on and which will be published by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

being that some of us had already bought drinks. After one false start ("Would it be all right for us to do a sword dance here?" "Not really" Exit) we hit upon the Bird-in-Hand, at Oulton. This was marvellous. In the first place there was free food, I'm not sure why (they certainly weren't expecting us), but sandwiches, sausage rolls and the like were very welcome. We danced, admittedly in a rather tight space and generally relaxed in a very friendly atmosphere before moving on to Wigton Hospital, where we had arranged to dance for some of their elderly patients. This was well received, and so were we - afterwards we were taken to another room for tea and biscuits, which was just right for this time of day. Then one of the staff came in with a message: they'd had a telephone call from an old people's home up the road who had been contacted by the landlord of the Bird-in-Hand, and who were wondering whether we'd have time to look in. We did, and once again we were made very welcome, although lack of time prevented our accepting any more tea and biscuits.

Now it was time to stop for the evening. The dancers of 1780 appeared at a local event called an Upshot, whereby a group of people would organise an evening of dancing and other entertainment, all of which would be accompanied by beer and simple food and paid for by means of a whip-round. We finished our day at the Bridge End Inn at Dalston, where we spent the evening singing, dancing, playing tunes and eating and drinking. This might yet be remembered as the Dalston Upshot. We hope to do it again next year.

POSTSCRIPT: although the Cumberland sword dances have not been performed in living memory, there was a lot of interest from our audience in this largely forgotten piece of local history. Over the winter Carlisle have been working on a new dance which is consistent with surviving descriptions. We hope to dance it out in April and, thereafter, to incorporate it in our repertoire. Mike Jensen is producing a booklet about sword dancing in Cumberland which should be available soon.

