



# RATTLE UP My Boys

AN OCCASIONAL BROADSHEET FOR THOSE  
WITH AN INTEREST IN LONGSWORD DANCE

Issue 2, Series 5 Winter 1995

## Ker-FLOOM! Ker-FLOOM!

### A VISIT TO JAPAN

This is an extract from an article in an American folk magazine called "Northern Junket" (Vol. 5 No 9 March 1957) describing the visit to Japan of an American delegation.

In 1956 a group of five American folk dance teachers toured Japan to teach folk dancing in 19 cities to over 21,000 Japanese. A 'moving force' in the group was the noted American dance teacher, author and researcher Ralph Page.

Ralph Page wrote up his experiences and printed a series of articles in a 'Gestetner' private circulation magazine he produced called "Northern Junket". Most of these articles deal with aspects of the groups' travels within Japan, but this extract is his report of a demonstration he saw of the Japanese sword dance known as Oni Kenbai - The Devils Sword Dance.

In other literature describing the dance the claim is made that Oni Kenbai is a Buddhist prayer dance performed to pay homage to ancestral spirits at the Summer Lantern Festival. Formerly called Tebutsukenbai (Buddhist Sword Dance), the name Oni Kenbai is said to derive from the performers frightening masks and aggressive dance movements.

Wassaki Oni Kenbai is the oldest of 12 versions of the ceremony performed in Iwate prefecture. It was originated during the Taiho period (AD 701 to 704) by followers of En, a spiritual recluse and was spread by the priests of Mount Haquro. The farmers of the area have continued the tradition of three basic dance themes: Kuruma Taison (protection from the Devils), Shujo Saido (salvation of Mankind) and Gokoku Hojo (Bountiful Heaven)".

Ralph Page writes:

Japan is divided into many prefectures roughly corresponding to our states, each prefecture seemed to have its own dances for which it was famous. At an evening party the last night we were in a community, we gave a short demonstration of dances and the audience loved them all. We danced Italian

Tarantella, Irish Siemso Berta, Bavarian Laendler, Mexican Vietijos or Mexican Wooden Doll Dance - or at least Michael Herman and Nelda Drury did the last - and once in a while Michael and Mary Ann (Herman) would show the Hopak. Then, many times, a group of dancers from the local city would show us some of their dances. In Hawata we were shown a three hundred year old dance of the merchants, and it was very exciting, danced in the dim light of torches and accompanying music of flutes and drums.

The most exciting dance of all we saw in Sondai, which is in north-eastern Japan. The Asahi Press [part sponsors of the trip] brought in a group of dancers who performed part of the "Devils Sword Dance of Iwo-saki". We were told that the dance was a thousand years old and we believed it. The entire dance is broken up into several parts and takes two hours to perform in its entirety, but they broke their usual custom and showed us but three parts, taking in all perhaps a half hour. Without question it was the highlight of our trip. Eight male dancers costumed for the part, four of whom wore black masks indicating the bad devils, and the other four wearing red masks, signifying the good devils. Each man wore a mane of white horse hair on his head.

The orchestra consisted of a pair of cymbals, three flutes and a huge bass drum, and the musicians sat on the floor in a line about twenty feet from the dancers.

The dance represented the triumph of good over evil and we were reminded of the fact that every sword dance in the world has the same motif. We were told in all sincerity that not fifty white people had been privileged to see this dance.

The first two parts of the dance were exciting enough with each line of dancers going through various gestures to scare the opposing line of men: they were working up to the main event so to speak. They stamped, yelled and gesticulated vigorously waving their arms and shaking their heads very dramatically as the white manes tossed in the air with their every movement. But now the fight itself.

Each dancer retired to the sidelines, returning with a two-edged sword at least three feet long. The line of red dancers faced the line of black, knelt on one knee holding the point of the sword to the floor in front of them, making a rude sort of cross. They seemed to be at prayer and a deathly silence settled over the room. The tension built up to breaking point as we waited, scarcely daring to breathe for fear it would break the spell of anticipation.

Ker-FLOOM! Ker-FLOOM!

It was the big bass drum thundering its demand for action. With an ear piercing shout the eight men leaped high into the air and came down cutting and slashing, sparks flew as the swords met in mid air; they wove sort of a grand right and left figure cutting and hewing as they went; each line advanced and retired with suitable sword play, then they passed through and returned. They

screamed continuously - the flutes shrilled - the cymbals clashed - and the drum throbbed incessantly; the audience was beside itself with excitement and yelled itself hoarse; I found myself beating the floor with my fist and exhorting the dancers to still greater endeavours. The last figure of the dance was exactly like a figure in the English Flamborough Sword Dance. The dancers circled, each man holding the sword point of the man behind him and running at top speed they turned the circle inside out, leaping over the sword of the opposite man, who merely lowered it to waist high. The dance ended with the bad devils falling to the floor and the good devils raising their swords, held in both hands, high above their heads and striking at their fallen foe. Of course they stopped the blow short of beheading, but it looked plenty close to me.

