

# Bob Cann, B.E.M. 1915-1990. Step Dancer

by Chris Metherell<sup>1</sup>

Bob Cann was born Robert Frederick John Cann, near Spreyton, Devon, on 1st August 1916,<sup>2</sup> into a family of musicians and step dancers. His death on 25th May 1990 brought to an end a life during which Bob had brought pleasure to countless thousands through his playing, storytelling and step dancing.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

After World War Two Bob spent much time trying to revive old Dartmoor traditions and taught his dances at Festivals, Folk Dance Classes in the area, and local Primary Schools. During later years, Bob passed on his stepping to many others, particularly through his Dartmoor Pixie Folk Club, which was held in a room at the rear of the Seven Stars public house in South Tawton during the 1960s and 1970s. Here, children of six or seven could be found learning the broom dance with men well into their 80s step dancing. He also revived the contests at his Traditional Dartmoor Folk Festival held each year in South Zeal from 1977.

In 1953 Bob performed at the EFDSS Albert Hall Festival, when he played the melodeon for the Chagford Step Dancers.<sup>6</sup> In 1981 he was awarded the EFDSS Gold Badge. No citation has ever been published and so it is perhaps appropriate to quote the citation in full here.

Bob is from Dartmoor and as far as traditional music and dance are concerned, he is Dartmoor.

At the age of three he began to play a melodeon his uncle in the Navy had bought for him. He learned tunes from his uncle George and other relatives, who in turn had learned them from Bob's grandfather.

At the age of 14 he won 3rd prize in the last step dancing competition held at Whiddon Down. The dancing was done on a farm wagon and the competitors were mainly farm workers and gypsies.

In 1957 he won a music competition organised by the Society, beating the Northumbrian Piper Billy Pigg into second place, and Bob's dear friend Charlie Bate won the singing.

He formed and ran the Dartmoor Pixies Club at which he taught the local traditions of music and dancing and due to this work, Dartmoor tunes, step dances and broom dances have been handed on to the younger generation, and are still alive and well.

The song revival gave Bob the opportunity to perform at clubs and festivals throughout the country and he became well known not only as a musician and step dancer but as a caller, singer and storyteller. His knowledge of Dartmoor folklore is quite remarkable and throughout his life he has been devoted to sharing his music, songs and knowledge with his audiences and countless friends.

It is for his wonderful music, singing and dancing and for his successful determination in keeping alive and passing on

the traditions of Dartmoor that we AWARD TO BOB CANN the Society's GOLD BADGE.<sup>7</sup>

In 1989 Bob was awarded the British Empire Medal for his services to local and national folk music.<sup>8</sup>

This article is devoted to Bob's stepping, frequently described as "Devon" or "Dartmoor" stepping. This is not intended to be an academic dissertation, and it is hoped to publish a fuller account of the Dartmoor step style, covering other dancers' repertoires as well as Bob's, in due course.

Although Bob is perhaps better known for his melodeon playing he is of particular importance to step dancers. Only two Devon dancers have had their entire repertoires recorded and Bob is one of these.<sup>9</sup>

## Step Dancing

Step dancing, that is the beating out of a rhythm with the feet, is found over a wide area of the British Isles. In some districts, notably the North East, Cumbria and Lancashire, the predominant footwear for step dancing was a pair of clogs, and step dancing in these areas has become popularly known as clog dancing. In other parts of the country, for example the Western Isles and East coast of Scotland, Norfolk, Suffolk and Devon, the steps are danced in leather hobnail boots or, more recently, shoes. The principle is always the same however, whatever the footwear involved. The rhythm of the music accompanying the dancer is beaten out with the feet.

Bob's stepping, although unique in 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, Bob 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.<sup>10</sup>

## Bob Cann's Stepping

Bob's steps are notated using Newcastle Notation, which having been devised in 1981, has become the most widely used form of notation for the publication of clog and step dances.<sup>11</sup>

Each unit, insofar as Bob's steps are concerned, takes eight bars of music. The structure is always the same, being composed of six bars of movements, unique to the particular step 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).

The above pattern is as the steps are performed by Bob. He always said that he was only able to dance off one foot due to an injury as a result of a bicycle accident. It seems that other Dartmoor step dancers always performed off the right also, and so 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.<sup>12</sup> Analysis has been kept to a minimum.

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.



Set 1.

1		tap	:B
and		↑	:B†
2		<u>step</u>	:A
3	tap		B:
and	↑		B†:
4	<u>step</u>		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		<u>step</u>	:A
2	tap		B:
and	↑		B†:
3	<u>step</u>		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 tap	:A
3	↑	<u>toe drop</u>	A†:A
4		<u>heel drop</u>	:A
&	tap		A:
a	heel touch tap		A:
5	<u>toe drop</u>	↑	A:A†

Step 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 tap	:A
2	↑	<u>toe drop</u>	A†:A
3		<u>heel drop</u>	:A
&	tap		A:
a	heel touch tap		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		<u>flat step</u>	:A

Unit is six times through off alternate feet and finish.

