

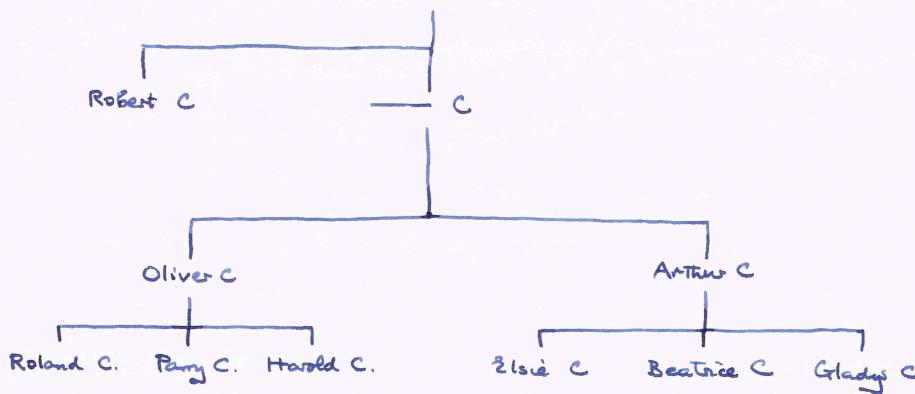
Misses Elsie and Beatrice Cowper, 50 Severs Avenue, Acomb, York,

ages ca 68 and 65 respectively.

Interviewed by F & Frank Rhodes - we talked with them from 2:30 p.m. until about 6 p.m.

The Misses Cowper are the nieces of Oliver Cowper of Warkington (see pp 29-40)

The relevant parts of the Cowper family tree are shown below



So far as they know, their Great-Uncle Robert was the first member of the Cowper family to teach dancing. He took their father, Arthur Cowper, as an assistant, and on Robert's death, Arthur took over the business. Eventually Arthur retired, and Elsie and Beatrice took over. Now they, too, have retired, and the business has lapsed.

The only fixed date is Arthur's death; he died in 1937 at the age of ca 80. He was married ca 1887, and Robert died very soon after this. Elsie and Beatrice, naturally, have no memory of Robert. Moreover, they knew very little of his teaching or of the way he ran his business, but it seems reasonable that Arthur carried on, at least to a substantial extent, in the same manner as his uncle had done. Robert left no books or papers relating to his business.

Virtually all that Elsie & Beatrice know of Robert is that he played the violin for his classes and that he whacked erring pupils with his "fiddlestick". But they have heard it said that in those days one danced on one's toes. Some teachers chalked their pupils' heels, & rewarded a chalk mark on the floor with a wallop from the fiddlestick.

When Arthur Cooper first began to work for his Uncle Robert, the latter was already an established figure in York. He had a dancing academy in his house at 8 Stonegate; the entrance to the house was down a snicket which opened out into an alley. A big front door with a brass plate and a big brass doorknocker opened into the hall, with the main reception hall beyond. The ballroom was on the first floor, reached by a spiral Georgian staircase. It was originally L-shaped, with two large fire-places in the Adams style, but Arthur had one half of the L removed. After this modification, the room still held 5 sets of Quadrilles, but you could double this number with a bit of a squash. With circle dances, you might get 130 to 140 in the room.

[The Coopers must always have been a somewhat unconventional family. In Arthur's and their time in the house, there was a rope and pulley up the centre of the spiral staircase, so that if anyone forgot something from the bedrooms (on the top floor, 52 steps up), it could be sent down by the pulley!]

Arthur was born ca 1857, so presumably helped Robert in the business for about 10 years before Robert's death.

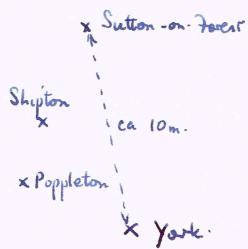
From Elsie & Beatrice's earliest recollections, their father, Arthur, held classes on two evenings a week in York, on Mondays and Thursdays. These classes were for ballroom dancing, for adults only. On Monday evenings the class ran from 7 p.m. till 10.30 p.m., the first hour being for beginners, the remaining time for advanced dancers (though the beginners could stay on for the second period if they wished). The class on Thursday evening lasted the same length of time, but the whole period here was devoted to beginners. The winter was divided into two terms, from October to Xmas and Xmas to Easter, and the charge for either the Monday + the Thursday classes were one guinea a term (of 10 or 12 lessons). Pupils were given numbered tickets, and when they came to a class the doorman ticked

off their numbers in a book.

On Saturday afternoons he had the juvenile class, when he taught both ballroom dancing and fancy dancing. He also gave private lessons, by appointment, during the day time.