We had occasion to meet the dancers afterwards and found them to be farm folk and not professional dancers, yet their performance bettered that of many professional troupes I have seen. They gladly posed with us and I prize a color shot of our two groups. They seemed eager to learn what we thought of their dance, with no hesitation we told them that it was the most exciting sword dance we had seen; that they should take pride in their dance and keep it alive, and in keeping it alive see to it that no foreign elements were allowed to creep in. We examined their costumes closely and were permitted to handle their swords and I can report that the blades were the real thing, were very sharp, and quite heavy. No wonder they swung them two-handed! What baffled us was that no one was injured during the dance. I inquired if anyone had gotten hurt learning the dance and they smilingly replied that they didn't learn the dance with swords but with sticks, until they became adept in all the movements. All the same it was a wonder to me that some of them were not decapitated in the melee."

*I am indebted to Stephen Corrsin for sending me a copy of Ralph Page's "Northern Junket" magazine from which this is taken. In the meantime the search for more information on this fascinating Japanese Sword dance goes on. A project I am involved in to assemble a Video Anthology of World Folk Dances (funded by JVC Victor Company of Japan) has resulted in a promise of video and photos of the Devils Sword Dance. I wonder how long it will take before my urge to see the dance takes over and I take off for Japan!*

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## Clarification of "the bombing of Guernica"

Letter from Jan Vroman, a member of Lange Wapper dance team, who comments on my recent article on a trip to Northern Spain.

Dear Trevor

In "Rattle Up My Boys" (Issue 5, Series 4, Summer 1994) I read your account of our joint trip to Markina. On page 3 you say that "...Guernica was bombed by the Germans in 1937 during World War 2". This event was not in the Second World War and your article could even suggest that Spain was fighting against the Nazis during World War 2.

In reality the town of Guernica was bombed on 26 April 1937 by planes of the German Nazi-government assisting General Franco in his fight against the Republican government. On 18 July 1936 Generals Mola, San Jurgo and Franco seized power. They rebelled against the democratically elected Republican government of Spain. This was the start of the "Spanish Civil War", which ended on 28 March 1939 with the capitulation of Madrid. The second World War started on 3 September 1939 as a consequence of the German invasion of Poland. Franco-Spain did not join in this war.

But coming back to Guernica, I will explain how it came to be bombed by the Germans.

In 1936 the capitalist economy was in a world-wide crisis. Franco was sustained by the Catholic Church, the Spanish aristocracy, the big capital and the banks. Hitler & Mussolini were backed by Franco with troops. Many people abroad were aware of the fact that if fascism was to win in Spain, it would also march on in the rest of Europe. Individuals from others, Germany, Italy, Holland, Belgium and England (eg George Orwell) moved to Spain to fight on the side of the Republican Government. This government was also supported by Stalin with arms and military experts. They were not only fighting against fascism but were also responsible for the death of many Trotskyists and Anarchists.

This is why the Germans bombed a Spanish town, but why Guernica?

From 1512 until 1876, the 4 Basque provinces of Spain, Nafarroa, Araba, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia were to a high degree autonomous. They lost their autonomy in 1876, but, exception made for Nafarroa, acquired it again in 1933 (so this autonomy was not limited to Bizkaia as suggested in the article). It is because the Basque provinces defended the Republican government that Guernica, the historical and cultural capital of the Basques, was devastated. Of the 7000 inhabitants, 1600 were killed and 70% of the town was destroyed. It was a physical and mental humiliation for the Basques and the start of a radical oppression by the regime of Franco.

The Basque language was forbidden and those could speaking it in public could count on a vigorous punishment. Basque street names were renamed, the use of Basque names for children were banned, tombstones were mutilated and playing the Tixstu (Basque flute) was forbidden. With the end of the Franco regime this direct repression ended as we could observe on our trip to Markina.

As stated in the article, Picasso made his painting "Guernica" in protest. He refused to exhibit his painting in Spain under the Franco regime and was living in France, where he refused to collaborate with the German occupation. Even in 1948 he refused a passport from the Franco government to travel from France to Poland.

I would like to add some reflections. Although there exists a movement in Basque towards extreme nationalism and even fascism, it is, according to the information I have, incorrect to present ETA as solely separatist. The movement is not racist and has a programme concerning employment, the situation of women, lodging and environment. To illustrate this point: at Lemoniz, about 30km north of Bilbao, on the coast, there is a nuclear electrical power station. The construction was finished in 1977 but it never worked due to mass demonstrations.

