DEVON STEP DANCERS

1. Bob Cann

Chris & Alice Metherell

Bob Cann.

Bob Cann was born Robert Frederick John Cann, near Spreyton, Devon, on 1st August 1916, into a family of musicians and step dancers. He died on 25th May 1990.

Bob's family were, at his birth, farm workers and quarrymen. He was the youngest child, having two elder sisters and an elder brother. His father played the Jews Harp and his grandfather, Sam, the concertina as did his uncle George. Of his other uncles, Jim was a melodeon player and Uncle Bob played the mouth organ. Indeed it seems that of his immediate family, only one uncle, a Navy man on his mother's side, was unmusical. However he came to stay with Bob's family, during a period of leave, bringing with him a little melodeon, upon which he was trying to learn to play. One day Bob, who at that time was about three and a half, picked this instrument up and began playing about with it. Soon, with his uncle's encouragement (and doubtless help from the rest of the family), he was able to pick out "Now the Day Is Over" with one finger. Bob never looked back, and, each time he came home on leave, his uncle would bring back a new box from Germany, Italy or elsewhere, until, by the time he was twelve or so, Bob had amassed a collection of 3 or 4 concertinas and 7 or 8 melodeons.

Bob's grandfather, father and great uncle were also step dancers, as were some of his aunts, and Bob learnt to dance by watching them both at family parties and at more formal competitions. Bob stated that as a youngster he used to copy individual steps, these often being steps which travellers used to dance. Indeed many of the locals did steps which the travellers had brought to the area. In addition to step dancing, Bob also learnt the Broom Dance and the Monkey Hornpipe.

In 1953 Bob performed at the E.F.D.S.S. Albert Hall Festival, when he played the melodeon for the Chagford Step Dancers. The team included Leslie Rice as a step dancer. In 1981 he was awarded the E.F.D.S.S. Gold Badge, and in 1989 the British Empire Medal for his services to local and national folk music.

Step Dancing in Devon.

Bob's stepping, although unique in its own style, was similar in many respects to that danced by other step dancers in Devon, and in particular around Dartmoor. Like most traditional step dancers, he had a relatively small number of steps in his repertoire, and these are perhaps best regarded as a subset of a larger corpus of material which may be said to represent the "Devon Step Tradition". Bob always considered that there was much variation in this type of step dancing because of the influence of travellers coming into the area.

Each unit, takes eight bars of music. The structure is always the same, being composed of six bars of movements, unique to the particular unit in question, followed by a two bar "finish" (a Newcastle Notation word, not used by Bob) which is always the same, whatever the content of the previous six bars.

Bob's dancing consists of two distinct types of unit, called by him "steps" and "sets". Each is of identical structure, but the two types are always danced alternately in performance, commencing with a "set".

Each unit is always danced commencing by using the right foot (in Newcastle Notation terms "off the right"), and is always repeated using the same foot to start. Thus each unit, whether a "set" or a "step" is always danced for 16 bars, the order always being set twice (16 bars) and then step twice (16 bars).

Bob always said that he was only able to dance off one foot due to an injury as a result of a bicycle accident. However, other Devon step dancers, notably Leslie Rice, always performed off the right also, and indeed Leslie was always most insistant on this point, frequently repeating the catchphrase "step right, finish right". Perhaps Bob's injury was not the whole story. In later years Bob encouraged pupils to dance off both feet, often commencing with the left rather than the right. One might postulate that this stems from Bob's contact with dancers involved in the clog dance revival during the 1970s and 1980's. The notations given however, all commence off the right, with the repeat off the same foot, as this is how Bob always danced.

As regards the units themselves, sources are given, insofar as they relate to specific collections.

It should be noted that there is no particular order for performance, and indeed any "step" can be danced after any "set". Likewise any finish can be employed to terminate any "set" or "step" save that within any 16 bars of "set" or "step" the same finish seems to have been employed for both repeats.

Competitions.

