

Sam Bell - The Basic Hornpipe Steps

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Introduction

I first met Sammy Bell when I moved to Reading in 1979 and joined the Reading Step and Traditional Dance Group (Reading Cloggies) as a fairly new but enthusiastic clog and step dancer. Sammy had been part of Reading Cloggies for only a short while himself as I understand it. He'd been invited to join by Mike Cherry, another Reading member, who'd received a letter from North-east clog dancer Johnson Ellwood shortly before Johnson's death, telling him about the existence of one Samuel Bell. Sammy had moved from Northumberland, where he was born, to the South of England in 1938 to seek work.

Until that point, the wider clog world had been unaware of Sammy and his early career as a stage performer with his brothers in the music halls of the early 20th century and of his clog dance champion status in the early clog competitions. Even more surprising was that by the time he came to Mike's notice, he hadn't danced for over 40 years, so his willingness to join the Reading team and to start dancing again in his mid 60s showed a remarkable spirit.

Equally surprising to me was that his wife had never seen him dance and even when he joined Reading Cloggies, she never once came to watch.

Sammy had a kind manner and a twinkling eye. He was unfailingly polite and very willing to pass on his steps to us at Reading Cloggies. If I remember rightly, it was Laurie Muliner, another member and I who were the two people who spent the most time with him learning his steps. I say learning, but his feet were so tiny and his movements so fast that I mostly learnt them through the intermediary of Laurie's and later, Chris Brady's teaching. I learnt his Exhibition Hornpipe and his Waltz steps, and I've continued to dance them and have taught them myself at a number of clog workshops over the years. Sadly, I don't often see them being performed out by other dancers.

What follows now is taken mostly from the transcripts of interviews with Sammy Bell prepared by Peter Clifton (see Cherry 2007 p 74-78) and a film of Sam by Barry Callaghan made in 1981.

Early Life

Sammy was born on September 11th, 1914 in Pegswood, a small pit village near Morpeth, the youngest of five brothers. He moved with his family to Linton in 1924 and there, through his father he met clog dancer Jimmy Ellwood, who offered to teach Sammy and his brothers some clog steps. This was in 1925 when Sammy was eleven and Jimmy gave them weekly lessons, starting with shuffles and gradually building up his steps. Sammy quickly gained confidence and competence and was soon able to dance to his brother Flem's accordion playing. When Jimmy found out that Flem

could play, he arranged for three of them, Sammy, Flem and Jimmy to go on the stage as a novelty act. They first performed as a trio at the Theatre Royal Blyth and they won the first prize of £3 in a competition, although Sammy recalled that he never saw any of that money!

This was the start of their performing career together and they quickly developed a routine. Flem would play the banjo and Jim would come on and sing a song about famous clog dancer Dan Leno song and then when he had finished, it would be time for Jimmy and Sammy to do their clog dance. They also had a novelty act which Sammy describes thus:

‘...Jimmy had two blacking (polishing) brushes specially designed which interlocked. He would steady me on these and I danced two steps, the First Stage Step, just off the toe, without rolls, and then the Cross the Buckle’.

His stage outfit consisted of velvet trousers, a blue silk shirt and a ‘bolero’ style jacket. His clogs were made of patent leather and oak soles, with thick heels so that heel beats could be danced easily. Jimmy usually wore blue serge trousers and an open neck shirt. According to Sammy, Jimmy travelled around quite a bit, carrying his clogs, did a lot of busking and seemed to earn his living by dancing in pubs and sometimes hiring a ‘bell tent’ to perform in. It was only if Jimmy got really short of money that he would look for work in a local colliery. I guess that Sammy was too young to accompany Jimmy, as this would have been in about 1926-7 when he was still at school. He left school in 1928 when he was fourteen to go to work in Linton Colliery.

When Sammy was thirteen, Jimmy Elwood passed him on to local dancer Eddie May to continue learning with him. However, Eddie was very strict and he frightened Sammy, so when Eddie became ill, Sammy took the chance to leave him. He moved on to George Golightly, from Ashington and from whom he learnt some more steps. Sammy remembered George as a very dapper man who always wore a bow tie and patent leather shoes. He was also a neat dancer and he seemed to have been influential in enabling Sammy to sort out his routine of steps, with which he entered the many ‘go as you please’ competitions of the time. He and his brother Sid did a lot of entertaining together (Flem had died in the 1926 strike), with Sid playing the banjo for Sammy to dance to. Sid dressed up as a ‘coloured’ man and Sammy dressed as a girl in a skirt and high heels, in which he managed to dance his waltz steps!

