

EDDISBURY FRUIT FARM
 KELSALL, CHESTER
 KELSALL 300

May 24th 1956

Dear Mrs Flett,

Here are the addresses which you want for the bands.

ANGUS FITCHET 32 Gillburn Road Dundee,
 Tel. Dundee 87522

JIM MCLEOD 18 Backcroft Lane Dunblane
 (The Band of the Dunblane Hydro)

DONALD MCBAIN 2 Wilmer Crescent, Park Rd
 Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey.

The cost of engaging these bands has been about £45 each for the bands from Scotland and about £30 for the one from London - but on top of this we 'give hospitality' to them for the night - the above figure being for performances and travelling expenses only.

At our last dance in Chester I was asking Mrs Flett if you would like to

Yours sincerely
Leslie Howard

come out here some Sunday in the summer when the weather seemed promising - it seemed that you could get to Chester without much difficulty, and I could pick you up and return you to there - As you may realize, I am very fond of dancing which I feel is a delightful thing which brings out the happiest qualities in people. I have been trying to encourage it in these parts, and feel that it ~~is~~ has shown itself to have every chance of becoming a very popular and worthwhile activity, but the more I go in for it the more I realize how much I have to learn about it. It has meant a lot to me that such an outstanding dancer and authority as Dr. Flett should apparently enjoy himself among us. I feel I ought to try to draw upon his store of experience and investigation in this field if he feels that we are the sort of people he would like to help - but anyway, we should very much like to see you here, and I hope we shall be hearing from you before long -

REGAINING TRADITIONAL DANCE

Some notes by Leslie Haworth.

FOREWORD

In September 1956 Mrs. Raymond McLain of Kentucky visited our Cheshire village of Kelsall and took part in one of our normal village dances. The club which organises these dances has now been in existence for five years. I know of nobody who can remember traditional dancing in Kelsall before this.

Mrs. McLain asked me if I would note down for her my ideas on this subject, and the lines on which we had proceeded, suggesting that these could be of interest to others who are, or expect to be, engaged in similar developments. Those who know Mrs. McLain will be aware that we must attempt to do whatever she asks of us, and these notes have therefore been produced.

It is, of course, obvious that our experience here is very short. I do not think that the popularity which the dancing has steadily gained is just a passing fashion, but it has not yet stood the test of time. I feel that I can now speak with some measure of assurance upon the starting of this sort of enterprise, but the developments which I anticipate require a much longer time in which to mature. It is very encouraging that Mrs. McLain, with her great experience and deep love of traditional dance, should feel that our beginning is promising, and that it is possible to hope for our success.

I have tried, in the part I have had to play, to give practical realisation to ideas inspired almost entirely by Mr. Douglas Kennedy. He also has been to a dance here, and enjoyed it; so I hope he will not feel that I have misinterpreted him seriously.

1. FOLK DANCING IS THE DANCING OF THE FOLK - or let us rather say ORDINARY PEOPLE.

The "Folk" of to-day are not survivals of a by-gone age. They are everyday people, lively, educated, in touch with all the influences of cinema, radio, television, and every sort of social and commercial propaganda. Still they find, as might be expected, joy and inspiration in their native dances.

They are not intellectuals, they are not aesthetes, not conscious artists. They enjoy and express themselves in ways which attract them and appear to be good sense. The readiness of people to do this is natural and spontaneous. Only mistakes and misapprehensions can prevent wide enjoyment of folk dancing which is in fact the normal self-expression of ordinary people.

In many parts of England the violent disturbances of recent history have resulted in people losing touch with their dances: but when they regain them, they are thoroughly happy with them. They do not to-day associate them with lack of progress.

We must admire those individuals who recognised the value of these dances and treasured them at the time when people were breaking away from them. Unfortunately, their education, upbringing, and manner of life were so different from those of ordinary people, that the continuity of tradition was broken, or seriously injured. Their appreciation was consciously aesthetic. It is perhaps difficult to recognise to-day the desperation of the concern they felt that these good English activities should not be lost. 'Preservation' was their

first aim. And so the living dances, which they had received direct from folk dancers, became museum-pieces. The 'Collectors' could not as a rule carry them on as members of a community. - When they tried to transmit them, they used the methods derived from their different upbringing - they taught in schools, they explained and recorded meticulously in print. The dancing of ordinary people has never lived in such a fashion, and is not likely to do so.

The living, continuing, tradition of folk dance has never been entirely obliterated from the life of England, and it is possible to receive it at first-hand. It is necessary to gain this direct experience in one or two places before attempting to revive the dancing in a locality which has lost touch with its dances.

Necessary, because there the dances are used by gatherings of ordinary people, as part of their every-day life. This is the essence of folk dance, and the only way in which it can continue. The character and quality which are so much admired grew in this way, and it can confidently be expected that they will still do so.

The nucleus in which the new start is made must be a good average sample of the community. They must, in fact, be ordinary people. This is essential at the start; afterwards, maybe, other elements will be able to join in.

It is to be expected that young people will always predominate in a dance club. Where something is being introduced to which people are not accustomed it is normal that older people should take to it less readily. But there is no exertion in the dances, only vitality. In an established dancing community many people continue dancing when no longer young, and this element is valuable.

