

# Devonshire Step Dancing

by Owen J. Lewis



**O**ne of the most crucial elements of the folk revival is the sustainability of what you have discovered and revived. If people pick up and enjoy what has been revived, and in turn share it to an understanding audience, you have success: that is how the revival works. Where one can see evidence of this aspect of the revival is in the Devon stepdancing tradition, high up on Dartmoor in a place called South Zeal. I spoke to researcher and step dancer Lisa Sture about Devonshire step dancing and how step dancing in general is fairing in the revival of lost or fading traditions.



Albert Crocker on the wagon winning the 1932 Whiddon Down competition with 'Uncle' George Cann playing the concertina  
Photo courtesy of Julie Scoines

Lisa explained to me how she embarked upon a grant funded exploration of Devonshire step dancing in 2017, how the melting pot of styles came to be and how the tradition is now. Initially I wanted to know how Lisa grew interested in the dance and how she herself learned to master such an intriguing tradition. It all came about when she enrolled in Dartington College of Arts. "I very quickly got involved with the Dartington Morris team," she said, "and this led to visiting some traditional musicians, one was Pop Hingston on the river Dart, and then Les Rice, Jack Rice and George Allen in the Three Crowns in Chagford. Les was a player, a dancer and a singer. Jack played a harmonica and danced. And George, who was a slight man, smoked a big cigar and played a very big accordion," she said with a noticeable air of respect. She also went on to explain that she found the Devonshire pubs were great fun because, "it is simply great to be with the old boys, so of course you would want to dance." Lisa raises an interesting point: "Women didn't seem to be in pub bars, where men regularly danced, until maybe the sixties. Men danced together a lot, one report being of a whole room of men dancing together, but the women were not there." So it is not surprising that it was the older male dancers that Lisa found. Women had been dancing, but more at home and at meetings like the Women's Institute entertainments. Now it is shared more evenly amongst the genders. Now, anyone can dance and entertain.

The term Dartmoor Stepdancing has come into use fairly recently as the dancers that were still known to dance in the 1980s were all from Dartmoor, with some of the Romany Gypsy dancers living just outside of Dartmoor. The annual competition at the Dartmoor Folk Festival, which was the link from the old dancers to today, is also on Dartmoor. Furthermore, the 2017 project, 'Taking Steps: Discovering & Enjoying Dartmoor's Stepdance Heritage', was focussed on engaging the Dartmoor community and invigorating stepdancing in this area. However, there are newspaper references in the archives that refer to stepdancing in every corner of Devon, and the old Dartmoor stepdancers themselves used to call it "Devonshire Stepdancing".

So how did this competition come about? Lisa explained

that it was modelled on the old competitions that local dancers used to dance in. Bob Cann, BEM (1916-1990), who was passionate about the entertainment traditions of Dartmoor and was an accomplished melodeon and concertina player as well as stepdancer, started a festival to celebrate these traditions – The Dartmoor Folk Festival. Stepdancing was always included, but there weren't many dancers around to restart the competitions. In 1983, Lisa and her partner visited Bob Cann as he wanted an old concertina he had in the cupboard to be renovated for his young grandson. Whilst talking to Bob about stepdancing, Bob expressed an interest for reviving the tradition of stepdancing competitions, but said that there weren't enough dancers to hold one. Lisa said she knew dancers and had been teaching some and could put the word around. That was all Bob needed to hear; he said to tell people and he would organise a competition for the next year's festival. Lisa said that Bob thought it was important to teach the children in the area stepdancing and to encourage younger people to have a go. So, the first competition happened in 1984 and competitions in Dartmoor have been going ever since. Today there are also competitions in Chagford and Okehampton and the first competition ever to happen at the Devon County Show will be in 2020.

So how does a competition work? Lisa told me: "There is a flat back farm wagon with a dance board on it. The musician sits on the cart with his back to the dancers. They dance three times each and the musicians must never know who it is they play for. The tunes used are hornpipes and the first half of the tune is called the setting where the dancer will mark time, and in the second half the dancer will show their steps. One's heart goes out to the player, reports from the past say that some nearly fell asleep with the repetition, but it is crucial all dancers have the same tune. Judging is quite a complex matter and has changed from the old days. Then, one would start with a number and during the dance, points would be deducted for mistakes or lack of timing. If you fell off the board it was an instant disqualification. The board I learnt on," said Lisa, "was an 18 inch square board. For the Dartmoor Folk Festival competition, the board is 15 inches square, making it all just a little harder. The score now goes