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		<u>flat step</u>	:A

Set 4.

A

1	heel drop		A:
---	-----------	--	----

B

2		tap	:A
&		heel tap	:B
a		tap	:B
3		<u>flat step</u>	:A
4	tap		A:
&	heel tap		B:
a	tap		B:
5	<u>flat step</u>		A:

Step 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. Units of a similar type formed part of the repertoires of several other Dartmoor step dancers.

Step 1. "Single Cross Step"<sup>14</sup>

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

Step 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		<u>step</u>	:A/F*
and		<u>step</u>	XE/C:
2		<u>step</u>	:A
and		<u>step</u>	C:
3		<u>step</u>	:A
and		<u>step</u>	XE/C:
4		<u>step</u>	:A

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		<u>step</u>	:A
and		<u>step</u>	C:
2		<u>step</u>	:A
and		<u>step</u>	XC:
3		<u>step</u>	:A
and		<u>step</u>	C:
4		<u>step</u>	:A

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.<sup>15</sup>

4. Sources: AMH, TMF, CM.

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

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

B				
1		<u>step</u>		:A/F*
and 2		<u>step</u>		XE/C: :A
and 3		<u>step</u>		C: :A
and 4		<u>step</u>		XE/C: :A

Step 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. (see Step 4 below)

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

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

Step 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.

1		<u>step</u>		:A
and 2	heel slide touch			B,A: :A
and 3	<u>step</u>	heel slide touch		:B,A :A
and 4	heel slide touch	<u>step</u>		B,A: :A
and 5	<u>step</u>	heel slide touch		:B,A :A
6		<u>step</u>		A: :A
7				A: :A
8		<u>step=</u>		A:

Notes:

1. This finish was certainly taught by Bob at workshops in the 1980's. It was not noted by any earlier collectors.<sup>16</sup>
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.

and 1	heel slide touch			B,A: :A
and 2	<u>step</u>	heel slide touch		:B,A :A
and 3	heel slide touch	<u>step</u>		B,A: :A
and 4	<u>step</u>	heel slide touch		:B,A :A
and 5	heel slide touch	heel slide touch		:B,A :A
and 6	<u>step</u>	<u>step</u>		B,A: :A
7				A: :A
8		<u>step</u>		A:

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.

1			heel slide touch	:B,A
and 2			tap	:A
and 3			heel slide touch	:B,A
and 4			tap	:A
and 5			heel slide touch	:B,A
and 6			<u>flat step</u>	:A
and 7				B,A: A,A,RC†
and 8	heel slide tap	heel slide tap		RC: :A
	catch in	<u>flat step</u>		A:
	<u>step</u>			
	<u>flat step=</u>			

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.

1		<u>step</u>		:A
and 2		<u>step</u>		XC: :A
and 3		<u>step</u>		C: :A
and 4		<u>step</u>		XC: :A
and 5		<u>step</u>		C: :A
and 6		<u>step</u>		A: :A
and 7				A: :A
and 8		<u>step=</u>		A:

Notes:

1. The most common finish taught by Bob at recent workshops.
2. The finish as collected by TMF was slightly different:

1		<u>step</u>		:A
and 2		<u>step</u>		C: :A
and 3		<u>step</u>		XC: :A
and 4		<u>step</u>		C: :A
and 5	touch	<u>step</u>		XC: :A
6		<u>step</u>		A: :A
7				A: :A
8		<u>step=</u>		A:

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

Having considered the steps themselves, it is appropriate to consider the occasions upon which Bob's steps were used and the way in which they were danced in a social context.<sup>17</sup>



## 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<sup>18</sup> 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).<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup>

## 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."<sup>21</sup>

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"<sup>22</sup> 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 the contests at one time, being succeeded by Bob's uncle George. The tunes used were even-rhythm hornpipes or schottisches. An example is given below.<sup>23</sup>



## Acknowledgments

My thanks go to the many researchers who have made the fruits of their collecting available to me. In particular I must mention Ann-Marie Hulme who provided the inspiration for this article and checked the draft. Jennifer Millest, at considerable trouble to herself, provided me with copies of her notes. Joan Flett allowed the

publication of Tom Flett's material, John Howson provided many useful leads and Malcolm Taylor searched out various references. Of the many others who have assisted I must mention Helen Leese, Rhona Hitchcock, Simon Ritchie, Peter Kennedy and Bill Parrott. Finally my particular thanks to George Dunn for supplying the only film of Bob I was able to view. Any errors are of course entirely my own.

