



Issue 3, Series 17, 2008

Sword Dancer Becomes the New Squire of the Morris Ring

By Brian Tasker

Right:
North British Sword
Dancers, with some
real swords!

Just right of centre
is the new Squire of
the Morris Ring,
Brian Tasker,
complete with chain
and staff of office.

Photograph:
Susan Briscoe



Full story on page 2.

Sword Dancer Becomes the New Squire of the Morris Ring

It is unusual for a sword dancer to become Squire of the Morris Ring so Andrew Kennedy asked me to write an account of my dancing experiences over almost forty years.

It all began at the end of the 1960's when my wife and I joined the Farningham Folk Song Club in Kent. Many members of the Hartley Morris Men were members and at every club night in the summer it was announced where the Hartley men would be performing the following week. We often went to see them dance and I decided to join them at the beginning of the 1971 practice season. I soon became hooked and danced regularly with them during the 1970's. This included a spell of two years when I was bagman.

In 1981 my job took me up to Tyneside and I decided to try rapper dancing. I found a contact name and phone number for the Sallyport Sword Dancers in an arts centre programme. I joined them and learned to dance the Newbiggin and Winlaton dances. We practised in a pub called the Tanners Arms in Newcastle. The Sallyport men thought I was crazy to drive six miles to practice. At the time they all lived in the City. It is a sign of the times that today they have regular members who live as far away as the Scottish border to the north and Northallerton to the south. Rather sooner than I expected my job moved again to Leeds and I joined the Castleford Longsword Dancers. There I learned the Boosbeck and Escrick dances and developed a lifelong love of longsword.

After a few years, for family reasons, we decided to move back to Kent. I rejoined Hartley but missed my sword dancing. Several of the Hartley men showed an interest in learning rapper and longsword so I formed the Wrotham White Star Sword Dancers. Wrotham was where we practised at first but we changed our practice location several times and soon dropped the Wrotham part of the name and became simply the White Star Sword Dancers. White Star still has strong connections with Hartley but for a long time we have had members from outside the club.

Some ten years ago Andrew invited me to join North British, a sword dance side with a difference. In fact two

differences. The first is that the club draws its membership from members of other sword dance sides all over the country. We get together four or five times a year to practise and to dance at festivals and other events. The second difference is that we dance some rather unusual dances. We have a rapper dance which is danced to the song "Byker Hill" and has a completely different step to normal rapper. We also dance the Papa Stour longsword dance from the Shetlands, a five man longsword dance called "Elgin" which is a recreation of what the original Elgin dance may have looked like, and the White Boys dance from the Isle of Man.

I continue to dance with all these clubs, though with Sallyport and Castleford my appearances are restricted by distance. My dancing has given me wonderful friends all over the country. In fact, after so many years of dancing I know far more people in the dance world than all my other friends put together! The common interest we share makes it so easy to make new friends wherever we go. How to convey the enjoyment we get from dancing and the companionship we get from our dancing friends is the challenge we face in finding the new dancers we need to carry our traditions forward.

I first thought of standing for election as Squire of the Morris Ring many years ago, but the time was not right for me. Five years ago I decided that I would make my bid. I stood for election in 2006 and was unsuccessful. I stood again in 2008 and was elected. I "danced in" by dancing a solo jig at the Dartington Morris Ring Meeting in September.

I was supported by Hartley who performed a set dance immediately before my jig. I would have liked to have one of the sword sides I dance with there as well but unfortunately that was not possible. I follow in the footsteps of previous sword dancing Squires: Bill Cassie, Nibs Matthews, Alan Brown and Ivor Allsop. One of my missions as Squire is to promote sword dancing in the Morris Ring so that we can give displays with a greater variety of dances. Castleford are attending the Thaxted meeting in 2009 and are hosting a Morris Ring meeting in 2010. This is a start, but there is a long way to go!

Sword Dance Union: Tournament Results

October 2008, Derby Guildhall

Best Traditional Dance		
Position	Team	Score
1	Grenoside Sword Dancers	158
2	Newcastle Kingsmen	146
3	Sallyport Sword Dancers	144
4	Sir Harry's Sword	140
5	Ryburn Longsword (youth)	117

Best Own Dance		
Position	Team	Score
1	Redcar Sword Dancers	161
2	Stone Monkey Sword Dancers	137
3	Lord Conyers Morris Men	115
4	Essex Longsword Girls	114
5	Ryburn Longsword	109

Best Youth Team		
Position	Team	Score
1	Sir Harry's Sword	140
2	Ryburn Longsword (youth)	117
3	Essex Longsword Girls	114

