
Alyis Angus

Step Dancer



Aylis Angus - Step Dancer

by

Ednie Wilson

Preface

The real difficulty in writing this booklet has been deciding what to leave out. In this short biography of Aylis (pronounced *ejls*) I have attempted to present a balanced picture of her life as a traveller as well as as a dancer. A longer work dealing with the Angus family and their dancing is in hand. The style of the dance is spontaneous and exuberant, and the few steps I have recorded here are examples of the variety of the steps and the more common chorus figure which links the parts of any dance. Part of the attraction of Aylis Angus is the memories and stories she has to tell of competitions and the dancers.

1

Aylis Barrett was born into the Angus family in about 1923 (date uncertain). Being divorced she now uses her maiden name Angus. The Angus's were a travelling family who travelled the Northumberland area. During Aylis' lifetime they only travelled in the summer months, and spent the winter in the Leazes Park area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She learned her way of life, and incidentally to dance, from the Angus's and the other families they travelled with. They always camped in groups. Among her many talents: dancing, basket making etc, she also makes jewellery. They travelled between the fairs, fetes and gatherings in and around Northumberland. Aylis stopped travelling in about 1942, and the last place she remembers travelling to was Hexham. She now lives in their permanent home in Leazes Terrace.

Just before the War she had a go at running her own dancing school. She managed to rent a place at the bottom of Strawberry Lane in Newcastle for the sum of 3/6p per week, and gathered about 20 to 30 pupils. She taught them for about eight months before the War put a stop to it, as the pupils could no longer travel in for their lessons. She taught the type of dancing she herself had been taught: clog steps, tap and a bit of Irish.

When she gave up the dancing school she went to work in the ship yards during the War in Walker and Wallsend and has had a variety of jobs since. She never went back to teaching dancing, except to her sons, of whom she says there are one or two who are quite good.

Her family has a dancing history. Her grandmother's family were the Armstrongs, and one Armstrong ancestor was a court jester of some repute, being a good musician, dancer and singer.

Aylis learned to dance from her father and her uncles, and they learned bits here and there from other dancers they saw. It seems many dancers learned at the same time, and sometimes they were taught as they were walking along between towns. They called this moving dancing 'gravel dancing'. I imagine this to slightly resemble the Wilson and Kepple sand dance. They also mimicked the sound of the horses'

hooves and trains going over the points on the track.

Clog dancing was a fairly common sight around the fairs and in the concert halls before the War. Steps were commonly 'borrowed' from other dancers you saw performing, and most dancers made up their own steps as points were given for originality in the competitions. Granny Armstrong's brother Peter Armstrong was a champion clog dancer. The first competition Aylis ever entered was a Charleston Competition at the Colloseum in Morpeth. She came second. The young man who won was wearing a Kilt and it was this she reckons that caught the judges' eye and placed him first. Aylis' first clog competition was at the 'Grand' in Byker and she would be about five or six years old. She won. Aylis says that most towns and areas had their competitions. She remembers Newbiggin, Shields and Long Horsley near Alnwick. Some were purely for clog dancing, some just for dancing of any sort. She also remembers events like Go-as-you-pleases, which were in essence like talent contests. Besides the competitions she also danced at events for charities and these were usually held at such places as the British Legion clubs. She remembers these 'do's' as being very stingy and only once did she get 'so much as a cup of tea'. Many of the competitions had a cash prize though these were never for very much. Just as often the prizes were things such as a pig or other types of provisions, fruit, meat etc. Aylis once won a gold chain at Ashington, or it might have been Blyth. It was presented by a film star called Gordon Hawker who played detective type roles. During the War Aylis took a local clog dancer Tommy Armstrong up on a bet; she would be about 16 or 17 at the time. The challenge was to dance in the clock bar in Clayton Street against Tommy and the prize was a white £5 note. The contest took place on V E Day 1945 and she had to dance on a round bar table with pints of beer all round the edge, without spilling a drop or knocking the glasses over. A similar challenge sometimes used was to dance on a table with 3 pennies on it; the idea being that you could place the pennies anywhere of your own choosing, but once in position, you had to dance without touching them and without their falling off the table. She won the challenge against Tommy Armstrong in 1945.

