



Issue 3, Series 18, March, 2010.

Now we've collected £20 what shall we do with it? The revival of the Kirkburton Raper Dance.

Bob Schofield



Left: outside the Smith's Arms, Highburton, Jan. 1st 1975. From left 'Raj' Clayton, Barry Crick, Richard Castle, Bob Schofield, Alan McLean, Malcolm Smith, Derek Liversedge, and Alf Lemm.

Photograph: Bob Schofield.

December 31st 1973 in thick fog was not the best of times to inflict a badly rehearsed mumming play on the citizens of Saltaire, more interested in viewing the world through yet another pint of John Smith's than the finer delights of England's heritage. We were bored with New Year celebrations, and who wouldn't be at the thought of what was on offer in those golden years. So we did a mumming play. And it flopped. What on earth would we do

next year?

Surprisingly it was HM Government who came to our rescue, for in 1973 they had declared New Year's Day to be a public holiday and we wouldn't have to drag ourselves off to work and pretend to be sober. We would do something that would last over both the Eve and the Day itself. We would revive the Kirkburton Raper Dance. Richard Castle, who lived in the village, had been the first to discover it, in 1971, when he told me that he'd been talking to an old resident, Mrs Rhodes, who remembered seeing the dance when she was a young girl. "Swords were held up in the air then down on the ground and jumped over." Over the next year or so we learned that they wore clogs, danced inside (she recalled the sound of the clogs in

the sand on the floor). had shirts and trousers "with flowing ribbons" and blacked their faces.¹ But there were no real figures for us to practice, and we'd put it on the back burner.

Left: June, 1975, with Mrs Rhodes, before the Cricket Club Festival. Ralph Sheeran, Barry Crick, Richard Castle, Bob



*Schofield, Alan
McLean, Malcolm
Smith, Derek
Liversedge, Alf Lemm.*

Photo: Bob Schofield.

By October 1974, New Year loomed, and the decision was made to perform a dance in Kirkburton and see what would happen. It couldn't be any worse than the year before. First, of course, find your dancers and musicians. Barry

Crick, my brother in law had danced with me in Colne Royal, so with Richard that was three of us. We were members of a Mountaineering Club and from there we acquired Malcolm Smith and Derek Liversedge as dancers, and Alf Lemm and "Raj" Clayton as musicians. One more dancer was needed and Richard twisted the arm one of his workmates, Alan McLean, to come along. Not many of us were folkies, and that's the way the team has remained.

Next, what dance would we perform? Well, I'd done a bit of longsword before and had a copy of Sharp's book, which was trotted out, and just as quickly put away again. Instead, we devised our own dance, just four figures, single- and double- unders and overs, and a lock to finish. A chorus was added and it became the forerunner of what is now our Dance Number One. Derek sneaked time at work to make half a dozen swords out of mild steel (yes, they did bend). Ribbons were sewn onto white shirts and by New Year's Eve we were ready for the first performance to a bemused audience at Longroyd Bridge in the Huddersfield Commercial Travellers Club. I don't remember any of us falling over, and somehow we must have got to the end, collecting all of £3.94, and set off for Burton Cricket Club (£6). Finally as the bells rang out at midnight, outside the George we acquired our first (and only) injury when a rather wild sword sliced open Derek's skull. Blood pouring down his face he manfully completed the performance before being carted off for tender care and a good night's kip.

New Year's Day was bright and cheerful; thankfully Derek reappeared and we walked down to the Smith's Arms for a fragile start to the day, a collapsing lock and a proper team picture. Then onto the Junction and yet more photos, this time in the middle of the road as we stopped the traffic. But nothing prepared us for the final performance, in the car park at the Royal. Richard, as a resident, had done his stuff, and it seemed the whole village was waiting for us as we turned the corner. In fact we've never since had a New Year audience like it. Nerves brought the performance level up to something like decent and we were on a high, such that when we counted the takings, £20.52, of which we gave £5 to the Old Folk's Treat, there was no talk of calling it a day – new uniforms and swords were quickly acquired, a treasurer appointed, bank account opened and bookings sought, even if the first was to the Old Folks' Treat where by the time we arrived all the old people had gone home after a hard day's boozing. Soon we met up with "them over t'hill", Spen Valley and Leeds Morris Men at an evening at the Ring O' Bells in Cleckheaton, where Trevor showed his films of North Skelton, and an orthodox performance from London Pride, prompting a rather interesting discussion on Regional Identity, which still fuels the team's attitude.

