



# RATTLE UP My Boys

A quarterly publication for those with an interest in  
sword dancing

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Some time ago I met Paul Davenport and (naturally enough) got to talking about sword dancing. Paul kindly sent me a copy of his treatise "THE FORGOTTEN MORRIS" which sets out evidence he has gathered to support his theory for the existence of a type of Morris Dance once found in the Aire Valley and in Holderness (to the west of Hull).

On reading Paul's book I was surprised to see so many references to sword dances, and especially the dances from Flamborough and Grenoside. Paul draws attention to elements in these two dances which can be seen as links with an earlier processional form of Morris. In particular he sees evidence for some sword dances to have originated as two part dances, a stationary part and a processional part, which, over the years, have become "merged".

Paul agreed to the publication in *Rattle Up My Boys* of extracts to illustrate some of the points from his book.

## EXTRACTS FROM "THE FORGOTTEN MORRIS"

For many years it has been believed that the Morris Dance divided into a number of distinct regional variants. The Cotswold Morris has become accepted as the

definitive form of the dance, although not the oldest. It has also been suggested that the Longsword Dance, once common in Yorkshire, is the characteristic form of ceremonial dance in that geographical area.

My book presents the evidence and makes the case for the existence of different types of dances in Yorkshire, chiefly from Holderness, which show some of the features of both the Morris and the Sword dances and which may shed some light on the origins of both.

There has been much written regarding numerous references to now extinct Sword Dances in Eastern England. Several authorities have proposed theories regarding the common origins of the Morris and Sword Dances. In no case has there been any attempt to explore the evidence upon which these theories are based.

During 1980 and 1981, in the course of collecting information for the Morris Ring Archive, I came upon references (1) which point to a dance tradition which appears to have been completely overlooked by early collectors. This tradition is perhaps less important than those which surround it, in a developmental sense. In many respects what we have here is a sort of 'missing link' which connects many dance and non-dance traditions into a single entity.

In the *Journal of the EFSS* 1933, (NPMA) Needham and Peck examine the East Anglian Molly Dance tradition. The article contains a quote from Ordish, *Folklore* (1893) in which the writer states that a comment in Blomefield's *History of Norfolk* referring to dancers means that "the dancers referred to (at) Blomefield were the sword dancers". Needham and Peck then go on to say although they found no dances which resemble sword dances they believe that, from the association of the Molly Dances with Plough Monday Plays of the Sword Dance type, "one would expect that the Molly dancing would be some derivative of Sword Dancing".

This is exactly my point, here is a statement which is based on a supposition, there has been no real attempt to examine the basis on which the statement was made. In references from East and South Yorkshire it is made clear by contemporary writers that the Sword Dance is part of a ceremonial variously called the 'Fond Plow' or the 'Fool Plough'. I will show that this ceremonial was made up of several elements which included sword dancers,



Paul's ongoing researches uncovered this photograph believed to be taken outside Chestnut Croft, a house in Carlton, near Selby. Information on the reverse states that the photo was taken for the *Yorkshire Post* newspaper raising the hope that it may have been published (with more details) but, despite the best efforts of Gordon Ridgewell, no further information was uncovered - have any readers any information or comments to offer?

Photo by courtesy of the *Yorkshire Post*

Plough Stots, Morris dancers, a man-woman, a Fool and a play with supernumerary characters of whom the principle was a 'devil' figure.

The main characters of this "amalgam" are described along with descriptions of their antics:

*'they go round the towns and villages dragging a plough ..... stopping occasionally to perform a rude morrice dance round their implement of labour ....' (RosH)*

Another reference to a similar performance is recorded as being general to East Yorkshire by Nicholson. Here follows a description which shows how little the ceremony changed between Nicholson's time and later entries:

*'Often their disguise is so complete that at lonely houses they are rude and bold, demanding money and drink in such a way as to terrify women who have been left at home.' (NicY)*

The writer goes on to mention the dance and his personal observation of the same event at Beverley in 1889.

*The English Dialect Dictionary* of 1905 has an entry which states (regarding 'Plough Lads'):

*'In EAST HOLDERNESS the special designation of farm servants generally, who at Christmas-tide go about from village to village fantastically dressed and dance to rude music, accompanied by the mummery of a clown' (TEDD)*

## Sharp's postcards

When Cecil Sharp was compiling his information for the Sword Dance Books he produced (in 1911) a letter which was sent to the vicars in a number of Yorkshire Parishes. In this letter Sharp asks for only two pieces of information:

**a) Whether the Sword Dance is still annually performed in your Parish at Christmas or at any other time of the year**

**b) and if not, whether it has been so performed within the memory of anyone now living. (2)**

Thus Sharp pre-empts any reply detailing anything else of interest. In this respect he reveals an unfortunate characteristic of his scholarship, that of "editing lives". Sharp's single-mindedness is both his strength and his weakness. The replies to his survey indicate a very rich folk-culture but only the Sword Dances were of interest to him at that time. However a number of these replies mention 'Plough Lads' in a few villages, still performing annually as late as 1913. (ShaQ) From GOODMANHAM (East Yorkshire) Sharp's informant said that there was no regular dance. This does not allow us to presume that there was NO dance at all but rather it may suggest that, as elsewhere, the dance varied from year to year. (PeaP)

## Plough Lads

Further to the west (and outside the area covered by Sharp's survey) at Wakefield there were records of a party of 'Plough Stots', though without a plough, who appeared in 1865 - a week too early according to the author Banks in an item named **Wakefield Words** which was published in the same year. Banks comment is worth recording in full:

*'Plough Stots ... go round begging on Plough Monday with a plough frame steered by the last married man, the two youngest lads being drivers, two of the eldest men the beggars and the rest taking the place of horses. The practice is almost gone out now, though one party, without a plough, came into Wakefield in 1865, but on the wrong Monday, namely a week too soon.'* (BanW)

Also referring to activities in Wakefield the **Yorkshire Weekly Post** for August 22nd 1896 stated:

*'On Plough Monday Plough Stots have from time immemorial paraded and walked in procession along the streets of Wakefield. Until a few years of this date (1867) they brought a plough with them and about 30 farmers men drew it along with a rope whilst one man held the stilts and guided the plough ... One or two had cows horns which they blew loudly, and attracted many people from their houses and shops. When they got a copper, they cried 'Largess'.*

The Vales of York and Pickering are defined as having a 'Plough Stots' tradition in which the main part consists of a sword dance. The more developed of these traditions involved dragging a plough at some time in their history.