In Sissie's and Beatrice's earliest days, Arthur gave balls at Christmas-time for pupils and their friends - by invitation only. There was a juvenile ball and an adult ball, both being devoted to ballroom dancing only (and parents weren't permitted to attend : "we didn't like parents"). There were no exhibitions of dancing at these balls.

On the evenings on which he had no classes in York, Arthur held classes in some of the smaller places round York. Thus he held classes in, for instance, Sutton-on-Derwent, Sutton-on-Forest, Shipton, Poppleton, and Coxwold.



At Sutton-on-Derwent, for example, the class was held in a big barn, the seats being planks laid on sacks of wheat. The normal period in these country places would be one term, but if the members of the class requested it, he would carry on for a second term. Usually he spent two evenings a week in the country. In his early days, Arthur had to walk all the way to some of these classes (e.g. Sutton and Shipton), even when the roads were under snow. On one occasion he was walking home from one of his classes with the ground deep in snow, when he became knotted in the telephone wires which the snow had brought down.

At the end of the session in these country places, there would be a ball, going on until about 3 a.m. For this, Arthur took his band out, but for the ordinary classes he provided the music himself with his violin. At these country classes "he had to walk in and give them a good twank with his bow if they didn't behave themselves".

In York itself, their pupils were drawn from the better-class people, often from professional people - "Copper's were always known to be select". The Monday and Thursday evening classes usually drew about 70 to 80 people. In the country, it is possible that the ordinary farm lads and lasses attended the classes, but more likely that most of the pupils there would be farmers' sons & daughters. The usual number of pupils would be around 30 or 40. [There was some doubt whether the ordinary farm workers would have attended the country classes. Beatrice thought they would have done so, and at first Elsie agreed with her, but on reflection Elsie thought that it would have been "probably the farmers' families more than the hinds".]

In both town and country, Arthur did not hold classes from Easter to September. In addition to his dancing lessons, Arthur also taught the violin. He used the violin for all his classes, both Town and country.

Elsie & Beatrice do not know if Robert held country classes, but it seems very likely that he did [and a search of York newspapers would probably settle this point.]

When Elsie can first remember her father's classes, the social dances which he taught were as follows.

Quadrilles

Caledonians

Lancers,

Waltz Cotillion

Sir Roger de Coverly

Cartescrew

Waltz

Polka

Schottische

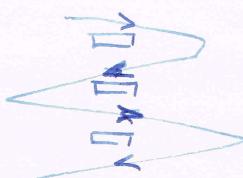
Gavot

Bam Dance

Highland Schottische

She has heard her father talk of Alkerto, a square dance containing one figure from each of the Squares, and also Circassian Circle, both of which he taught before her day. So far as she knows, he did not teach La Vassourane or Polka Mazowka.

Corkscrew [apparently a version of the Scandinavian County Dance: F]. This had a push-pull figure in which the couples took both hands with partners, and one couple zig-zagged backwards and forwards through the other pairs, thus:



while the others moved out the road. There was also a figure in which the dancers knelt while the top couple formed an arch over them and ran down one side & up the other [with a simple "step-hop" step]. Start in two lines, men one side, ladies other. Top couple begin by swinging with linked R arms, then swing the 2nd person of opposite sex with linked L arms, then swing partner again with linked R arm, then the 3rd person, & so on down.

This dance must have gone out of use about 1900, for it was done only when Elsie was "a nipper", and Beatrice never did it at all.

[I took the opportunity of asking them about the "ladies waltz across" figure in Waltz Cotillion, which I have never known how to do correctly. When they move across, the two ladies should pass each other by the right shoulder, and should make one complete turn clockwise as they cross over, using the standard waltz step.]

I was also put through the original version of Velela by Miss Elsie - as taught by Arthur Morris of "our association" [United Kingdom Alliance of Professional Teachers of Dancing]. He is said to have received £5 for this dance.

Here "pas de valse RF" is : 1.1. Step forward on RF

2 Step forward on LF

3 Close RF to a (closed) rear position

"Glossade to L" means

1.1 Step on LF in 2nd position

3 Slide RF to 3rd position (the slide begins on count 2, finishes on count 3).

The positions here are defined more exactly later.

The dance is as follows. Face direction of dance, lady on man's right, nearer hands joined. I give man's steps; ladies dance counter-clockwise.