On the other hand, the dances are definitely not children's dances. The underlying meaning of the dances, and the movements in which it is expressed, are those of grown-up people. On account of the attraction of the music, children would swamp the dance if not prohibited. This would make dancing impossible. A junior age limit of fifteen, or higher, is a necessity. Children will find means of seeing something of the dancing, and long for the time to come when they can play their part. They will be found, then, to have some idea of the dances.

The dances can only be restored to people who would like to try them. They are pretty sure to enjoy them, if some bad mistake is not made - but they must have some belief that there is good fun to be had before they will give them a try. If the person who knows something about the dances and wants to promote them is sincere and unaffected, he will be given the friendship and confidence of those people among whom the dances will flourish. It is when they ask him if he can help them that the opportunity comes. This moment may not come soon, but he must have patience. A premature and abortive start might waste far more time.

1. THE SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE

Dancing springs from happiness, and promotes happiness. Country dancing is an activity of the community. A collection of young people coming together to enjoy themselves, and hearing good dance music, are almost certain to respond to it, and to begin to dance.

While the music is the one essential, there are one or two helpful accessories. The provision of refreshments is

important in any friendly gathering. The meeting place should be as cheerful as possible; it is best if it can be a place associated with community enjoyment; and only where this is the case should a school be used. The place should be one in which people feel at ease, and should not be subject to 'NO SMOKING' or similar restrictions. Rather close quarters are better than big spaces. Out-of-door dancing is unlikely to be a success at an early stage in the dancing of a community

It is essential that the fellows should invite the girls to dance, and look after them while acting as their partners. Where dances are being reintroduced, it is necessary to forbid women from dancing with each other. But very soon this is not regarded as a prohibition, for people do not want such conduct, and dislike it when they come across it elsewhere. The playing of their respective parts by the different partners is, of course, a basic demand of the dances themselves, and of the enjoyment of an evening's dancing. This is something which ordinary people entirely understand, and it occasions no difficulty.

Pleasant behaviour and unselfish consideration for others are very much encouraged by the happy dances, which require them for their enjoyment. Like the dancing, they can not be inculcated nor compelled, but they come into being where the conditions are right.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES

Dancing is a pleasure shared by a group of people. Most people enjoy it, some become very keen on it. Those who are keenest will probably like to form a club to ensure that a regular series of dance-gatherings will take place. There need not be any rigid organisation, but the necessary tasks must be allotted to those who are able and willing to undertake them, and the general body of dancers will be given opportunity to review their activities; probably an annual occasion for questions, suggestions, and election of officers will be desirable. Whoever they get to do various jobs for them, it is always the dancing community which, deliberately or unconsciously, makes all the important decisions.

The dance club should be formed quite independently of any other organization, and not be used as a 'draw' by any Church, Political Party, Youth Organization, etc. It must be free to make all its arrangements entirely for the furthering of its own objects. It will be found, however, that the good feeling promoted in the dance club will win it the friendship of those genuinely concerned with social welfare.

As in most clubs, there is plenty of work to be shared by those willing to serve on the committee. Arrangements for hire of premises, provision of refreshments, securing the necessary music, collecting and keeping account of the funds required, all call for time to be given. In a country dance club the M.C. has special responsibilities, and where a new club is formed in a community which has to rediscover its dancing, they will at first have to ask someone who has some knowledge of the dancing to act in this capacity. The conduct of the gatherings for dancing is in his hands, and their success or failure can depend upon him to quite a large extent at first.

His first task is to see that the dancers get the music and the dances which suit their needs, and these will be considered more particularly later. If good dance music is provided and suitable dances chosen, people will just go right ahead and become and enjoy being dancers. The dancing is in them, and it will soon come out in congenial circumstances.

People learn to dance as they dance, and no time need be spent in teaching. It is just a matter of getting them going. Really most of the M.C.'s work is done before he comes into the dance hall, where he should not be too much to the fore. But his preparations enable him to do whatever is required there easily and expeditiously. The people should neither be left kicking their heels nor hustled or ordered about. The dancing of the community will develop and expand almost without effort, the comfort of what is familiar will never lack a spice of freshness, if the M.C. achieves good judgment.

The 'feel' of the evening is his guide, and he must learn when and how to arouse enthusiasm, or to quieten an over-excited party. His choice of material may get people to extend their friendships, or bring 'wallflowers' onto the floor. He can help people to pick up figures quickly, and to move in easy carefree dance, by a judicious use of prompt calling. But this should never continue a moment after it ceases to be needed. It is the music to which people dance, and it can only be annoying if other noises intervene.

An M.C. can not know his people too well; but they can get to know him too well. No one man is without some limitations. The M.C., therefore, must be on the look-out for good deputies, and give them plenty of opportunities to take over his duties. He must not become separated out from the community. The dancers will benefit from the change, and he can learn from the mistakes or the improvements which others introduce.

4. THE DANCING

Dancing is a form of self-expression, and its character will arise and develop naturally among a set of people who come together and dance over a certain amount of time. They are stimulated by a number of influences, and especially by the music, but it is the people who respond according to their inherent qualities. Thus they will select the conditions and the forms of dance in which they will express themselves.