The area includes the sword dance villages of ESCRICK, HAXBY, STILLINGFLEET, ASKHAM RICHARD, (ShaQ) RICCALL (DavR) - these and

other sword dances are well documented and are described by Sharp and others in a variety of publications. To further examine these dances is outside the scope of this article so I confine myself to the examination of sword dances which show the characteristics of Plough Stots dances.

I will explore two of these. The first is a dance which occurs on the headland at the northern limit of the Wolds. The sword dance from the village of FLAMBOROUGH is of great interest. Firstly, Sharp records in his field notes that the dancers at Flamborough used to black their faces and were locally called 'Fond Plows' (ShaF). The character of the dance bears this out. The first half of the dance is clearly a sword dance of the linked hilt and point variety, albeit rather simple in its figures. The second half of the dance, however, is danced with swords unlinked and involves a series of intricate heys and weaving figures. The overall appearance to the onlooker and the all important 'feel' of the dance to the dancers, is of two dances. (DavF)

My second example is the GRENOSIDE Sword Dance from South Yorkshire which also shows this two part characteristic whereas it's close neighbour at HANDSWORTH does not. In his **Sword Dances of Northern England**(ShaS) Sharp is quick to point out that there are two parts to the Grenoside dance, one in which the dancers are linked and the second in which they are not. An interesting feature of this dance is the ending in which the dancers all face in and raise their swords in such a way as to suggest the Morris dancers 'All-in' - a fact not missed by Sharp.

When asked to define the English Sword Dance writers tend to describe it as a dance wherein the performers are linked hilt and point. Certainly this is true at HANDSWORTH, HAXBY and KIRKBY MALZEARD but elsewhere there are figures where dancers are linked in pairs or even completely separated from one another. Other sword dances have these characteristics in some form, quite noticeably at AMPLEFORTH, and less so in those traditions which include the 'No Man's Jig' figure in which supernumerary characters join the main group as at SLEIGHTS, GOATHLAND and ESCRICK.

## Evidence from the Sword Dance Traditions

My interpretation of the Flamborough Sword Dance is made in the light of evidence from documentary and field sources. I explain features of the sole surviving Sword Dance from the East Riding of Yorkshire in the context of current evidence. The first inkling of this possibility came on a visit to Flamborough in 1980 when I spoke to the dancers from the current team. Firstly the dancers danced the dance more slowly than local evidence would suggest so as to make the dance longer. Secondly there was a feeling at that time that the dance felt like two dances because of changes in pace and placement. There was enthusiasm for a revised interpretation as the dancers wanted to expand their repertoire of local traditions and were learning the Sleights dance.

In the following interpretation the dance is divided into two and the whole dance is given a treatment more like a Cotswold dance than a Longsword dance. This is based on Manning's treatment of the Cotswold Morris where he uses the phrase 'figures' to describe what are now considered to be separate dances in the Cotswold traditions. My premise is simple - why not treat sword dance 'figures' as separate dances? Thus my references to 'figures' refers to a passage of movement in a discrete dance.

The terminology I use is solely for the purpose of describing the dance - in my view there is no 'correct' terminology. Sharp (ShaS) uses terminology at variance with local custom throughout his work and I feel no less entitled to do so.

## The Flamborough Dance(s)

### Part 1 - The Sword Dance

a) Dance On (see also the next section Part 2 - The Long Dance) - Form a circle dancing round with the dancers facing clockwise. The sword is held in the left hand. Place own sword on own left shoulder taking hold of the point of the sword in front in the right hand - this is done while dancing round in a circle, i.e. without a pause from the Dance On.

b) Lock - All turn in. This is effected by raising the left hand and bringing it over the head. All swords are thus crossed and the lock is made by opening the arms and pushing the hilt of one's own sword under the point of the next sword along. This method produces what is probably the fastest Longsword lock possible. This also gives some indication to the nature of these dances.



c) Raise the Lock - All dance in a circle clockwise. The lock is lowered and drawn and instantly the clash begins. It seems likely, from verbal and photographic evidence, that the lock is drawn by the right hand and the direction of travel is smartly changed to allow the left hand to be used only after several turns. The change, like all the figures is called by the leader and never pre-set to the music. Thus after circling both clockwise and anticlockwise the leader must choose his time to call for the next figure. Link swords and dance round.

d) Circle Over - Here Nos. 1 & 8 lower the sword between them and, using No. 1 as a pivot point, No. 8 leads the other dancers over the sword to reverse the set. As each crosses the lowered sword he shoulders his right hand sword onto his right shoulder. The set now faces anticlockwise. Circle until the next figure is called.

e) Circle Under - This is the reverse of the previous circle figure but here the sword is raised. Sharp (*ShaS*) gives this move as initiated by Nos. 1 & 2 but team practice in 1980 was for Nos. 1 & 8 to start. After this figure the swords are shouldered as before but onto the left shoulder. The dance round is then repeated at the leaders discretion. This combination of figures is then repeated as often as required. There is some evidence that the Circle Over and Circle Under were performed by each pair in turn. This might easily bore an audience. There is some (slight) evidence for the existence of double sword under and over figures in the past (*DavF*) but despite Sharp's repeat of the Circle Under (*ShaS*) present practice is to repeat the whole of d) and e) as required.

f) Lock - Raise lock then lower and draw swords. Normal practice is then for the dancers to face in whilst stepping on the spot in a circle until the command to form lines. At this point all fall back to create the following set.

