

The Hexham Festival - A Landmark

By DOUGLAS KENNEDY

HEXHAMSHIRE is a bit of country unlike anything else in England and Hexham is the old town that lies in the centre of it. Here the North and South Tyne split into their respective valleys, which go wandering off to their ultimate sources. Above the Tyne, stretching in one direction to Carlisle and in the other to Newcastle, is the Roman Wall. The inhabitants are English, but to a Southerner the spoken word, the songs, the dance-steps and the rhythms are such that he might think he was in a foreign country. The "polka" country dance step we have met in the South but not in such vigorous form. A common rhythm is the Schottische. English modesty keeps the German title and suffers the world to think the rhythm an invention of the Scots or the Poles. The Keel Row, a good example of the rhythm, is, of course, Tyne-side and neither Scots nor Polish. But let me start at the beginning, which was a reception at the grammar school, where Councillor Heslop spoke for his community, and Bill Scott and Peter Kennedy, the joint instigators of the Festival, outlined the plans to the members. The next day, Easter Sunday, started with a service in Hexham Abbey, followed by an excursion to the Roman Wall, conducted by Dr. Mitchell, of King's College, Newcastle—an enthusiastic archaeologist who led the party from Housesteads (almost at the double) four miles along the wall to a small white cottage for tea. We had beginners' luck, for Dr. Mitchell said he had never known so clear a view on so sunny a day. You could see the mountains of the Lake District and might almost have chucked a stone among the Scots. That evening, rather stiff from the walk, we rehearsed for our procession and dance programme for the Bank Holiday. The team being slightly unbalanced in favour of the fair sex, we chose for the procession a local dance based on two women to each man, joined by two handkerchiefs, named the Kielder Rant or Schottische. Kielder is on the North Tyne; Schottische is a dance step, and it made an excellent procession performed to the tune of "Castles in the Air" (a variant of the tune used for "Twin Sisters," also known as "Wee Willie Winkie").

Monday started showery, perhaps a mercy,

as it may have kept some hundreds away from Hexham. While the streets were drying we organised ourselves in the Queen's Hall, a fine dance hall with a wide gallery and café, overlooking the Abbey Gardens. In these gardens the outdoor dancing took place round a bandstand equipped with amplifier and a raised platform for demonstrations. While the final arrangements were being made for the selling of brochures and the street collections, five country musicians arrived to join the band. Two had come from Rothbury, up near the Border. One was a railwayman who played the fiddle, the other a giant policeman who indulged in the English concertina. The policeman had to surrender his concertina, which was of unusual pitch, and play Mrs. Kennedy's tiny piccolo-concertina, which in his great hands looked like a child's toy but sounded most impressive. Unfortunately, none of the shepherds off the fells was able to come because lambing was in full swing. As so many of the shepherds are fine fiddlers,



Photo: J. E. Hedley of Hexham

and melodeon players, the arrival of the lambs just at that time was somewhat deplorable! The other three players, fiddle, piccolo and mouth organ, came from Humsaugh, on the North Tyne. The band struck up the Schottische for the Kielder Rant and the procession began. The Schottische steps made heavy demands, so we had interludes of marching to the tune of "Hexham Races." We arrived at the Market Square and circled round to get the tail of the procession into the cleared spaces. It then transpired that the tail had no end, for at least two hundred had joined on behind the team! So the space had to be cleared again and the groups of threes joined up to make sixes, and all danced The Sylph followed by the Circassian Circle. At this point the crowd were joining in so determinedly that I decided to move to the dancing space round the bandstand in the Abbey Gardens. While we danced in the enclosure, some of the team managed to get out to sell brochures. The complete stock was exhausted in ten minutes. Our attempts to take a collection were watched with patient tolerance, one or two suggesting that we bring sheets next time so that everyone could make a contribution! As some of the local sword dance teams arrived they were put to dance on the platform. While such displays went on, some of the teams and musicians went to the Queen's Hall to be recorded by the B.B.C., who were doing a broadcast that evening.

The space available for the general dancing proved quite inadequate, and sets began arranging themselves up the paths. An announcement made by request to a party of camping children to leave the gardens and go to their lunch was met with a howl of dismay from the children and cheers from the crowd! Before the open-air dancing stopped the audience was told of the Clog-dancing and Rapper Sword Dance Competition in the Queen's Hall in the afternoon. The weather, which up till then had been kind and sunny, now became cool, but still kind to us, for the crowd automatically gravitated to the Queen's Hall and began to queue. When the doors were opened an hour and a half later the crowd poured in. When standing room only was posted up they poured in as cheerfully as ever. When the hall was solid they still got in somehow. Most of the spectators had to stand, and they stood for nearly 2½ hours without a murmur, except when they applauded.

