

BERT BOWDEN

Liverpool Step Dancer and Entertainer

Madelaine Hollis

Bert Bowden was born in 1910 in Lodge Lane, Toxteth, Liverpool, where his family had lived since his great grandfather came to Liverpool from Northern Ireland. He now lives in Netherley on the outskirts of Liverpool.

Bert's father, Nathaniel, was born in 1859. Bert knows little about his early days, but does know that Nathaniel's father was a clog dancer, so we can assume that he taught Nathaniel to dance. Bert's mother did not dance.

Nathaniel, a rope maker by trade, did clog and soft shoe dancing. He went blind as a result of injuries sustained in the First World War, and was therefore unable to see much of the development of "modern" tap dancing, which was all the rage when Bert was a youngster.

Bert says that there was never as much clog dancing and music in Liverpool as in the Manchester and Wigan areas, but even so there were plenty of opportunities for amateur performers like Nathaniel and his friends. A lot of pubs did not allow dancing, particularly at night, but there were many variety shows and concerts, often for charity, in church halls, civic halls, institutes etc., and people danced, sang and played music at home. Nathaniel always liked a crowd at his house, and when he was in the mood for dancing would teach Bert and his friends a step or two.

Nathaniel and his friends learnt their steps from each other and by watching other dancers, often going to the same theatre several nights in a row to make sure of the steps. As well as performing solo, Nathaniel sometimes formed a trio, "Bowden, Roper, Stack" with a couple of friends to perform at shows.

Music for step dancing was provided by concertina, melodeon, violin or piano. Nathaniel was usually accompanied on the concertina by a friend. Bert recalls that he danced a fast tempo to tunes like the "Irish Washerwoman", a medium tempo to tunes like "Woodland Flowers", and also in Waltz tempo.

Clog dance competitions had died out when Bert was growing up, but his father remembered taking part in them. There were two judges, one to watch the dancer and one under the stage to judge beats.

Dancing clogs had only wooden soles, no irons or leather. The thinner the soles, the faster the dancing could go, and "they used to dance really fast". The dancers would walk around the streets in their dancing clogs to wear the soles down, and get them thinner and lighter. Dancing clogs were always black and decorated elaborately with eyelets. They either had a silver buckle or a large ornate tongue covering the laces.

Nathaniel taught Bert six "old Lancashire steps", which were danced to hornpipes, one of them learned by watching Dan Leno! The form and rhythm of the steps seem to indicate to me that they have evolved from the same root as the "off the toe" hornpipe steps found right across Northern England.

Bert is very particular as to how the steps should be danced. The style and rhythmic "expression" must be exactly right, and the heel drops, which Nathaniel called "chops" must sound properly. "Dad used to say 'chop it down'".

Bert started performing a clog routine at children's parties and concerts when he was about fifteen. He says he was very shy at first, and was told off for not smiling enough. Observing that clogs were no longer worn by dancers in the theatres, but that tap dancing was all the rage, he soon took up tap, picking up steps like his father before him by going to the theatre several times a week and watching the performers. He reckons the best act he ever saw was "The Five Sherry Brothers"! He has never had any lessons in tap, but when he went to a local ballet school to learn ballet in order to help him burlesque, he found he knew more tap than the teachers. They immediately entered him for an "All England Competition" to represent the school, which he won. This was the first of many competitions in which he invariably did well.

Bert became a joiner by trade, remaining a dedicated amateur dancer, comedian and puppeteer in his spare time. He performs his clog and tap routines on a dancing mat of wooden laths which can be rolled up for transportation. He also performs a sand dance, wearing a pair of soft shoes which belonged to his father.

He has been a puppeteer since the age of fifteen, and has appeared to great acclaim on the T.V. programmes "Blue Peter" and "The Generation Game". He makes all his materials: puppets, props and theatre and still takes endless time perfecting his techniques.

Bert has been depressed in the past at the lack of local interest in learning the old clog steps. He is delighted to pass on his dancing skills, and is thrilled that he has managed to get Melanie Barber and myself dancing the old steps in a way that (on occasion anyway!) meets with his approval.

There will be an opportunity to meet Bert, see him dance and perform with his puppets, and attend a workshop on the old steps at which he will be assisted by Melanie, on 25-26th February 1984 at the Wallopers Weekend of Lancashire Clog in Leyland, Lancashire. For the other delights offered over the weekend and further details, see the advert elsewhere in this issue.