Down 1 2 3 4  
8 7 6 5 Up

## Part 2 - The Long Dance

a) Rolling down the Lines - The set is formed as above. Dancers at the top of the set take hold of each others swords and dance under these turning to face down. They then cast down with No. 1 turning out and 8 turning in travelling down the centre of the set both turn continuously under their raised swords. This gives a parallel cast. At the bottom of the set No. 1 turns in travelling up the middle of the set and No. 8 turns out. This process is repeated by each pair of dancers in turn. Dancers not engaged in casting continue to dance on the spot whilst moving up into position inconspicuously. There is evidence that earlier the whole set performed the cast following the leading couple each time and thus the stepping men could remain in position during the spinning down.

b) Arches - The first couple, having arrived again at the top of the set begin to 'roll down' again. At the same time the other pairs take hold of each others sword points and begin to step up the set forming arches. As soon as the first couple have passed under the arch at the top of the set. The next couple begin the turn under their own swords. Thus the whole dance is moving down from the top with the same rolling action seen in the previous figure. The process continues until the first couple is at the top of the set at which point the leader calls the next figure.

c) All-Swing - Still linked in pairs the first and third couples face down whilst the other two couples face up. The figure is essentially a 'hey' for pairs. The movement involves a sideways swing of the arms in separate moves. as the dancers move out, forwards and then back in. Each couple on reaching either the top or the bottom of the set performs two 'rolls' before moving on. Couples passing 'down' swing to the left then to the right and finally to the left.

In the earliest photographs the 'pousette' as described by Sharp is not evident. Further evidence (*DavF*) indicates that local informant Mary Cross remembered this figure being used as a 'processional' to move the dancers from place to place. Meeting Sharp when she was a student teacher at Scarborough College proved a lasting experience because Mary taught Sharp's version of this dance for many years and not as she remembered it as a girl.

d) Chain - No. 1 faces down all the other dancers face up in a single line. They then move up whilst No. 1 moves down passing the next dancer on his right then the following man on his left and so on. (This is a 'Strip the Willow' type figure and is found in the Cambridgeshire Molly Dances.) Each dancer, on arrival at the top makes a 'loop' to face the new direction. Swords are shouldered throughout.

When No. 1 is ready and reaches the top of the set the next figure is called. No. 1 and 8 link swords and each couple does likewise upon arriving in position.

e) Dance-Off - All face up and begin to dance forwards. The couples progress forward using the 'All-Swing' figure crossing and re-crossing like Morris men in the Winstar Processional but in pairs. On arriving at the next site they perform one 'All-Swing' figure to reorder the set ready for the sword dance. This following on of one dance after the other might raise the question what is the correct order of the dances? I base my own conclusion on the placement of the Lock in the order of events. I invite others to make their own conclusions.

It is worth noting that each section of the dance can stand entirely on its own which is unusual if the two dances are a single dance. Evidence points very clearly to certain elements regarding these dances. Firstly the stepping is vigorous, it never ceases and there are no breaks between figures in either dance. Secondly there is no fixed conclusion to the figures in normal practice, these are called like country or Morris figures and not fixed as in sword dances. There are still conclusions to be drawn from the examination of a series of photographs of the dance given to me by Mary Cross. (*DavF*) Secondly there is always a tambourine involved in the early photos. This would have given a sound of bells throughout the dance. Another question is, why are two of the dancers in the early photos wearing clogs? Obviously these were their daily footwear but were they originally part of the dance? If so this would bring up a possible parallel with the Grenoside Dance(s) where the dancers perform in clogs.

During 1981 the Green Oak Morris Men (based in Doncaster) performed the Flamborough dance(s) in accordance with the evidence which I collected rather than that published by Sharp. This included the unpublished processional figure which works very well and feels quite natural in performance. While talking to Mary Cross about the photographs she gave me she suddenly exclaimed that she remembered the dancers processing using the 'pousette' figure (All-Swing). She had seen this as a girl and despite over thirty years of teaching the dance in Flamborough, it had never crossed her mind again until our conversation.



The Long Dance for eight men contains so many features found in Morris dances elsewhere - in particular I am reminded by the pairs of dancers pulling the Rush carts in Lancashire with men pushing on the 'stangs' which drew the carts.

The dance at Flamborough provides support for the theory of a ceremonial with two dance elements which have been retained here by reason of geography. My final point involves a drawing in Brearley's book - shown left (*BreF*) which is labelled 'Sword Dancer 1860'. I showed this to Mary Cross who remarked, quite vehemently, "That's a Fond Plow, not a sword dancer!" (*DavF*).

## The Grenoside Dance(s)

I do not propose a second reconstruction here but, in the light of the evidence I set out above, I present ideas for consideration.

Firstly, according to Sharp, the Grenoside men circa 1912 called themselves 'Morris Dancers'. We don't know whether this was their own vocabulary or one placed in their minds by the likes of Sharp or Gatty, both of whom had contact with them. Sharp is quick to realise that there are two elements to the Grenoside dance which he published as such in the *Sword Dances of Northern England*.

Secondly, while watching the Grenoside team on Boxing Day over a period of years I was puzzled by several things. Clearly there may have been two dances here also, but why does the Lock occur at the beginning of the dance after the first part of the song, and why do the dancers hold the swords halfway down the blade when performing the clash in the second part of the dance?

In conclusion I feel it is worth pointing out that it is easy for an interviewer to accidentally create in his interviewee the answer which he wants rather than the truth. I have referred to Sharp's single-mindedness in his search for sword dances and it may be that he misread what the real picture was in earlier times. I would point the reader in the direction of the Escrick and Ampleforth Sword Dances as further areas for investigation in the light of the above ideas.

