Some Notes on Dancing in Orkney

PART IV.

In the last three articles I have dealt with the introduction of dances from the south, and how they have developed in the Orkney Context, from the reel, through to the Caribbean influenced dances as I have met them in Orkney. Now there is unfortunately little dancing of "Auld Orkney" dances left, but I was fortunate enough to meet Mrs Roy of North Ronaldsay, now

By

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living in Kendal, Shropshire. Mr and Mrs Roy learnt the dance from his father, and he and his wife have helped greatly in keeping it alive in North Ronaldsay, where it is still performed at weddings.

The dancers take part in this dance. The dancers start as shown in Fig. I, facing partners (the names given to the dancers are as if one is looking down on the dance floor). The ladies are set to one or more of the four approximately square sides, the

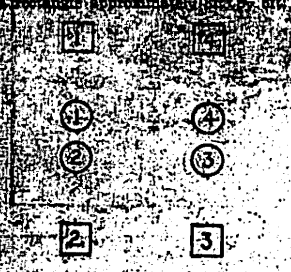

Fig. I

(The first part of the dance is performed to any strathspey tune.

Music:

Bars 1 to 2—All "dance" in, set to partners with suitable setting steps.

Bars 3 to 16—All "run the reel". In this reel, the pattern of which is shown in the accompanying diagrams, all the dancers follow the same track, all moving in the same direction. The first couple finish in third couple's place, the second couple in fourth couple's place, and vice-versa.

The dancers begin the reel by passing partners, with left shoulders, the direction in which each begins to move being shown in Fig. II (second and fourth men diverge slightly from the standard track as the beginning of the reel, resulting in telling their partners):

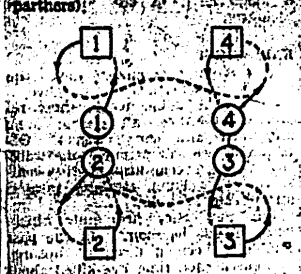

Fig. II

At the end of the second bar of the reel, the ladies are half-way along the sides, and the men half-way round the loops (Fig. III):

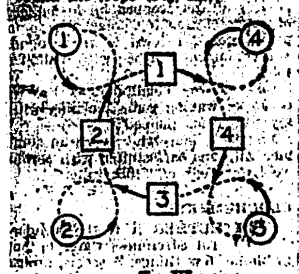

Fig. III

During the third bar of the reel, each lady moved on to a loop. The man, who is already on that loop, have of the loop passing round the lady, left shoulder to left shoulder. The positions of the dancers at the end of the third bar are shown in Fig. IV.

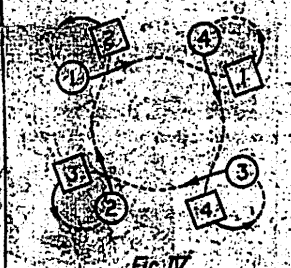

Fig. IV

During the fourth bar, the men leave the loops, passing behind the ladies, and at the end of the bar the men are half-way along the sides, and the ladies half-way round the loops (Fig. V).

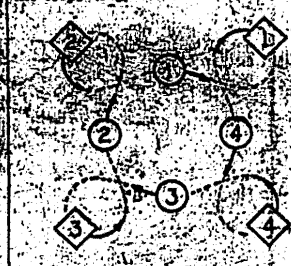

Fig. V

In the fifth bar, each man moves on to a loop. His partner is already on that loop, and she takes small steps so that she stays on the loop, passing round her partner, left shoulder to left shoulder.

In the sixth bar, the ladies leave the loops, and at the end of this bar the ladies are half-way along the sides, and the men half-way round the loops (Fig. VI).

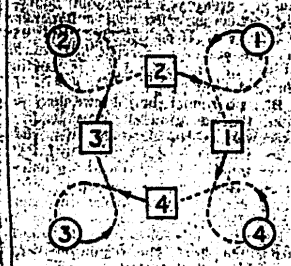

Fig. VI

During the seventh bar of the reel, the ladies move on to the next loop, the positions at the end of this bar being as shown in Fig. VII.