Competitions were important attractions at many fairs and fetes (or revels) held at such places as Chagford, South Zeal and Whiddon Down, although Bob considered the latter to be the real centre for stepping. They were advertised before the day in the Western Gazette and took place in the afternoon at about 3.00 p.m. and would go on as late as 7.00 p.m. There were often more than 30 competitors, many of whom may have travelled upwards of twenty miles to enter, made up of local labourers and travellers. A box 15 or 18 inches square and 4 inches high was placed on a farm cart in a prominent position. One musician played for all contestants continuously.

The judges were, in their time, respected step dancers, who, though elderly, were required to give a short demonstration before the contest. They did not judge their home contest and were known for their fairness. Contestants registered during the afternoon and drew lots for a dancing position. Entry was free. The dancers were eliminated in a series of three heats. In the 1920's and 1930's first prize was about 10 shillings (now 50p). To quote Bob himself:

> "You see you had to go on the wagon, and you would have to set twice through the music, setting was just marking time with your feet. Then you would do a step dance, twice. Then you'd leave the wagon and the next one would go on, and he would set twice, dance twice, till all the competitors had been on. The second time you went on you would set twice again and then do another step dance, but it would have to be a different step from the first time. Then you would have to go on the wagon three times, which would mean you had to be able to do three different kinds of steps."

Social Stepping.

Step dancing took place at other social occasions: harvest suppers, spring revels, club walk dinners, in the pub and at family parties. Bob once again:

> "...and perhaps for a night out at me Uncle's, drinking cider, they'd get in the kitchen. They'd start playing and they'd all be step dancers, even the women used to step dance as well. And if you went to a pub likes at Whiddon Down years ago, don't matter what night you went, especially on a Saturday night, there was always a concertina player or a penny whistle player and they'd all be step dancing."

On these occasions the mode of performance reflected the more informal occasion involved, and a dancer might get up in the middle of a tune and perform a few steps as and when he, or she, felt moved so to do. The number of steps danced on these occasions was, of course, a matter for the dancer.

There seems to have been no tradition of using the steps within social dances, as has been found to be the case in many other areas of the country, although the "polka step" was extensively used in this way.

Music

Many of the old timers played concertina, fiddle and more recently mouth organ or melodeon. Bob's grandfather Sam played for contests at one time, being succeeded by Bob's uncle George. The tunes used were even-rhythm hornpipes or schottisches. Suitable examples are to be found in, A.D. Townsend. *A First Collection of English Country Dance Tunes* (Oxford: Ferret Music. 1982).

Sources.

AMH. Units learnt by Ann-marie Hulme, from Bob's dancing, c.1977.

TMF. Single sheet in the collection of the late Tom Flett. Unmarked as to provenance or date. Identified, by the author, from internal evidence, as almost certainly emanating from Bob Cann. The units have been translated into Newcastle Notation by reference to the collector's other manuscripts and published works.

CM. Units noted from video tapes provided by Mr G. Dunn and contacts with Bob's pupils 11/90 - 2/91.

JM. Units noted by Jennifer Millest 7/71 & 5/73.

A slightly expanded version of this booklet has previously been published; see "Bob Cann, B.E.M. 1915-1990. Step Dancer.", *English Dance and Song*, Vol 53 No 1 13-16.

Bob's steps, together with those of Leslie Rice, have already been published in part by way of photocopied sheets prepared for various workshops at the Newcastle Weekends of dance and the Reading Day of dance; A-M Hulme and P. Clifton, *Dartmoor Step Dancing*, (Newcastle: The Newcastle Series), October 1985, 1st Revision 11/85, 2nd Revision 10/86, 3rd Revision (with C & A.S. Metherell) 11/89.

The quotes from Bob are taken from G.Barratt. "Ever Since I can Remember..." *What's Afoot* No 16 p17-18.

Bob can be heard dancing on, *Five Generations* (Stowmarket: Veteran Tapes. 1988) VT110, Side B Track 1.

Set 1.