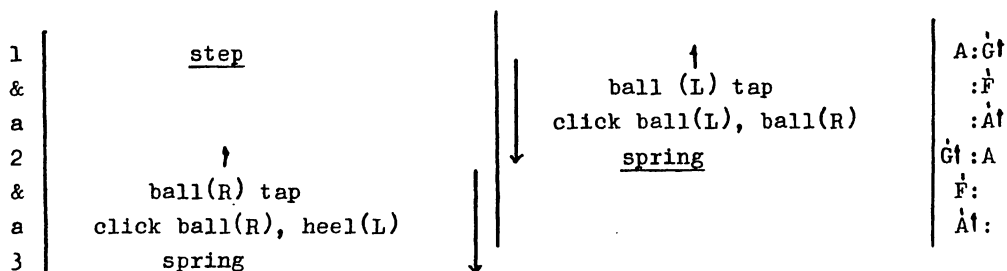
It was common to dance to the band provided by the contest organisers, but Aylis also had her own musicians, one of them being a little lad called Jack Allen who played the fiddle and another later one called Terry Shields. She danced to all sorts of music, from the popular tunes of the day to more traditional material. She particularly likes the tunes Jimmy Shand plays, and some of her favourites were: 'The Morpeth Rant', 'The Flowers of Edinburgh', 'The Cuckoo Waltz' and 'The Skater's Waltz'. Aylis' style of dancing is a sort of 'free-style' dancing performed to any sort of music, almost any tempo, with little structure. When asked if she danced each step off first one foot then the other, she replied that she would sometimes, for balance to the dance, but that you must always start to dance off the left foot, ie: step left. She recognises no regimented pattern that you would dance eg: 6 bars of step followed by a break and then repeated off the other foot. Aylis uses short steps of half a bar to two bars in length (approx) which she links together like building blocks to form each dance. This is done spontaneously with no predefined order. Each little step or block will be repeated for as many bars as Aylis fancies, and a chorus figure or block is used to link the steps.

These little building block steps , some of which Aylis has taught me, are quite complex and have beautiful rythms using pauses as well as beats for effect.

4	heel drop tap			A:
&		ball(R) tap		:A
a		heel(R) touch		:Atup
1	heel drop tap			A:
and		ball(L) tap		:A
2	heel drop tap			A:
and		click heel(L), heel(R)		:A!
3	heel drop tap			A:
and		<u>step</u>		:A
(4		<u>drop heel</u>		:A)

The beats written as made with the sides of the clog eg: ball(R) tap etc. are in fact made with the sharp edge of the clog sole. The springs should be quite high and performed with energy.

"Have you not tried this yet?"



As will be seen from the modifiers for this step, it is performed with the feet very close together and very little movement should be seen by the audience.

Learning even these few pieces from Ayllis is quite difficult as she no longer gets up and dances. These snippets are performed sitting down at a table and us going over and over the step until I have it, which in these limited conditions can often take some weeks. More of what Ayllis 'teaches' is about the presentation of the dance eg: "You're going to attract the judge's eye and get more points if you wave your skirts about and show a bit of leg". How competitions have changed! She believes that the dance should be first and foremost entertaining. In her day there were many more clog dancers at the concerts and go-as-you-pleases so the audiences were more discerning and the standard had to be high. Dances had to be original and good to watch. She had no set finishes for the end of each little step, but at the end of the whole dance she did a little 'kick forward'.