Andrew Kennedy, April 1993

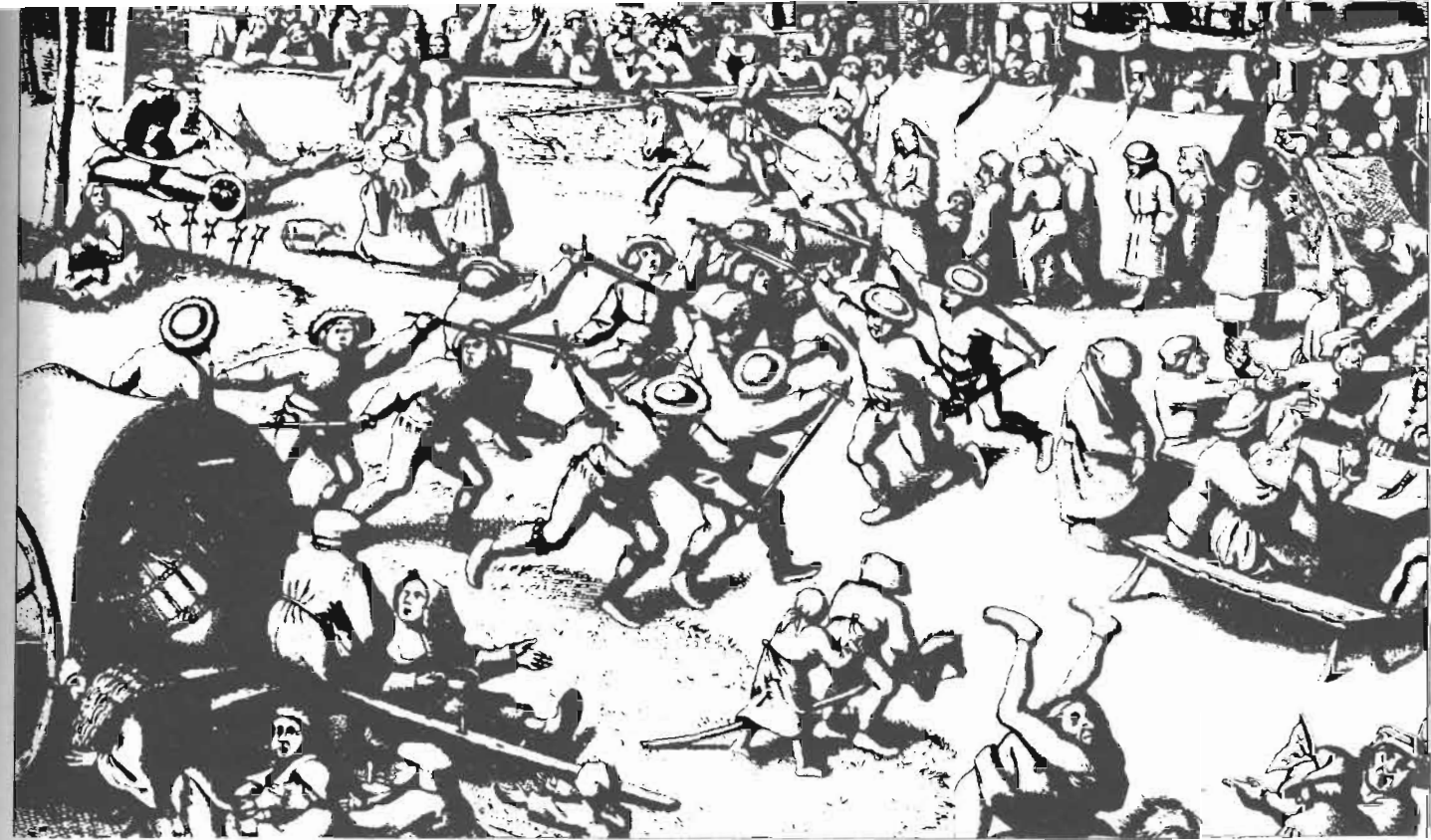
SWORD DANCING IN EUROPE: A HISTORY

An abstract supplied by Steve Corrsin describing his latest project, a book on sword dancing in Europe.

One of the most widespread and dramatic styles of folk dance performance in Europe over the past six centuries has been sword dancing, specifically the linked styles - often called "hilt & point" or "chain" sword dances - which developed in the late Middle Ages and are still practised in a number of countries today. In these styles, a group of dancers, normally ranging from four or five up to twenty-odd, moves through various figures, minimally lines and circles but often using very complex and demanding movements. The dancers are connected to one another by swords, or sword-like implements of metal or wood, which they usually hold with the hilt in their right hands and the point of the next dancer's sword in their left.

This style only developed in Europe. Cultures all over the world have developed fencing, mock combat, or 'Pyrrhic' sword dances, but that is not the topic of this book. Records of linked sword dances exist in most countries of northern, western and central Europe, in present day Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Sweden, Denmark and Britain. The dances are still done in a number of these countries (particularly Britain, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Czechoslovakia), and also in the United States, Canada and in other countries where they were not found before the 20th century. The oldest records date from the late Middle Ages, beginning at the end of the 14th century, in Flanders.

In many parts of the European continent, linked sword dancing had its heyday in the 15th-17th centuries, as a performance style for Shrovetide (Carnival) and other public holidays. But in some countries it has been chiefly a modern (18th-20th centuries) style.



One of the earliest representations of a sword dance? This etching is from a painting by Pieter Bruegel the elder entitled "The Fair of St George's Day" dated circa 1600.

This book will cover all the history of European styles of linked sword dancing, from its recorded beginnings in the late Middle Ages to the present day. The first chapter is an introduction, providing an overview, plus the histography of the topic and theories of its origins. (the idea that this is a survival of ancient tribal rituals has been widespread. I criticise that approach, and show it to be a relatively modern, i.e. 14th-20th centuries, performance style.) Chapters 2-4 concern the late Middle Ages and early modern times 14th to mid-18th centuries), in the Low Countries (chapter 2), central and northern Europe (chapter 3), and Spain and Portugal (chapter 4). Chapters 5-10 concern modern times (mid-18th century to World War II) and ends with a brief survey of developments in all countries since 1945.

Most of the sources that I have used are not available in English. I have drawn on the rich literatures that exist in German, Dutch, French, Czech, Slovak, Italian, Spanish, etc. Writers in English have normally concentrated almost entirely on the British contribution to sword dancing. Surveys in English of developments on the continent, or of the whole scope of sword dancing, are very few, and the sole book length one is inadequate and outdated (1962). No comprehensive surveys on the topic have been published in other languages since two German studies in the 1930s. They suffer from the use of incomplete sources and a nationalistic, "Pan-Germanic" bias, and are also marred by the "ancient ritual survival" approach. I hope that my book will correct this problem of lack of comprehensive studies, and will provide one solidly based on the historical evidence as well.