1. Pas de valse LF, swinging hands forward + upward to bring partner back to back (turning outwards)
2. Pas de valse RF, turning inwards to face partner, hands swing back.
- 3-4. Glossade twice to L, facing partner.
- 5-8. Repeat 1-4
- 9, 10. Waltz two steps with partner, making one complete turn clockwise (using ordinary ballroom hold)
- 11, 12. Glossade twice to L (in direction of dance, still with ballroom hold)
- 13-16. Waltz four steps, making two complete turns clockwise, with ballroom hold.

Incidentally, Arthur Cowper was originally a member of the ISATD, then joined the UKAPTD, of which he became President.

Arthur started his evening (adult) classes by making the pupils stand in line and learn the five positions of dancing, first with the RF, then with LF. With RF, his positions were

$$60^\circ \leq \theta < 90^\circ$$



1st

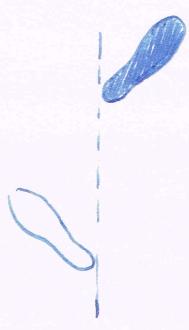


2nd.



3rd

[ball of RF on ground close to LF, RF turned much farther out than usual]



4th.

(in front of 1st or 3rd?)



5th

(R instep to L toe, RF turned much further out than usual)

He then taught them how to bow and curtsey to a count of eight [in Lances & Quadrilles, the bow to partners took 8, the bow to corners the same] [for juveniles also [only?]] he also taught them to bow or curtsey to him when leaving the room

The two basic movements in the Square Dances were

Advance and retire

"Advance through 4th position, one, two, three, and a half, one, two, three, and a half."

1. 1. Step on RF in 4th position (one)

2 Step on LF in 4th position (two)

2. 1 Step on RF in 4th position (three)

2 Close L toe to rear 5th position (and a half) with L knee turned out.

3. 1, 2 }
 4. 1. } Three steps backwards LF, RF, LF

2 Close RF to LF in 1st position.

"Set and turn."

"Advance through 2nd position, one, two, three, and a half, back, two, three, and a half."

1.1. Step on RF in 2nd position, turning $\frac{1}{4}$ turn to R.

2 Step on LF in 4th position (relative to new direction)

2.1 Step on RF in 4th position, pivoting on the ball of R foot to turn $\frac{1}{4}$ left (or to face original front)

2 Slide LF into 3rd position

3,4 Perform bars 1, 2 clockwise.

We asked the Misses Cooper about 'ladies chain', but this was done without the 'allemande' taught by Oliver Cooper in Worthington. Here they just turned partners as usual (without the helping hand round the back). They had heard the term 'allemande', but had forgotten its meaning.

A swing in Lancers or Quadrilles was done with ballroom hold & pivot step. The 'Belgian bid', in which the dancers step round with alternate feet -as fast as they can - was usually known as "Manchestering", though it was also known as "dollying" (see p.13). "Manchestering" was also used in the more general sense of making a mess of a dance.

When teaching steps, Arthur Cooper counted them against the beats, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, etc.

In addition to the dances, Arthur Cowper also taught calisthenic exercises and deportment (presumably to the juveniles). For instance, in the bow a man "mustn't put your hand on your stomach as if you've got stomach-ache".

Arthur Cowper never had much contact with Oliver Cowper; it therefore seems likely that Oliver Cowper obtained his knowledge of dancing directly from Uncle Robert, and not from Arthur Cowper.

The Muriel Cowpers deny ever having learnt steps from Harold Cowper of Walsington (see p. 33). In fact they only met Harold for the first time late in life, and then he did not seem at all interested in dancing. They suspect that Marion Cowper learnt the steps noted on p. 34 from her sister (now in Canada), & that the sister learnt them directly from Harold.

Arthur Cowper had a sword dance done over crossed sticks, but they don't know where he learnt it. They never performed it themselves.

Arthur Cowper was master of the dances at the York Pageant in 1909. He composed three dances, a Morris dance, a Roman dance, and a children's dance. It is not known whether the Morris was based on anything traditional.

So far as Elsie & Beatrice Cowper know, their father's & great-uncle's only competitor in York was a Mrs Inman - "but she fizzled out". There was also another teacher in Harrogate.

"Fancy dancing". This is the usual term for concert work, e.g. for school concerts and the like. For instance, a local convent school had an annual concert, and Beatrice arranged the dances for this. The name "stage dancing" was also sometimes used for this type of work, but they both felt that "stage dancing" would tend to be more intricate and more often for adults than would "fancy dancing".

Fancy dancing has now gone out of fashion slightly, and ballet dancing has tended to take its place..