## REFERENCES

The initials in brackets below refer to the publications listed in Paul's Bibliography - they do not totally equate to a similar system used in "A Geographical Index of the Ceremonial Dance in Great Britain" in the 1962 Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society

1) Copies of the notes collected by Paul are available from the Moris Ring archive - contact Ivor Allsop for details

2) See also "Sharp's postcards" by Norman Peacock - an updating and re-examination of the initial analysis and report on the replies Sharp received following his 1912 survey. Rattle Up My Boys issue 5, series 6, Winter 1997

Books referred to are:

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(ShaQ) C J Sharp, *Replies to a questionnaire re Sword Dance, 1912-13*

(PeaP) N Peacock, *Report on the Sharp Postcards, 1955*

(BanW) Banks, *Wakefield Words, 1895*

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## New and Invented Locks, Rhett replies..

I was very pleased to read Norman Peacock's article "The Mechanics of Sword Locks" in Rattle Up My Boys. The author clearly has a unique combination of professional and sword dance knowledge. While I must admit that some of the discussion is well beyond my poor ability to add or detract, I can distil from it several simple concepts which are interesting and may prove helpful:

1. The thickness of the sword is the most important factor in determining rigidity.
2. Stiffness is proportional to sword width but is proportional to the cube of sword thickness.

3. The type of steel used in widely different swords is surprisingly unimportant in determining stiffness, accounting for only a factor of two.

4. The force needed to bend one sword over another is essentially proportional to the cube of how tight it is tied.

Norman Peacock writes that my "New 6/4 and New 8/4 locks would be almost impossible to make with normal longswords as they are shown in the book and they would almost certainly cause permanent distortion of the swords, even with rappers." I believe I am correct in assuming that the most important phrase in that sentence is "as they are shown" and that the criticism is not of the locks themselves, but rather of the illustrations, specifically the proportions of the individual swords and how tightly they are woven (i.e. how small are the "little triangles"). The author also writes that "it is most important that any diagrams of swords and locks should be to scale and be mechanically feasible, otherwise they may be most misleading". I fully admit that I gave no consideration to scale at all and did not intend the illustrations to be an accurate draftsman's plan. Rather, they were simply meant as teaching aids which most importantly show the general shape of the lock, which sword crosses which and at what angle the swords cross. The illustrations are perfectly acceptable for this purpose, and I do thank Trevor and Tony Barrand for using their computer graphic skills to greatly improve upon my initial chicken scratchings.

In order to draw the locks exactly to scale, I would have had to chose a specific type of sword for each illustration, as each sword type has a specific dimensions and stiffness that allows the lock to be tied to a certain degree of "tightness". And which sword should I choose? Perhaps the illustrations used - somewhat stylised and based on no real sword - are preferable to suggesting that there is a standard English longsword or implying that, for example, the usual 8-sword lock is better illustrated by Flamborough swords than with those of Handsworth.

I would caution readers not to ignore Norman Peacock's phrase "as they are shown" and then misinterpret him to mean that my "New 6/4 and New 8/4 locks would be almost impossible to make with normal longswords." This would be far from the truth. Indeed, of the seven new radially symmetric locks I proposed, these two are actually the easiest to make. With minimal practice with longswords they each may be tied about as quickly as the usual six or eight sword locks, and I taught two different methods for each of these locks at the first Sword Gathering in Scarborough. I also note that the multiple sword crosses involved on the New 8/6 Lock B illustrated in Norman's article may seem impossible, and indeed are with all English longswords. However, this does not stop In de Kring (Belgium) from using the lock in their dance.

**Another issue....**

I would like to make one brief comment unrelated to Norman's article. For the past three years within the mummer's play of *Nowell Sing We Clear* (an American midwinter show that includes Tony Barrand), three performers tie the usual six sword lock in nearly the same time it would take a team of six dancers to do the same. Each performer carries two swords. Tony's method for doing this is brilliant, and English dancers may have some fun figuring out how it can be done.

© Rhett Krause, South Hadley, USA, January 1999

## A New Model for the Evolution and Dissemination of Sword Dancing in Europe.

By Alan Nowell

I have built up an hypothesis for the origins of sword dance, which is related to some other work that I am engaged in, on a possible development precursor to sword dance. I have a body of inconclusive evidence that would take a lengthy academic effort to present. Being a full time engineer, with far too many hobbies and interests, it is possible that I will never find the time to develop my hypotheses and present them fully.

I have decided, therefore, to state my sword dance hypotheses, with some of the historical background and a brief outline of the evidence, in a public forum. The resulting discussion and feedback, whether positive or negative, could save me a lot of time and, who knows, I might be right.

## INTRODUCTION

My principal hypothesis is unashamedly of the ancient ritual survival sort. My gut feeling is that the origin of sword dance has to be early. For the genus to be so widely spread and the means of transmission lost from folk memory, we have to consider dates pre 1000 AD. Going back to the birth of Christ and well beyond,

dancing would have been common in most cultures. Any new genus of dance was likely to have evolved from some previous one, so the origins of sword dance probably blur into an earlier dance type with features in common. In some communities the development of sword dance may have killed off the earlier form. In others, the early dance could have survived in parallel. There is a third possibility, that sword dancing did not develop in some areas despite the existence of the earlier form. My work on this earlier dance is strong evidence but beyond the scope of this document. I shall refer to it as my hypothetical tribal men's dance. I hope to write a summary of this work to follow the brief article that I wrote for "English Dance and Song", summer 1994. I am now 95% certain that this dance existed. I suspect that the Latin word "tripudium", which came to mean dance in the early church, actually referred to this dance specifically.

The following paragraphs are written with the assumption that readers of "Rattle Up My Boys" are familiar with European hilt and point type sword dance. I have underlined place names when they are directly associated with sword dances.