Finally, about our common interest and love for folk dances and music, there is always some danger this could be misused for extreme nationalism. I've known such things happen in Flanders during the Second World War. We must always be apprehensive for this, certainly with sword dances. Our concern is to keep music and dances alive. If they should fade away we become poorer because something beautiful is lost which took generations to be built up. During our visit to Basque country in May 1993 I never observed abuse of this ideal.

Jan Vroman, Antwerp 1994

Other comments about my misleading reference to the Second World War was made in a letter from Gordon Ridgewell. His points are covered by Jan's letter printed above.

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## Arising from John Ledbury's articles

John Ledbury was kind enough to agree to have extracts from his thesis on the history and background to sword dancing published in Rattle Up My Boys. I split it into three parts which were

published in issues 1 (Winter 1992/3), 3 (Autumn 1993) and 4 (Spring 1994) in series 4. Corrections to transcription errors were printed in issue 5 (Summer 1994) as a result of correspondence from Gordon Ridgewell.

Shortly before the last issue of Rattle Up My Boys went to press John Ledbury wrote to me to comment on some of the points made in Gordon Ridgewell's 'CORRIGENDA AND ADDENDA' which was the main article in the previous issue (issue 5: Summer 1994). In addition to acknowledging the list Gordon supplied of corrections to place names etc John comments on the claim (which was challenged by Gordon) that the leader of the Flamborough Longsword team once carried a real sabre. John presents the basis for his report:

"The statement that the Flamborough lock was raised by a metal sword was not from Violet Alford's *Sword Dance and Drama*, as Gordon correctly points out, but in fact from Cecil Sharp's *Sword Dances of Northern England, part II*. Whilst referring to both authors on the subject of steel/wooden swords I got my sources somewhat confused. I plead guilty and to put the record straight I would like to quote a little more fully what they both said on the subject.

*Violet Alford, Sword Dance and Drama, London, Merlin Press. 1962, p41:*

*It is interesting to glance at the suggestion that the Flamborough swords - really long here, that is to say thirty-seven inches and of wood - possibly represent the local weaving implement for making ships mats, the more so as they are held, not in the sword hand, but in the left. There is good evidence that Sword dancers use their trade tools in the dance; the Coopers of Nuremberg used iron cask-hoops, Flamborough men a mat-weaving 'sword', and the Glovers of Perth may have used their skin 'scutcher.' But there is also plenty of evidence that wooden swords have replaced metal ones. Over and over again one is told 'Oh, their swords were lost, so now they have wooden ones.'*

*Cecil J Sharp, The Sword Dances of Northern England, Wakefield, EP Publishing, 1977, Part II, p28:*

*Each (Flamborough) dancer carries a wooden sword, made of ash or larch, thirty-seven inches long by one-and-a-half wide, shaped at one end into a handle and tapering slightly towards the tip. Nowadays the leader uses a wooden sword like the rest of the dancers; but until a few years ago he had a metal one, by the hilt of which he raised the Lock in the course of the dance."*

John's reference to the 'trade tools theory' prompts me to comment that, amongst Kathy Mitchells notes, there is some material on net repairing in the fishing trade. I will put together a short piece on the subject for a future issue.

## SWORD DANCE IN RHYME

Over the years I have come across a number of instances of poems and songs relating to Longsword in print. Readers may appreciate the following selection - if I have missed out your favourite let me know and I will add them to a follow-up article in a later issue.

### Introductory verse to a Lancashire Sword dance

*"A Prologue to a Sword dance spoaken at Latham Upon Ash Wednesday" (1)*

The common proverb teacheth us to say  
tis hasardus with sharp edg tooles to play  
Yet we t'increase your honors pleauer shall  
adding more triumphs to this carnauall  
forgett ye muses hid these nimpths those dames

and practyse with oure swords the olimpicke games  
be but auspicious to our platt while wee  
this night shall marse preferr to mercury

### T' Pleeaf Stots

*Dialect verse by Frank Dowson (2)*

Here they cum, tidaay seea grand,  
Runnin', lowpin', sooards i' hand!  
Rooases, ribbins, cooats sea sthraange,  
Hoose ti hoose they're gahin ti raange.

Last back-end when neets was dark,  
All t' lads set their sens ti wark -  
Leeartn their steps, an' showed their airt,  
Watchin' t'awd fooaks deea their pairt.

Hoo they thried an' thried ageean,  
Thowt this nivver wad be deean!  
Then they drissed i' sike fine cleeas  
Fancy suits frae heead ti teeas.

"Blues" an' "pinks" is allus pets.  
Seean theease danced i' twee fine sets.  
Watch 'em plet at last their sooards,  
Just when theease seeam flung all rooads.