When dancing is being restarted there will have to be some trial and error. Later, when the needs of the people are more clearly understood, a familiar basic form will become established. - But the essence of folk dancing is always that people select and adapt to their purposes the material which appeals to them.

The dances which are done traditionally in the nearest or most sympathetically related communities seem to be the obvious material to try to begin with. The first dances tried should be so simple that no one has to think, and so enjoyable that people are carried away by them. There is a wealth of such matter in almost any tradition, for in fact that is what people mostly look for in dancing. It may be that people by degrees come to find their way through a series of figures which might seem elaborate to the beginner, but this sort of dance will come in its own time, and if offered to people too soon will only puzzle and thwart them. Probably any dance that lives will be basically simple, and the component movements will be familiar. A very long-established self-contained community may do all manner of complicated-looking tricks without giving them a thought, but to-day's conditions do not favour this sort of development, and elaborations should not be attempted by beginners. When people have to think what they are doing, they can't dance.

People pick up dancing from each other, and nothing is better for beginners than to go among, or to have among

themselves people who dance well in a good and sympathetic tradition - But conscious and deliberate imitation is not helpful, and is more likely to lead to fidgety tricks than to sound, satisfying dancing. Above all, a community coming to the rediscovery of its dancing must not be perplexed by trying to dance in the manner of several different traditions. They must find their own style, and develop it.

A living tradition is like a family - A man will have something of his grandfather in him whether he knew him or not, whether he liked him or not. Other people will see the family characteristics and how they have conditioned him. He may be careless of his descent, or proud of it; he can not escape it. But he is a new man living to-day, he is not his grandfather; and he won't put up with it if you want him to be his grandfather, or treat him as if he were. Records may be old, but the tradition is always young and up-to-date.

THE MUSIC

People who hear good dance music can hardly help dancing to it. They want to as soon as they hear it, and they find themselves dancing because the music awakens in them rhythm and lift, unnoticed control, and carefree delight. It is an inspiration, and can be left to do all the work of starting people dancing and developing dance in them.

All that is necessary, therefore, is to see that good dance music is provided. It is not really difficult to recognise good dance music, and there is quite a lot to be heard. The qualities which lift and sustain and liberate the dancer are soon apparent. There is also plenty of bad dance music to be heard, and it will be noticed how it depresses wearies and confines the would-be dancer.

The playing of music for dancing has its own requirements, and they are not those of other sorts of music. A high degree of proficiency on an instrument is comparatively inessential - what matters is to get to know what it is the dancer wants, and to learn how to provide that. This can be done by people who are very rough and ready performers, while skilled artists may be unable or unwilling to produce it.

It must be noted, however, that untrained musicians may develop a high degree of skill, and the better they play, the better the dancing goes: while those who have been schooled to their instruments can find or even be shown how to meet the dancers' need, if they recognise the importance of this. The dance player must be in touch with his dancers, and his eyes must be upon them - If he uses printed or M.S. music, it can only be as the merest reminder. Every opportunity should be taken to hear the best dance bands. The music is very fine, but attention to the needs of the dancers is paramount. By constant listening to them the way to tackle this first necessity may be learnt. At the same time it will be recognised what a grand scope there is for the really talented player, and how much enjoyment he can give to himself and to others.

It is a great treat to dance to a really good band. It may not be possible to pay for them very often, but opportunity should be found to enjoy this experience at least occasionally. Not only does it give the dance season its peaks - it helps every one to get to know how really good dance music should sound. For day-to-day requirements most communities where traditional dance is usual have little bands of their own, who often appear to be made up from rather the older members. It seems reasonable to expect that the more musical members of a dancing community may take to playing

rather more as they become a bit older. They have the right rhythmic idea, and some may be able to transfer to a melodeon their schoolboy skill on the mouth-organ.

It is most likely, however, that such a unit will be formed around at least one person whose principal enjoyment is in playing for dancing.

No effort should be spared to promote the establishment of a group of local players. The life of the dance club must be accounted precarious until it has this resource to draw upon. This also is a normal form of enjoyment, and its development can be looked for with confidence.

For those who have gathered no local talent as yet, a makeshift is to be found in gramophone music. This is a bit expensive because a large number of records is wanted, in order to mitigate the effect of identical repetitions, and fees have to be payed on account of copyright. There is, however, a good quantity of excellent dance music to be had by this process, and it is certainly better than music played by people who lack the conception of playing for dancing. But less skilled performers in direct contact with the dancers can give people the better evening.

As with the dances, it appears wise first to try the music of the nearest or most closely related communities. When it is found out to what type of music the community responds, nothing could be more disastrous than any sudden switch to music of a different character. Such a change, though it be to music which is in its own field good dance music, can knock the dance right out of people and set them stumbling. It is normal for people to have quite a limited repertoire of dances, and for their music to be consistent in character.

If the right music is provided, and its influence is not interfered with, good dancing will unquestionably develop. This is a very happy experience, and it is a wonderful thing that the way to it should be so clear and certain.