

Roland Cowper, 4A Cross St, Whitehaven, aged 71

Son of Oliver I Cowper, who taught dancing in Workington and the surrounding districts. Roland Cowper himself is a decorator by profession, but teaches dancing in his spare time. Two of Roland's daughters are also professional Teachers, though one of them is now in the States. Oliver Cowper died in 1922 at the age of 68.

Oliver Cowper was born ca 1854 in Wakefield, where his father had a sweet-manufacturing business. His interest in dancing came from his Uncle Robert, who was a professional dancing-master in York. This Uncle Robert had a dancing academy at 8, Stonegate, York, with a ballroom attached to it, and Oliver and his brother Arthur were frequent visitors there when they were children. Uncle Robert seems to have taught both the lads to play the violin, and also to dance, and aroused their interest in dancing as a career.

Oliver's father, however, had other ideas, and put Oliver and Arthur to work in his sweet business in Wakefield. Arthur was apparently the more determined of the two, and made it perfectly plain that he did not want to take up the confectionery business, and eventually Uncle Robert took Arthur to live with him. When Uncle Robert retired, Arthur took over the dancing academy in York, and then in turn was succeeded by his own daughters, Elsie and Avril (?). The two girls have now themselves retired - last year - and are living at

50 Severus Avenue, Acomb, York.

They can probably give a certain amount of information about Uncle Robert's teachings.

But to return to Oliver; Oliver continued to work in the family confectionery business for a short while, but he, too, was not at all interested in it. He would bring his fiddle into the factory and play to the workmen, distracting them from their duties. At last his father gave way and sent him out of the business, but instead of sending him to York, he apprenticed Oliver to a draper in

Manchester

After Oliver completed his apprenticeship, he worked for some time in Manchester as an auctioneer. There, too, he met and married a Keswick girl, and it was probably this which determined him to come to Cumberland; for soon after his marriage he took a job as manager of a big draper's shop in Workington. Here he worked for a number of years, but still remained dissatisfied with his job, and eventually he threw it up and became leading violinist at the Opera House in Workington. At the same time, he began to take pupils privately for music and dancing.

In Roland's earliest recollections, Oliver was giving private lessons, whilst still working as the leading violinist at the Opera House. The private lessons were given in their own house during the day - they simply lifted the carpet off the floor.

While Roland was still at school, Oliver had so many requests for classes, that he gave up his post at the Opera House, took bigger rooms, and began to make his living as a full-time teacher of dancing. In the winter & from the first week of September to just before Easter, he taught in the towns in his district - a class every night except Saturday in a different town, Workington, Whitehaven, Maryport, Cockermouth, and Wigton. Saturdays he kept for private lessons. In the summer he went out into the villages; the classes there went on right through the summer till the end of August. "They knew him so well round Cumberland they used to write to ask him to come, and he had a job to decide which village was the best one to go to". For instance, he held classes in Bullgill (4 m N. of W from Maryport), Aspatria (9 m N.W of Maryport), and at Bagger (). At Bagger, in particular, he held his class in a farmer's barn, since there was no other available venue. Transport to most of these classes (all?) was by train.

He provided the music for his class himself. "No such things as pianos then. He used to walk round the room playing, and everyone danced to it It seemed he

couldn't teach dancing unless he had his violin in his hand... Some people used to go to his classes just to hear him playing the violin". Oliver taught his wife to dance, and she helped him in his classes. As soon as his three sons, Harold, Parry, and Roland were old enough, they, too, assisted him. Roland himself began to learn to dance at the age of 3 to 4.

The classes were divided into two sessions, the first for children off school age, from 5.30 to 7.30 p.m., and the second for adults, from 8 to 10.30 p.m. Most of the "adults" were aged about 20; in any case they had to have left school. The series of classes ended with a "Grand Ball". In the villages, they also had "long night dances" for the adults 3 times in the course of the summer; these would normally go on till 4 a.m. There were also "long night dances" in the towns, but less frequently in the villages.

In the towns, Oliver Couper insisted on his pupils wearing white gloves. He tried to make the same stipulation in the country villages, but there apparently he failed. He did, however, insist on teaching these country people ballroom etiquette. When they went to ask the lady for a dance, they had to say "May I have the pleasure of this dance". And after the dance was over, he insisted on their taking the lady on their arm to her seat, then they had to bow to her, take two steps back, turn, and walk back to their own seat".

"By the way, in those days no one was late for a ball. My father insisted that if they were coming to this ball, they must be there for the first dance".

In the children's classes, the boys and girls sat where they liked, but usually boys wouldn't sit with girls. But at these places he had almost as many boys as he had girls. After an hour of skirt-dancing, gavottes, and so on, Oliver would often hand over the class to his wife and go for some refreshment.

Oliver had a long waiting-list for his private classes. In these he would make

his children help out. Oliver also "had a class for the nobbs (or snobs) in Workington, and another in Whitehaven; these were his best-paying classes.