Here's t'awd woman an' t'awd man!  
Peak'd aboon 'em sits a cloon.  
Sike queer "stots" an' "actin'" teea -  
Sum on t' deearstean, sum i' t' fleear!

Off they gan awaay ower't green  
Sike a show, was't ivver seen?  
Noo they're i' t' foad garth ti start,  
Ivry yan seea glad at heart.

### Calling-on verse used by Goathland Plough Stots

*by Frank Dowson*

"We're Gooadlan' Pleeaf Stots cum'd ageean  
All deck'd wi' ribbins fair;  
Seea noo we'll deea t'best we can  
An' t'best can deea neea mair."

*ED: At this point the spell checker on my word processor gave up!*

### The Sword Dancers song

*Written and performed by John Browell (3)*

*This is a humorous, self-penned song which is performed by John Browell, dancer and musician with Spen Valley Longsword.*

*John is typical of many performers who write and perform material for their own satisfaction, or to entertain small groups, rather than for 'concert' style performances.*

*Tune: "Treat my daughter decent"*

When I first came to Yorkshire many years ago  
I met a bunch of Odd Balls and I'll have you all to know  
They took me to a Public House and filled me up with beer  
And then they said they'd demonstrate a Sword Dance

Each man has a number and each one has a sword



We twist & turn and leap about and never say a word  
But if we lose our bearings and don't know where to go  
This verse will show you how to do a Sword Dance

#### *Chorus*

Three and four go smartly up and one & six they lead  
Five & six they raise a sword already for two and three  
You put a little circle in and four and five go through  
That's how you do a figure of the Sword Dance

I couldn't get the hang of it, it gave me loads of grief  
I nearly lost a finger and I bust me best false teeth  
But when I took refreshment I slotted into place  
And I just forgot me number in the Sword Dance

#### *Chorus*

They said you've managed Figure One now have a go at three  
It's really very similar but it wasn't so to me  
The brain was in a turmoil, but I couldn't let it go  
For I wasn't to be beaten by a Sword Dance

#### *Different chorus*

Three and four they put one down and one and six they leap  
Five and six lower a sword already for two and three  
You put another circle in and four and five jump o'er  
That's how you do this figure of the Sword Dance

The first place that I danced at, well it was the Pennine Show (4)  
We were on between the ferrets and the bantam judging, so  
we leapt about on pallets in the middle of a moor  
And we couldn't hear the music for the Sword Dance

We went to London Jubilee (5) it really was a slog  
Cause Brian trod in something that was left there by a dog  
He traipsed it all round Camden Town while dancing number three  
And took it to Australia in the Autumn

One snowy day in April we left for Lealholm Town  
We were looking for Belgian tourists that were said to be around  
Bruce said they were in Pickering but they were nowhere to be seen  
So we first got on the train and came to Goathland

So here's good luck to dancers all, to Captain, King & team  
From Loftus down to Handsworth may you never run out of steam  
For Yorkshire's own tradition to keep it on the go  
And show the County how to do a Sword Dance

We like to go to Whitby (6) cause we win it now and then  
On Sunday down to Beckhole where we have some Carlins (7), when  
JB can chat up Glenys and we have a pint or two  
To help us on our way back to Cleckheaton

## **Glenys' Commentary on the Sword Dancers Song**

*by Glenys, the landlady at the Birch Hall Inn at Beckhole, near Goathland, the pub used by Spen Valley when they visit the area*

The first time that they landed, well we wondered "What's to do?"  
There seemed to be lots of 'em, w't strangest accents too  
But any friends o't Plough Stots get a welcome at Beckhole  
Especially if they come to do the Sword Dance

Some jugs of beer were passed about and bowls of Carlin peas  
And someone shouted from the crowd "what do we do wi these?"  
There were several suggestions - and most I can't repeat,  
Lets just say they added something to the Sword Dance.

We marvelled at their lively step as they sped round and round,  
At shirts and jumpers riding up and trousers sliding down,  
Revealing scarlet undies and vests of varied hue,  
It was more like Belly dancing than a Sword Dance

Beckhole had never seen the likes of such a thing before,  
The company they stamped and shouted out for more,  
So its in and out, and round and round, and up and over too,  
They showed the company how to do the Sword Dance

Then its back to the bar, me lads, and fill the jugs anew,  
John struck up and rolled his eyes and sang without ado,  
Of Mrs Olroyd's antics and GGGGGossip John (8)  
So we asked them back next year to do the Sword Dance.

Now Russell came on his bike! he said that it were nowt,  
And David gave us all a treat and passed the Parkin out,  
They even left us with the cup they won down at the Spa (9)  
For beating Goathland Plough Stots at the Sword Dance.