The competitions

The ‘go as you please’ competitions were talent competitions and were held weekly in and around places such as Ashington, Morpeth, Blyth. It was at one of these competitions that he met another, at that time very well-known clog dancer, Dickie Farrell. Sammy had won the competition and had beaten Dickie, who wasn’t used to being defeated. Dickie was so impressed with Sammy that he took him under his wing and advised him to refine his steps, pick out the best and throw the rest away, which is what he did.

Many clog dancers had their own pedestal which they took to competitions with them and danced on stage on these. Sammy’s was about two feet square and about three

foot high, with a glass top so that it could be illuminated from below. The stage was put into darkness so the audience could only see the dancer from their knees down. He got it from Eddie May.

From then on, Sammy entered many clog competitions including ones North Seaton and Morpeth which were knockout ones, where if you won one round, you went on to compete against another dancer in the next round. Eventually, you were either knocked out yourself or you won the title.

He talked about entering a competition in Blyth in 1932 when he was eighteen. An orchestra played for the competitors, two judges sat on the stage and points were awarded for timing and execution.

He also said that he had won a "Northumberland Championship" three years in a row from 1931-1933. These competitions have not been traced.

Sammy also danced in the revived Northumberland and Durham Championships in Stanley in June 1935, but he didn't win this one. Jimmy Ellwood and George Golightly also entered this competition; there were twenty nine entries in total, quite an event by today's standards. The rules required the dancers to dance ten steps, all finishing with the double shuffle 'off the toe'. It was danced twice nightly at the Victoria Theatre, once before the interval and once after, in a knockout format as at the Blyth event. Sammy was knocked out in his heat by the eventual winner, Joe Daley. The finals were on Saturday night, June 29th, when the prizes were awarded. There were two judges as with the Blyth competition and the winner received the championship belt.

Later Years.

The following year, 1936 was apparently the last time that Sammy danced, and in 1938, he moved to the South of England to look for work. By the time Mike Cherry made his acquaintance, more than forty years had passed and Sammy was just 14 miles away in Buckinghamshire and working at the local Ford Commercial Vehicle Company, but with all his steps still in his head and his feet. The film made by Barry Callaghan in 1981 when Sammy was in his mid-sixties, shows him still very light on his feet and also very fast. Sammy died on 12th November 1993.

I am so pleased that our paths crossed and that I'm able to carry on dancing his steps for him.

The Routine.

Sam was filmed by Garland Films in 1981. The compete film, together with clips of Sam's hornpipe steps in are available from the Instep Research Team website. www.InstepRT.co.uk. The film was shot in two parts; the steps in Reading, Berkshire, on 21st February 1981 and the conversations with Ann-Marie Hulme at Hedgeley, Buckinghamshire of 16th May 1981.

This was Sam's basic routine which he taught to beginners, the steps building up from basic units as one moves through the routine. Each step is performed off the left foot

and repeated off the right. On the 1981 film Sam doesn't dance these steps as a routine but he does demonstrate most of them when in conversation with Ann-Marie Hulme.

Stylistically it will be seen on the film that Sam often dances off a flat foot. I have interpreted this in general as dancing with the heel raised except where the use of the flat foot seems particularly important, for example in the double hop in the finish. Shuffles have been notated as Sammy danced them. "Twisting" shuffles, for example in \tilde{C} , C , were common in Northumberland and Durham but there may have been a tendency in the area where Sammy lived to regard dancers who performed in this way as "smart alicks." (Cherry 2007 p 85). Additionally it is apparent that Sam used flops rather than lazy shuffles, although the snatch back movement is very slight and not at all pronounced as is sometimes seen in other dancers.