The "oldest fancy dance" taught by their father was the Skirt Dance. This formed an invariable part of his juvenile class, and they danced it "every Saturday afternoon for 15 years" [this said with justifiably strong feeling!] when they assisted their father in their younger days. It was danced to a tune called Dame Mayore, and the dance was actually composed by Arthur Cowper himself. It could be done by one or four girls, the routine being a fixed one. The "skirts" were very full, simply hanging from a yoke, with no bodice.

[This was presumably the Dame Mayore Gavotte composed by Arthur Cowper of York, "for skirt, garland, scarf, or veil" which is described in Joseph Wallace's book of fancy dances.]

Other "fancy dances" which the Misses Cowper have taught were

- 1) Japanese dances. In one of these the girls were dressed in kimonos, and had fans & parasols. They also had Japanese lanterns folded flat inside their kimonos, and, when they had their backs to the audience, they produced the lanterns, and then turned to the audience, now magically supplied with lanterns.
- 2) Tambourine dances
- 3) Gypsy dances
- 4) Spanish dances, with castanets.

- 5) Fan gavotte
- 6) Minuet and gavotte
- 7) Sailor's Hornpipe. This particular one came from their father. The steps were very simple (see No 5 below) and there was a good deal of the standard miming which usually occurs in this dance.

In these fancy dances "the main thing is to get the troupe to dance together in time."

Most of these dances which Elsie & Beatrice Cowper used in their work were composed for particular concerts, using a certain amount of standard material, padded out with fresh stuff. Beatrice said that very little of her concert work was derived from her father, but much came from other teachers - she would see a movement in a display given by another teacher which took her fancy, and she would incorporate it in one of her own dances when a suitable opportunity arose.

[She herself made her dances up in bed - kicking holes in the sheets - she could think better in bed!]

"Step-dancing" was a part of fancy dancing. In step-dancing there was not so much emphasis on beats as in Tap-dancing. Thus steps Nos 1-9 below formed part of step-dancing.

Tap dancing was done on mats with tipped shoes, and here the beats were the important thing.

In their teaching of this fancy dancing, Elsie & Beatrice Cowper made very little use of technical terms.

Examples of steps used in step-dancing.

No. 1 Pas de Basque.

- Count 1. Step on RF in semi 2nd position
 " 2 Place LF in (open) crossed position
 " 3 Beat with the RF in rear crossed position (+ retain this position throughout the count of 4, i.e. the movements finish with both feet on the floor).

No 2. A balance step, forward & backward, or vice-versa, keeping the knees close together throughout the movement

No 3.

- Count 1 Hop on LF and place R heel in semi 4th (?) position
 2 Hop on LF and point R toe in 3rd or 5th (or even 1st) position

No 4. The same without the hops.

No 5. Combine No 3 with 'hop, step, close, step' forward. This occurred several times in the 'Sailors' Stampede'.

No 6.

- Count 1. Hop on LF and point R toe in 3rd or 5th position
 " 2 Hop on LF and extend RF to very high 4th position.

No 7. Start in 1st position

- Count 1. Spring on to both feet, RF well in front of LF with R knee well bent as shown (with the ground).  L knee almost touching

Count 2 Spring erect again, landing with both feet in 1st position

Counts 3,4 Perform counts 1,2 counterwise.

No 8. Start with RF in semi 4th position, but with feet parallel to each other (I use this starting position for convenience in the description; others are possible).

Counts 8,1 Spring off both feet, to land with the positions of the feet interchanged. The LF stays very close to the ground, and meets the ground on count '8'; the RF is lifted about 4" off the floor, and meets the floor on count '1'



Start.



Count 8.



Count 1.

Counts 8,2 Perform counts '8,1' counterwise, etc.

The step is similar in rhythm to the 'backstep with a hop', and is somewhat similar in style to Norman Robinson's step No. 15 (see p. 58).

I think Elsie Cowper once referred to this step as the "side shuffle", but I couldn't be certain.

No 9.

Count 1 Hop on LF, and keeping knees together, side by side, raise RF to rear 4th int aerial position, with toe pointed straight downwards towards the ground.

Count 2 Hop on LF, and bring RF down past the L ankle and out to very high 2nd aerial position with the toe pointed out to the side.

(Most effective when done by a line of girls & seen from one end of the line.)

One particular exhibition of the Skirt Dance remains fixed in their memories. It was on a school stage, where the curtain was of the old-fashioned sort which rolled up from the bottom. The dancer had performed her Skirt Dance superbly, and had come to the front of the stage to receive the plaudits of the audience, while the curtain rolled down behind her. The cries of encore continued, and the M.C. gave the order for her to dance again. The curtain rolled up, but part of her skirt had got caught in it - and there was progressively revealed her underwear as the skirt went higher & higher! "It was the best bit of the show".