Best Character	
	Team
	Essex Longsword Girls

Best Overall Longsword		
Position	Team	Score
1	Redcar Sword Dancers	161
2	Grenoside Sword Dancers	158
3	Newcastle Kingsmen	146
4	Sallyport Sword Dancers	144
5	Sir Harry's Sword	140
6	Stone Monkey Sword Dancers	137
7	Ryburn Longsword (youth)	117
8	Lord Conyers Morris Men	115
9	Essex Longsword Girls	114
10	Ryburn Longsword	109

Best Musician(s)		
Position	Team	Score
1	Redcar Sword Dancers	28
2	Sallyport Sword Dancers	26
3	Sir Harry's Sword	25
4	Grenoside Sword Dancers	23
= 5	Ryburn Longsword	21
= 5	Newcastle Kingsmen	21
= 5	Stone Monkey Sword Dancers	21
= 8	Lord Conyers Morris Men	20
= 8	Ryburn Longsword (youth)	20
= 8	Essex Longsword Girls	20

This was a good turnout, with not only some longsword veterans, but younger teams and at least one team known for their rapper but less well associated with longsword. We need to see more of teams like Lord Conyers, who have been dancing both Morris and sword for many years.

The competition was preceded by dancing in the streets of Derby, and the whole event was organised very efficiently by Sullivan's Sword. Next year's SDU tournament will be held in Sheffield and organised by the Handsworth Sword Dancers.

Midwinter Dancing

NOTE: check before travelling

Photographs of Handsworth,, Barnsley, & Kirkburton by Boz Davison; others by the Editor.

EARLY DECEMBER

Sallyport Sword Dancers

Friday, 19th December: Shields Rd. tour, Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne. Phone Vince Rutland 0n 01609 780536 or email: vince@srutland.orangehome.co.uk



BOXING DAY

Claro Sword Dancers

Dancing in Harrogate. Phone Ian Porter 01423 502528.



Flamborough Longsword

12.00, White Horse, Bempton; then Rose & Crown, Flamborough; then round the village, finishing in the Square at 2.30 or thereabouts. Phone Richard Traves 01262 851311

Grenoside Sword Dancers

11.00 at the Old Harrow, Grenoside. Dancing followed by carols. Phone Ray Ellison 0114 245 3361

Highside Longsword (Kirkby Malzeard)

1.00 at the Grantley Arms (approx 3 miles from Kirkby Malzeard), followed by a tour of Kirkby

village. Ends with a session at the Drovers at Dallowgill.

Phone Ted Dodsworth 01765 620374

Handsworth Sword Dancers

11.15 at the Crossed Daggers, Woodhouse; 12 noon outside the Parish Church, Handsworth, followed by carols at the New Crown. Phone Donald Watts 0114 258 5283



Redcar Sword Dancers

12 noon at the gates of the Church in Greatham, followed by a song session. Phone Brian Pearce 01642 454371

Southport Swords

1.00 at the Hesketh in Churchtown; c3pm at the Guest House, Southport. Phone John Clarke 01704 574762



Spenn Valley Longsword (Cleckheaton area)

A tour of Cleckheaton, starting at the New Packhorse at 12 noon; 12.45 at the Wickham Arms; 2.00 at the Old Saw. Phone Dave Webster 01924 466220

FIRST SATURDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS: 27th
December

Saddleworth Morrismen/Lordsmere Longsword

3.30-4pm (approx) King William IV, Greenfield; then the Railway, Greenfield, and on into Uppermill. For details phone Richard Hankinson 01457 834871



FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS: 29th December

Barnsley Sword Dancers

1pm at the Spencers Arms, Cawthorne. Phone Jack Ledger 01226 726585



NEW YEAR'S DAY

Kirkburton Rapier Dancers (Huddersfield area)

Kirkburton: 12md at the Carlton Club; stops thereafter to be confirmed. Phone Bob Schofield 01535 644260



Monkseaton Morris Men

Ampleforth Play and rapper: 12md outside the Ship, Monkseaton. Phone Peter Brown 0191 252 3022

Wype Doles Longsword Dancers (Peterborough)

Local tour. Phone Robert Crick 01733 767779

FIRST WEEKEND IN JANUARY

White Star Sword Dancers (Tunbridge Wells)

Saturday, 3rd: With guests North British Sword Dancers. 10.30, George & Dragon, Speldhurst; 11.30, Chafford Arms, Fordcombe; 1.00, the Rock, Chiddingstone Hoath; 2.30 onwards, the Fountain, Cowden. Evening rapper tour of Tunbridge Wells.
Sunday, 4th: Lunctime tour of Rusthall Common and Tunbridge Wells Common, starting at 12md at the Beacon.