## THE HISTORICAL MODEL

Celtic tribes used to inhabit large parts of Europe. Waves of invasion drowned their culture and language in Central Europe but those families/tribes that migrated to the western fringes of the continent survived. Many Celts must have been left behind to integrate with the newcomers. In Ireland the Celts integrated with the native population which was perhaps related to the Picts of Scotland.

Celtic society was tribal in nature. Many tribal societies have initiation rites. These can involve physical tests, games, dance and festivities. My research suggests that the population of central Ireland had a dance for men that evolved from the simple circle dance into a series of "clever" figures separated by a chorus figure. This dance developed further when the dancers discovered the potential of holding strips of cloth, sticks and eventually swords between each man. This development could have occurred between 600 and 700 AD but not necessarily in Ireland. The resulting sword dance may, for instance, have been born in Scotland, Northumbria or on the Continent where the Irish had taken their undeveloped ritual dance.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ireland was converted to Christianity. Pagan sites were taken over. Pagan calendar festivals were adopted and Christianised. Festivities would not have been suppressed. Some aspects, including dance became part of Christian ritual.

Monasteries flourished with large numbers of students under the rule of an abbot who was often a close relative of the local king. Celtic style monasteries fitted neatly into the tribal social and political scene. Labour and learning were part of the monk's daily routine. As monastic working practise developed, the organisation of specialist skills and crafts would have produced groups of specialist workers with masters, apprentices etc. Systems used in monasteries would have overlapped into secular society resulting in guild-like organisations. Where dances had been done by groups of men bonded by tribe, groups bonded by religion and/or occupation would now do them.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries Ireland was a major centre of Christian learning in Europe. One effect of this was that Irish monks (the peregrini) set out for all corners of the continent to convert the population to Christianity. Many have been forgotten altogether but, to judge by the number that made it to sainthood, there must have been thousands over the centuries. The best known ones are St. Columbanus of Bobbio Northern Italy, St. Gall of St. Gallen Switzerland and St. Virgil of Salzburg. Another, St. Willibrord of Ectemach in Luxembourg, is in the same tradition although he was an Anglo-Saxon born in Northumbria who had spent 12 years in Ireland. (He spent a lot of this time at the monastery of Rath Melsigi in County Carlow where some other students were from the Kingdom of Lindsay in what is now Lincolnshire. There may be a connection between Revesby, its abbey and nearby Partney and Bardney where these high born students came from.)

Within the British Isles Irishmen were spreading the word, especially in the north. St. Columba of Iona was an abbot of royal blood in self imposed exile from Ireland. He was known as a good singer and possibly wrote "Altus Prosator" a Latin poem in which the word tripudium is used. He returned to Ireland late in life to defend the Order of Bards, an institution of pagan origin. He went on missions to convert the Picts whose main lands were east central Scotland and north through Aberdeenshire to the Moray Firth and thence to the Orkneys and Shetlands. Several Ionian foundations flourished in southern Pictland. On

Orkney and the Shetland Islands groups of Irish monks set up communities. They can be traced by place name evidence. Place names with "papa" in them are derived from Old Norwegian, papa meaning "hermit" or "priest". Papa Stour is one such place named by Viking newcomers.

The only potential survival of my tribal men's dance from the Scottish Islands is the "Eigg War Dance" or "An Dannsa Mor (The Big Dance)" which was collected by Tom and Joan Flett in 1953. It was originally from Skye. The hopping chorus is similar to a figure from my hypothetical dance. My dance may have been "The Small Dance (An Dannsa Beag)".

In post Roman Britain the Kingdom of Northumbria (principally Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire) came into existence. The conversion of the population to Christianity was accomplished from two directions. From Iona St. Aidan, St. Cuthbert, St./King Oswald and others represented the Celtic Church. From the south Benedict Biscop, St. Wilfrid and others represented the Roman Church. Amongst the Celtic foundations were Lindisfarne, Gateshead, Hartlepool and Tynemouth. Amongst the Roman foundations were Hexham, York, Wearmouth and Jarrow. Whitby, founded by Oswald's successor Oswiu would have started out Celtic but after the Synod of Whitby and the death of Abbess Hilda, it came under the influence of Wilfrid at York. A study of the areas of Celtic conversion in Northern England, compared to areas of sword dance tradition would be a useful exercise. Unfortunately this is difficult because of the period, the geographic complexity and the fact that in many areas we are talking about a re-conversion after a lapse.

King Oswald had spent part of his early life in exile on Iona and on his return as King of Northumbria he sent to Iona for priests to convert Northumbria to Christianity. Churches that are dedicated to St. Oswald may have been founded at this time and indicate an Ionian influence. Two interesting ones are Oswaldkirk near Ampleforth and St. Oswald's in Flamborough. Oswald's cult was important in the aforementioned Lindsay connection.

Land given to monasteries was not necessarily adjacent to the main estate, indeed it could be in another county or country. The abbot was responsible for the management of the land and development of its resources. These would have included farming, fishing, quarrying and mining as well as all the associated industries like weaving, tanning, smelting, building etc.. The common practise of transhumance would have required small, originally temporary communities of shieling farmers/stockmen on the summer upland pastures, which were often separated from the main estate. The dance could have been seeded in any community which was developed by the Celtic Church.

In early monastic estates, the monks might have done most of the labour. As the estates expanded and the spiritual benefit of labour became less accepted, the work was gradually left to the resident population with guidance from monks and lay brothers who would have held a fund of agricultural, industrial and commercial knowledge. The resident population became tenants and paid rents to the abbey. An example, which is relevant here, is the leasing of coal mining rights on Tyneside. The Whickham lease of 1356 is the earliest one known. It makes it clear that coal mining in Whickham (Swalwell is attached to Whickham) was done by farmers who were tenants of the Church's estate of Gateshead. This would have been the estate of Gateshead abbey, an Ionian foundation. Swalwell has two other interesting historic attributes, firstly a "hopping" fair, thus named after a dance done on these occasions (now forgotten) and secondly, an early an early freemasons lodge of the Scottish type. My hypothetical dance is a hopping dance.