¹ As the sword dancers did in Mirfield (correspondence with H.N.Pobjoy, Jan 6th 1977, - see note 6).

The die was cast, Kirkburton Raper Dance was an entity again, a second set of figures was devised, following our normal practice of doing something different, seeing what happens, and if we can repeat it, does it look sufficiently interesting? We appeared in the local press, the Pennine Magazine and even the Farmer's Weekly. The Raper Dancers' song "Our bridge is broken down and we are going to mend it" was found in a nineteenth century book², which gave us more confidence in our claims to the revival.³ The term "Rapier" was adopted to be more understandable in these self-conscious days, though we've reverted to announcing ourselves as "Raper" in village performances. New members, musicians Ken Clarkson and Ralph Sheeran, dancers Alan Winpenny, Phil Fletcher and Dave Swindells appeared and Mrs Rhodes, by now ninety years old, was fêted in a way she'd never expected.

That was over thirty years ago. Has anything changed? Not really. Currently we have eight dances and they're devised by members of the team in a huddle, rather than a dancing master (by the way, you never see Number Four, it's reserved for very special occasions). Some dances suit the older generation and require little bending, others are for the those with more supple backs. Our main annual performance is still New Year, though we don't turn out on New Year's Eve. The tour is generally the same, and we aim to do at least one performance outdoors, whatever the weather – at the George. We dance outside if we can at the other pubs since swords have a nasty habit of getting entwined with trimmings, candelabras and so on.

It is difficult to analyse how the team developed an individual style. There are a number of factors involved, and, up to a point, intended. I mentioned earlier that members were not particularly sought from other dance teams or the folk movement. I was a member of Colne Royal and at the time we were at the pinnacle of achievement (performing at the Albert Hall, in Lancaster for the Queen, and winning the Llangollen International Eisteddfod); a degree of experimental imposition of attitude and style followed naturally, and there was no-one else in the Kirkburton team to contradict from past knowledge of performances by Morris Ring sides or the teachings of Kathy Mitchell. For instance, the use of a chorus (we called it the Hokey-Cokey) was, and is, inserted between many of the figures, and this is pure north-west practice. Clogs were not introduced to ape the morris or Grenoside, but originally to help provide a rhythm, especially recalling that members were not experienced dancers. Nevertheless, to a couple of us then, and since, who have danced with Colne it has always seemed like second nature, and allows us to emphasise the beat with a drop-step. This brings me to a final point, the revival was carried out with a single question in mind: what would the original dance have looked like in the boundary zone influenced by processional morris and rushcart traditions to the north and west and a sword tradition to the south and east? Almondbury, only two miles to the northwest is recorded as having rushcarts,⁴ Barkisland, six miles further, had a morris dance,⁵ and sword dancing is believed to have been a tradition in Mirfield, about four miles northeast.⁶ Grenoside, of course is not all that far south.

Tradition is more than performing dance figures, it involves an audience who remember it last year, the year before, and the year before that, indeed a feeling of history and locality. It's great dancing at festivals, on foreign tours and so on, but longsword, perhaps because it's shunned by many dancers, has a unique place: it's fairly scarce, and is still strongly attached to the Christmas season, something that Sharp did not question deeply⁷ but has been maintained and clearly reinstated. I would like to think if he saw us now, he'd be witnessing a vibrant example of traditional regional culture, not a museum piece or a Dickensian pageant. Long may it remain so.

Editor's note: in subsequent correspondence, Bob explained that their custom of blacking up for the New Year's outing stems partly from their mumming roots and partly from the desire to create a sense of occasion (Bob calls it 'affectation').