Sammy's steps have been published in:

M. Cherry, *Originality: The Steps of Samuel Bell*, Twyford: Author (1984)

M. Cherry, *Originality: 40 years of Clog and a Drum*, Victoria: Trafford Publishing (2007)

My thanks go to Mike Cherry for allowing the use of material from his books, to Chris Metherell for assisting with the notations and of course, most of all, to Sam for teaching me his steps. Any errors are entirely my own.

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 1- The First Stage Step

1		<u>step</u>	)	shuffle	A	:	
a			)			:	C,C
2)			:	
a				<u>step</u>		:	A
3	)	shuffle			C,C	:	
an)					:	
4		<u>step</u>			A	:	

Step is six time through off alternate feet and finish

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 2 - Cross the Buckle

1	<u>step</u>	)	shuffle	A	:	
a		)			:	E/C,C
2)			:	
a			<u>step</u>		:	XĊ
3	<u>step</u>			A	:	
4	<u>hop</u>			A	:	
&		)	shuffle		:	C,C
a)			:	

Step is six times through off alternate feet and finish.

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 3 - Double Shuffle

1		<u>step</u>	)	shuffle	A	:	
&			)			:	C,C
a)			:	
2		<u>hop</u>	)	shuffle	A	:	
&			)			:	C,C
a)			:	
3				<u>step</u>		:	A
&	)	shuffle			C,C	:	
a)					:	
4				<u>hop</u>		:	A
&	)	shuffle			C,C	:	
a)					:	

Step is six times through off alternate feet and finish.

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 4 - Double Shuffle/Cross the Buckle

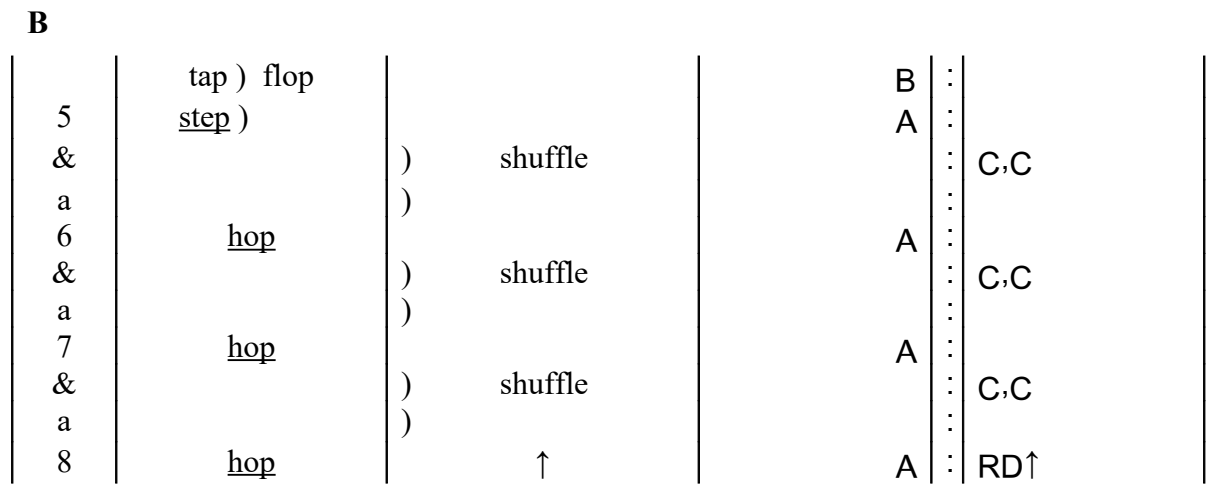
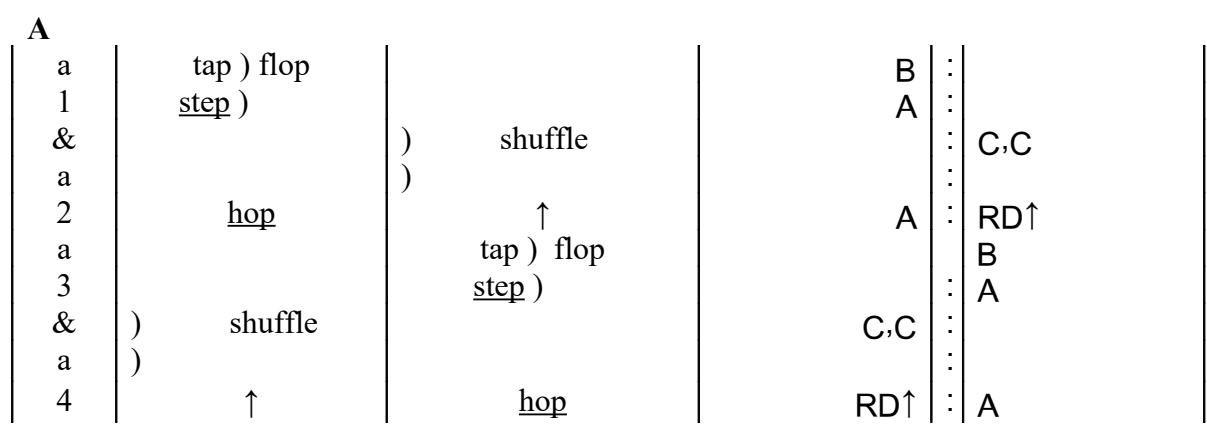
1					A	:		
&	<u>step</u>	)	shuffle		:	:	C,C	
a)			:	:		
2	<u>hop</u>				A	:		
&		)	shuffle		:	:	C,C	
a)			:	:		
3			<u>step</u>		:	:		
&	)	)	shuffle		C,C	:		
a)				:	:		
4			<u>hop</u>		:	:	A	
5	<u>step</u>				A	:		
a		)	shuffle		:	:	E/C,C	
6)			:	:		
a			<u>step</u>		:	:	X \bar{C}	
7	<u>step</u>				A	:		
8	<u>hop</u>				A	:		
&		)	shuffle		:	:	C,C	
a)			:	:		