Trevor came along with them - have you heard of him?  
He's written a book about it but its nothing like the film!!!  
So now on a rainy day or when were feeling low  
We can sing along and watch you do a Sword Dance.

Beckhole had never seen the likes of such a thing before,  
The company they stamped and clapped and shouted out for more  
So its in and out, and round and round, and up and over too,  
They showed the company how to do the Sword Dance.

## **The Longsword Lament**

*by Keith S Anderson (10)*

We're Gundulfs Longsword from way down in Kent  
to dance with perfection is our firm intent  
But when a crowd gathers things start to go wrong  
and that's why I'm singing this very sad song

#### *Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
perfect in practice but not on the day

While dancing in Yorkshire we were agile and deft  
the lock we performed was 'right over left'

When it was displayed wot an 'orrible sight  
some silly bugger went left over right

*Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
it all went wrong - wot an 'orrible day

"We'll do a lawnmower (11)" the Foreman did cry  
"There goes my finger, I saw it pass by"  
"and I wore a wrist watch when we sallied forth  
but now it's a sundial the hands have come ort!"

*Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
We're a comic turn, I did hear someone say  
  
Don't talk of the back lock, I'm fed up with it  
the last time we did one I went arse over tit  
The sword of my neighbour passed thru' my belt loop  
and the Cotswold side who were watching were all cock-a-hoop

*Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
They were using their hankies to wipe tears away

Over your neighbours from inside to out  
Hold the lock up but don't shake it about  
For if you do then I'm sure all your fears  
will come quite true when it falls round your ears

*Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
Pick it up quick then slink slowly away

We got it right at the pub Tuesday night  
We were real sharp, everything went alright  
We carried the lock off and when we were done  
found we were dancing to an audience of one

*Chorus*

Tour-a-loo tour-a-lay  
It's just sods law - aint it always that way

## Hird's Annals of Bedale

*An epic poem which mentions sword dancing is Hird's Annals of Bedale which, in rhyming couplets, presents many aspects of the history and folklore of the Bedale area of North Yorkshire. Some of the relevant verses are:*

With this solemnity I've done  
Procession still in view  
At Christmas time was many a one,  
When men begged for the plough

And this is done by husbandmen,  
It was their festival,  
Of Plough Stotts they'd a long train  
and drivers had withal.

They'd bladders blown, ty'd to a stick  
and rattling peas within,

Well the Stotts shoulders they did lick  
which caused a bumping din.

The stotts they walked two and two,  
With stretch stick in their hand  
Like to a wain, a rope went through,  
A long and strong cart band

Their hats with paper were well lace'd  
and ribbands round the crown,  
With clowns and bessys, they were grac'd  
To beg around the town

They did solict ev'ry one,  
And when they'd money giv'n  
Shout, lads, shout they cry anon  
And then the air was riv'n.

They'd musick too to lead the van,  
A fiddle, pipe or drum,  
Or perhaps they had a gay horseman,  
Who after children run.

All this is now quite laid aside,  
But how, I cannot tell,  
Whether religion, or vain pride,  
Or some mysterious spell.

The merry clown he sings them on,  
And names them one by one,  
With titles great he doth them crown,  
They follow him in turn.

He sings aloud, youv'e seen us all,  
Think on us what you will,  
And on the music he doth call,  
Old wife of Coverdale.

Then they commence, by jingling swords,  
They lightly trip the ground,  
Orpheus acts, you hear no words,  
They merrily dance around.

Next form themselves in a hexagon,  
Hold of sword point and hilt,  
Two after two, hold one sword down,  
Which they all leap agile.

.... *the poem continues for many verses'*

## 'The Sword King's address'

*another item identified by Gordon Ridgewell - but this time I beat him to it. In 1987 I saw a German team (Baden Wurtemberg) at an event in Sint Niklaas in Belgium. The climax of their performance was the hoisting of the leader on a sword platform from where he presented a speech in verse. When I enquired about the words of the speech I was surprised to hear that they had translated their speech from a report of an earlier German team (Arbeits-gemeinschaft der Sing Tanz und Spielkreise of*

Stuttgart) which had appeared in 1961 at the Royal Albert Hall. I found a translation of the speech in an article by Douglas Kennedy in *English Dance & Song*, Vol XXIV No 5, September 1961, p174

The German Sword Dance at the Albert Hall Festival aroused a great deal of interest and speculation, particularly the speech made by the character known as the King, who was lifted above head level on the lock. The speech he made in German aroused some suspicion in the minds of hearers, who were inclined to think that it was some blood thirsty reference to the Rite. They may be interested to see the translation!