1			tap	:B
and			↑	:B↑
2			step	:A
3	tap			B:
and	↑			B↑:
4	step			A:

Six times through off the same foot and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes:

1. Pay particular attention to the aerial position which gives the unit its particular character.

2. This unit may also be danced with the step on beats 1 and 3, commencing on the upbeat, indeed Bob frequently did this. The unit then becomes:

4			tap	:B
and			↑	:B↑
1			step	:A
2	tap			B:
and	↑			B↑:
3	step			A:

3. This setting unit seems to have been particularly common, and has been recorded from other Dartmoor step dancers.

4. In later years Bob taught Finish A particularly for use with this set.

5. Sources: AMH, TMF, CM.

Set 2.

A

1	<u>flat step</u>		A:
a	<u>pt</u>		A:

B

2	<u>heel drop</u>		A:
&		tap	:A
a		heel touch tup	:A
3	↑	<u>toe drop</u>	A↑:A
4		<u>heel drop</u>	:A
&	tap		A:
a	heel touch tup		A:
5	<u>toe drop</u>	↑	A:A↑

Unit is A once then B six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes.

1. This is perhaps the best of Bob's setting units, being extremely satisfying to perform.

2. Pay particular attention to the exact beat upon which the weight transfer takes place.

3. Sources: AMH, TMF, CM, JM(1973).

4. As with Set 1 this unit may also be performed commencing on the upbeat, and in fact this makes it much easier to get into the finish at the end of the unit. The unit then becomes:

A

4	<u>flat step</u>		A:
a	<u>pt</u>		A:

B

1	<u>heel drop</u>		A:
&		tap	:A
a		heel touch tup	:A
2	↑	<u>toe drop</u>	A↑:A
3		<u>heel drop</u>	:A
&	tap		A:
a	heel touch tup		A:
4	<u>toe drop</u>	↑	A:A↑

Set 3.

1		tap	:A
and		↑	:A↑
2		tap	:A
and		heel drop tap	:A
3		tap	:A
and		heel drop tap	:A
4		flat step	:A

Unit is six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off same foot.

Notes:

1. Source: TMF. Not recorded by any other collector and not taught by Bob in his later workshops.

2. It will be seen that this is essentially a repeated toe/heel movement. The exact foot positions are not given in the original notes and are thus interpretative.

3. Similarly the exact method of performance of the toe/heel movement is speculative, the original notes being imprecise. Other interpretations are possible, the other most likely being:

1		tap	:A
and		↑	:A↑
2		touch	:A
and		heel drop tap	:A
3		touch	:A
and		heel drop tap	:A
4		flat step	:A

Set 4.

A

1	heel drop		A:

B

2		tap	:A
&		heel tap	:B
a		tap	:B
3		flat step	:A
4	tap		A:
&	heel tap		B:
a	tap		B:
5	flat step		A:

Unit is A once then B six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes:

1. Source: JM(1971)

2. It will be seen that the pattern of this unit follows that of Set 2 above.

3. Steps of a similar type formed part of the repertoires of several other Dartmoor step dancers.

Step 1. "Single Cross Step"

				step		:A/F*
1						XC:
and		step				:A
2				step		A/F*:
3		step				:XC
and				step		A:
4		step				

Unit is six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes:

1. It will be seen that this is essentially a version of the Pas de Basque.

2. Beat 2 and beat 4 often become forward shunts rather than steps , although Bob rarely used a shunt all the way through the step.

3. Sources: AMH, TMF, CM.

Step 2. "Double Cross Step"

1		step	:A/F*
and	step		XE/C:
2		step	:A
and	step		C:
3		step	:A
and	step		XE/C:
4		step	:A

Unit is six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes.

1. This is essentially a Double Pas de Basque.

2. T.M.Flett gives a slightly different version of this step.

1		step	:A
and	step		C:
2		step	:A
and	step		XC:
3		step	:A
and	step		C:
4		step	:A

Unit is six times through off alternate feet and finish. Repeat all off the same foot.

It will be seen that the step is identical to that given in the main text but that the foot positions of the moving foot are, as it were, reversed.

3. This step may also be done with a shunt in place of the step at beat 4. In later years Bob regularly used this variation, and seems to have used it throughout the unit.