In Workington, Oliver Cooper had Mr Bryden as a competitor. But Bryden's classes were reckoned of a lower class than Oliver's. "Bryden's classes were common; Our price was always a bit above his. We charged 1/- a night, he charged 9d. — this for the adults. The children paid 6d a night." Oliver also had a system of reducing fees when two or more children of the same family came. If two children came, they paid 4d each. If three came, the third paid only 3d. If four, one came free (but this was rather uncommon).

When Roland was about 16 (i.e. ca 1905), the list of dances which Oliver Cooper taught to adults was as follows.

Quadrilles, Caledonians, Lancers, Alberts (a mixture of figures from Quadrilles, Lancers, Caledonians, and Waltz Cotillion; They never did the Waltz Cotillion as a separate dance because the 2nd figure of the Waltz Cotillion is in the Alberts)

Saraband (a dance in 4's, sometimes called it the Spanish Waltz. It had a special time of its own).

Two Circular Cycles. (One was a great big one round the room, the other was like the Saraband.)

Sir Roger de Coverley (fairly often), Triumph,

Square-8, Long-8, Six-Reel. (the last didn't need any teaching).

Varsovie (i.e. La Varsoviana), Polka, Polka Mazowka, Schottische, Barn Dance, Veleta Waltz — all kinds of simple waltzes.

They also did a very popular type of Scotch Reel, in 4's, in which they galloped on to the next couple.

They also did two dances which were really games, a French Cotillon (pronounced Cotillon) and Ninepins

The type of dances which Oliver Cowper taught the children in those days were skirt dances, fan gavotte, tambourine dance, and the like. Oliver Cowper also did a good deal of carnival dances, and arranged a big annual children's display in the summer in Workington. He taught very little ballet.

Oliver Cowper had a special session for step-dancing - this was the old Cumberland step-dancing, quite different from tap-dancing. When Oliver Cowper took up the teaching of dancing on a full-time basis, various people asked him about step-dancing. He himself had never bothered with it, but he realized that it was imperative to do something about it now. Accordingly, he sent his eldest son Harold (then aged 17 or so - Roland would only have been 5 at this time) to Jack Robinson at Seaton, a man of 60 who was a very clever Cumberland step-dancer. Then, when Oliver was holding his children's classes, he asked those who wanted to learn step-dancing to go into a separate room with Harold.

I asked Mr Cowper some further questions on this Cumberland step-dancing. It was quite distinct from clog-dancing. There was, of course, an obvious difference in footwear. Step-dancing was done in light shoes with hard soles, whilst clog-dancing was done in clogs without cokers (iron). But there was more to it than that. In clog-dancing, for instance, you sprang into the air & cracked your heels together; this would not have been done in step-dancing. Pedestal dancing is nearer step-dancing in style than is clog-dancing on the ground. In the step-dancing there were steps called shuffles, double shuffles, and sidesteps. And when I showed Mr Cowper and his daughter, [unclear], the crunch and heel-roll, they said that those were step-dancing rather than clog-dancing. But they had never seen the hagworm crawl, except as a recent step for the samba!

Harold Cowper showed some of his Cumberland steps to his cousins in York, and they have taught one or two of them to Roland's daughter,

One was catch in and treble, done straight to the front. Another was as follows (not noted exactly)

1. 1 Step on LF
- 2 Brush R toe out
- 2 Hop on LF
- 2 Brush R toe in
- 3,2 Step on RF, LF
- 4 Step on RF
- 2 Brush L toe out
- 2,1 Hop on RF
- 2 Brush L toe in
- 2 Step on LF
- 3,4 Step on RF, LF

This is 1.1-3 contrarie.

Mr Roland Cooper also had a step with heel-beats in it.

Roland Cowper and his daughter also have a family version of the Scottish Sword-dance. It is a clockwise version, and my impression is that it is the oldest surviving version I have seen.

Oliver Cowper was President of the United Kingdom Alliance, and Secretary of the BATD. It is noteworthy, however, that he quite definitely taught the Long-8 and Square-8 in his classes.

One or two other remarks which are worth noting: "Dancing, of course, was a much more strenuous business than it is today". At one place called Lorton, the fellows took their jackets off. Father was keeping a watchful eye to see no girl was lifted off her feet".

Oliver Cowper taught the 6-Reel only by request; he didn't like it, because "it got too rough". Normally he would tend to leave dances like this to Parry. Apparently Parry Cowper was the family expert on folk-dancing [but whether the "folk-dancing" here meant real folk-dancing, or Cecil Sharp's dancing, I did not question.]

Parry Cowper's address is

Parry Cowper, 8 Salisbury Street, Herne Bay, Auctland, N.Z.

Six Reel. Each man has two partners and lines up opposite another three

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The threes advance, retire, and cross to the opposite place

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Then advance and retire again, and cross back to original place

□ □

Each man swings his RH partner (8 bars), then his left-hand partner
(8 bars), using ballroom hold and pivot step.

□ □

Then "cuddle up all three" and swing with pivot step in a baby
basket (8 bars)

Sometimes they "join up all six" and swing another 8 bars, but
usually this was omitted.

Repeat the whole sequence ad lib.

Square-8, Long-8. Roland Cowper cannot now remember these.