Clog-dancing is a traditional form of folk dancing. Before the war there were regular competitions and championships for prizes. After the war there seemed to be no one to start it up again, so the E.F.D.S. Representative in the North East Area put an advertisement in the local paper and quickly found out who was who. What he was told prompted him to organise a championship under the E.F.D.S., and this was to be the Easter Monday afternoon entertainment. Two old champions judged the Clog-dancing, and I joined them for the sword dancing. The juniors had to dance six steps on each foot ending with a double-shuffle, and the seniors ten steps. The audience knew so much that you could hear little sighs and grunts in the otherwise still room, and their handclapping began just at the end of the second double-shuffle. The judges were very firm. They disqualified a number of competitors who only showed five steps instead of six. They took one favourite of the afternoon and fairly lopped marks off him on account of missed beats (or taps). At one moment the two old champions were so disgusted at the post-war idea of clog-steps that they took the floor together and rattled off a little symphony to the huge delight of all the competitors!

One lad, Jacky Toaduff, brought down the house with his dash and vigour. Girls were in the majority, with a uniform costume of very short skirt and a gaily-decorated blouse. The winner of the championship silver belt turned out to be a big girl named Tiny Allison; she beat by one mark an obvious future champion, Mr. Ellwood, who had trained many of the young competitors. The Sword teams included four from Winlaton: the "Blue Star" team—the sons of the famous pre-war team; lads of Youth Club age; girls slightly younger and tiny little boys, the grandsons of the old "White Star" team. The Earsdon Royal team won the senior prize, and the tiny Winlaton boys stole the show. Lady Trevelyan, President of the Northumberland District, presented the prizes and everyone was grateful to Peter Kennedy for having revived the event.

At 6.45 there was an excellent broadcast, produced by Richard Kelly, called "Northumbrian Folk Festival," giving impressions of the street dancing, the Sword and Clog dancing, and the various musical instruments. Later, at the Grammar School, a variety entertainment was provided by the

mining community which had furnished the majority of the Clog-dance competitors. It started with a Can-Can dance; this proved too much for one visitor who had just looked in to see what the folk dance festival was like! The Can-Can was followed by song and dance turns, some of which were quite brilliant and gave one an idea of North Country talent and of the vitality of the community that can use this talent for home-made entertainment.

The rest of the week passed in a rush and only the evening Barn Dances and an excursion to Blanchland can be recollected distinctly. Blanchland is a village that still looks as if it were expecting a Border raid. (It might even still contain some Romans!) The Festival Members, numbering about one hundred, arrived at six o'clock in the late sunlight to find the total population (about one hundred) lining the village square along with a few visitors from the locality, including the Speaker of the House of Commons. The displays in the square were continued until the shifting sunlight left the road surface and the dancers moved off for a cup of coffee or other stimulant. The Speaker expressed great satisfaction at the dancing and was especially gratified when he saw his gamekeeper in breeches and leggings footing it neatly in "The Cornrigs."

The Barn Dances each night were, for the Southerners, the greatest education. They showed how magnificent are the traditional dances when performed properly. The vigour and skill of the men was matched by the demure restraint of their partners, but the same degree of enjoyment seemed to emanate from both. The animation and gaiety of the company seemed to start with the first dance and never faltered. A different Country Band provided music for the dancing each night and interludes were provided by guest singers. Jack Armstrong's

playing of the Northumbrian small-pipes, accompanied by Celtic harp, was much admired. Mixed with the Country Dances and Reels were simple old-time couple dances such as the Gay Gordons, Varsoviana, Ma'tese Schottische and the Progressive Barn Dance, etc. There was a useful dance for a trio of two women and a man—the trio following round in close procession, performing a double-arch figure, as in the Kielder-Schottische. It was called, for no good reason that I was able to discover, "The Russian Ballet." But the jewels of the programme were the Schottische rhythms for "Drops of Brandy" (Strip the Willow), the Jigs for the Hulichan and Square Eight, and the Reels for the Quadrilles. In the North they have the spirit of the dance and the way of it. Somehow many more must go North to Hexham next year, and each year something of this live tradition must be imported South.

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Plans are already going ahead for next year. Owing to Easter falling before April 14th it will not clash so much with the lambing season, which reaches its peak in Northumberland and Cumberland after that date.

The contest will include, besides Rapper Sword and Clog-dancing, fiddle, melodeon and concertina playing, and Traditional Dance Bands, who will be required to play a Reel, Jig, Hornpipe and slow air.

More members will be able to be accommodated in Hexham next year and there will be more opportunities of private accommodation. Travel costs from London will be reduced by making up a party. It is hoped that more people from other parts of England will be able to take the opportunity of joining in the Northumbrian Folk Festival, Easter, 1950.

PETER KENNEDY.

Hunsdon House

The following words set to the tune of Hunsdon House have been sent in by Mr. Tom Fletcher.

*Hunsdon park's a | pleasant place in | fine midsummer | weather ;
 There I spied a | bonny lass, a | -walking in the | heather :
 Lambs were playing | all around, and the | dew was flashing | rarely
 And we | lay and listened | to the larks | singing, "Up in the morning early."
 Though I've wandered | England over, | searching for a | true love,
 I have found no | other one was | half as sweet as | you love ;
 Girls in plenty | looked so gay, but their | hearts were dull and | surly—
 So | come to me my | smiling lass, that I've | met in the morning early!*