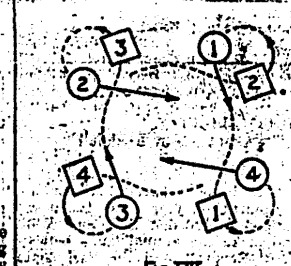

Fig. VII

During the eighth bar, the dancers move in the direction of the arrows shown in Fig. VII, to finish facing partners as shown in Fig. VIII (second and fourth men have to diverge slightly from the standard track, but the others remain on it. The first man passes to his place in front of second man, and the third man in front of fourth).

Bars 17 to 24—All set to partners with suitable setting steps.

Bars 25 to 32—All repeat the reel figure of bars 9 to 16, finishing in original places as in Fig. I.

This sequence of 32 bars is repeated as often as is desired. One of the dancers, or someone sitting out, now calls "run it bot". The fiddler then gradually speeds up the music until it is approximately at reel tempo, still keeping to the same strathspey tune. During this part, the dancers just keep moving round

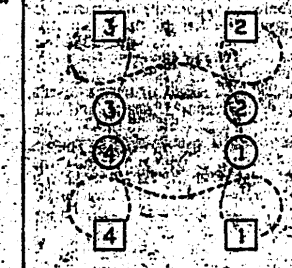

Fig. VIII

the figure of the reel, without any pause, making something like four complete circuits and taking 18 bars to finish. The first two bars of this second part are similar to bars 9 to 10 of the first part, and after this the phrasing is simply a repetition of that of bars 11 to 14 of the first part. The dancers should not attempt to form into four lines at the end of each phrase of 8 bars, but should keep the figure flowing evenly throughout. There is no setting in this second part.

The following remarks concerning the reel may be helpful. It will be noticed that, when going round a loop, each dancer passes by the left two other people of the opposite sex. The dominant impression of the reel to a viewer should be the periodic grouping of dancers at the corners, and to achieve this the dancers should keep as close as possible to each other when describing the same loop. It is also necessary to use shorter steps on the loops than on the intervening portions of the path.

To learn the reel in the first instance, I would suggest that the track be drawn in chalk on the floor, the portions between the loops being drawn as straight lines. The emphasis should be put on the fact that each dancer passes two others by the left at each corner. The exact phrasing is largely governed by this, and should not be unduly stressed. The actual dance should flow evenly, and the positions shown in the diagrams should be taken as a guide, but not as a rule.

The original setting step used for the first part by Mr Scott's father was the step now known as the "Highland Scottische step." After Mr Mackenzie taught dancing on the island, Highland Fling steps were also used.

Mr Scott told me that in his younger days it was rather rare to see the men raise their arms during the setting, the men normally had their hands either by their sides or on their hips, while the ladies usually held their skirts out.

The travelling step used in "running the reel" is as follows:—

Bar 1. Count 1. Step forward on right foot.

Count 2. Close left foot behind right foot (usually left instep or toe to right heel, but this is not invariable. Those who danced more on their toes closed one foot right under the other).

Count 3. Step forward on the right foot again.

Count 4. Hop on the right foot, at the same time swinging the left foot past right foot, close to the floor, ready to step forward on it.

Bars 2 to 8. Repeat the same movements as in bar 1, beginning with the opposite foot each time.

This step, which is the traditional strathspey travelling step in many parts of Scotland, is not to be confused with the modern Scottish Country Dance strathspey travelling step. The latter begins with a long glide forward, and is a much more polished step. To be performed properly it must be done in soft heelless shoes. In the traditional step, which was performed in ordinary shoes, the steps are quite short, and there is no excessive pointing of the toe.

The music for the first part of the dance should be played at the traditional strathspey tempo of 42-44 bars per minute (this is a good deal faster than the tempo used by most bands for Scottish Country Dancing).

The "Axum" Reel was used in North Ronaldsay as the last dance at weddings. The newly married couple stood in the centre, back to back, with their arms linked, while the dance was performed round them. At some point while the dancers were "running it bot," the fiddler would stop suddenly. The bride and groom had then to attempt to unlink their arms and turn and kiss each other before any of the four girls could kiss the groom or any of the four men could kiss the bride. It was also sometimes danced in this manner twice in succession, the first time being performed by eight girls who had to try to kiss the groom before his bride could do so, the second time by eight men who had to try to beat the groom to his bride

(To be Continued).

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