Of the continental peregrini I shall look at four as examples, firstly, St. Columbanus. His main foundations were Luxeuil in France and Bobbio in Northern Italy. Luxeuil in the Vosges is not a sword dancing area but this is explainable in that King Theuderic II sent St. Columbanus and his monks back to Ireland for sticking to Irish traditions. The date of Easter being the main problem. Anything Irish is likely to have been purged at this time. The ship carrying the saint back to Ireland turned back in a storm and he and his monks then wandered through central Europe looking for a royal benefactor. One of the followers, St. Gall, remained in Switzerland and founded the monastery of St. Gallen, which is close to Uberlingen on Lake Constance. Columbanus continued into Lombardy and founded the monastery of Bobbio east of Turin in the tip of the Appenines. To the west of Turin is the mountain village of Bobbio Pellice, which is 25km from Fenestrelle and 30km from Cervieres. In the next valley to the north of Fenestrelle is a village called St. Columban. I have yet to establish

the assumed connection between Bobbio Pellice and Bobbio the monastery town. A gospel book from Bobbio contains an illustration of my hypothetical tribal men's dance. Bobbio was founded c. 613 and became a major centre in the Celtic monastic network. Any dance transmission from Ireland to Italy (or vice versa) may have taken place long after the foundation.

The third Saint of interest is St. Virgil (Vergil or Fergill d. 784) bishop of Saltzburg. An Irish monk whose Celtic ways conflicted with those of Rome. He had some special interest in Iona. Following the end of the Roman Empire the salt mining around Saltzburg declined. It was redeveloped by Rupert the first bishop of Salzburg (d. c. 710) who may have been the same as an Irishman called Robertach. (The mining at Hallstatt near Saltzburg used to be done by Celts of the "Hallstatt Culture" which lasted from somewhere between 800 and 700 BC to between 600 and 500 BC. The culture was renowned for its metalwork and especially the quality of its swords. It is curious that the Irish were taking their Celtic Christianity to a land where there were probably still some embers of Celtic traditions and folk memory). Saltzburg has a men's dance called the Tetscher. It has some features in common with my hypothetical dance and requires investigation.

My fourth example, St. Willibrord (c. 658-739) was known as "The Apostle to the Friesians" and he founded many continental monasteries during his lifetime. He was archbishop of Utrecht in Holland and his monastery of Echternach in Luxembourg became a centre for the production of gospel books in common with Bobbio, Iona/Kells and Lindisfarne. The Echternach Hopping Procession, which is thought to originate at the time of Willibrord, has features in common with my hypothetical tribal men's dance.

Iberian connections with Ireland will naturally be dominated by seafaring contacts. Fishing and trading communities along the north coast of Spain and the coast of Portugal would have had regular contact with the Irish. I am unaware, as yet, of any Irish foundations in Spain or Portugal but these are only indicators. Irish monks would surely have been amongst the fishermen and merchants that sailed from port to port along the coasts. The dance would have travelled with them to places like Coimbra and Lisbon. The learned Irish monks had an immense respect for the work of Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636). In the 8<sup>th</sup> century his *Etymologiae* (an encyclopaedia) were in general use by Irish authors. It seems likely that Irish monks would have at least visited Seville. Since the flow of knowledge was at one time from Spain to Ireland there is the possibility that the dance travelled in that direction also. Madeira, which was populated from Lagos in Portugal, has a dance called Pimponpet that has features in common with my hypothetical dance.

## SUMMARY

My theory is either: - a tribal men's dance which had taken on a Christian significance was developed into the sword dance in the craft and tenant communities of Celtic monasteries, or: - followers of the Celtic church adopted the sword dance, found perhaps in Spain, and transmitted it around Europe.

As historians spend more and more man hours studying the past, the term "Dark Ages" is no longer considered relevant. Violet Alford referred to the "Folklorist's Gap" which has a roughly equivalent time frame. Both terms came about due to a lack of documentary evidence. If we are to fill the gap we must look elsewhere and take a more philosophical approach. If we accept that there is a link between all the occurrences of European hilt and point type sword dances, then that link should be the feature that stands out from the general background noise of history. My theory matches areas linked by sword dance to areas linked by the Celtic Church. Papa Stour is linked via Iona and Ireland to Saltzburg. Northumbria is linked via Iona and Ireland to Seville etc.

Violet Alford's hypothesis which considered the possibility that sword dance was associated with early mining regions is enveloped by my own. My hypothesis allows for the development of sword dance in any working community with Celtic Church connections. Farmers, horsemen, miners, vintners and fishermen can thus be related.

The dearth of documentary evidence concerning sword dance in Ireland is disappointing but not altogether damning since there is very little evidence of any other form of dance either. The lack of an Irish tradition of sword dance only matches the situations of Scotland and Lancashire. Without a couple of chance mentions, nothing would be known of sword dance in Lancashire. In O'Keefe and O'Brian's essay on "The Origin and History of Irish Dances"(1912), they mention

the Loc Carman Fair in pre-Christian Ireland. An ancient text describes a number of entertainers but there is no mention made of the man or dance. One name however, FER CENGAL, "has been interpreted by some as a dancer, and his dance has ever been compared to the German Springendantz, which was a song and dance combined. The name however, suggests an acrobat rather than a dancer, but as it does not appear elsewhere in Irish literature it would be unwise to build any theories on it." Another recent interpretation was FER = men CENGAL = intertwined. This fits in perfectly with my tribal men's dance theory but I take their point.

There is a dangerously convenient explanation for an absence of sword dance where one might have expected it. It is the Romanisation of the Celtic Church and the subsequent suppression of religious dancing.