#### THE SWORD KING'S MOTTO

As the swords discovered themselves,  
As we now have firmly united them,  
So may we be successful,  
In conquering that which divided us.  
Strength can separate,  
Strength can unite,  
May the brothers discover each other,  
May that which parted them become a bridge,  
On which the people here on earth,  
Are presented with a good home.  
I salute therefore the creator of Life and Death.

*Perhaps it may be worth getting another translation done!*

## Grenoside Sword Dance

by Peter Clarke

*Peter Clarke currently dances with Grenoside Longsword. Prior to joining the team he was prompted him to write the following poem which first appeared in English Dance and Song in Vol 43, No 3 1981. I am grateful to Peter for permission to reprint it here.*

Each year, outside the pub on Boxing Day,  
We stand, Christ-gentled,  
Civilised,  
Giving witness to the dance -  
Tidy faces, Petals on the Golden Bough,  
The tarmac shows us how to stand,  
Rectangular, squaring the natural ring.  
The swords are blunt,  
The dancers shod in clogs,  
The pretty costumes quaint,  
The captain lies a brief moment in the wet,  
His fox masking a pith-helmet.

These men who weave the endless chain  
Web-close within the crowd,  
And knot their swords,  
And slay their captain  
Are linked  
Sword tip and sword hilt,  
Hand to hand and mouth to ear, with all who ever dug their fingers  
In the earth  
And smelt the scent of green things  
Growing -  
With all who ever killed to eat  
And fought to live  
And felt their spittle thick for love -

With man -

With me. I'm not the single grain of sand,  
The drop of water falling on the rock of time:  
I bear my share by standing silent,  
The ritual must be done  
And watched.

Last year the dancers  
Wove the sun and mist into a rainbow  
Arching across the village street.

The rough grain of the dance has been filled  
With military polish:  
Swords go with trumpets, soldiers  
And the wounds of Cupid's darts,  
Romantic bullshit.  
The mystery has been  
Coerced  
Into what sense we make today  
Of magic.

Why ask the meaning  
Of rolling waves  
As dancers arch and dive along the set -  
Seasons, furrows, reaping, weaving?  
Of clashing swords -  
Fighting, threshing, sacrifice?  
Of tinkling song,  
Of endless chain,  
Of god-king's death and resurrection -  
Enough to sense  
The depth of magic.  
Animal spirits  
Working in the dark  
Linking us to timelessness  
And binding us  
To the earth.

## The Long Sword Dance

*Poem from English Folk Dance & Song News, No 5 April 1923. Credited to 'C.L.' - anyone got any more detail?*

With even, measured steps unhasting  
Run the swordsmen, each to each united  
Hilt and point, no movement ever wasting.  
Working to a common end, and single sighted:  
Outward, inward intertwining,  
Never pausing, never making an error:  
All the figures of their dance combining  
In one spell of vague, religious terror.  
Over swords held down, and under arches,  
From its steady purpose unrelenting,  
Still the dance with solemn grandeur marches,  
Rituals of an earlier age presenting.

Rhythmically the swords are rising, falling,  
 Bodies tensely crouch, eyes gleam and brighten:  
 Tramp of feet throbs out refrain appalling,  
 Sound to steel the strong, the weak to frighten.  
 Swords fly up on sudden, follow loudly  
 Clash and clash and clash and clash outringing:  
 Close the dancers gather, spread; and proudly  
 In the leaders uplifted hand upswinging,  
     See the lock!  
 The victim; that symbol now descending  
 Rings his neck; now faster, faster wheeling  
 Round him, savage eyes upon him bending -  
 Drawn! The swords fly out, the victim reeling  
 Falls, the dancers stand, and silence comes a shock.

## In Memory of Cecil Sharp

by Herbert M Bower

Three verses of a poem from *EFDS News* No 19, January 1929, pp160-3. I am grateful to Gordon Ridgewell (12) for submitting it for print.

### IN MEMORY OF CECIL SHARP

Founder of the English Folk Dance Society  
 Born 22nd November, 1859. Died 23rd June, 1924

### BALLAD

Of old the Yule-tide festival  
 Was hardly yet gone by,  
 When song and dance fantastical  
 Announced a tragedy;  
 In sight of all both great and small  
 It must enacted be.  
 The play to show from door to door  
 There passed throughout the land  
 Six gallant lads: gay clothes they wore,  
 Each held a sword in hand,  
 Some twenty turns they danced or more,  
 A stately scene and grand.

The sinuous dance millenniums old  
 Did vividly reveal  
 Strange sacrifice of age untold  
 From forest, field and hill,  
 While bitter Winter's breath so cold  
 Did all the world congeal.