The overall picture of linked sword dancing shows enormous diversity. Yet there is also an essential unity of form. The emphasis and originality of this style of dance lie in the linked movements of the dancers, connected by their swords. Linked dances are very common, whether using hands, handkerchiefs, belts, leather rings, or other objects. Using swords, or sword substitutes, for the purpose adds an element of excitement, and even risk.

My goal is to help readers understand that linked sword dancing comes close to being a "Pan-European" tradition, one with a rich and well-documented history covering six centuries. It has, moreover, a distinct and definite history. It is by no

means a timeless, ancient mystery, with roots in the magical rituals of primitive humanity, insusceptible to historical study, which is the way many authors have described it. Further, it has proved to be a very adaptable style (or complex of styles), which, while fascinating in its own right, is best viewed in the particular contexts of local styles of celebration and performance. It is still very much a living form. It is now a recognised part of historical and folk dance scenes in a number of countries.

Steve Corsin, January 1993

OKI KENBAI - THE JAPANESE SWORD DANCE

Frank Attanasio writes:

"My ventures into Japanese longsword came swiftly after my return (from a visit to the UK). An appointment was set up for Friday to meet with Mr Ochai of the Japanese Cultural School. Mr Ochai performs a sword tradition called IAI - a solo martial arts routine. It has 10 "figures", but no music and is definitely not a dance.

But, he has seen "Kembai" and we discussed this at length, trying to accommodate a language problem. Showing him some photos of longsword (English) he said Kembai was very similar! Kembai, according to Mr Ochai, is an older Japanese tradition (150+ years) for 5 or 6 dancers, sometimes masked. He said, initially, that it is connected (hilt & point) and makes a lock; but later he contradicted himself on these two elements. It is performed at Summer festivals to a music that includes drums, Japanese timpani and possibly flute. It is local folk dancing that can be seen in special areas of Northern & North Central Japan (he referred to Aomori and Gith prefectures). He said there are clubs for keeping the sword dancing.

The sword used, he said, are the same as martial arts or "Samurai" swords; long, slightly curved and handled, but not sharpened. I then played for him a video of Pinewoods men performing Ampleforth, he said it was "the same movement" but "different". He very much enjoyed the performance! (Another convert). He apologised for not knowing more about Kembai and we discussed any follow-up. He said he would look into what information he could find when he got back to Japan, including contacts and addresses of folk clubs that are doing

the dances. He asked if I would like a video of the dance if he could arrange it and I immediately affirmed the merit of this."

Frank Attanasio, January 1993

The following description of the Kenbai was contained in photostats of an illustrated leaflet supplied by Renaat van Craenenbroek

The Oki Kenbai (Devils) sword dance is very famous from the Iwate Prefecture. This dance originated more than 1,000 years ago in the Kitakami region for the purpose of driving devils out.

The dance has been performed more than ten times in foreign countries including the USA, China, France and Belgium. It is annually performed on August 7th, 8th and 9th as part of a local festival. At this festival about 160 people dance in a splendid and dramatic scene.



The dancers put on hair pieces, a mask, a blue breast plate, a pleated skirt and socks called Tabi. They hold a fan in the right hand, a red stick in the left hand and they have a Japanese sword called a Tachi.

Supplied by Renaat van Craenenbroek, April 1993

The dance appears to be of the 'combat' variety but some moves are very similar to English dances. Further details of the Kenbai are contained in a copy of 'NORTHERN JUNKET', a magazine published by Ralph Page in which he describes a teaching trip to Japan in 1957. If space permits I will publish it in a later issue.

CATCHING UP

I was sad to hear that Phoenix Sword from Leicester have folded after many years. Reduced numbers resulted in them making less outings in recent years. The last time I saw them they put in a super performance at the 1989 Longsword Festival at Goathland.



As one team disappears another emerges. At the Ring Meeting they organised in Otley Boars Head Morris from Bradford brought out their new Longsword dance - a self penned dance for eight men they call 'Spinning Jenny'



A number of readers have expressed interest in the sword lock tattoo described in an earlier newsletter. I have decided to let the wearer remain anonymous - but he dances with Pinewoods Morris Men from the USA!



The next issue will carry the second part of John Ledbury's thesis which deals with John's study of the Historical evidence.

Be sure to let me know if you change your address

Contributions welcome....

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