When the Celtic ways were purged, the areas where the dance had held a Christian significance would have been forced to give up the practice. In tenant communities away from the monasteries the suppression may have been less effective and the dances had already lost their religious connotations. Late survivals of pagan festivals like Beltane are of similar antiquity, yet there is little doubt that they still took place in remote communities in Ireland Scotland and Northern England well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I would like to give the reader a confidence estimate for one of the hypotheses being correct. It is difficult, when you have been pursuing a "worm hole through history" for five years, to see the evidence objectively. I was lead on by investigative zeal and the positive evidence that accrued seemed to outweigh the negative. I'm sure there are mistakes in my facts and reasoning, but I am 60% certain of the Celtic church connection and it is worthy of consideration by the readership of "Rattle Up My Boys".

I would like to thank Trevor Stone for "Rattle Up My Boys" and his encouragement. Thanks to John and Linda Green for introducing me to Trevor. Thanks also to Brian Cardy who introduced me to rapper dancing in 1977 when he founded "The Preston Guildsmen". Thanks to Joan Flett for spotting the significance of the Eigg War dance.

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I am greatly indebted to two authors in particular, firstly Stephen D. Corrsin and secondly Violet Alford.

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## Swords and Sword Dancing

By Robin Longbottom

Although I have been involved in Sword Dancing for nearly fifteen years I have not, until now, been moved to enter into the debate regarding the origins of the "sword" we use in our dances. However, the time has arrived when I can resist no longer - brace yourselves for my own personal views on the subject.

I am not of the school that favours theories that the current somewhat unsword-like appearance of our dance "implements" must indicate that they were originally shuttles to mend herring nets, or sticks for beating flax, or for that matter scrapers for dehairing hides (1). I am prepared to give our forebears the benefit of understanding what a sword is (and, as they have happened to adopt or evolve a dance performed with one, that they would be bright enough to describe it as a "sword dance"). However the designs of swords, as they have come down to us, are at first a little puzzling and very unsword like. Interestingly the ones that do look like swords - Haxby, Bellerby, Riccall and perhaps Poppleton and Askham Richard - are made of wood, could this be significant? It could if we consider that from the 1830's the carrying of side arms was forbidden by Act of Parliament and this was strictly enforced and is still applicable today.

We could therefore ask ourselves whether the enforcement of this Act may have persuaded the above mentioned dance teams to forsake their earlier metal blades for wooden ones - a move which would keep them within the law. This may also account for those teams who wished to retain metal swords altering theirs sufficiently for them to fall outside the descriptions of a 'sidearm'

However prior to the 1830's Act forbidding sidearm there had been an interesting cultural move with regard to the humble dinner knife. This took place during the mid Seventeenth Century at which time a diner would carry his own table knife with him upon his person. These knives were at this time narrow, sharp pointed and served a dual purpose - culinary utensil one minute and dagger the next.

There are numerous references from this era to stabbings taking place following dinner, particularly in Inns and Taverns, many of which were fatal! A particular incident took place during the Commonwealth period and a witness to the stabbing, on returning home, ordered that all the dining knives in his household should have their tips ground at right angles to the blade.

The trend caught on and it was soon deemed antisocial to arrive as a guest and produce a sharp pointed dining knife. Fashion then moved towards grinding the dining knife into rounded, spatula like tips, triangular tips, square or angled tips. The final stage in this development was to broaden the blade and add a large bulbous end to it.

Interestingly the changes to the tip of the humble table knife appear also to apply to the design of swords used by sword dancers! A quick glance at Appendix 2 of Ivor Allsop's excellent book (2) will confirm this. Dancing with "real" swords would have involved risks and, associated with alcohol, these risks would have increased. I am not suggesting that Sword Dancers revels ever deteriorated (through the consumption of drink) to the point that somebody got stabbed. But it may well be that village constables, squires, the Lords of Manor etc. were no doubt happier turning a blind eye to the antics of high spirited lads waving swords about if the swords had been rendered as harmless as possible. To

achieve this they may well have introduced the table knife principle! Seems like common sense to me.

The Act forbidding the carrying of side arms came some 150 years or so after the changes to the evolution of the dinner knife but, no doubt reinforced the requirement that the swords for dancing with should be blunted in some way to indicate that they were not weapons. The addition of ribbons to the end of swords by some teams (3) may have been intended to emphasise that they were merely a dance accessory and not a weapon.

So sword, flax sticks or shuttles - no doubt the debate will continue to run but for me, if my illustrious ancestors were happy that what they danced with were swords, then that's good enough for me.

PS. There are a considerable number of books on the development of English Cutlery should anyone wish to take the research further.

© Robin Longbottom, West Riding Longsword Men, March 1999

### Notes

See Melusine Wood, "Some Notes on Trade Tools and Ritual Dance". *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, Vol. IV, No 6, 1945

2. Ivor Allsop, "Longsword Dances from Traditional and Manuscript Sources" Plainfield, Vermont (USA), Northern Harmony, 1996

3. Renaat Van Craenenbroeck recently recorded the sword dance performed at Corpus Christi in Redondela in Galicia, Northern Spain. Their swords (of wood) have loops of ribbons at both ends (point and handle) enabling the dancers to use their hands to play castanets.

## St George's Day

West Riding Swordsmen held a special event to celebrate St George's Day. On Sunday April 25th at the Wuthering Heights Pub at Stanbury the team met with friends from York Gentlemen to hold a day which involved Knur and Spell, a clog battle and various team and solo performances. Organiser and clog maker Robin Longbottom has also submitted a fascinating article which sets out his "table knife theory" (his description) relating to sword design. To contact Robin phone 01535 642 086.



**The Saint George's Day event by West Riding Longswords included a clog battle and a Knur and Spell competition in addition to step dancing, sword dances and a jig played superbly by a musician as he danced the jig.**

I am told that, after a most enjoyable (and unusual) afternoon, the whole event was declared null and void as St George's flag had not been properly displayed - as tradition demands. The whole day will have to be rerun again next year.