² A.L. (Arthur Lodge), *Forty Years Ago* (Huddersfield, 1869).

³ See Bob Schofield *The Sword Dance of Kirkburton* (Kirkburton, 1977) Reproduced on the team's website www.Kirkburtonrapier.co.uk.

⁴ A. Easther *A Glossary of the Dialect of Almondbury and Huddersfield* (London, 1883), p.111. For geographical relationship of Kirkburton to other dance traditions see map in Schofield, (1977) and website.

⁵ Collected from Miss Bella Travis, 17 May 1971.

⁶ H.N. Pobjoy, *A History of Mirfield*, (Driffild, 1969); Mr Pobjoy elaborated on this in correspondence with Bob Schofield, 6 Jan 1977.

⁷ In *The Sword Dances of Northern England*, Sharp waited until the Introduction to Vol 3 before he related the dances to the death of the old year and birth of the new (pp. 12-13). Yet he mentioned the weeks around Christmas as the dancing season for all the 15 teams he described, except Haxby.

Rolf Gardiner and North Skelton

Stephen D. Corrsin

Rolf Gardiner (1902-71) is best remembered in the dance community for his involvement in Morris dancing in the 1920s. But he was also responsible for one of the most intense and dramatic pieces of writing about sword dancing ever published. This is the essay, "Homage to North Skelton." He begins:

"And dark and true and tender is the North.

"The north of England is dark with a godly darkness. The aura of Northumbria, of the North Riding of Yorkshire and Northumberland, is a dark blue merging to blue-blackness as one travels further north. It is an atmosphere richly mysterious, pregnant, exciting to blood and spirit, thrown off by the clash of wild moorlands with the tossing ferment of the North Sea....

"We came to North Skelton at that magical time of the year, in the days shortly before Christmas towards the winter solstice.... It is a time which has been significant and sacred to men since the beginning of the world."

Gardiner had many years of involvement with the northeast of England, even though his own base became the Springhead estate, in Dorset. This began in 1925, in Ravenscar, near Scarborough, when he first met the North Skelton dancers. In this period he corresponded frequently with Arthur Heffer (1898-1931), a fellow member of the Cambridge Morris Men and the Travelling Morrice. His letter to Heffer about the North Skelton men, which can be found in Gardiner's correspondence file in the Cambridge University Library, reveals his excitement at encountering a traditional dance with more life in it than any Morris dancing in the south of England. It brings the reader much closer to Gardiner's feelings about dance than almost anything else he wrote; the mood of the letter is much like that of the eventual "Homage" essay. The letter is dated 17 December 1925, from Ravenscar, just after he had returned from North Skelton.

"Arthur, they are positively worshipful: the first time I saw them dance, I could have knelt down and wept for joy. I felt as though my heart would break. Never in my life have I watched anything quite so magical. If there is such a thing as religious ritual, it is found here among the simple ironstone miners. The dance is the most subtle counterpoise between supreme intensity, extraordinary swiftness and concentrated POWER on the one hand, and perfect restraint and measure on the other: imaginable. In the first place, the swords are utterly unlike any others I have seen. They are exceedingly long and heavy and made of beautiful burnished steel. They seem to be endowed with some magical property of their own; as if in the course of years they had become charged with an electric quality 'generated' by the dancers and charged with the weight and significance of this: holy things. And the men held them and handled them as if they had been forged in heaven and dedicated by the Archangel Michael himself.

"The music which is beautiful (hardly recognizable variants of the Oyster Girl, Keelrow and other tunes) is played on a melodian at a fierce speed, with tremendous passion and emphasis. But the dancers themselves move like priests without the slightest suggestion of speed or hurry. The step is a magical thing in itself. The foot 'drops' in action from the thigh, rather than is lifted up. Each tread has a meaning and is endowed with the same kind of mystical 'weight' as the swords, and the figures are marvellously beautiful. But it is a thing which beggars description.