## The Land Workers

by John Mansfield

A second contribution by Gordon Ridgewell, this time of two stanzas from a poem, written when John Mansfield was Poet Laureate in 1942 and taken from 'Poems' by John Mansfield (London: Heinemann, 1946) pp 13, 30

And helped the children to make gay  
 a maypole for the First of May,  
 For glory of the fragrant, green

Delightful Spring, the Meadow Queen;  
 All sang (and after sixty years  
 The singing lingers in my ears)  
 From waggon-tops, while bearing back  
 The end of harvest to the stack;  
 The young men, with their swords, would dance  
 Our pagan blood's inheritance,  
 Or, strangely dressed, with helms and swords  
 And uncouth, half-forgotten words,  
 (And bladders upon sticks, to beat  
 Spectators back) in market street  
 Would act that age-old play of Corn  
 Cut down by death and then reborn.  
 And other touching graces stayed  
 From times ere pageant had decayed.

### REFERENCES

1. The writer was William Blundel the Cavalier (1620 - 98) of Little Crosby in 1638
2. Frank Dowson was the man who stimulated the 1922/23 revival of the Goathland Plough Stots. He was also a leading light in the Yorkshire Dialect Society and he wrote a large number of dialect poems and stories.
3. John Browell is a long service musician and dancer with Spen Valley Longsword.
4. A number of country areas in West and East Yorkshire hold local shows, based on earlier Agricultural Shows. The Pennine Show is one of these which is held in a windswept field near Holmfirth.
5. Spen Valley Longsword were invited to perform at Cecil Sharp House as part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the English Folk Dance & Song Society.
6. The Whitby Competitive Dance Festival, formerly known as the Eskdale Dance Festival - held every year in March or early April since its foundation in 1921.
7. The Sunday of the Competitive Festival weekend is Carling Sunday in the church calendar - the landlady of the pub at Beckhole provides a local delicacy known as Carling Peas.
8. John Browells repertoire of songs includes a number of local variants and music hall songs including 'Mrs Oldroyd' and 'Gossip John'
9. The Whitby Competitive Dance Festival is held in the Spa Theatre in Whitby (see 6 above)
10. Keith Anderson is the Secretary of Bishop Gundutts Sword, a longsword only team who hail from the Rochester in Kent.
11. The "Lawnmower figure" is the Rolls figure from the Escrick dance which Sharp named the New Roll.
12. I recently was given a collection of back copies of 'English Dance & Song' and, flicking through copies from the early 1970's, I came across regular contributions by Gordon Ridgewell. Going back as far as my copies allowed, to 1959, there was a letter from Gordon commenting on the unfriendliness of regulars at Cecil Sharp House events - some things never change. Long may he continue to act as a scourge to editors.

## LONGSWORD VIRGINS

### The Ryburn Longsword Dancers (hopefully)

observations by Mel Howley

Longsword dancing: half a dozen people shuffle round in a circle, weave in and out a bit, hold up the swords, then off to the pub for a couple of pints. Nothing to it!

So off I go to a beginners try-out for forming a new side. Listen to Trevor Stone, watch a couple of videos, then Trevor suggests a dance for us to try, the

Bellerby sword-dance. Walk it through, try stepping it and, whoops, it isn't as easy as it looks, but by the end of the afternoon we've sort of done a dance and made the lock and are pretty chuffed with ourselves. As I said, nothing to it!

Back the next week and no one dropped out. Walk it through, the way Trevor showed us, get in a mess. Try again, get in a mess again. Try again but this time check the notation Trevor left for us (thanks a lot Trevor), get in a mess! Discuss the problem and decide to watch the video. Phoenix are dancing it wrongly! Or perhaps we are? Check the notation against the video and surprise, surprise Phoenix are dancing it correctly. Well that must mean that we've been doing it wrong - thanks a lot Trevor, but now we've got it right it flows a lot better and we are really getting to grips with it, like I said nothing to it!

Third week, time to try the music. Piece of cake 'cos we know the moves fairly well now, don't we, so Pete plays and we dance that's all there is to it. Can't you play more slowly? Well can't you match it to our dancing? How do you mean we should complete the move in eight bars? How about playing ten and a bit bars so we can get round? OK, so we'll just speed it up a bit. Nothing to it!

Got the steps, got the pace of the music, just need to put them together. Blurry hell that's fast innit! Can't possibly get round that fast! But we persevere and we find that we can get round that fast, just, but there is no room for hesitation, and not a chance of correcting any mistake. The short swords are harder to get under and over, but with the longer ones we have to travel further and faster. And Dave (the only experienced dancer there) says that it is quite a hard dance, very unforgiving (thanks a lot Trevor) but we can process on, and get off at the end, just the bit in the middle is giving slight problems, but really, nothing to it!