OTHER EVENTS

Seven Stars Sword and Step Dancers (Wigan area) Tour tbc. Phone John Sheill 01204 669311



SATURDAY, 10TH JANUARY

Grenoside Sword

Village traipse. Phone Ray Ellison 0114 245 3361

Whittlesea Straw Bear

Not a sword event, but many sword teams present. Phone Robert Crick 01733 767779

SUNDAY, 11TH JANUARY

Claro Sword

Plough Service, Knaresborough Church, 10.30; dancing outside Church, 11.30; Knaresborough Market Place, 12.15.

Highside Longsword (Kirby Malzeard)

Plough Blessing in Kirby Malzeard Church (includes dancing in the Church). Phone Ted Dodsworth 01765 620374

Sullivan's Sword Plough Celebration (

Plough Blessing, 10.30 in St. Denis' Church, Morton, followed by dancing there, and then 1.30 at the Full Moon, Morton. Phone John Holder 01636 896 311

Goathland Ploughstots

Plough Blessing Service

SATURDAY, 17TH JANUARY

Goathland Ploughstots

Tour of Goathland, Darnholm, and Beckhole.

Hans von der Au's and Bernhard von Peinen's *Deutscher Schwerttanz – German Sword Dance* (1935)

Stephen D. Corrsin

Note: this article first appeared in the American Morris Newsletter.

One of the most widespread and dramatic styles of folk dance performance in Europe over the past six hundred years has been sword dancing. I am specifically referring to the linked styles – often called “hilt and point” or “chain” sword dances – which were first reported in the late Middle Ages, and are still practiced in a number of countries. Records and descriptions of sword dances can be found in present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Sweden, and Denmark, as well as, of course, Britain.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when collectors and scholars were transcribing folk music and dance across practically all of Europe, sword dancing could be found in a number of countries. This included, in the decades leading up to World War I, in northeastern England, Austria (Upper Austria and the Salzkammergut), southern Bohemia, parts of Moravia and Slovakia, northwestern Italy, and northern Spain. It could also be found in a few isolated locations, in individual towns or villages in southeastern France, southern Germany, and in the Shetlands. While in some cases it could be seen as a “living tradition” (whatever that means: I will not get into that argument!), in many places it represented a consciously historical show and demonstration of local pride, in fancy dress – more like street theatre or holiday pageants than anything else, sometimes an effective way to separate tourists, officials, or enthusiasts from their pounds, lira, marks, francs, etc.

In this series of articles – if the editors of the *Newsletter* permit – I plan to provide information on a number of the detailed, dance-manual level accounts of sword dances from the European continent. I will start with several

German descriptions. In this first report, I will describe one of the most detailed, and also, from its context, the most outrageous. (With regard to copyright concerns, and considering the vintage of many of the German publications, if any old Nazis want to get in touch with me to discuss the matter, I'll be happy to oblige. Here in the US.) My goal is to acquaint English-speaking dancers, in North America and Britain, with these continental European styles, and thereby to make available additional sword dance material and ideas for performance. Of course, anyone who has attended the wonderful series of “Sword Dance Spectaculars” in Scarborough and Whitby, England, has seen some of these dances, or their close analogs, first hand.

While sword dances have been documented in the German-speaking lands since the fifteenth century, the earliest “danceable” accounts were printed only in the 1930s, in Austria and Germany. The dancing in the interwar years was often inspired by the German and Austrian youth movement, the *Jugendbewegung*, which played such an important role in the general folk music revival in those countries – often as the *Jugendmusikbewegung*, the “youth music movement.” The movement typically got its material from older German sources, as well as from Cecil Sharp's *Sword Dances of Northern England* and from EFDSS teachers – including Rolf Gardiner, who was deeply involved in the German youth movement.

In 1935, the music publisher Barenreiter published a 16 page pamphlet (in black letter or “Gothic” printing), entitled *Deutscher Schwerttanz – German Sword Dance*. The author was Hans von der Au (1892-1955), who was an important folk dance teacher for many years. A dance group which he helped to found after the war, in Erbach,

Hesse, named for him as the *Hans-von-der-Au Trachtengruppe*, provides a short biography and photos on its Web page (<http://www.hans-vo-der-au.de/home.htm>). The introduction was written by Bernhard von Peinen, who was also co-author of a popular general dance manual, *Tanzen und Springen*, which first appeared in 1935 and was republished after the war, probably in bowdlerized (de-nazified) form.