"I loved the men: they are by far the most refined, dignified and charming-looking workers, I have ever seen: aristocrats to the soles of their feet, and possessed of quite perfect manners. Yet one of them, Mr. Wallace, who plays the 'Betty,' can neither read nor write. We had tea in his cottage, a real miners' home, with a wonderful spread of jam and cheese and cakes laid out for us, with beautiful nickle-plated knives and forks and willow-pattern cups and plates.

"The men only have one shift in the pit, from 6-2, so that their time for recreation is long. The Sword-dancers meet regularly

twice a week all the year round. They are a real Bund [German: union, league], a Blutbruderschaft [German: blood-brotherhood], and I am inclined to think even the Handsworth men will seem rather theatrical to me after this."

Gardiner remained linked with the North Skelton team in the 1930s; for example, they danced at his wedding at Cecil Sharp House in 1932. He also used them as evidence to support his ideas about sword and other ritual dances. In a letter published in *English Dance and Song* (November-December 1937), he presented them as a way to criticize what he regarded as the EFDSS tendency to sacralize particular dances, leaving them "imprisoned in the text-books." (His earliest writings about the dance revival frequently criticize the Society for this.) He maintains that, "A dance truly cannot stand by itself; it is infallibly dependent on its occasion, a festival, a ceremonial, the gathering of a group or club for common enjoyment. And the occasion should determine the manner and even the form of the dance, not any arbitrary text-book regulation." He went on to point out that the sword dance of North Skelton was a contemporary phenomenon, connected with socioeconomic developments less than half a century old.

"Finally, there is the slightly dishonest distinction still made between so-called 'traditional' and other clubs. What the traditional team really has, of course, is an implicit sense of occasion. The dance is part and parcel of a common economic and social background. Such dancing deserves admiration for this connection and not because of some mythical traditionalism. Take North Skelton, for example. There is historically no North Skelton tradition. The very place did not exist 45 years ago, before Messrs. Dorman, Long opened the pits. An old miner named Winspear introduced the Plough Stots dance of the Whitby moors (basic type: Sleights), adapted it as he saw fit, and called his team the North Skelton White Rose Sword Dancers. Other villages followed suit: Skelton Green, Brotton, Lingdale, Boosbeck, all made up variants of the same dance. The various groups felt the appeal of the dance, got members of North Skelton to coach them and then branched off, intensely proud of their own variants. The reason why the dances appeal to us is the spirit in which they are danced, the instinctive sense of form and rhythm which the Yorkshiremen feel, and which is enhanced by their physical aliveness and unbroken community life. The occasion to dance is still there. The challenge to us is a social and political one, not one of technique."

When he published that, Gardiner was 35 years old, deeply involved in his work on the Springhead estate, raising his family, and trying to build a movement of his own -- combining rural ecogism with the strong element of ritual music and dance performance which was present in all his work.

It seems appropriate to end with the conclusion of "Homage to North Skelton" -- on a note mixing sadness at departure, with joy at remembered discovery; plus a reference to his favorite theme of the once and future unity of "Northern Europe."

"And when, next morning, I rose before sunrise to travel south, the magic was still in my heart like ancient pain. I knew that here in the north of England, in the winter of 1925, the flame of the ancient mystery was still unquenched. In these coming days one must take this flame and kindle with it a new fire throughout Northern Europe, that men may once more acknowledge the wonder of life, and gather the wonder into their souls."

Stop Press: Snow Falls in the South

Such were conditions in and around the Royal Borough of Tunbridge Wells that the White Star Sword Dancers were forced to call off their annual Plough Tour. This event has gradually grown and was due to include not one but two guest teams this year. There was a call in the area that the event be rearranged, but the team feels that the event has its place in the calendar and should remain there. The tour will be back in 2011, weather permitting.

'To Slay a Bullock'

...celebrates the 100th year anniversary of Cecil Sharp's "Sword Dances of Northern England - Part1."

This special event is a collaboration between Grenoside Sword Dancers and The Newcastle Kingsmen. There has been a long relationship between the teams that started in 1951 when the Grenoside dance was taught to the fore-runners of the Kingsmen, "The Kings College Morris Men." Recently, this friendship has been rekindled and this collaborative project was developed.