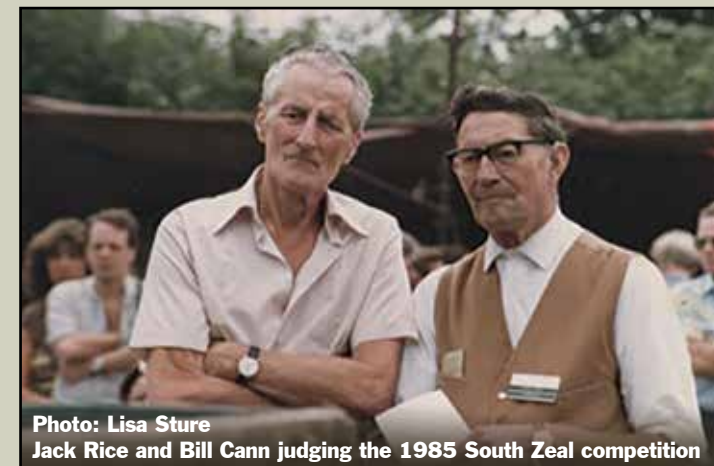


Photo: Lisa Sture  
Jack Rice and Bill Cann judging the 1985 South Zeal competition



Sue Coe dancing on the wagon at South Zeal - Photo: Alan Quick

up instead of down and dancers are marked for their timing, their style and the complexity and difficulty of the steps." Lisa added that although 15 inches square is small, it was said that good dancers could dance on a dinner plate, but she hadn't found one yet that didn't break.

Lisa noted that it is very difficult to learn steps just by watching someone else dance, and it was not a quick process to learn her teacher Les Rice's steps. In fact, most steps, even when similar, were rarely exactly the same as someone else's, so although the tradition looks as though it is set as it has a set structure for competition, the actual steps are always individual. From the current information it seems that improvisation was part of all the shoe stepdance traditions, i.e. not referring to clog-stepping, across England. The famous collector of traditional music and dance, Cecil Sharp, writing in 1911 said stepdance was, "the most popular folk dance at the present time" and "standing proof of the capacity of the village dancer to create and execute extremely complex and intricate movements." However, Cecil Sharp did not ever note any step dancing steps down. Some have suggested that it was because it was so popular it was perceived

that there was no need to note them down. It may also have been that, as it was an improvised tradition, there was no clear "this is how it is done", and if he asked someone to repeat a step, they may have done it differently. Sharp knew, though, about the sheer joy the dancers feel when they are up there doing their thing, but he didn't annotate any dances.

As women weren't allowed or didn't venture into the pubs, I was interested to know how they got involved. It turns out that dancing was everywhere, so they would dance at get-togethers in private homes, at village hall entertainments and at fairs and other such events.

The Romany Gypsy Travellers in the area were always an important part of the tradition and when there was a competition, competed. If today you have an evening out with some Romany Gypsy dancers, you will notice they will dance to jigs and waltzes, not just hornpipes, and not on a small board. It looks like a different tradition, although there are similarities in some steps. Lisa said, "One of the questions is whether it is a different tradition, whether the practice of Devon Step Dancing has changed, or whether it was always an improvised dance



(albeit influenced by the dancers you watched) just aiming to dance out the rhythm of the music. We don't know this, and I wonder if it is possible to know it."

Bob Cann commented that the large number of Romany Gypsies, horse dealers and horse breeders in the area was because there was a lot of common land, and also plenty of wild ponies. Bob Cann said that the Gypsy Travellers and the horse dealers used to gather, they'd get in the pub of a night and they'd start to broomdance and step dance – there was no other entertainment, they used to entertain themselves by doing this.

One Romany Gypsy Traveller family that has lived in the area a long time and are well known is the Orchard family. Tom Orchard is a very fine step dancer and has even danced, with his family accompanying him, at Cecil Sharp House. I myself have spent time in the Orchard's company and they just love anyone who has a go. They are mighty fine company, and their stepping has been indelibly etched into the traditional backdrop. After all, the salient point is that step dancing is just great fun to watch and fun to do.