To quote from my book, *Sword Dancing in Europe: A History*: "It is chilling to read the introduction to Au's and Peinen's pamphlet [*Deutscher Schwerttanz*]. It suggests that the Nazi Party's paramilitary sections, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, or Storm Troops) and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, or Defense Corps), should take up sword dancing. The lead dancer would hold, at least, the rank of *Sturmfuhrer* (captain), and the dancers would wear parts of their military uniforms. These bizarre suggestions were printed shortly after Hitler used the SS to butcher the SA leadership, on the night of 30 June 1934, a grisly event which became known as the 'Great Blood Purge' and the 'Night of the Long Knives.' The authors suggest that a dance performance should end with the dancers stating their devotion to *Fuhrer, Volk, und Reich*, and with a great *Sieg Heil!* from all, performers and audience alike."

Night of the Long Knives – sounds like longsword, doesn't it? So much for the context. I have been unable to learn whether this dance was ever performed according to Au's instructions. The dance itself is a particularly complex performance, from the city of Hermannstadt, now called Sibiu, in the Romanian province of Transylvania. Hermannstadt had been one of the historically German *Siebenburgen*, settled in the Middle Ages to help upgrade the economy and urban development of this eastern region. References to the sword dance of Hermannstadt begin to appear at the end of the sixteenth century, and continue as a dance of the skimmers' or furriers' guild well into the nineteenth century. The last special occasion on which the guild danced was a visit by Franz Josef, Habsburg emperor of Austria (to which empire Transylvania belonged), in 1852. In the latter part of the century, it was also performed by the *Turnverein*, or local gymnastics society – typically a highly nationalistic undertaking. In 1896, Otto Wittstock published the following, brief description, which with other accounts became the basis for Au's highly detailed dance manual version. Wittstock gives a taste of the performance.

The sword dance is performed by thirteen dancers, among whom one does not take part directly in the dance; the so-called Hanswurst ["sausage Hans," the typical fool in such performances] strives to entertain the spectators through imitating in parody the actual dancers. The dress of the dancers is the following: half boots with gold fringes, on which small bells hang, tight white britches, over them black velvet, loose trousers decorated with gold, reaching halfway down the leg, a black velvet, tightly cut jacket with a narrow belt and a blue silk scarf around the chest, white collar, blue velvet beret with a white feather on top. The twelfth dancer has more small bells than the other eleven. The Hanswurst wears the usual multicolored harlequin's clothing. All dancers carry sharp swords in their hands – the Hanswurst has instead the usual wand...

The sword dance is danced in the following way:

1. All go around in a circle once to the measure, stand in a line and salute with the swords.
2. The snake movement. During which they hand in the garlands. [They had been carrying garlands on the sword points.]
3. Each gives to the others the sword points to hold, during which the last gives up his sword and the declamation star is made.
4. The swords are again let go and the last dancer also takes his sword, during which the cap is made.
5. The city coat of arms.
6. The last dancer again gives up his sword.
7. Each again gives to the others the sword points to hold.
8. The doubled city coat of arms.
9. Cutting off at the feet and striking.
10. The doubled bridge.
11. The cartwheel.

12. The swords are laid around the neck of the first dancer.
13. Cutting off at the feet and striking.
14. The wheel again.
15. Cutting off at the head and feet.
16. Going through the middle.
17. Cutting off at the feet and striking.
18. The swords are let go again, the last dancer gets his sword, and the second fool must also enter with a sword, during which the waves are made.
19. They stand in two facing lines, with their swords at their sides, and on the third beat the swords are struck together and the festive dance is begun.
20. They stand in line and cross the swords.
21. They dance again in a circle and dance to the measure, and while going around the swords are lowered.

This list has the distinct feel of an aide-memoire, but Wittstock, and later Au, provide much more detail. In "City coat of arms," for example, pairs of dancers place their swords crossed at knee height, dance with them, and then lift them over their heads. In "Doubled city coat of arms," they do the same by fours. The repeated figure "Cutting off at the feet and striking" consists of the following, according to Wittstock:

[T]he first dancer turns suddenly around and dances towards the others with his sword [point, presumably] held at the ground in front of them. He strikes his sword in front of each dancer, while the other jumps over it and then turns around the same way and follows the first dancer, so that the last dancer has to jump over eleven swords...

As for the rest of the dance, some of the figures are familiar (such as rounds), and some appear to be unique. Others are reminiscent of certain other figures which appear in central Europe. Both linking and non-linking elements appear.



One more of Boz Davison's – a fine portrait of the Handsworth Sword Dancers on Boxing Day, 2007.