The aim is to express the spirit of the dances as collected by Sharp and also how they have developed since that time. The show will include a group of musicians and singers drawn from Grenoside and the Kingsmen. Dances will be linked by new works and adaptations of the calling on songs.

The performance will be enhanced with the imagery of bulls. You may ask why? The Grenoside Dancers used the expression "Slaying the bullock" for the killing of the captain prior to the second world war. Research also shows that the following lines appear in the 'old' Earsdon calling on dance...

*Now I'm going to kill a bullock,
Of that I'll make you sure.
We'll kill it in Eardson Town
And divide it amongst the poor*

Sheffield artist Ted Fairclough has been commissioned to design masks for the singers and a large "bullock beast" to be the centre piece of the show.

A limited number of public performances of this show are planned for 2010 only. The day will include several dance workshops and an illustrated talk. The Sunday of Shepley Spring Festival may be your only chance to see this very special event.

Sunday and Weekend tickets are available from the Folk Store (with no online booking fees) at:

<http://www.folkstore.co.uk/Tickets.html> or by telephone: 01629 827013. Camping is also available at an extra cost.

A limited number of special event tickets (Performance, workshops and talk for £15) will be on sale nearer the time and you can reserve these via email to Sally Atkinson at: sally@shepleyspringfestival.com

Keep up to date with Shepley Spring Festival at:

www.shepleyspringfestival.com

and for the socially networked amongst you

join our Facebook Group too!

More from the Morris Ring Archives

Left: an undated photograph of a youthful Barnsley Longsword Dancers – maybe Ivor could place it?



Both photographs supplied by Brian Tasker.

Below: the Wilsthorpe Longsword Dancers at the Manchester Ring Meeting, 23rd April, 1977.

Has anybody out there any information about them?



Incidentally, on the subject of sword dancing and the Morris Ring, there will be a **longsword workshop** among the activities on offer at this year's Annual Representatives Meeting, hosted by the Stafford Morris Men on the 26-28th March, 2010. For more information email Peter Copley at peter@copley5.freereserve.co.uk.

The Magic of the Swords

Sue Coe, of Ryburn3step, writes:

Hi Andrew, I've just been given this poem by one of our Junior Team - Molly Innes who is 11 years old. Molly is actually the third generation of her family to be in Ryburn Longsword, her grandmother Liz still dances with us, her Uncle Chris danced with us from the age of nine until he ran away to join the navy to get away from us and now Molly and her sister Daisy dance with us.



The swords sweep high and mighty,
As the music flies through the room.
The foot beats,
Through the country street,
As joy fills the air.

The sword sweep low and higher,
As the velvet tabards drift around us.
The high emotion,
As the swords whistle,
As the ribbons fly in the room.

The swords dance to the rhythm,
As the mandolin sound fills the room,
The concertina squeezes.
Fingers flying on the penny whistle.
Accompanied by the fiddle.

The swords weave together,
Making the steel lock.
Twisting and turning.
Handle over the point,
Dancing in the air.

The swords sweep.

by Molly Innes

DERT 2010

The annual rapper tournament will be held in Derby on the 9-11th April, 2010, hosted by the Stone Monkey Sword Dancers. The event will include the main competition, which this year is limited to 20 teams who will dance four times in pubs and once on the Guildhall stage. A separate, additional prize will be awarded for the Guildhall dance.

There will be a separate competition for a maximum of eight teams, who will each perform a 'traditional', notated dance once only.

Finally, there will also be a youth tournament. Teams will perform one dance on the guildhall stage.

For more information, go to <http://www.dert2010.co.uk/Index.html>

Published by: Andrew Kennedy, 88, Liverpool Road, Penwortham, near Preston, Lancashire. PR1 0HT. Tel: 01772 748976

E-mail: andrew@north-british.co.uk

Subscriptions and distribution: Jeff Lawson, 110 Park Road, Chorley, Lancashire. PR7 1QY. Tel: 01257 249686

E-mail: JeffL@lambflag.org.uk