## News

### Search for new members

I am told by a member of the team that the White Boys of Mann are currently "resting", being short of members and facing the regular problem when team members get older and have other calls on their time.

West Riding Longsword have made an appeal for new members - in a typically dramatic form. They had nearly half a page in the May 26th issue of The

Yorkshire Post with two excellent photos and no sign of the mocking tone often adopted by the press.

## Hopes for a new team

On the more cheerful side I am pleased to hear that the veteran campaigner Norris Winstone is encouraging a local team to include Longsword in their repertoire by teaching them the version of the Boosbeck dance he learnt from Miss Douglas.

Incidentally the survey of sword dancing teams has ground to a halt due to the very poor level of response (plus a shortage of time on my part to do the necessary chasing up).

## Highside Longsword/Flag and Bone Gang

Ted Dodsworth of Highside Longsword contacted me following the piece in the last issue on the Kirkby Malzeard Plough Blessing. He pointed out that the cleric being "decapitated" in the photo was none other than a Bishop. This "beheading of a VIP" reminds me of an event at Eastbourne Folk Festival some years ago when Spen Valley, instead of getting a sweet young girl into the sword lock at the end of their dance, decided to get the Mayor in all his finery. Just as the music was speeding up the uncomfortable and worried Mayor was asked what political party he represented. He went ash white!

Ted is also a dancer with a Molly team called the "Flag and Bone Gang" who I saw for the first time at the Yorkshire Coast Morris Scarborough Fayre weekend. The team, one of the few single sex teams at the weekend, were as impressive as they were unusual - after a day of watching "Molly" teams (obviously the latest fad) yell, scream and prance around it was a contrast to see the vaguely ominous Flag and Bone Gang who went down well. The team were inspired by Paul Davenport's researches and his book "THE FORGOTTEN MORRIS"

## EFDSS workshop

I was surprised that EFDSS, as part of their educational programme, promoted a Longsword workshop at Cecil Sharp House on the Flamborough Sword Dance. There is a well established village team in Flamborough who are determined to retain their tradition whilst making moves to travel a little more often than they have done over the past 20 years in the hope that increased awareness of their dance will result in respect for the tradition.

## Comment on Steve Corrsin's book

Gordon Ridgewell - prompted by Steve Corrsin's book - has sent in an interesting item on how the distinct styles of Longsword and Rapper may have developed. I hope to include this, and other material from him, in the next issue.

In his letter Gordon writes: "Allow me to make a few comments on **Sword Dancing in Europe: A History** reviewed by Renaat Van Craenebroeck in the last issue. .... as the work is concerned solely with linked sword dancing to be found in Europe it would have been more precise to have entitled this book "Linked Sword Dancing in Europe: A History". Gordon lamented the standard of the book's index and supplied a two page list of corrigenda and addenda.

Gordon's point about the definition "Linked sword dance" interests me as, for some years, I have been tempted to expand the coverage of **Rattle Up My Boys** and include material on other sword dance forms including solo dances and "mock battle" dances i.e. not linked sword dances. Any comments?

## Some birthday celebration!

Lange Wapper's 30th birthday was a memorable event with guests: Markina, a Basque team from Northern Spain, In De Kring for Dunkirk and Quevaucamps from Belgium (these latter two were both taught by Lange Wapper's founder Renaat Van Craenebroeck) a brass band from Villance (close to Renaat's new home) named "Les Echos de la Lesse" and a team of musicians in exotic masks whose name (translated) means "Little Noise" - unless they were having me on!

There were no teams from the UK (Rumworth were invited but could not get a team together) but there was a large group of English spectators who thoroughly enjoyed the occasion.



*Lange Wapper have always presented medals to dancers to mark their 10th, 15th and 20th anniversaries. They had to come up with something special for Renaat Van Craenebroeck, the first dancer to attend all thirty outings since the team was founded.*

## Congratulations

Congratulations to Spen Valley Longsword for winning the sword class at the last (March) Whitby Competitive Dance Festival. They have competed at the Festival every year for many years and it has become an important focal point (as well as an enjoyable weekend) for the team. Spen Valley and neighbours Kirkburton Rapper Dancers both celebrate their 25th birthdays this year - I will pass on details of events they have planned as soon as they are available.

## ..... and from the Web

Whilst I was in Germany at Easter I over heard reference to a sword dance event but as my ability to speak German is non-existent I missed the details.

So I turned to the Web. I was astonished to see reference to a "Sword Spectacular Weekend" - it turned out to be an event in California (on June 18th - 20th) for Sword Professionals, Actors, Swordmakers and writers and dealt with duelling, planning and choreography for sword fights etc. There were also details of a magazine **Sword Forum Magazine** and I have contacted the editor to see if we can swap publications - who knows.

My search for details was answered by Renaat who supplied a glossy brochure describing the Festival of Sword Dance in Balingen in Germany - from June 8th to 15th. There are sword dance teams from Russia (Abchasien Group), Belgium (Speelschaar Ossaart), Croatia (Kompanija Pupnat), Turkey (Ensemble Folkur, Istanbul), Galicia, Spain (Gruppe Vigo), Austria (St Martin im Sulmtal) and Germany (Uberlingen and Volkstanzgruppe Frommern). The fascinating thing about the programme is the appearance of a rapper dance group from Wales (Cwmni Dawns Wenn Caerdydd).

*The Autumn issue will contain a report by Dr Dunin on dancing at Lastovo in Croatia, details of my visit to see the Traunstein Sword Dance in Southern Germany and, hopefully, details of the plans for the "World Sword Spectacular 2,000". I also have another piece from Robin Longbottom (see "Swords and Sword Dancing" in this issue) - this time with the tantalising title of "Do Not Replace the Chamber Pot Under the Bed":*

## Contributions are welcome ...

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