5

Chorus Fig. 1

&
a
1 heel drop
and
2

tap
catch out
↓
touch
drop heel

:B
:B↑, B, D↑
A: E↑
:A
:A

Chorus Fig. 2

&
a
1 step
and
2 spring

tap
step
↑
catch in

:A
:A
A: E↑
:E↑, B, A↑
A:

"You can fit this into a good step".

a tap (-) } lazy
1 step }
&
a
2
&) shuffle
a)
3 step
&
a
4
&) shuffle
a)
5 step
&
a
6
&) shuffle
a)
7 step
&
a
8 hop
&
a

↑
ball(L) tap
click ball(L), heel(T)
spring

À: (-:)
À: E↑
:É
:RÉ↑
:RÉ
È, B:

↑
ball(L) tap
click ball(L), heel(T)
spring

À: E↑
:É
:RÉ↑
:RÉ
È, B:

) shuffle
)

À:
:É, B

step

:Á
:E, B

) shuffle
)

A:
:E, B

) shuffle
)

A:
:E, B

Aylis danced solo for competitions because there was usually some prize money involved, but sometimes she danced with her sister. They danced everything, from tap to Irish to clog dancing. Usually when dancing with someone else they would agree on a routine. As for the length of the dance this could be anything up to an hour, as long as they had the energy and the musicians would play. When they danced at the fairs and the gatherings they would just set up dancing and pass the hat round.

For public display and competitions Aylis wore a crimson skirt, a navy satin blouse and red clogs (very eye catching). The clogs she wore had a higher heel than those around today, probably up to an inch high, and she feels that the sole was deeper as well. The other thing she remarked about was that the toe of the clog sole was flat and not curved like today's clogs. She cannot understand how it is possible to dance with curved sole. They used to get their clogs from Leonards in Morpeth or from a clog maker on Castle-Garth Stairs in Newcastle. They had laces like boots and each lace had a tassel on the end. Sometimes these were also threaded with beads and bells, but she would probably have taken these off for competitions. Clogs were often examined before the competitions by the judges because some dancers hollowed out the inside of their clog heels and put ha'pennies or farthings in them to make extra beats when they danced. The rivalry was quite fierce in the competitions and it appears that a variety of dirty tricks were played on the other competitors eg: scattering red brick dust on the stage to make the surface difficult to dance on. Removing competitors' clog laces is another common story. A tip from Aylis when you are entering a competition: Have a bit of brandy with your cup of tea before you go on. It puts you in a better frame of mind for dancing as well as getting rid of nerves.

Aylis remembers a few other dancers specifically, though unfortunately never by name. One was a pitman 'stocky built' and a very good dancer. And in about 1935, just before the War she met a very good dancer from Birtley who she only remembers as being a very little woman/lass. Another dancer was a lady called Gloria who Aylis now believes owns a chip shop in Shieldfield.

Some of the dancing feats Aylis can relate sound absolutely amazing. She knew a man once who could perform in clogs the sound of a train travelling across America. Apparently each of the stations has a different sound because of its points. Perhaps that story was a tall one, but I may be wrong. Aylis says that she used to make her clogs 'talk on the pavement' as she was walking down the street, and her children not only knew that she was coming but also to put the kettle on or whatever. Another trick was to dance up and down flights of stairs, stepping in the rhythm of 'this little piggy went to market' swinging her legs round on to each step, with her arms behind her back.

Aylis' clog dancing memories seem to be mostly of the Go-As-You-Pleases and the contests rather than the very formal competitions, though she did enter a few competitions when she was a little girl. The steps she dances come from the travelling tradition and though the techniques are traditional there is no set order, and the style is her own. Hopefully in the not too distant future one of her sons will teach me the steps, but on the condition that they are never written down and only passed on by word of mouth. There are also some stepping traditions of her family about which she has only hinted. These are ritual steps for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals; one seems to be a 'step walk'. These have never been seen in public, or taught to outsiders, and will never be taught. I asked 'Can you still do it Aylis?' and she said 'Why aye man - Every night coming home from the pub'. Served me right for asking!

I asked if she had ever forgotten any of her steps and she told me: "No, it comes naturally".

Newcastle Series