Lisa and Tom - Photo: Ayla Bedri

I asked Lisa to tell me a bit more about step dancing around the rest of England. "The other living shoe traditions are in the eastern area of Norfolk/Suffolk/Essex area and along the southern counties from Kent westwards. The southern tradition doesn't have a competition, and the eastern area has an annual competition, but it doesn't have a set structure to dance to like the Devon competition does, it is completely freestyle. These traditions also have a good number of Romany Travellers dancing in them. There is also a tradition in Cromer. There is a wonderful video of the Cromer lifeboat crew dancing on YouTube."

What about footwear for this sort of dancing? Lisa explains, "In earlier years, when people worked in the fields, men wore big hob-nail boots. They had a horseshoe-like piece of metal around the heel and large nails knocked into the leather sole which would make a great noise. When people stopped wearing hobnail boots, they wore shoes. Back then, the soles would be leather with little pieces of metal tapped into the toe and heel. These bits of metal were known as segs and blakeys, according to their shape. Then hard plastic

was invented and shoes with these soles made a good sound. However, then trainers came along, which means that for the first time people have to buy special shoes to dance in – it takes some of the spontaneity out of it." So sadly today on competition day you see people carrying their prized dancing shoes around and only wear them when they are dancing. Tommy Orchard uses a pair of tap shoes which make a mighty sound and he certainly knows how to use them.

In bygone years, as the noise of the feet or the percussive rhythm is so important, some judges would sit under the wagon so they would just hear the sound of the feet. That is how seriously judges can take it.

I wanted to know about Irish step dancing as it is probably the most famous style thanks to Riverdance and the work of Michael Flatley. I asked why Irish dancing demands that the arms stay still at all times. Lisa said she didn't know, but that in Devon it was considered harder to keep your balance if you can move your arms around, so keeping them by your side is another indication of skill.

Around the country there are different stunts written about, some of which become seen as traditions. These were usually created by dancers trying to out-compete each other. So, one might hear, "Bet you can't dance over a candle" or "I bet you can't dance on a board with a pint on each corner". As a consequence, there are some creative showing-off competitions written about. The common thread through all of them was that, whilst it was serious, it was also for the fun, the crack and the laugh. It is quite remarkable that this tradition has grown and spread at all given so much of it is ephemeral in nature, however, when something is fun, the word gets out and people want to try it.

I asked Lisa to explain how a tradition works in the true sense, and she said, "It is important that not only the dancers but also the audience understands what is happening on the board. If non-dancers gain an understanding and get pleasure watching, the tradition will embed. It can create a sense of belonging." She also raised an interesting point in that whilst the dancing has been gaining strength at the Dartmoor Folk Festival, it is now moving on and the dancers are working for it to once more become widely

known across the county. The competition to be held at the 2020 Devon County Show will certainly help that.

There is now a slot in the busy Sidmouth Folk Festival where step dancers meet, talk and dance together, hosted by the Instep Research Team ([www.insteptr.co.uk](http://www.insteptr.co.uk)). Lisa said that in those meetings there are shoe and clog dancers from all over the country. That is an indication of the growing interest in step dancing. It is good to learn our step dancing traditions are healthy and getting healthier daily.

How might it continue? Lisa told me that the junior class of the annual step dance competition at Dartmoor Folk Festival in 2019 was so good that some of the juniors would have done well in the senior competition. Both broom dancing and step dancing can be seen at The Dartmoor Folk Festival, held annually in the pretty Dartmoor village of South Zeal, and the standard year on year is getting higher. There are also now many more entries than in those early days 35 years ago - a clear indication of the tradition gaining both interest and strength.

What about the future, will it grow, will it remain and what is happening to sure up the walls of the tradition? "As part of the project in 2017," Lisa told me, "there was a booklet written about what had been learnt about the tradition, as an accessible start to understanding the tradition and its history." Well that has now happened. The book is out and is called, *Dartmoor Step Dancing: Yesterday, Today And Tomorrow*. It was clearly a successful project and has even further highlighted how the tradition was almost lost and its journey to the healthy scene that it is today.

In summary, what I learned is that step dancing is great fun and can be done by anyone who can stand up. It was on its knees as the older dancers died out, and Bob Cann and Les Rice in particular tried to pass the tradition on. Luckily, they were successful and Lisa Sture and others have breathed new life into it and the scene is exciting and looking like it will continue to grow. Folk festivals and village fetes and shows are all great places for a competition. Lisa has started a competition at the Okehampton show, and this year there will be a competition at the Devon County Show, providing a growing and safe future for stepping, which really is quite a journey and a true indication of a living tradition.

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