French Cotillon. Very much a game. When the dance was announced, partners promenaded round the floor as for a Circle Dance. When there were sufficient couples, the M.C. then halted them, and said All you have to do is follow your leader; you do as I do with my partner. Anyone who sits down has to pay a forfeit". Then off they went, usually to John Peel. They went round, did the silliest things with their partners, opened out, then wound on to one end of the line into a tight reel, and unwound again, then had to kneel on a hamlet and make love to their partner in mimic, and so on.

Ninepins. A very popular dance - people used to go wild over this one. Oliver Cowper used to use it at the "finish-up ball" in the country villages, and Roland Cowper still does so.

When the dance is announced, the couples promenade until everyone is on the

floor, with a gentleman in the middle. Then 4 bars for bows and curtseys (every dance started with this). They all join hands in a large circle round the room, advance 4 steps, retire 4 steps, then all swing partners (8 bars). Ladies advance to the centre and bow to the lone man in the centre (4 bars) - and can push him backward and forward between them if they please - and retire. Then the men advance, join hands in a circle round the ninepin while the ladies remain in their places. The men gallop round the ninepin, and when the music stops, everyone must find a partner. The man who is left out is the new ninepin.

When a man is three times the ninepin, he must go round the girls and kiss them all.

Circassian Circle, Version I. For this, Oliver would announce "Take partners for a Circassian Circle and promenade", meanwhile playing a march often 'John Peel'. As the couples came on the floor they promenaded round, and when all were on the floor they stopped. 8 bars bows and curtseys, advance 4 steps, retire 4 steps, and swing partners for 8 bars. Then ladies to the centre, bow(?) to the centre, and retire backwards, then the gentlemen advance and turn about and bow to the lady then on their right, return to her, put R arm round her waist, L hand on hip, and galop round in a big circle to the end of the strain (8 or 16 bars). Then repeat.

Circassian Circle, Version II This was known as the "Cumberland Canter", and was always used as the first dance at a ball. The figures consisted of those of the first figure of Quadrilles.

Stand with couple facing couple round the room

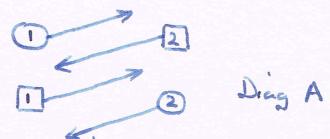


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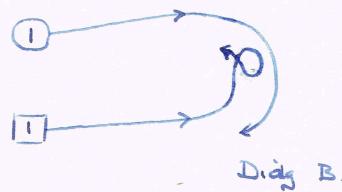
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8 bars introduction, bow to partner, bow to opposite.

1-8 Cross over to opposite side, the ladies passing between the opposite couple (A)



When you reach the opposite side, "allemande the lady", i.e. partners join R hands, and the lady turns to her left under her own right arm, while the man goes round behind her. (bars 1-4). They then



return to places in the same way (bars 5-8).

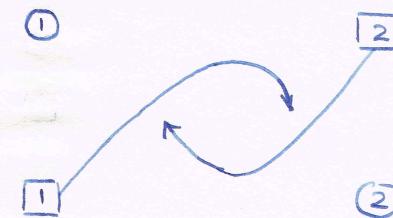
9-12 Set to partner

13-16 Swing partners with ballroom hold and pivot step

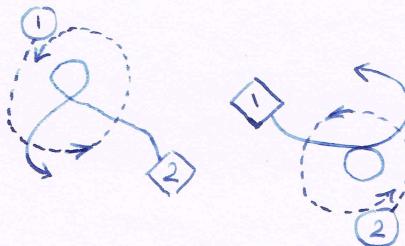
17-24 Ladies chain, sometimes done with a turn under the arm.

25-32 Take ballroom hold ("closed position"), galop forward (2 bars), back (2 bars), and then on to the next couple, passing by the right (4 bars).

The turn under arm in the ladies chain was also called an allemande, but was different from that in bars 1-8. Here the ladies give right hands to each other (Diag. C), then left hands to the opposite man. He turns her to her right under her own left arm, at the same time passing completely round her in a counter clockwise direction (Diag D)



Diag C.



Diag D.

In this way the man faces inwards to his partner throughout the turn (though his partner is not facing him, of course). The figure is thus a refined form of the figure used in Cottages by Miss Short and Mrs Boyle

The step used for setting to partner was (to the right)

- 1. 1 Step on RF in 2nd position
- 2 Close LF to rear 3rd position
- 2. 1 Step on RF in 2nd position
- 2. Close LF to 5th position

Here the L hand is placed on the waist (fingers forward?), while the R hand is held up



Allemande. Two forms of allemande are given in Circassian Circle above. There is also another, the slow allemande, in which partners face, and the man turns his partner under her own arm (which?). She makes the turn, to her left, with 4 slow steps.

Scotch Reel.



- 1-4 Link arms with partner, facing opposites. Then dance the Highland Schottische step to the right and to the left, substituting 4 galop (ie. skip) steps to the right in place of the Common Schottische step on bars 2,4.
- 5-8 RH & LH star with step hop (2 bars each way)
- 9-12 Schottische with ballroom hold and step-hop on to next couple

This was "usually done in place of the Highland Schottische, which nobody liked".