

Some Notes on Dancing in Orkney

FIG. XIII
 The second dance I mentioned in my book is from 225 mainly from the neighbourhood of Doumy and is called "Hind's Strus". I learnt this from Mr and Mrs Tom Harvey of Banks and Mr and Mrs John Gindlater of Breckan. It was popular in the Doumy region in Mr Harvey's young days, but later fell into disuse. It was revived again after the 20-15 war and was danced quite frequently at Doumy until about 1925. I have not met it anywhere other than in the Doumy region in Orkney.

The pattern is very simple and the dance has a real swing to it. Three couples take part, standing facing partners as shown in Fig. XIII. Partners should be about 12 feet apart and about 8 feet from the next couple.



TOP

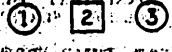


FIG. XIII

The dance is in reel tempo throughout, to any foot time (there is some slight doubt about the tempo, but it seems to go better to a reel).

Bars 1-8. All dance six hands across round to the left and back to places (i.e. all join right hands in the centre and go round to the left for four bars then change hands and return to places in the opposite direction).

Bars 9-16. All join hands in a ring and dance round to the left for four bars and then back to the right to

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original places. (They reverse at the beginning of the fourth bar, and for the rest of this bar dance backwards, ready to return on the fifth bar. The dancers should bend their arms here to keep the circle fairly small and compact).

Bars 17-24. First man and second lady, second man and first lady and third man and third lady, now face each other, link right arms and pass each other as shown in Fig. XIV (do not turn), and then proceed round the set in this direction, linking left and right arms alternately, until all are back in original places. The set should be kept very compact here, and the dancers should swing straight from one arm to the next.

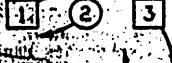


FIG. XIV

Bars 25-32. All set to partners with suitable setting steps.

This sequence of 8 bars is then repeated as often as desired. In bars 25-32, the change step described above was used (the skip-change-of-step is quite unsuitable for this dance), while the most common setting step was the pas de Basque.

I was very fortunate in being able to take down this dance from an actual performance. In these times this is most unusual. Most of the best sources of information are elderly people, often unable to leave their homes, and the would-be folk-dance collector has to be content with walking the dance through in their presence, usually with only half the required number present. Sometimes I have taken the pattern of a dance from a performance on the kitchen table, knives representing the men and forks the ladies.

On this occasion, with very great help from Mr John Tait and Mr Jas. Garson of Doumy, I was able to gather together a number of older

people to show me the dance they did in their younger days. We danced (or rather they danced and I watched) the Basque, Round Hands Across, Queen Victoria's Party (O'More, Cumberland Reel (the Stanzas War Dance), Oldman Circle, Jacky Tar Schottische, Venus Polka, and finally finished off with La Vespertienne. All but the first two of these are of course known on the mainland of Scotland, but most had some small variation of figure or style which made them peculiar to Orkney.

It was a delight to me to watch these folk-dances, to see truly traditional dancing. The dancing was vigorous but there was such a natural ease of movement that the dancing had an innate grace. It was very nice to see the Queen Victoria Country Dance. Unlike most of the country dances once performed in Orkney, this has not been revived by the Scottish Country Dance movement, but it does not deserve to die. It is not actually native to Orkney, but was danced here quite regularly for a number of years.

The dancers stand in two lines as in Petronella, four couples to a set. The dance can be performed to any 6/8 jig.

Bars 1-8. First couple turn with the right hand (bars 1-4), and then with the left. (My friends held their hands high, with the upper part of the arm almost horizontal. They brought up their left hands on bar 4 and swung straight into the left-hand turn). They finish between second couple and form a line of four with hands joined (and held high as before), the ladies facing down and the men facing up (Fig. XV).



TOP



FIG. XV



FIG. XVI

Bars 9-12. Balance in line with four pas de Basque steps.

Bars 13-16. The first man and second lady, second man and first lady, make a half turn with right hands joined, and then the first and second ladies make an extra half turn to the right (Fig. XVI), so that all are again in a line of four facing down the set.

Bars 17-24. The two couples go down the centre, arm in arm. At the bottom they break their hold and turn about (first man and second lady towards each other, second man and first lady the same), link arms again and come up the centre. As they rise to top, first couple come forward in advance of the second couple to meet each other.

Bars 25-32. The first and second couples now take halbroom hold and polka round each other, first couple ending in second place. (The step here is similar to the chase step, like a very lax polka step, without the hop).

The dance is now treated with the usual progression to Petronella.

Except where I have noted the step above, any original or novel lifting walking step. This was used in other country dances also. It is most unusual to find this step so used in Scotland, but it is quite common among the traditional dances of Northern England. The polka Pousette of bars 25-32 is now very much out of favour in Scottish country dancing circles, but I have never met any other form of pousette among traditional dances. It seems to me that it has great advantages over the modern square pousette, for it is easy to learn, and much more in keeping with the old, easy, natural way of dancing country dances.

I very much hope that these notes will encourage the younger folk of Orkney to learn some of the older Orkney dances, and to keep alive the traditional Orkney style. But may I add a word of my own. The dances which I have described here are social

dances, the dances which your grandparents and great-grandparents (and probably mine too) danced for enjoyment. If they cannot meet again be social dances, then let them die. Don't let them drag out a useless existence as exhibition pieces to be performed only by teams of children on platforms at music festivals. And if you revive them as social dances, learn the style of the older people. Don't take them from these notes, but go out into the country, listen, and find out from the older people how they danced. You can learn much better from the old people around you than ever I can hope to teach you through a description on paper. And above all, keep to the vigorous dancing of the older folk. Keep too, to the ordinary shoes which they wore. Don't be like the country dancers of the Lowlands who have dressed themselves up in Highland kilts and Highland dancing shoes, and have polished and amasculated their dances until nothing is left but a pretty pattern. For that is not traditional dancing.

I have no doubt that there will be gaps and errors in these notes, but my time in Orkney was all too short. If any reader can add anything to what I have written, however little, I shall be very grateful if they would write to me, either to The Editor, "The Orkney Herald", or direct to The University Liverpool, 3.

In conclusion, I wish to express my great indebtedness to the many people in Orkney who took me into their homes, and not only gave me information about dancing, but also such delightful hospitality. I wish to thank particularly Mr John Tait of Doumy, Mr and Mrs Roy Scott of Rendall, and Mr and Mrs Walter Forrest of Flota, all of whom showed me so much kindness, and gave so unstintingly of their time.