Another Sunday session and after a few warm-ups (other might call them cock-ups) we start getting sorted out and surprise surprise we get all the way through: process on, circle, dance, lock, process off! Try it again to prove it's not a fluke, yea, piece of cake. Well OK, there were a few mistakes and just a hint of confusion but it looked like we were doing a dance and it felt like we were doing a dance! Perhaps we were getting close to being a side, a long way to go yet agreed, but at least we can see where we are going now, and this time it was even enjoyable! Thanks a lot Trevor. Nothing to it?

Sunday, bloody Sunday! Let's try again. 'Ere what's in that box? Swords, whose swords? Our swords. Well that finishes discussion on whether the short or long ones are best! And fired with a new enthusiasm the practice begins, and the dance starts to come together! We get through it without actually going wrong, and although we are off pace, and there are a few dodgy moments, we can actually do the full set without screwing-up. It transpires that some people have been studying videos, others practising steps at home, and our two youngest members, the twins, have been coaching each other and dancing with bamboo canes! Anyway at the end of a hard, but rewarding, session the talk goes back to videos and other dance teams (other teams - an implicit assumption there I think!), and Dave offers to teach us the North Skelton dance and in no time at all we are making a fair attempt at it! Isn't this the one Trevor suggested we leave alone 'cos everyone does it? Nothing to it! Thanks a lot Trevor!

A small disaster. A brief, but unpleasant, argument with a car leaves a key member with a broken leg, and decidedly not up to dancing for a while - but at least she can supervise and make constructive criticism! The rest of us persevere, and, flushed with growing success, somehow the idea of performing

in public gets introduced. Surely this way lies madness, two months since our first session we are seriously planning to perform! A brief spot at the local Christmas ceilidh is the idea, and although we won't be perfect it may attract more recruits, and it will probably be better if we aren't so good, 'cos then we won't put discourage any potential beginners. But we'd better put in a little extra practice anyway. Nothing to it!

Two weeks to go to the ceilidh and we still can't get the dance on pace, no matter what we seem to do we are dancing across the music. It doesn't look too bad, and probably the audience wouldn't notice, but we know it's not right.

A chat over a pint at the local with a longswordman from an established team elicits the view that the dance we are attempting is "very difficult, even for experienced dancers" and he doubts we will ever manage it with beginners, a bad one to start with - thanks a lot Trevor! But not to be beaten, long periods are spent with the video recorder (an essential aid to the traditional form of collecting dances) to give additional clues for our final practice the week before the ceilidh. Who said that it is better to travel in hope Must've been Trevor.

Sunday. A really serious practice session, really working at it and putting in all the bits picked up from the video. And we do it! We actually get the dance right! All the elements, and on pace - nothing to it! And not content with getting it right once we do it again, and again and by the end of the afternoon's session we are almost confident. And what a great feeling to actually get it right - perhaps we will make longsword team after all! Thanks a lot Trevor.

Just the ceilidh to worry about now ....!

**Mel Howley**, January 1995

Trevor replies:

*I don't know how to take this! Mel is obviously critical of a number of aspects of the workshop I gave. That is his prerogative but it may be worth clearing up a few things.*

*The choice of dance for the workshop was decided in conjunction with Pete Coe, who organised the workshop. Pete agreed that it would be preferable to do a dance not already done by any other local team (Spenn Valley do Helmsley and the North Skelton dance).*

*I really must stop showing videos at workshops if they are taken as 'gospel' in the way Mel has done. He must have missed the bit where I emphasised that I was not teaching the version of Bellerby done by the now defunct Phoenix Sword (shown on the video he refers to) nor was it intended to be the exact version recorded by Maud Karpeles. The variant I teach is based on the dance evolved from a workshop for a women's team in New Jersey, America. They picked it up rapidly and added some elements of interpretation which I liked and have retained.*

*This really is the first time I have heard the Bellerby dance described as "very difficult, even for experienced dancers" - a number of workshop teams I have taught will be very flattered that they managed it so well! North Skelton is any easy dance to get to an acceptable standard - as instanced by more than 25 teams in the UK who already dance it.*

*I strongly recommend new teams to avoid the temptation to learn a dance parrot fashion - from a book (or a video). Many dances benefit from new interpretations and, so long as the original is kept intact, the tradition grows.*

*Mel's article seems to me to reinforce the view that to achieve anything worthwhile takes effort and application. I look forward to seeing the Ryburn team dancing out soon - they must be making very good progress to feel up to public display after such a short time.*

*The next issue will enable me to catch up on my backlog of photos left out of the past two issues due to shortage of space.*

*In addition I intend to print a collection of material showing Longsword in print - postcards, Christmas cards and the like. Any submissions gratefully received. I will continue to coax people who have promised articles in the past.*

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

## Contributions welcome....

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