Step is three times through off alternate feet and finish

Notes:

1. This will mean hopping into the finish.
2. This step was not published in M. Cherry's 1984 notations, however it is contained in his later 2007 book.

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 5



Step is AB AB B B nad finish.
 | | | |
 L R L R

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Step 6 - Crabwalk

A

a	tap) flop		B	:	
1	<u>step</u>)		A	:	
a		<u>heel swivel</u>		:	Ċ, Ċ
2	<u>step</u>			:	
a		tap) flop		:	B
3		<u>step</u>)		:	A
a	<u>heel swivel</u>		Ċ, Ċ	:	
4		<u>step</u>		:	

B

a	tap) flop		B	:	
5	<u>step</u>)		A	:	
a		<u>heel swivel</u>		:	Ċ, Ċ
6	<u>step</u>		XA*	:	Ḟ, Ḟ*
a		<u>swivel</u>		:	
7	<u>step</u>		A	:	
a		<u>heel swivel</u>		:	Ċ, Ċ
8	<u>step</u>		A	:	

Step is AB AB B B nad finish.

| | | |
 L R L R

Notes:

1. Note that the supporting foot only moves behind the swivelling foot once (on beat 6) and the beats 7 and 8 are in A position.

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Finish

1	<u>step</u>	)	shuffle	A	:	C,C
a		)			:	A
2		)	<u>step</u>	A	:	C,C
a		)	shuffle		:	A
3	<u>step</u>	)		C	:	X \bar{C}
a		)	<u>step</u>	A	:	
4		)	shuffle		:	
a		)	<u>step</u>		:	
5	touch)			:	
6	<u>step</u>	)	touch		:	
7)			:	
8		---			:	

Sammy Bell Basic Hornpipe - Final Finish

a	tap) flop	)		B	:	
1	<u>step</u> )	)		A	:	C, \bar{C}
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	\bar{A},A
2	<u>step</u>	)	<u>swivel</u>	A	:	C, \bar{C}
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	\bar{A},A
3	<u>step</u>	)	<u>swivel</u>	A	:	C, \bar{C}
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	\bar{A},A
4	<u>step</u>	)	<u>swivel</u>	A	:	C, \bar{C}
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	\bar{A},A
5	<u>step</u>	)	<u>swivel</u>	A	:	
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	
6	<u>step</u>	)	<u>swivel</u>	A	:	
a		)	<u>heel swivel</u>	A	:	
7	<u>step</u>	)		A	:	
8	<u>heel drop</u>	)		A	:	