## Endnotes

1. Chris Metherell is the Director of the Instep Research Team and has been responsible, over the last 10 years, for the recovery of many step and clog dance repertoires, several of which have been published through the Newcastle Series.
2. This date of birth is confirmed by Bob's birth certificate. The date is often erroneously given in earlier publications as 1915.
3. See *What's Afoot*. No. 32, 4-5 for an obituary.
4. A number of readily available recordings of Bob exist. Particularly of note are: *West Country Melodeon* (London: Topic Records Ltd. nd.) 12TS275; *Five Generations* (Stowmarket: Veteran Tapes, 1988) VT110 (with Mark Bazeley); *Dartmoor Pixies* (Stowmarket: Veteran Tapes, 1989) VT113 (with the Dartmoor Pixies Band).
5. It is hoped in due course to publish a full description of Bob's Broom Dance. For the purposes of this article it is perhaps sufficient to say that it is not unlike other versions from other parts of the country, which have already been published. See for example: Cyril Papworth. *Polka Round* (Cambridge: The Author, 1984) at pp.20-24. The Monkey Hornpipe involves the dancer going down on his haunches "just like Cossack dancing". It seems to have been a popular South and West Country pub dance.
6. EFDSS *The English Folk Dance and Song Society Festival. Souvenir Programme* (London: EFDSS 1953). For a review of the event see D. N. Kennedy. "A Shop Window." *English Dance and Song*. Vol. 27. No. 5 149-153. The performances were on 9th and 10th January 1953.
7. Copy in Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.
8. See report in *English Dance and Song*. Vol. 51. No. 1. 9. The official citation appears in *Supplement to The London Gazette*. 30/12/88. p.21. col.1.
9. The other is Leslie Rice of Chagford. Bob's steps (with those of Leslie Rice) have been informally published 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).
10. See for example P. Clifton and A.-M. Hulme, "Solo Step Dancing Within Living Memory in North Norfolk." *Traditional Dance*. Vol. 1. 29-58. Clifton and Hulme found in the area of their study, Frank West, a traveller who had married a Cornish traveller, Charlotte Crocker. Frank had travelled extensively in the West Country, and it is known that other members of the Crocker family were regarded as excellent step dancers in the Dartmoor area. Indeed the Wests maintain that their style of stepping, involving much shunting and heel work is the old style of Devon stepping.
11. For a full description of the system see C. Hays *et al.* *Newcastle Notation* (Newcastle Series: Newcastle 1981). A résumé is to be found in C. Metherell and E. Wilson. *The Beginner's Guide to Clog Dancing* (Newcastle Series: Newcastle. nd.).
12. Sources can be summarised as follows: AMH. Units learnt by Anne-Marie Hulme, from Bob's dancing, Bath, c.1977; TMF. Single sheet in the collection of the late Tom Flett. Unmarked as to provenance or date (copy in author's collection). Identified, by the author, from internal evidence, as almost certainly emanating from Bob Cann. The steps 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. George Dunn and contacts with Bob's pupils in 11/90-2/91. JM. Units noted by Jennifer Millest in July 1971 and May 1973.
13. JM collected this variation in 1973. Bob can be heard performing it upon VT110 *op. cit.* at Side B Track 1. Bob is dancing accompanied by his grandson Mark Bazeley. This setting unit is performed twice through for the first 16 bars of the sequence, and again at bars 33-48.
14. The step names given are those actually used by Bob when referring to the step in question. It is of note that he seems to have had names for all the Steps but none of the Sets. In fact he is unusual amongst traditional dancers in having names for his steps.
15. He can be heard upon VT110 *op. cit.* This step is used for bars 17-32. The shunt can be quite clearly heard.
16. Billy Cooper can be seen performing a similar finish on *All Along Down Along*. VHS VT (Folk-tracks: Gloucester. nd.).
17. Much of the information in the latter part of this article is culled, and in some cases lifted directly, from A-M Hulme and P. Clifton. *Dartmoor Step Dancing* *op. cit.*
18. The exact size is a matter of some dispute. Bob always suggested 15 inches.
19. It should be borne in mind that at the time referred to a pint of beer cost 4d (now 1.6p) and thus ten shillings was a considerable sum.
20. Graham Barratt. "Ever Since I Can Remember..." *What's Afoot*. No. 16. 17-18.
21. Barrett. p.17.
22. It is not certain exactly what Bob meant by a "polka step". He seems to have been referring to the crossed polka type of step referred to in Dave Townsend. "Some Dorset Reel Steps" *English Dance and Song*. Vol. 44. No. 2. 2-3 and in Michael Bell. *Community Dance Manual No. 5* (London: EFDSS 1957) at p.12.
23. The tune, "Uncle Georges" can be heard on VT110 *op. cit.* Side B Track 1. It is published in A. D. Townsend. *A First Collection of English Country Dance Tunes* (Oxford: Ferret Music. 1982) at p.24.