4. Sources: AMH, TMF, CM.

Step 3. "Treble Cross Step" (Version 1)

A

1			step	:A/F*
and	step		step	XC:
2			step	:A
3	step		step	A/F*:
and			step	:XC
4	step			A:

B

1			step	:A/F*
and	step		step	XE/C:
2			step	:A
and	step		step	C:
3			step	:A
and	step		step	XE/C:
4			step	:A

Unit is A B A B B B and finish.

| | | | | | |
R R L L R L

Repeat all off the same foot.

Notes.

1. This is a combination of Steps 1 and 2.

2. Source: AMH.

3. T.M. Flett collected a slightly different version of this step, not seen by other collectors.

Step 4. "Treble Cross Step" (Version 2)

Count			
1		step	:A/F*
and	step		XE/C:
2		step	:A
and	step		C:
3		step	:A
and	step		XE/C:
4		step	:A
and	step		C:
5		step	:A
and	step		XE/C:
6		step	:A
and	step		C:
7		step	:A
and	step		XE/C:
8		step	:A

Unit is three times through off alternate feet and finish.

Notes:

1. This step is unusual in that the weight ends on the R foot, thus necessitating the performance of the finish off the "wrong foot". An alternative approach would be to end with a step= in which case the finish could follow in the usual way.

2. Sources: TMF, CM.

Bob Cann's Finish A.

Beat			Code
1		step	:A
and	heel slide touch		B,A:
2	step		A:
and		heel slide touch	:B,A
3		step	:A
and	heel slide touch		B,A:
4	step		A:
and		heel slide touch	:B,A
5		step	:A
6	step		A:
7		step =	:A
8			

Notes:

1. This finish was certainly taught by Bob at workshops in the 1980's. It was not noted by any earlier collectors.

2. Bob taught this finish for use with Set 1, perhaps because it was particularly simple, and also allowed its use for other "sets" and "steps", perhaps where dancers were less able or workshop time did not allow the teaching of a more complex finish.

3. Source: CM.

Bob Cann's Finish B.

Beat			Code
and	heel slide touch		B,A:
1	step		A:
and		heel slide touch	:B,A
2		step	:A
and	heel slide touch		B,A:
3	step		A:
and		heel slide touch	:B,A
4		step	:A
and		heel slide touch	:B,A
5		step	:A
and	heel slide touch		B,A:
6	step		A:
7		step =	:A
8			

Notes:

1. Source JM(1971).

2. This finish is unusual in that it does not end with three strong beats on 5,6,7, as do Bob's other finishes.

Bob Cann's Finish C.

Count	Action		Action	Notation
1			heel slide touch	:B,A
and			tap	:A
2			heel slide touch	:B,A
and			tap	:A
3			heel slide touch	:B,A
and			flat step	:A
4	heel slide tap			B,A:
and	catch in			A↑,A,RC↑:
5	step			RC:
6			flat step	:A
7	flat step =			A:
8				

Notes:

1. This would seem to be the finish favoured by Bob in performance. It was not taught by Bob in recent years however. He can be heard performing this finish on VT110.

2. Source: AMH.

NOTE.

The above three finishes can clearly be seen to be closely related. JM was told by Bob, in 1971, that one could use various combinations of the basic movement, giving finishes with one two or three heel/toe movements off the same foot.

Bob Cann's Finish D.

Count	Step		Foot
1		step	:A
and	step		XC:
2		step	:A
and	step		C:
3		step	:A
and	step		XC:
4		step	:A
and	step		C:
5		step	:A
6	step		A:
7		step =	:A
8			

Notes:

1. The most common finish taught by Bob at recent workshops.

2. The finish as collected by TMF was slightly different:

Count	Step		Foot
1		step	:A
and	step		C:
2		step	:A
and	step		XC:
3		step	:A
and	step		C:
4		step	:A
and	touch		XC:
5		step	:A
6	step		A:
7		step =	:A
8			

It will be seen that the foot positions, as given by TMF, follow those of his version of "Double Cross Step".